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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Virtual Exchanges in Multilingual Environments: A Collaborative Autoethnography

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Abstract

In virtual exchange projects, students from two or more nations work together synchronously or asynchronously on collaborative projects as part of their coursework, using digital technologies such as learning management systems, forums, and video conferencing platforms. Although there is a growing body of research on virtual exchange projects between postsecondary classes, literature using collaborative autoethnography as a tool to investigate the transformative potentials of virtual exchange remains limited. Accordingly, in this study, we use this technique to provide insight into our perspectives as transnational instructors, leading virtual exchange projects in our respective educational settings at access-oriented postsecondary institutions in the United States and the Bahamas. In addition to including student perspectives, we pay particular attention to our experience as outsiders in our respective educational settings leading groups of non-traditional post-secondary students.

Keywords

access-oriented post-secondary institutions; collaborative autoethnography; digital technologies; transnational instructors; virtual exchange

INTRODUCTION

Since the early days of the internet, scholar-educators have been captivated by how digital technologies allow students the opportunity to cross boundaries (both physical and social), learn from others, and gain access to nonhegemonic perspectives as part of the learning process. While the more messianic early thinking—often linking digital technologies to concepts such as the ideal speech situation and the public sphere (e.g., Habermas, 1990, 1991; Roberts, 2000)—has largely subsided in light of practices such as cyberstalking, flame wars, and now even unmitigated AI-driven cheating, teacher-researchers continue to promote the potentially transformative value of building digital communities into classrooms. Virtual exchange—defined by O'Dowd and Lewis (2016) and O'Dowd (2018) as having students participate in digital groups with partners from other cultural contexts or geographic locations as an integrated part of coursework—is one of a number of recent pedagogical strategies

using digital technologies, designed to break down barriers between student groups, to find currency among educators.

One of the reasons teacher-researchers have found virtual exchange valuable is for its potential to destabilize established perspectives and "inject" diversity into classrooms (Mudiamu, 2020; also see Oenbring and Gokcora, 2022 for a critical perspective on this discourse). Although the research literature about virtual exchange using both traditional quantitative and qualitative methods continues to grow, we contend that collaborative autoethnography remains an underutilized methodology in the area of virtual exchange. While studies using autoethnographic perspectives to analyze virtual exchanges (e.g., Helm 2018; Reynolds 2020; Weaver et al. 2022) are highly valuable, there is a notable lack of ethnographic research focusing on how virtual exchange might destabilize existing perspectives or taking full advantage of autoethnography's potential to reflexively and phenomenologically demonstrate their development (see, for example, Pitard, 2019). Accordingly, in this study, we describe our experience leading virtual exchanges between diverse student groups while being 'outsiders' ourselves in our respective communities, drawing upon a range of student perspectives as well.

INSTITUTIONAL AND PERSONAL PROFILES

Our ongoing virtual exchange partnership brings together two distinct types of postsecondary institutions where we each bring our unique personal backgrounds to the classroom. Deniz is originally from Türkiye (Turkey), a nonnative speaker of English, and an immigrant to the United States teaching ESL, developmental writing, and linguistics at a highly diverse community college in New York City. Raymond is an English native-speaking American/Canadian expatriate teaching academic writing and linguistics courses at an Anglophone Caribbean university with a unique but not particularly diverse student body. That is to say, we both teach nontraditional postsecondary students while being outsiders in our respective societies.

For one, I, Deniz, work at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) within the City University of New York system. In accordance with the great diversity of New York City, as of Fall 2023, BMCC students come from over 140 countries, speaking over 100 different languages at home (Office of Admissions, 2023). I have been teaching in the U.S. for more than 25 years, and even though I am a faculty member, as an immigrant, I see myself as an academic role model for my students. I aspire to help students, both

nonnative and native-speaking, to establish their own voice. Indeed, I had similar experiences finding my individual voice, first as an international student in the U.S., and then as a faculty member taking on several teaching and administrative tasks at U.S. institutions.

Conversely, I, Raymond, work at the University of the Bahamas (UB), the national institution of higher education in the Commonwealth of the Bahamas, where I teach a variety of general education writing and linguistics courses. Most UB students are first-generation postsecondary students who speak Bahamian Creole English as their L1. As a White expatriate working in a majority Black postcolonial nation still forming a unique linguistic and educational identity, I desire to create conditions in my classrooms that allow students to empower themselves and change their own perspectives, rather than merely proselytizing students into Western diversity discourses and progressive language ideologies. I believe this relativistic stance is key to genuine student self-discovery.

OUR VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

In virtual exchange, also known as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), students work together in multinational groups using digital technologies as part of coursework for an academic program. These exchanges usually take place over a period of four to five weeks; interactions can be either synchronous using a video conferencing platform, or asynchronous using messaging or forum software (see O'Dowd, 2018). As several studies have noted (e.g., Custer & Tuominen, 2017; de Wit, 2016; Elliott-Gower & Hill, 2015), virtual exchanges give students greater educational and linguistic mobility without the usual costs associated with traveling abroad, something that we, as instructors working at access-oriented institutions, find particularly important. Of note is that virtual exchanges were especially popular during the COVID-19 epidemic as physical exchange programs were not active.

Scholars of teaching and learning have found virtual exchanges particularly valuable for intercultural learning and building students' cultural competencies (e.g., O'Dowd, 2003; Morollón Martí & Fernández, 2016). As O'Dowd and Dooly (2020) note, in virtual exchange, "learners have the opportunity to more fully grasp cultures as highly complex, dynamic systems, with boundaries that are fluid and mutable" (p. 365). In particular, we value virtual exchanges as a way to encourage students to become more reflexive and culturally aware learners.

Virtual exchanges have also been found to have professional value for instructors. Being part of a professional community of practice can offer teacher-scholars an opportunity to connect theory and practice (O'Dowd & Dooly, 2022). Moreover, participating in collaborative projects gives teachers the chance to develop a fresh understanding of their roles as educators, their pedagogical methods, and their course material (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). We personally have been able to expand our perspectives on language instruction by working with a variety of student groups at diverse institutions that we otherwise never would have had dealings with.

Since 2020, we have worked together on a variety of virtual exchange collaborations, bringing together academic writing and/or linguistics students at UB with ESL, linguistics, and developmental writing students at BMCC. In our collaborative online projects, we have been careful to select topics that students at both institutions can relate to easily, such as their educational journey in college, and their challenges and successes in classes. For example, in one virtual exchange pairing two general education linguistics courses, we directed students to conduct interviews with second/foreign language learners and reflect on their experiences learning new languages. In other assignments, we have encouraged students to build awareness of inequalities in their own community or that of their virtual exchange partner through contrastive analysis of social issues. Through these projects, students learn to analyze their partner's input and become more critical thinkers, as well as enhance their technical skills. As we have noted, as virtual exchange practitioners ourselves, we are outsiders in our respective cultures and academic environments. We believe our students need to be sensitive and establish an understanding of topics to which they can make connections as outsiders, and that our own outsider positionality has been an advantage rather than a hindrance to our virtual exchange activities.

WHY AUTOETHNOGRAPHY?

As a research methodology, autoethnography emerged in significant part as a response to the pretensions of objectivity claimed by outsider scholars describing other cultural groups, as routinely takes place in traditional ethnography. Indeed, as Lapadat (2017) notes:

> The tradition of researchers entering indigenous or other 'exotic' cultures and social groups to produce authoritative ethnographies or in search of a master narrative was seen to be a colonial practice of questionable ethics. Research in this tradition was criticized for presuming to represent others …for being racist, appropriative, and exploitative…and for failing to care for and maintain relational ties (p. 591).

This seeming paradox of us, as outsiders, writing autoethnography involving our students is not lost upon us; instead, we acknowledge and own this paradox. We recognize that we are representatives of the academic community with social power as instructors over the students with diverse backgrounds we describe and work with. Nonetheless, we are outsiders of different sorts in our respective communities, despite having lived within them for many years. Further, all virtual exchanges are (or should be) oriented outward and across boundaries; there is a *neither-here-nor-thereness* to such projects that we reflexively inhabit.

A handful of previous studies using autoethnography to examine virtual exchanges already exist in the literature. Weaver et al. (2022), for example, is a case study of a virtual exchange between leadership classes at a university in the United States and one in Hong Kong, wherein the researchers reflect upon how their prior lived experiences mediate the process of teacher capacity-building in a transnational virtual, collaborative exchange. Further, Schrage-Früh and Wehrmann (2023) describe an innovative virtual exchange between students at an Irish university and a German secondary gymnasium, wherein they composed and exchanged autoethnographies about their local culture for the other group. As the authors note, "by conceptualising the partners as participants in rather than subjects of research, autoethnography offers a more dialogic, symmetrical relationship that might correspond better to the situation of VE [virtual exchange] than traditional ethnography" (p. 3). Conversely, Ren (2022) uses autoethnography to describe his professional experience as an instructional designer for a virtual international exchange program during the COVID-19 pandemic, together with his perspective on course design and delivery factors.

However, an issue with a number of such studies is that they take a bounded view of autoethnography, treating it in an almost perfunctory manner as a *plug and chug* social science methodology (i.e., including typical social scientific subheadings such as *Data Collection*). This discounts scholars' motivation for primarily using autoethnography as a response to the problems of the "objectivity paradigm" behind much traditional ethnography (see, for example, Schrage-Fruh & Wehrmann, 2023; Stodulka, 2021, p. 102).

With a keen eye toward these existing studies, we decided to jump in ourselves. After working together on a few virtual exchange collaborations and publishing a few traditional academic articles about these experiences together, we decided that autoethnography would allow us to more fully capture the transformative potentials of virtual exchange both for students and instructors, and to critically examine reflexively our insider/outsider status. We believe that a more interpretative and reflexive form of autoethnography would allow us to

better describe inner worlds and personal experiences, as well as to unveil, interpret, and critique social structures and underlying power dynamics. Further, we believe the method allows us to include a critical interpretation of our experiences, which stimulates students' academic growth in the college classroom, and to provide insight into our own development as educators, specifically as outsiders teaching outsiders. (Note that this study falls under a general IRB approval received from BMCC for Deniz's work involving virtual exchanges with faculty in a number of countries including the Bahamas, Israel, Jordan, and India.)

DENIZ'S POSITIONALITY

Having grown up in a collective culture with three siblings in Ankara, Türkiye (Turkey), I have long understood the importance of making decisions based upon consultation and negotiation with my surrounding community—something which I bring to my classroom and my virtual exchange activities today. As a child, I remember visiting family and friends two or three times a week, playing with other children in the neighborhood, and learning from and with them. My parents' friends would stop by unannounced any time after dinner to pay a short visit, leading to vibrant discussions of politics and current events. Accordingly, an appreciation for lively discussion of topics of interest and learning in a group has been part of my life from an early age; I bring this to my virtual exchange activities as well. Indeed, I believe that learning is enhanced when students collaborate across campuses and nations, exchanging and developing new perspectives along the way.

Upon graduating from university in Türkiye with a degree in English Language and Literature, I received a Fulbright scholarship. This was the start of my life in the United States. Since then, I have understood my existence in the U.S. is proof of my ability to persevere, both as a human being and as an unattached female immigrant from a Muslim-majority nation. As a teacher of nonnative speakers of English, many of whom come from Muslim nations like I do, I imagine myself as a role model to my students. When I lead my students in virtual exchanges with students from various cultural contexts, I am inspired by my childhood experiences of learning together.

As a new international student who was not used to expressing her point of view in classes, I was challenged in graduate courses in the United States. In my previous educational experiences in Türkiye, my oral presentations in class were based on a rendition of what was available in textbook chapters. I did not have the opportunity to be engaged in project-based/discovery-based assignments. I had rarely been expected to express my opinions on

issues or make presentations; the only assessments I was used to as a student were timed tests. However, in the U.S., my professors and peers were always interested in what I wanted to say. Furthermore, some of my peers working in the local school systems had administrative duties and were taking courses at the same time, so they had rich personal experiences and perspectives which they could contribute to class discussions. As I took more classes, I became a more confident presenter and had a stronger critical voice both orally and in writing. These experiences helped me to establish my academic identity. Even today, I sometimes consider making presentations as a tool for establishing social ties in North American society, especially as an outsider.

Before securing my current position at Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), I had the opportunity to work at both community colleges and four-year universities in northern New Jersey. I also worked at a writing center of a four-year college which provided me with insight about the difficulties both ELL students experience in composing an essay or providing quotes. For some students, writing might not be their favorite academic activity, and working in the writing center taught me to meet students where they are. My mission as a writing tutor has always been to establish a positive experience for student writers—that is, I would like students to find their own voices, just as I aimed to do when I came to the U.S. While I enjoyed my experiences working at these institutions, I lacked the opportunity to engage in extensive scholarly work since I had several teaching positions at the same time.

Upon becoming a full-time faculty member at BMCC, I found lasting inclusion/acceptance in an academic community where I finally had a position and afforded the time to engage in research on the teaching and learning process. Attending a two-year college in a major metropolitan city, BMCC students come from a variety of backgrounds and need academic preparation to be able to transfer to a four-year college. Although I am a faculty member, I consider myself as a person of color in that space just like most of my students. Importantly, at BMCC, I was first introduced to virtual exchange through a specific workshop organized by the institution's Study Abroad Program. I was immediately interested in using collaborative online international learning in my classes because I was looking for an opportunity to enrich my students' perspectives and broaden their outlook towards important topics of discussion, such as race, discrimination, and social justice. These topics yielded interesting collaborative opportunities and conversations between my students and those in other nations.

Notably, being a female faculty of color has made me aware of communication issues between students and faculty members. As a faculty member who is not a native speaker of English, I am aware that I need to make my ideas well-expressed to be persuasive, a consideration that I also bring to my academic writing. For example, when I applied for one semester of faculty leave, I needed to make sure that committee members and the chair of the department were very clear about the specific details of my research project. Likewise, I pay particular attention to the topic of communication with all my students. Whatever their background, they should have all the opportunity and ability to communicate with me about their needs and desires.

Beyond difficulties with communication, whether written, verbal, or nonverbal, as an outsider to the United States, I can empathize with the difficulties many of my students have with being able to express themselves with regard to difficult/sensitive topics. In most of my classes, there are students from Muslim countries, such as Bangladesh or Pakistan, whom I can relate to easily on sensitive topics. For example, in LIN 100 – Language and Culture, as a warm-up activity, students work on "The Meaning of My Name" short research paper. In composing this assignment, one Bengali student whose name was "Muhammad" explained how his name was chosen and why all his family members had the same name. However, it was difficult for non-Muslim members of the course to understand how all the male members could get the same holy name. I encouraged students to explain in detail the significance of religion in their culture and how getting a name from the Quran fulfills the traditions of their culture. Some other members of the course might not have had as much religious dedication as the Muslim students in the group. This case reaffirms my belief that studying linguistics enhances students' thinking and helps them to understand their world as they meet new classmates; meeting students from a variety of backgrounds enhances my worldview as well.

In my COIL collaborations with various partners, I have routinely used Richard Rodriguez's famous essay, "The Achievement of Desire" as a springboard text. I was first introduced to this piece at a local CUNY conference I attended. I find it valuable in my classroom as I believe the themes in the essay are very relevant to my students' experiences. Most of them came to the U.S. as a child or in their early teens and had been brought up in immigrant homes; by pursuing a postsecondary education, they have experiences that most other members of their families have trouble relating to. For example, the following is what one student wrote as a reaction to her partner's experiences:

> A similarity between my partner, Sarah, and Rodriguez, is that she avoids conversations about universities with her family because these conversations are very limited because they do not have the same knowledge as her, which ends up affecting her overall bond with them. This shared experience highlights the importance of open communication and shared understanding within families. Limited conversations due to differing knowledge impact the family overall relationship. Just like Rodriguez, she also can't get home and talk to her family about the content she's been studying, and she also can't ask them for help with her homework because of the difference in knowledge between them. Richard Rodriguez states "such ambitions set me apart". In other words, the more knowledge he acquired, the more apart from his family he felt, and it can be compared to the statement of my partner when she said, "I do sometimes find myself to be intellectually distanced from my family especially in university as a person whose family revolves around the world of STEM and having just entered the realm of humanities."

As the above quote testifies, as children's education surpasses their parents' education level, they might adapt to the changes and invest more in their education. At the same time, however, as students continue to advance academically, they may feel greater distance from their family and home culture. I can personally relate to this change as I came to the U.S. on a Fulbright grant. Nonetheless, it is exciting for me to see the educational aspirations of immigrant children and establish better opportunities for themselves; my accomplishments in the U.S. are similar to what my immigrant students aspire to achieve in their education. Indeed, every virtual exchange project I get involved in fosters the same excitement, "the Fulbright spirit", that I felt when I was a new Fulbrighter. I can easily connect with my students and reveal my background and identity instead of hiding from them. By engaging in COIL projects, my students leave their comfort zones and exercise their skills to become more flexible and accepting.

RAYMOND'S POSITIONALITY

Fresh from my PhD program, I arrived in the Bahamas in 2009 excited by the opportunity afforded me to teach at the College of the Bahamas (now the University of the Bahamas), but with little specific knowledge on Bahamian or Caribbean culture. As a linguist, I was delighted to find in the Bahamas a very rich sociolinguistic environment with an English Creole variety, Bahamian Creole English, existing side-by-side with local and international varieties of English in the country. Yet I was immediately struck by the negative popular attitudes to Creole expressed by the population of a country where considerably more individuals were fluent in Creole than standard varieties. Nonetheless, as a White male American/Canadian expatriate entering a majority Black postcolonial society, I did not want

to privilege my perspectives in a country still developing its identity. Furthermore, still being new to the Bahamas, I did not want to cast myself as the newcomer foreigner with all the answers; it was clear to me that those sorts of people would not last long in the Bahamas. After having attended graduate school in the most secular/progressive of environments, I was (probably naively) surprised to discover that at the unaffiliated University of the Bahamas, academic meetings regularly begin with a Christian prayer. Nonetheless, I was determined, out of respect for the local culture as well as fully embodying a spirit of cultural relativism (which is, I may add, key to reflexive ethnography), to embrace the practices of my new home.

Despite their proximity to and cultural connections with North America, many postcolonial Anglophone Caribbean nations have not developed, even in academic contexts, broadly entrenched diversity discourses as have developed elsewhere in North America. While this may not be surprising, given that these states are largely small developing nations with recent histories of anti-colonial—and in many cases partly ethnonationalist—struggle against British colonialism, the conservativism, seeming cultural homogeneity, and prevailing xenophobia of some Anglophone Caribbean states is nonetheless surprising to many visitors to the region, who likely expect the relaxed 'anything goes' images of the Caribbean promoted in international tourism advertisements. However, this surprise at the lack of diversity accommodations and discourses in many Anglophone Caribbean nations is not limited to just Western outsiders; even new graduates who are nationals of Caribbean countries may experience it when returning after receiving advanced education abroad. (For an incisive analysis of the state of diversity discourses in the Bahamas, see Sairsingh et al., 2020.)

As Deniz and I have written about previously, although the Bahamas is a unique society, it is not a traditionally diverse society (see Oenbring and Gokcora, 2022), nor are diversity accommodation discourses well-entrenched in the Bahamas (see Sairsingh et al., 2020). Despite the fact that the country relies upon tourism for the bulk of its economic activity, Bahamian institutions are not particularly welcoming to outside perspectives. Moreover, xenophobia, especially directed toward Haitian migrants (see Perry, 2020) and the immigrant and worker Chinese population remains a significant problem (see Smith & Tanzil-Smith, 2017). In Winner and Shield's (2002) study, aptly named "Breaking the Island Chains," they documented a digital exchange between Bahamian students and postsecondary students in the American South using the asynchronous internet technologies of the day, describing the

former as geographically and culturally isolated. Indeed, University of the Bahamas students are, almost exclusively, Black Bahamian Christian; I am fairly certain that a significant portion of my students have never knowingly met a Muslim.

Accordingly, when the chance to participate in virtual exchange activities using digital technologies came about, I was keen to participate so that our students might develop richer international perspectives. I believe that it is ultimately more productive to create opportunities for students to engage in meaningful exchanges with diverse students than to proselytize students about Western notions of diversity and critical language ideologies. This is especially important to me as an outsider from the Global North. That is to say, my students who participate in virtual exchanges with other environments may or may not expand their horizons by participating in virtual exchange activities, but whatever happens will happen organically and not through explicit ideological inculcation.

REFLECTION ON OUR COLLABORATION

We began our first virtual exchange in the fall semester of 2020, while both our institutions were operating remotely due to COVID-19 restrictions. Having relocated temporarily to Canada and living with family at my father-in-law's house, I, Raymond, fondly recall participating in our Zoom meetings, as I taught all my courses from a makeshift temporary office in an unfinished storage area located (*à la* Harry Potter) under the stairs. In spite of the isolation and detachment of COVID-19 and lockdowns, the virtual exchange provided the opportunities to break down barriers and make new experiences that we both found uplifting.

Following accepted best practices in virtual exchange pedagogy, our first exchange began with students meeting for a combined icebreaker activity via videoconferencing. Next, we introduced students to the springboard text or piece of media on which the group activity would focus. After that, students arranged to meet with each other digitally to interview each other and/or collaborate on the project. Finally, students produced either a video or a traditional written assignment. All along the way, students made course forum posts responding to their virtual exchange partners and reflecting upon their learning in the course.

In the class, we asked students to explain a social justice topic in their communities and create a YouTube video, choosing a visual artifact from their culture and analyzing it according to the Aristotelian appeals of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. In these presentations, students chose a variety of social justice-related topics, including mistreatment of the homeless in the Bahamas, early childhood marriages in Morocco, and Boko Haram violence

in Nigeria. Notably, one of the BMCC students from the Ivory Coast made a visual presentation on female genital mutilation, which led a Bahamian student to react to the topic in the following manner:

> I found this presentation extremely informative. This was informative for me because I had no knowledge of this issue happening in Africa. The analysis of statistics was enlightening. I gained sympathy for this presentation after seeing the picture of the tools used for genital mutilation. I am a female myself and this is something I would definitely not approve of to take place on my body, this is pathetic. Something must be done to cease this issue in Africa. Females should not have to go through this.

In the discussion forum, the student's partner responded, saying: "I understand how you feel about this issue as a female but don't worry[;] now many organizations fight against this nonsense. Parents who force their kids to undergo female genital mutilation can go to jail." As we can see in this exchange, students used virtual exchange as an opportunity to build connections and critical consciousness across geographical divides. For me, Deniz, I was excited to see this interaction as an outsider, as I motivate students to gain more critical consciousness, express their voices, and create an effective online community by discussing social justice issues.

During another virtual exchange activity, where students were reflecting upon differences between their home country and those of their VE partner, one Bahamian student noted in a message board response that:

> The Bahamas is known nation-wide to be a Christian nation. Christian rituals are practised in schools, households, and public events .... It is uncommon to attend school or college and meet a Muslim ... and Buddhist. Bahamians become prejudiced against these individuals and as a result treat them differently from others. ... When young Bahamians are given the opportunity to attend universities across the world, ... it is evident that these countries are more accepting of human diversity. Human diversity is the unique biological and cultural variation within our species. In return it makes an individual feel accepted by society and can affect an individual positively.

As we can see in this quote, participating in the virtual exchange with a much more diverse set of BMCC students encouraged the Bahamian student to begin to ponder diversity in other nations. For me, Raymond, this sort of post is heartening, as it shows a young Bahamian thinking through cultural diversity on their own terms—that is, not directly as a result of an instructor pressuring them to do so.

The virtual exchange also encouraged BMCC students to challenge their preconceived notions about Bahamian students as well. Indeed, some found the Bahamian students very

intellectual, contrary to their preconceived notions that students living on small islands might not engage in intellectual thinking as do students in Western countries. One student explained: "You think the U.S. is the best country to get an education, but when you hear them, I understand that they are also well-educated." As a professor who has had many ELL students in my classes, I, Deniz, was not expecting to hear this from one of my students since some students in the class come from Haiti, another Caribbean country. I thought they should know better. This comment gave me assurance that my students needed international contact even though they come from diverse backgrounds. I believe that COIL will provide this growth process.

Furthermore, the virtual exchange offered students at both institutions the opportunity to think outside the boundaries of the English monolingual ideology present in both the U.S. and the Bahamas. One UB student noted, for example, that:

> Since English is the Bahamas' main language one may not understand why the students in the Bahamas learn English. We learn English for a number of reasons and the main reason is that Bahamians have their own dialect that they would carry into other English-speaking countries and they would run into trouble trying to translate the dialect into the 'proper' English. Our dialect is strong and unique, we understand each other but others will not because we tweak the original word and make it our own. For example, other countries may understand light rain or drizzling but as Bahamians we use the term "sprying".

While the above student does invoke some potentially problematic formulations (e.g., speaking of 'proper' English), it is clear that the student is thinking critically about the cultural context of language learning in the Bahamas. I, Raymond, aim in my pedagogy to challenge the hegemony of standard English.

Although one of our goals is to encourage students to be more flexible through their engagement in virtual exchange, participating ourselves also allowed us to reevaluate our pedagogies in light of more diverse student groups and different pedagogical discourses. While Raymond is trained in composition studies, Deniz's training is in TESL. These disciplinary differences manifest themselves in our pedagogical approaches in many ways, but in a nutshell, composition studies are traditionally oriented primarily toward the teaching of native speakers and college-ready students, whereas ESL is directed toward developmental writers and English language learners. This leads ESL pedagogy to be on average more directive, giving students less freedom of choice on assignments than traditional composition pedagogy. Indeed, in one of our collaborations, I, Deniz, learned to be flexible and include mindful choices from my partner professor, Raymond. We collaborated on a second language

acquisition project in which students interviewed each other on topics related to learning a second language. We decided to use a project created by Dr. Kubota from the University of British Columbia. In this project, students from both campuses are paired and ask questions to each other on language acquisition and instructional practices. Next, students write a report about the interview to share with both classes. Then, each writes a peer review about their partner's narrative. Some of the second language acquisition topic questions are about immigrant parents' speaking English at home and mixing languages when children speak with their parents. Coming from a different educational background, I have a habit of always following the instructions step by step. When I read my students' peer reviews, I realized that Raymond gave his students the choice of selecting topics related to *either* language acquisition *or* instructional practices. I perceived the ability to offer choices to students in their papers as a positive mind shift that encouraged students to invest more interest and resilience in doing their assignments.

In sum, we, as instructors, believe that we created a college community with the social responsibility of getting to know each other and learning how to communicate on a digital platform which could be as effective as personal communication. We, as well as the students, *coil[ed] around* the topics of discussion in our classes, thereby intellectually contributing to the knowledge production at our respective institutions.

CONCLUSION

At its best, autoethnography moves beyond the rhetoric of objectivity inherent in traditional ethnography, embodying a reflexive perspective. While some may say that as outsiders in our respective communities in positions of relative authority, writing about other groups may make our work more in line with traditional ethnography, we believe that writing ourselves into the process (as instructors are necessarily part of it) destabilizes the objectivity of traditional ethnography.

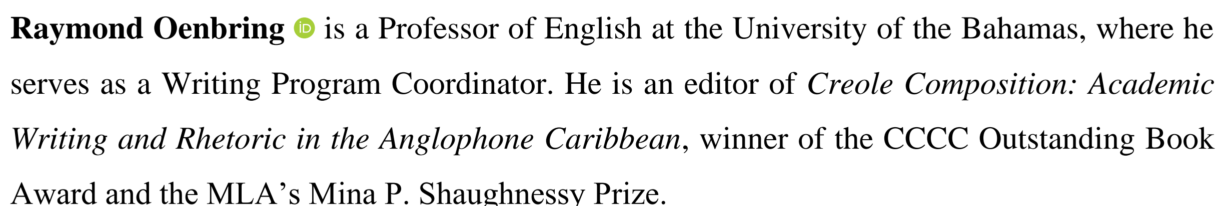
Ideally, virtual exchanges are crafted to cause creative tension between students of differing backgrounds, and we believe that as the leaders of our respective student groups, being outsiders in our respective host countries is an advantage rather than a hindrance for our virtual exchange activities. Whereas Deniz's outsider status in the United States makes her more likely to relate to and be a role model for immigrant students to the United States, Raymond's status in the Bahamas as an outsider from the Global North leading students from the Global South encourages him to view the virtual exchanges as a process where students

can be transformed organically by the learning experience. Nevertheless, we believe that globally connected classes prepare students much more effectively for future "global challenges" (Rubin & Guth, 2015; Marcillo-Gómez & Desilus, 2016) and multicultural work environments (De Castro et al., 2019).

In sum, following Chang et al. (2012, p. 25), we contend that collaborative autoethnography is a valuable research methodology for a variety of reasons. It builds community among researchers; enriches the research process; allows group investigation of researcher subjectivity; and can lead to power-sharing among researcher-participants. We are especially interested in the community-building aspect since a collaborative autoethnographic research process naturally encourages community development among study participants from its level of results-sharing. Simply put, employing this methodology allowed us to study understudied or delicate subjects that might otherwise be overlooked.

This study examined collaboration between ESL students at an urban community college in the U.S. and students at the national university of a small island Caribbean nation. For both the Bahamian students and the U.S.-based ESL students, the virtual exchange offered opportunities for the internationalization of their perspectives. Moreover, in our virtual exchange, peer-to-peer activities enhanced students' independent learning and provided variety to professors' teaching methods. Although BMCC immigrant students came from different corners of the world, they evaluated their preconceived notions and perspectives about college education on a chain of small islands, and social topics. Likewise, the virtual exchange project helped the Bahamian students, as Winner and Shields (2002) put it in their early study of a virtual exchange between a Caribbean university and a U.S. institution, "break the island chains."

THE AUTHORS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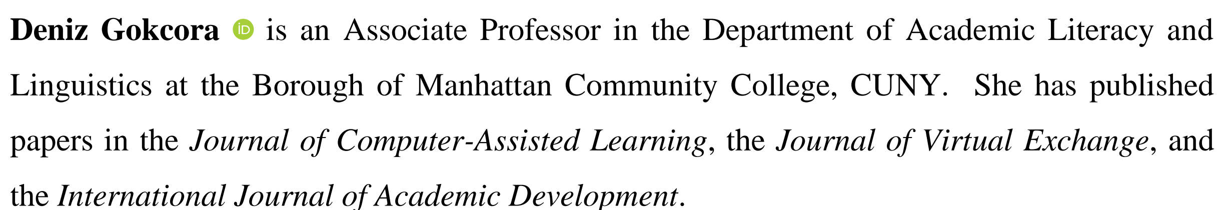
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