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## Article

# Rap on Trial in a Global Classroom: Exploring Race, Hip-Hop, and Mass Incarceration Through Virtual Exchange Pedagogy

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## Abstract

This study presents a qualitative case analysis of a cross-national Virtual Exchange (VE) classroom that connects undergraduate students in the Southeastern United States and Colombia through a course titled “Rap on Trial.” Designed amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the course investigates the practice of using rap lyrics as evidence in criminal trials—a legal strategy that disproportionately affects young men of color and reinforces racialized patterns of incarceration. Through a digital pedagogical model grounded in intercultural dialogue and collaborative learning, students engaged with the global dimensions of hip-hop, social justice, and systemic inequality while developing transferable skills in language proficiency, critical thinking, and digital literacy. Drawing from student reflections and instructor observations, this paper identifies key successes and barriers in implementing VE in the social sciences, offering recommendations for designing high-impact, equity-driven virtual learning experiences. The findings underscore the transformative potential of VE classrooms in cultivating global competencies and fostering meaningful relationships across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural collaboration; global classrooms; high-impact practices (hips); hip-hop pedagogy; intercultural competence; rap on trial; virtual exchange (ve)

## Introduction

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions swiftly embraced new digital pedagogies, with virtual and global exchange classrooms emerging as transformative tools for teaching and learning. Among these innovations, the ‘Rap on Trial’ course has emerged as a unique and relevant offering at an R1 university in the Southeastern United States. This Global Scholar Distinction (<https://international.gsu.edu/initiatives/global-scholar-distinction/>) course is designed to critically examine how rap music, particularly its lyrical content, is weaponized in U.S. courtrooms, contributing to racialized mass incarceration. The course, particularly in the context of the pandemic, serves as both a sociological case study and a platform for global engagement, demonstrating the adaptability and resilience of higher education in challenging times.

Virtual Exchange (VE) – which is also known as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE), and Online Collaborative Learning (OCL), virtual mobility or telecollaboration – is a digital pedagogical model connecting students worldwide through structured collaboration and engagement using online technologies (Higgins, 2024). Unlike traditional study abroad programs, VE is more accessible, cost-effective, and inclusive, particularly for students who have been historically excluded from global learning opportunities. In this context, the *Rap on Trial* course employed a VE framework to connect U.S. students with partner institutions’ global counterparts, enabling comparative discussions on race, justice, and cultural expression. This

format enabled students to explore hip-hop as both a musical genre and a sociopolitical artifact globally (Rose, 1994). Through shared digital spaces—video discussions, collaborative writing, and virtual panels—students examined the legal and cultural implications of the “rap on trial” phenomenon: the practice of prosecutors introducing rap lyrics as evidence in criminal trials, which courts have increasingly embraced despite concerns about racial bias and freedom of expression (Kubrin & Nielson, 2014; Nielson & Dennis, 2019).

Online or virtual global classrooms are a teaching method that has rapidly grown in popularity since the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual classrooms enable students and faculty from around the globe to communicate, study, and discuss various social issues in the same online collaborative space. The *Rap on Trial* course investigates the use of rap lyrics as evidence in criminal trials—a practice that disproportionately affects young men of color. This course not only facilitates cross-cultural dialogue among students from diverse international backgrounds but also provides a unique opportunity for students to engage in critical discussions on race, free speech, and the criminal justice system. It allows faculty to explore innovative pedagogical approaches and develop digital literacy skills. Thus, we highlight the pedagogical obstacles and successes of the VE model and provide recommendations for effectively integrating technology to promote equity and inclusion in higher education.

## Virtual Exchange Classrooms: Opportunities and Innovations

### *High-Impact Practice*

Virtual Exchange (VE) embodies the core principles of high-impact practices (HIPs) by promoting deep, meaningful learning through sustained engagement, global collaboration, and real-world relevance—all of which contribute to enhanced student success (Kuh et al., 2006). VE is a meaningful student-centered approach that intentionally connects students and faculty from diverse backgrounds, life experiences, and cultural settings to engage and collaborate virtually, gaining deeper insights into global issues regardless of their geographic location (Calvo et al., 2025). Like other HIPs, VE encourages active learning by requiring students to engage across cultural boundaries, reflect critically on diverse perspectives, and apply their knowledge in authentic, interdisciplinary contexts (Linder & Hayes, 2018). Through frequent and substantive online interaction and intercultural dialogue with global peers, VE encourages intercultural competence and the development of a host of intellectual and interpersonal skills essential for success in a complex, interconnected world (Jenssen et al., 2024). VE also promotes the acquisition of new knowledge and perspective-taking when students engage in cross-national online discussions with global peers about social problems that affect their respective societies (Commander et al., 2016). Research indicates that critical inquiry through teaching diverse content and multiple perspectives from people around the world can broaden students’ exposure to both local and global contexts, thereby expanding their worldview (Kopish & Öztürk, 2024). The *Rap on Trial* course exemplifies this interdisciplinary, high-impact model, facilitating discussions on critical themes such as race and justice among U.S. students and their global peers.

### *Accessibility and Inclusivity*

VE also serves as a transformative pedagogical model that enhances global learning accessibility, particularly for students who have been historically marginalized from such opportunities (Whatley et al., 2025). Virtual Exchange eliminates geographical and financial barriers associated with traditional mobility programs, making global learning more accessible for all students, including those who may not have the resources to participate in study abroad experiences (Lanham & Voskuil, 2022). It provides a platform for students from various backgrounds to engage in meaningful dialogue, promoting inclusivity in higher education (O’Dowd, 2022). This inclusive educational approach serves as a valuable resource for students facing financial hardships or lockdown restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as it allows them to participate in intercultural experiences despite physical barriers (Higgins, 2024). VE research demonstrates significant positive

benefits and student success outcomes—such as improved completion rates and higher GPAs—particularly for students of minoritized, under-resourced, and low-income backgrounds who have been historically marginalized from global learning opportunities at both 4-year institutions (Lee et al., 2022) and community colleges alike (Whatley, Labs & Wood, 2025). Providing access to global learning opportunities through virtual exchange is crucial in shaping cultural identity.

### *Development of Transferable Skills*

Virtual exchange is closely associated with the development of *soft skills*—cognitive, social, and emotional qualities that positively influence personal well-being, academic success, employability, and overall health (Chernyshenko et al., 2018; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015). The literature has long recognized the importance of these skills in preparing students to succeed in dynamic and evolving labor markets (Deming, 2017; Helm, 2024; Lanham & Voskuil, 2022). More recently, research has highlighted a growing demand among employers and industry leaders for *durable skills*—transferable, long-lasting capacities that integrate both cognitive abilities, like communication and critical thinking with non-cognitive character traits such as conscientiousness, leadership, digital literacy, resilience, professionalism, and emotional intelligence (Kim & Kwon, 2024; Onsomu, 2025). These skills are increasingly viewed as essential for success in the complex and globalized labor markets of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. VE programs provide participants with a wide range of transferable, cross-disciplinary, and interpersonal skills that support effective engagement across diverse economic sectors (European Commission, 2011). The collaborative and interactive nature of VE encourages problem-solving, critical thinking, global awareness, and intercultural competence (Hackett et al., 2023). Further, VE enhances students' digital literacy, teamwork abilities, and interdisciplinary understanding, while enriching their overall shared educational experience (Garcés & O'Dowd, 2021).

### *Pedagogical Framework*

Virtual Exchange can be integrated into existing curricula as a complement to physical mobility programs, enhancing the overall internationalization of education (O'Dowd, 2022). When used as a precursor to study abroad programs, VE can be used as a cultural acclimatization process to help students familiarize themselves with the host culture and language prior to departure, build their confidence and motivation, and help ease their transition into their new environment, thereby reducing culture shock and anxiety while in the host country (Ryan, 2020). While VE presents numerous benefits, some critics argue that it cannot fully replicate the immersive experiences of physical study abroad programs. Nonetheless, it remains a vital tool for expanding educational access and fostering global citizenship (Rakisheva & Xu, 2024).

Much of the existing literature on virtual exchange is rooted in the fields of foreign language education, international business (Commander et al., 2022), and global health/medical studies (Stuart et al., 2022), leaving a significant gap in its application within social science disciplines. This divide is notable in the implementation and evaluation of virtual exchange within the social science disciplines such as sociology, political science, and criminology—fields well-positioned to interrogate structural inequalities, power dynamics, and identity construction within global contexts (Wright et al., 2024). The underutilization of VE in these arenas is particularly concerning given its potential to address systemic disparities and propose possible solutions. VE can be a powerful tool for promoting equity by creating more inclusive and accessible learning opportunities. The failure to fully leverage VE means missing an opportunity to address systemic issues that perpetuate disparities. To address this, educators and shareholders can adopt pedagogical approaches, such as comparative and dialogue-based methods, that maximize intercultural communication competencies and support global learning outcomes (Helm, 2024).



## Methods

### *Course Structures and Pedagogical Approach*

*Rap on Trial* is a newly created interdisciplinary course, born from a partnership established during the U.S. instructor's recent Fulbright experience in Colombia, that investigates the global influence of hip-hop. The course was designed around three pillars: (1) critical engagement with legal and sociological texts, (2) cross-cultural dialogue on race and justice, and (3) applied digital projects. Students were introduced to key theoretical frameworks on racialized surveillance, cultural criminology, and the First Amendment. Topics ranged from global perceptions of hip-hop culture to comparative criminal justice systems, juror implicit bias and decision-making, as well as freedoms of speech and artistic expression. Students then examined real-world case studies where rap lyrics were used to secure criminal convictions, most often against young Black and Latino male artists – a practice that contributes to disparate outcomes and experiences for communities of color. By exploring the crossroads of race, free speech, and social inequality, this course raises important sociological questions and facilitates cross-cultural dialogue among global peers. Through this Virtual Exchange (VE) and Global Scholar Distinction course, students from diverse cultural contexts collaborate online to study contemporary hip-hop and mass incarceration, while developing global competencies, critical thinking, and digital literacy skills.

In the Colombian course, English 4, Spanish-speaking students were seeking to enhance their English language proficiency for academic, professional, and/or personal purposes. Students had varying levels of English language proficiency, ranging from B1 to B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) scale. The course emphasized the development of the four key language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Through interactive lessons, engaging discussions, collaborative activities, and real-world applications, students developed a strong foundation in both formal and conversational English. The primary objective of their virtual exchange component was to create an iterative and collaborative environment where students could engage in real-time English communication within a meaningful and supportive context, thereby enhancing their language skills, particularly fluency, accuracy, and comprehension. Recognizing music as a universal language, we used hip-hop topics as a dynamic and relatable medium to spark engaging conversations and build meaningful connections among global peers.

### *Study Aims*

The goals of this qualitative evaluation study are twofold: (1) to describe the experience of participants in an inaugural VE course, including student and instructor reflections, challenges, and successes; and (2) to offer best practice recommendations for faculty interested in designing and implementing future VE programs, particularly within the social sciences. We seek to understand how the VE experience shaped student learning, cross-cultural engagement, and the development of global skills and competencies. We also reflect on how the course structure, pedagogical strategies, and institutional support influenced the overall effectiveness of the VE program. By exploring the perspectives of both students and instructors, this study aims to generate actionable insights that can inform future VE initiatives and contribute to a growing body of literature on global learning in virtual learning environments.

### *Data Collection*

To support the global dimension of the course, undergraduate students at a large public R1 university in the Southeastern United States who were enrolled in the *Rap on Trial* course (N=17) collaborated with undergraduate students studying English as a second language at a university in Colombia (N=20). Both instructors agreed to incorporate a VE component into their respective courses to enhance global learning and skills. Students from both institutions were organized into five mixed groups and engaged in structured online discussions featuring activities and writing

prompts aligned with the course content. They collaborated both asynchronously and synchronously using communication tools of their choice – including Zoom, Teams, WhatsApp, Google Meet, and shared Google Docs — which supported a range of communicative and cognitive skills. Instructors provided clear guidelines for engagement and closely monitored student interactions to cultivate a collaborative learning environment that encouraged the open exchange of ideas, mutual respect, and professionalism.

The authors designed the VE assignments based on O’Dowd and Waire’s (2009) framework, a task-based typology for VE in telecollaborative online learning. The VE component of the course lasted for six weeks, with scaffolded activities and assignments organized across three distinct phases (see Table 1: Three Phases of VE Activities and Timeline). *Phase 1* was devoted to introductions with global peers in an initial synchronous virtual meeting, followed by asynchronous icebreaker discussions to build rapport and exchange contact information. In *Phase 2*, students explored how hip-hop addresses social justice issues in their respective communities through the use of key language features, including wordplay, hyperbole, slang, rhyme, tropes, and culturally specific poetic expressions. This involved cross-linguistic collaborations where they annotated and translated rap verses for their global peers, drawing parallels with the course material. *Phase 3* involved students’ reflections and personal takeaways from their VE experience. The data for this evaluation study were collected from student comments submitted as part of class assignments after the course ended and grading was complete. Faculty notes and perspectives were also taken into consideration.

Table 1. Three Phases of VE Activities and Timeline.

Length and Focus	Objectives	Task Typology	Interactions
Phase 1: Icebreakers & Introductions (Weeks 1-2)	Meet and build rapport with global peers. Share photo/video introductions. Provide overview of hip-hop as a global movement and an overview of hip-hop as a global movement and the purpose of the virtual exchange. Establish rules of engagement.	Information Exchange	Synchronous and asynchronous information-sharing with global peers.
Phase 2: Global Impact of Hip-Hop (Weeks 3-4)	Translate and annotate a rap song. Explore how artists use language, slang, and cultural references in song lyrics. Analyze how hip-hop addresses social justice issues.	Comparison and Analysis	Group Communication within (required) and across (optional) small groups of 6-8 students using platforms of their choice. Post formal deliverables on Padlet.
Phase 3: Reflection & Final Debriefing (Weeks 5-6)	Reflect on knowledge and cultural insights gained through the VE dialogue and collaboration.	Comparison and Analysis	Group Communication within (required) and across (optional) small groups of 6-8 students using platforms of their choice.

			Post formal deliverables on Padlet.
<b>Post-VE Final Presentation* (US students only)</b>	Incorporate insights gained from VE into a summative presentation.	Collaborative Task	Small Group Collaboration. Formal presentations were given in person during class.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the latest version of NVivo, which features an integrated AI Assistant, a qualitative data analysis software designed to support complex and iterative textual data analysis. This study employed content and discourse analyses to identify both emergent themes and theory-driven insights. Initially, we conducted inductive thematic analysis to allow recurring patterns and themes to emerge organically from the data without imposing a priori codes. This process involved multiple close readings of the textual data, including students’ online discussion posts and written reflections. The AI Assistant feature was utilized to facilitate preliminary coding, keyword identification, and pattern recognition. These outputs were subsequently reviewed and refined manually to ensure contextual accuracy and interpretive depth.

To deepen the analysis of the data, we also used discourse analysis to examine how language, power relations, and social identities were constructed within students’ conversations. This involved examining linguistic features, rhetorical strategies, and interactional dynamics to uncover the underlying meanings and social positioning embedded in the dialogue. NVivo supported the triangulation of findings and validation of thematic patterns in the data. Together, these complementary analytical strategies facilitated a rich, nuanced understanding of students’ experiences, perspectives, and meaning-making processes as reflected in their online discussions and reflections.

Findings

We identified four major themes from the data analysis: (1) Intercultural dialogue promotes global learning and critical awareness; (2) VE collaborations can develop transferable soft skills; (3) Authentic real-world practice can boost linguistic confidence and fluency; and (4) VE classrooms can build a sense of community and cultivate meaningful relationships. We spotlight both the successes and challenges embedded in an undertaking of this nature.

Key Successes Across Four Major Themes

This VE program yielded several meaningful student learning outcomes, demonstrating the promise of student-centered pedagogical strategies as a high-impact practice for global learning. We outline the program’s top four outcomes as themes and highlight its potential as a scalable and transformative model for future virtual classrooms in the social sciences.

Theme One: Intercultural Dialogue Promotes Global Learning and Critical Awareness

Intercultural dialogue and interaction can serve as practical tools to broaden students’ horizons, build confidence, and provide valuable real-world experiences beyond academic learning (Yang et al., 2025). Consistent with the literature, students reported greater awareness of global social issues and enhanced mindfulness of cultural dynamics. Students engaged in structured dialogue and critical interdisciplinary inquiry that challenged their previously held beliefs and assumptions,

encouraging them to consider different perspectives and respect alternative worldviews. Student reflections revealed numerous eye-opening epiphanies during the discussions where students confronted their pre-conceived beliefs, gained new knowledge from their global peers, and engaged in perspective-taking. One Colombian student explained his experience (paraphrased):

The experience of working with people from different countries allowed me to gain insight into how different cultures approach problem-solving, teamwork, and creativity. This exposure helped me to view challenges from new angles, which in turn enhanced the quality of our collaborative work. Moreover, the exchange greatly enhanced my cultural understanding. I was able to engage with peers from various parts of the world, each bringing their own perspectives and ideas to the table. This exchange challenged my preconceived notions and prompted me to think critically about global issues. I realized that despite our differences, there are universal themes and challenges that connect us, and that collaboration can foster empathy and understanding.

The interdisciplinary design of the *Rap on Trial* course supported deeper engagement with both local and global social problems, enabling students to situate U.S.-based issues within a broader international context. While students initially struggled to interpret and critique culturally specific lyrics and sociopolitical histories outside their own lived experiences or language fluency, their engagement with the material evolved over time. U.S. students often selected rap songs addressing social issues like the carceral state, racial discrimination, police brutality, disenfranchisement and economic hardship in inner-city areas like Brooklyn — hip-hop's birthplace — whereas Colombian students chose songs that reflected poverty, displacement, political corruption, guerrilla warfare, and armed conflict in neighborhoods such as the notorious *Comuna 13 Barrio* in Medellin. These song selections revealed distinct local realities; however, as dialogue continued, students began to notice parallels in their countries' struggles and hip-hop's role in promoting social change and resistance.

Student annotations of rap lyrics highlighted hip-hop's value as a compelling and effective pedagogical tool for critical global awareness and intercultural dialogue. One American student reflected on how the VE course challenged her pre-conceived assumptions and expanded her global perspective (paraphrased):

Before taking this virtual exchange course, I was under the impression that hip-hop culture was strictly an American phenomenon, but I quickly realized I was wrong. Learning about hip-hop's role in other cultures was incredibly eye-opening and made me see how globally influential and nuanced the genre truly is. One moment that stood out to me was when Professor X showed us a remix of Drake's song, "Started from the Bottom." Hearing how other cultures interpreted the lyrics and vibe of that song through their own cultural lens shifted my understanding of music. It showed me that hip-hop isn't just about beats or catchy hooks; it is a tool for storytelling and resistance, no matter where you are from.

The VE experience encouraged students to reflect critically on social problems within their own local communities, while also recognizing their global interconnectedness. Themes such as abuse of power, inequality, collective strength, and resilience emerged as shared concerns across both nations. Ultimately, hip-hop served not only as a lens for exploring social realities but also as a global platform for amplifying the voices and experiences of marginalized communities. One student from Colombia reflected on their learning process:

This experience helped me see the world in a new way. Even though I was not familiar with this music genre, I understood how music connects people from different places and how it reflects their lives and struggles. In the exchange, we compared and shared hip-hop songs from our countries. The language and style were different, but the messages were the same. Prior to this exchange, I was not very sure that both countries faced similar problems. This made me see that music is a way to tell stories and share emotions with others. Although artists come from diverse backgrounds, they use hip-hop to talk about their lives. Music helps us understand each other, even if we live far away. In the songs we shared, I saw that hip-hop is more than just entertainment; it is also a means of expressing feelings, experiences, and social issues.



Another student added insights on how hip-hop also helped them connect with global peers and understand the world better (paraphrased):

I also noticed how storytelling plays an important role in hip-hop. Many songs tell personal or social stories that make people think. This gives music more meaning. I liked seeing how artists from different cultures use music as a tool to create awareness and inspire change. Through this exchange, I also gained a deeper understanding of different cultures. I've noticed that, despite living in different places, we share similar problems and dreams. Hip hop gives people a voice to express their struggles. Music helps connect people in ways I had not thought about before. So far, this has been a positive experience, prompting me to consider topics I hadn't paid much attention to before. It has helped me realize that music is not just something to listen to, but also a way to learn, connect, and understand the world better.

VE played a key role in helping students explore culture and identity by offering a space to engage with diverse perspectives. Through cross-cultural collaboration, students communicated, compared experiences, asked meaningful questions, and offered feedback on a range of social and cultural topics. Discussions on music and heritage, in particular, opened up opportunities to understand how hip-hop functions as more than entertainment—it becomes a medium for cultural expression, resistance, and identity formation. One student highlighted the personal impact of VE, saying the dialogue helped them understand their roots and appreciate Colombia's rich heritage, expressing that their conversations about studies revealed their academic interests and showed how education shapes identities. Another participant captured the profound significance of these cross-cultural connections (paraphrased):

Making these connections across the diaspora is not just an interesting discovery—it's a significant moment in the study of Black history and music. Understanding how oral traditions function in different regions of the world, and recognizing their similarities, helps us reclaim a global narrative of Black identity. It challenges the notion that hip-hop or any other cultural form belongs to one place or people. Instead, it highlights how diasporic communities adapt, preserve, and evolve shared traditions in response to their unique environments. This exchange helped me realize that what we call hip hop is not an export of America—it is a reflection of who we are, no matter where we are.

These reflections show how VE promotes critical cultural awareness and supports students in discovering and affirming their own identities within a global, diasporic context.

#### *Theme Two: VE Collaboration Can Develop Transferable Soft Skills*

VE can be effective in developing transferable soft skills that can equip students to navigate the evolving demands of today's dynamic and global workforce (Remmerseal et al., 2025). Research shows that VE students develop critical thinking, interpersonal, digital collaboration, and global communication skills—all vital for 21st-century global citizenship (Rakisheva & Xu, 2024).

In the *Rap on Trial* course, students developed a range of valuable skills through collaborative assignments and structured cross-cultural dialogue. They developed openness, empathy, compassion, flexibility, adaptability, teamwork, a positive mindset, and problem-solving skills. One Colombian student reflected on how VE broadened her perspective and deepened her awareness of global social issues, mentioning that this exchange served to expand her vision. As a Colombian citizen, she spoke of the numerous problems Colombians are currently experiencing, and sadly, the fact that some of these issues are being ignored or normalized. She realized that the problems happening in Colombia are also occurring in far too many parts of the world. In a nutshell, she expressed that this experience caused her to generate a more reflective mindset. Others described the course as transformative, noting that learning went beyond academic content to enhance cross-cultural understanding, spark curiosity, and promote peer-to-peer learning. One student described

feeling not just more informed academically, but also more culturally competent and curious (paraphrased):

Overall, this course didn't just teach me about music or global perspectives; it gave me a greater sense of empathy, curiosity, and connection. It challenged my assumptions, expanded my understanding of the world, and introduced me to peers who taught me just as much as the course content did. I'm walking away from this experience not only as a more informed student but also as a more culturally aware individual.

Another student's comments reflected appreciation for gaining new digital literacy skills (paraphrased):

The virtual exchange experience had a profound impact on me, enhancing my cultural understanding, broadening my worldview, and deepening my appreciation for the role of technology in fostering global collaboration. It challenged my perspective on global issues and provided me with the opportunity to develop new skills that I will continue to apply in both my personal and professional life.

These student reflections demonstrate the power of VE to inspire personal and intellectual growth even beyond the course.

Additionally, results align with existing literature on the potential for VE to develop accountability, learner autonomy, agency, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016). Students described our mediated VE experience as a meaningful opportunity for both co-creating knowledge and developing autonomous learning and personal agency (Hung et al., 2024). One U.S. student, for example, expressed feeling empowered to take responsibility and ownership of their own self-directed learning, sharing that they were encouraged to be more independent and proactive, which improved their time management skills and reinforced their ability to work independently. This student also developed a greater sense of self-discipline, as they had to rely on their own initiative to progress with the project.

Another student reflected on learning to navigate cultural and logistical differences with greater patience, flexibility, and empathy, learning to be more patient because of everyone's differing time zones, given that their colleagues had exams and other assignments to worry about aside from this one, so they had to be patient in waiting for others' posts. Through these reflections, students demonstrated metacognitive awareness—actively monitoring their own learning strategies and study skills, assessing what worked effectively, and making adjustments to stay on track. This type of conscientious self-awareness is important not only for academic achievement but also foundational for lifelong self-regulation and personal growth.

### *Theme Three: VE Boosts Linguistic Confidence Through Authentic Real-World Practice*

The findings of this study confirm that participation in VE can significantly boost students' self-perceived linguistic confidence and fluency. By providing authentic, real-world contexts for second language use beyond the traditional scripted classroom exercises, our program allowed students from both countries to engage in spontaneous conversations using everyday language within practical and socially relevant situations. For non-native speakers, this type of real-time interaction can significantly reduce communication anxiety and increase confidence in their fluency (Remmerseal et al., 2025), especially when discussing relatable topics drawn from their personal experiences and daily lives (Higgins, 2024). Research indicates that when language learners engage in VE, they focus more on the substance of the conversation rather than grammatical perfection — a shift that both lowers communication anxiety and increases willingness to communicate (Freiermuth & Jarrel, 2006). Moreover, peer support in these environments can strengthen self-efficacy, which in turn, increases enjoyment and confidence. One Colombian student explained his boosted confidence in his language ability (paraphrased):

My experience during the cultural exchange was very fun. At first, we were a little bit shy, and my meeting partner limited herself to asking me pre-established questions for the

activity. However, later, another girl joined us, which, although she was embarrassed, made the conversation easier. We discussed what we studied, pets, hobbies, travels, families, friends, and movies. The most interesting part was when I realized that we had a lot in common when talking about our social circles and routines. Thanks to the exchange, I discovered that my English skills are better than I thought. I also noticed how insecure I am with verb tenses and their uses, but in the end, I can make myself understood, something I am very happy about.

This reflection highlights both increased fluency and awareness of areas for improvement – evidence of metacognitive growth.

Several key components of the *Rap on Trial* course supported meaningful linguistic growth for our students. Open-ended question prompts allowed students to choose their responses, while icebreaker suggestions encouraged creativity and helped build familiarity with the tasks. Throughout the six-week exchange, the evolving social and group dynamics fostered a sense of comfort, connection, and peer engagement over time. Grounded in the Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) framework, we clearly communicated assignment goals, expectations, and rubrics, and we were transparent about the fact that this was a first-time experience for both instructors and students (Winkelmes, 2023). This openness helped to create an environment of flexibility, trust, and autonomy. Student feedback reflected increased self-perceived communication confidence, along with a range of other academic and interpersonal benefits.

Overall, both American and Colombian students expressed a sense of success in their bilingual communication with their global peers. These informal, peer-to-peer conversations across cultural boundaries not only supported linguistic development but also made for a dynamic, contextualized, and personally relevant learning experience for language learners. Consistent with prior research, this experiential learning model can be particularly impactful in enhancing communicative competence, boosting willingness to communicate, and building the confidence necessary for real-world language use.

#### *Theme Four: VE Can Build Community and Cultivate Meaningful Relationships*

All participants reported having a pleasant and enjoyable experience in the *Rap on Trial* course, as this was their first time participating in a virtual exchange program during their undergraduate studies. The virtual exchange—particularly the synchronous and asynchronous meetings for both introductions and final debriefing—provided a solid base for building community among the students and developing mutually beneficial relationships beyond the course. Many students reported feeling more connected to their global peers and empowered to challenge narratives and advocate for change in their communities. One example comes from a Colombian student's reflection (paraphrased):

By sharing our stories, we built a genuine connection that went beyond superficial topics. In the end, speaking with her was an unforgettable experience that taught me a great deal. It showed me that even though we come from different backgrounds, genuine connections are possible when we open up and share our true selves. I look forward to more conversations like this that help me grow and understand the world a little better. This unforgettable conversation reminded me that every small exchange can deeply enrich our lives and build lasting bridges between cultures.

An American student highlighted his interconnectedness through shared experiences (paraphrased):

One of the most meaningful aspects of participating in the global exchange program was the opportunity to witness this connection unfold in real time through conversations with my peers in Colombia. It was amazing to see how students from another part of the diaspora could relate to the same oral traditions, storytelling methods, and cultural expressions I grew up with. This wasn't just an academic connection—it felt deeply

personal. There was a sense of familiarity in their experiences and the way they interpreted music, community, and resistance. It reminded me that we are all part of a larger narrative, one that extends beyond national borders and connects us to one another through our shared culture and history.

Student reflections emphasized the common humanity shared across cultures, with one noting that the global exchange experience served as a reminder that we are more alike than we are different. This person also shared that the experience reinforced the importance of listening to one another, learning from one another, and building together. In this same vein, another participant came to realize that, although we may live in diverse cultural and geographical contexts, we all have much more in common than we often assume.

Our VE program fostered social engagement and authentic global connections, which can serve as a catalyst for building long-lasting relationships, sustained international networks, and cross-cultural partnerships. One Colombian participant summarized his personal takeaways, expressing that this collaboration was a transformative experience that reinforced the power of connectivity and shared knowledge in overcoming global challenges. Another student echoed this sentiment, noting that the course provided a valuable opportunity to explore and learn from other people's ideas and expressed interest in participating in more VE activities in the future. This and other relevant feedback suggest not only the perceived valuable impact of the VE program, but also the potential of virtual exchange to foster meaningful, enriching, and enjoyable global learning experiences.

Our final key finding is that peer-to-peer interactions sparked *cultural desire*, or the motivation and enthusiasm to engage with diverse people and learn about their cultures (Spieler et al., 2025). Most students expressed a genuine interest in understanding other cultures and clarifying their own misunderstandings and biases. As one Colombian student explained, it was an opportunity to learn more about each other and explore our cultures through everyday topics. Some even showed an eagerness to go beyond the required interactions within their assigned groups to explore and connect with peers in other groups. One noted how great it was to read everyone's posts because each person had a unique way of wording things, with others holding different views altogether. This person would read comments even after the deadline, including posts that were not from people in their group. This sense of curiosity and excitement for discovery, particularly among students experiencing virtual exchange for the first time, reflects the kind of intrinsic motivation that drives lifelong learning and leadership long after the VE course has ended.

These results indicate a high level of student satisfaction with the virtual exchange learning experience overall (Hong et al., 2024). When describing their overall VE experience with one-word summaries, both U.S. and Colombian students overwhelmingly chose terms with positive connotations, including: "cool, different, interesting, *muy muy interesante*, sensational, memorable, alright, unique, would recommend to a friend, entertaining, fun, and innovative." These descriptors reflect students' enthusiasm and engagement, as well as their appreciation for the novelty and relevance of the experience.

## Key Challenges & Lessons Learned

While virtual exchange offers significant opportunities to enhance global competencies, career readiness skills, and meaningful relationships through engagement and collaboration among global peers, this study was not without obstacles. We outline several challenges we faced along with corresponding recommendations for improvement.

### *Program Design and Curricular Alignment*

A key challenge encountered in this VE program was the imbalance in assignment requirements between the two participating institutions. U.S. students were required to complete bi-weekly critical discussion assignments and deliver a summative presentation that included findings from their independent research projects as well as reflections on their virtual exchange experiences with their



global peers. In contrast, for Colombian students, all VE-related assignments were offered as optional extra credit opportunities, making their participation largely voluntary. This discrepancy led to unequal levels of effort and engagement, which sometimes affected the depth and reciprocity of cross-cultural collaboration.

A key lesson learned from our implementation was the importance of early and transparent coordination between institutional partners. It is important to establish mutually aligned expectations and commitments on both sides at the outset of the project. Requiring a comparable level of engagement can yield better accountability, more balanced student interaction, and meaningful intercultural dialogue.

#### *Logistical and Technological Barriers*

Differences in time zones and academic calendars presented challenges to scheduling and ongoing engagement during the exchange. For instance, while U.S. students were patiently awaiting responses to their online discussions, we discovered that Colombian students were occupied with week-long standardized testing, limiting their availability to interact with their global peers. In addition, a few students lacked access to reliable internet, up-to-date devices, and private spaces that were conducive to sustained online engagement. These disparities impacted their ability to fully participate in synchronous meetings and asynchronous activities and affected the overall inclusivity and digital equity of the VE experience. Despite these obstacles, students demonstrated adaptability by making necessary adjustments along the way and making the most of what they had.

We recommend that facilitators assess participants' technological readiness prior to the program launch and seek institutional support for hardware and connectivity deficiencies wherever feasible. Also, instructors should build flexibility into the program design, such as asynchronous alternatives, no-penalty buffer weeks, or "catch-up" opportunities – to support the collaborative process and sustain the engagement while mitigating disruptions due to unforeseen scheduling constraints, unexpected technology glitches, or time zone differences. Instructors must establish shared goals, timelines, and deliverables well in advance to ensure alignment with academic calendars, course schedules, and broader institutional policies. To ensure a high-quality VE experience, facilitators should actively solicit ongoing student feedback and remain flexible to adjust pedagogical and programmatic approaches in real-time (Case et al., 2022; Gordon-Chipembere, 2024).

#### *Unexpected Policy Shifts and External Disruptions*

Another challenge was the instability and uncertainty surrounding student funding and legal residency status, particularly during the current administration. Unexpected policy changes affecting international education—such as the sudden revocation of student visas and the sudden withdrawal of federal funding for specific international initiatives—created both uncertainty and, in some cases, direct barriers to participation. Additionally, personal and contextual disruptions, such as military obligations, impacted student engagement in the exchange. For instance, one student was forced to pause their studies due to an unexpected military deployment during the semester. These examples demonstrate how geopolitical factors and external commitments can impact VE learning environments in unpredictable ways. To address these vulnerabilities, future VE programs should develop a contingency plan that supports students in navigating interruptions without complete disengagement. Diversifying funding sources and institutional partnerships can also help reduce the dependency on politically sensitive funding sources.

#### *Measuring Global Competency*

While VE students received tangible credentials, such as a digital badge and graduation recognition, the more transformative impact on critical consciousness and interpersonal development was more challenging to quantify. To gauge student outcomes and identify areas for programmatic improvement, we primarily relied on students' and instructors' personal reflections. However, more

formalized assessment tools are needed to effectively measure the development of students' global competency and language proficiency.

We recommend a multimodal assessment strategy that includes reflective writing, pre- and post-surveys, and peer evaluations. While some scales do exist, such as the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale and the Cultural Humility Scale (Anderson & Or, 2024), institutions should strive to develop validated instruments to assess these harder-to-measure, multilayered outcomes. These tools could offer deeper insights into students' development of empathy, attitudinal shifts, and global self-awareness. Further, more longitudinal research is needed to explore sustained impact and the role of VE programs in shaping students' academic, professional, and intercultural growth over time.

## Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the design and implementation of Virtual Exchange in a social science context, several limitations merit consideration. Firstly, it is worth noting the limited generalizability, as the small, non-random sample from two institutions restricts the ability to generalize the findings beyond this specific context. Secondly, much of the data derives from student reflections and faculty observations, which, regardless of setting, may be subject to social desirability bias and retrospective distortion. The absence of formal pre- and post-measures restricts our ability to systematically assess growth in global competencies or language proficiency over time, which serves as the third limitation.

Given the time constraints involved in any project of this nature, other limitations include demographic disaggregation. Future studies can elevate this work by examining how variables such as race, gender, language background, or socioeconomic status may have influenced student experiences or outcomes. As a single-semester pilot course, this study did not explore long-term outcomes or sustained impacts on student development, professional trajectories, or global citizenship. Variability in course requirements across the two institutions may have affected student participation and engagement, potentially skewing perceptions of the VE experience. For this reason, cross-institutional misalignment can serve as another limitation. Thus, future research should incorporate longitudinal designs, validated assessment tools, and intersectional analysis to deepen understanding of VE's effects and expand its theoretical foundations in critical pedagogies and global learning.

## Implications for Future Research

Our findings suggest that VE classrooms—when rooted in socially relevant content and intentional design—can meaningfully enhance student learning, global engagement, and intercultural competence. This high-impact practice supports critical reflection, cross-cultural collaboration, and interdisciplinary understanding through authentic interactions with global peers. We recommend that future initiatives adopt an interdisciplinary approach to provide students across all fields of study with opportunities to make global connections, gain exposure to diverse cultural perspectives and linguistic contexts, and strengthen their language and digital communication skills (Calvo et al., 2025). For forward-thinking faculty and institutions seeking to internationalize their curricula, we offer the following actionable recommendations.

### *Institutional Support*

Faculty are key drivers of successful VE programs, but their efforts require significant hidden labor and uncompensated time and effort. Institutions must formally recognize and incentivize the additional labor involved through workload credits/course releases, stipends, professional development recognition, and support for technology integration. The U.S. institution in this study, for example, provided internal grant mini-grant opportunities, a virtual exchange academy to train interested faculty, and free Zoom licenses to facilitate global engagement and support the development of new VE programs. Other support structures—such as graduate teaching assistants,

interpreters, and partnerships with centers for teaching and learning, international offices, and career services—could further reduce barriers and expand participation in these high-impact learning courses. Promotion and tenure guidelines should explicitly recognize experiential learning initiatives, such as study abroad and virtual exchange, as part of faculty teaching, service, and scholarship contributions.

#### *Expand the Use of Technology*

Future VE initiatives should leverage emerging technologies to enhance the immersive quality of the virtual exchange learning experience. Augmented or virtual reality tools— including avatars, 360° video platforms, and virtual meeting spaces—can significantly enhance students' sense of presence, spatial telepresence, and co-presence, creating more meaningful interactions with their global peers (Potolia & Derivry-Plard, 2023). The innovative and fun nature of these technologies can also spark students' interest and motivation for language learning, stimulating deeper engagement, particularly among interdisciplinary and language learners, for whom the willingness to communicate is essential to the learning process.

#### *Intentional Cultural Scaffolding*

Results from this study indicated the need for intentional cultural scaffolding in the design and implementation of the virtual exchange collaboration activities. Future research should investigate how providing students with background on cultural contexts, such as pre-VE cultural orientation and sensitivity training, and structured support throughout the exchange might affect students' ability to navigate complex intercultural dynamics. It is essential to act early to mitigate bias, misunderstandings, and avoid misinterpretation. In particular, more studies employing intersectional frameworks are needed to better understand how multiple aspects of identity—such as race, gender, language background, socio-economic status, and nationality—interact to shape experiences and outcomes in VE classrooms.

Existing studies often treat students as culturally monolithic; intersectionality would offer a richer, more nuanced lens to understand the heterogeneous and layered ways students engage in intercultural learning environments. Current VE research is also geographically limited, with significant emphasis on international collaborations within or between countries in the Americas. Expanding access to VE to include more diverse global partnerships – particularly Africa, Asia, and the Middle East – would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of global issues and offer students a broader range of perspectives, value systems, and communication styles.

Finally, while much of the VE literature centers on student learning and the success of participants in these projects, there is a notable gap in research investigating the instructor's role in the VE process. Understanding faculty experiences, including the challenges they face, the support they require, and the pedagogical strategies they find most useful, can transform institutional policies and professional development trainings aimed at sustaining and scaling high-impact practices at the institutional level. Future research should also investigate both instructors' perspectives longitudinally, exploring how their pedagogical approaches might vary or evolve across multiple VE implementations and across different institutional and cultural contexts. In short, we recommend a more holistic, inclusive, interdisciplinary, and intersectional research agenda to fill these gaps and advance the theory and practice of virtual exchange in higher education.

## **Conclusion**

This paper explored the opportunities and prospects of using virtual classrooms through a case study of the *Rap on Trial* course at one R1 University in the Southeastern United States. The course investigates the use of rap lyrics as evidence in criminal trials, a court practice that disproportionately impacts young men of color and contributes to broad patterns of racial inequality, particularly in Black and Latino communities. By exploring the crossroads of race, hip-hop, and the criminal justice

system, the course raises critical sociological questions and facilitates cross-cultural dialogue among global peers. Through this Virtual Exchange and Global Scholar Distinction course, students from diverse cultural contexts collaborate online to study contemporary hip-hop and mass incarceration, while developing global competencies, language proficiency, digital literacy, and intercultural communication skills.

The growth of online, virtual global classrooms, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has expanded the reach and potential of higher education. VE classrooms enable students and faculty from around the globe to study and address pressing social issues in the same collaborative digital spaces (Helm, 2024). The *Rap on Trial* course demonstrates how virtual exchange can transcend geographic and cultural boundaries to engage students in urgent, real-world conversations while enriching their understanding of equity and cultural expression.

As higher education continues to globalize, courses like this represent a promising model for transformative, high-impact learning (Author, 2026). Virtual exchange programs have the potential to revolutionize teaching and serve as a powerful gateway for students to build meaningful global connections, develop cross-cultural collaboration skills, and prepare for the complex challenges of today's global workforce (Higgins, 2024). By spotlighting both the successes and challenges of implementing such a course, this paper provides practical insights and recommendations for educators navigating the complexities of virtual learning. Future efforts should continue to prioritize mutually beneficial learning opportunities that enable global peers to engage, co-create knowledge, and grow together.

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