

Tips for Virtual Exchange and Engaging Partners Online

Experiential Learning Opportunities Through Remote Partnerships

June 2020

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Citation: Blostein, S. (2020). *Tips for Virtual Exchange and Engaging Partners Online*. Guelph, ON: University of Guelph. <https://atrium.lib.uoguelph.ca/xmlui/handle/10214/2501>

What is a Virtual Partnership?

University units and departments face financial and institutional pressures to adapt to changing environments and manage fluctuations in global exchange, student travel for research, field schools, and semesters abroad. As a result, virtual partnerships have emerged as a leading model to internationalize curriculum and provide students with hands-on practical experience and know-how in the field.¹

An experiential learning virtual partnership integrates a community- or industry-focused project as part of students' course work in an online format. Incorporating remote partnerships into the formal curriculum helps students engage with local and global experts and gain vital technical skills.² In order for the course to be considered successful, it must be mutually beneficial, supporting student development and meeting partner priorities.

¹ State University of New York, 2020.

² University of Guelph Centre for International Programs, 2020.



The five key elements that define a virtual experiential learning project include:³

1. The use of internet-based tools to link students with a local or global collaboration and interact with institutions, community partners, and stakeholders from different sectors, fields, and backgrounds.
2. Student engagement in discipline-specific or inter-disciplinary exchanges with institutions, community organizations or industry partners, which aims to increase applicable skills and the development of digital skills, intercultural competence, and effective communication.
3. Student engagement in peer-to-peer learning with interactive learning tasks and online interaction, whether synchronous or asynchronous.
4. A set of Experiential Learning Outcomes that seek to develop global perspectives and foster students' intercultural and professional competencies.
5. A reflective component that helps students think critically about such interactions and develop critical awareness about the impact of culture on organizational behaviour and professional standards.

Virtual community-engaged experiential learning exposes students to the authentic demands of the digital workplace, and it improves their employability, interpersonal skills, and transition to the workforce. The following tip sheet and list of key values aim to highlight key considerations when developing online collaborations that connect faculty with partners and institutions in a virtual exchange.

Virtual Partnership Options

One effective partnership format for curricular experiential learning includes the implementation of team-based research projects. In this model, instructors consult with institutions, industry partners, or community organizations to create the projects.⁴ Engagement opportunities also focus on analyzing field issues and defining related policy and practice options. Overall, virtual exchange has the potential to enhance student engagement with key course topics.

Virtual exchanges may include partnerships with:⁵

- Local community-based organizations
- University-organized programs
- On-campus student organizations
- Non-profit organizations (regional, national, and international)
- For-profit businesses (regional, national, and international)
- Foreign affairs and development agencies
- Donors, funders, and philanthropists
- Community research teams
- Government officials, departments or initiatives (any jurisdiction)
- Urban and rural planners

³ Adapted from Coventry University Centre for Global Engagement, 2020.

⁴ University of Guelph Experiential Learning Task Force, 2020.

⁵ Adapted from Algoma University, 2016.

- Social entrepreneurs or industry experts

When developing curricular collaborative global learning experiences, important considerations are: Pedagogy, Experience, Assessment and Reflection.⁶

Course Partnerships and Community Engagement

Community engagement requires collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities, whether the communities are local, regional, national, or global.⁷ Such collaboration creates a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.⁸

Community-engaged projects should be more than a teaching tool – they should meet community identified research priorities. Identifying community research interests requires engagement with local community stakeholders and partners in the process, which is a central tenet of community engagement. This engagement helps ensure that new initiatives have value for both communities and students.⁹

Themes and topics for engagement activities are adaptable. They can be transdisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and discipline-specific. Examples of online learning activities and student projects include:¹⁰

- Literature reviews and environmental scans
- Research about existing initiatives and best practices
- Strategic planning
- Community-based research, needs assessments, and feasibility assessments
- Program development and implementation
- Project management and administration
- Public education and presentations
- Event planning, promotions, and marketing
- Community outreach
- Proposal and grant writing
- Policy analysis and policy development
- Program evaluation and impact assessments

Virtual community-engaged experiential learning helps students apply academic knowledge and essential employability skills through structured, purposeful, and meaningful activities. These opportunities prepare students for career readiness as they enter the workforce.

⁶ University of Calgary, 2020.

⁷ Campus Compact, 2020.

⁸ Campus Compact, 2020.

⁹ Rowthorn, 2015.

¹⁰ Algoma University, 2016.

15 Tips for Virtual Exchange and Engaging Partners Online

1. Explore the benefits of a remote partnership

- Assess the advantages of virtual exchange to enrich student experience and key course topics
- The overall goal is to design a course that enables experiential learning based on the core tenets of:
 - Social innovation;
 - Community engagement;
 - Knowledge mobilization;
 - Cross-disciplinary communication.

2. Connect with the right partner

- Select potential partners based on the course topic, interests, expertise, and networks.
- Connect with stakeholders and issues on the ground. This approach will help choose initiatives, organizations, and projects with the greatest need or impact based on a critical community-engaged learning lens.¹¹ It will also encourage ongoing partnership development and mutually beneficial outputs.
- Acknowledge important social and logistical considerations that are relevant to students and partners, including:
 - The goals of each group;
 - Differences in time zones;
 - The language(s) the groups use;
 - Accessibility and available resources for both groups.¹²
- Hone in on what the course can offer. Projects can range in size, scope and community involvement depending on the level of students, class size and available course supports.¹³

3. Pick the right project – start small and get specific

- Take the time to listen and assess the research interests of the partner.
- Evaluate the fit of the partner's needs, students' learning opportunities and goals, and instructor's areas of expertise and interest.
- Assess the viability of the project based on the appropriateness of learning opportunities and the course's resources and time constraints.

¹¹ Cynthia Gordon da Cruz (2017) uses the term "critical community-engaged scholarship" to describe how insights from critical theory can "support university and community partnerships in producing knowledge that more effectively dismantles systemic sources of racial and social injustice" (p. 363).

¹² University of Calgary, 2020.

¹³ For early year or larger classes, projects may focus on developing foundational community engagement skills including listening, understanding the community context and defining the problem from the partner perspective, with small community focused tasks (such as converting research to infographics or plain language). Upper level or smaller classes may have more in-depth projects that require higher levels of support and partner participation.

- Ensure familiarity with the research area; connections and contacts in the field are crucial to guide students.
- Before the course begins, turn the partner's ideas and interests into research questions, which students can address during team assignments and projects.
- Test, modify, and revise research questions with the partner's feedback.

4. Set clear expectations and plan ahead

- Get a real commitment from the partner by understanding their needs and context.
- Identify a common, articulated understanding of what the partnership can reasonably accomplish in the experiential learning activity.¹⁴
- Be clear about what the partnership involves, including an estimate of their anticipated time commitment. Be clear about what the partner will get in return for their time.
- Let them know what to expect in advance. Send them the course syllabus and highlight deadlines and dates for presentations to the class. Set times to review and revise key outputs and outline key points of contact throughout the semester.
- Develop written agreements with tangible goals and a timeline.
- Use templates and tools to help design work plans, expectations, and agreements.

5. Build trust, maintain communication, stay flexible, and be responsive

- Get to know the partner well in advance of the course. Make a genuine connection with them and build trust.
- Once the course begins, work to create an authentic connection between the partner and the students, despite the physical distance.
- Consistently check in with the partner. Plan regular meetings before, during, and after experiential learning activities to gather feedback and evaluate progress.
- Figure out optimal times to meet during the semester. If possible, schedule bi-weekly meetings with student research groups and the partner during class-time.
 - Regular meetings during class can overcome the challenges students face when they have conflicting schedules but have to find time to meet outside of class.
- Be adaptable and flexible. Offer extra time to meet with students and partners beyond pre-scheduled meetings, especially if students need research or context clarification, or someone needs to make a decision before the project moves forward.

6. Get comfortable with the technology

- Determine a plan for what resources and technology will be used to implement the course.
- Confirm that appropriate technology is available for all parties and decide which platform works best, considering issues such as location and internet availability.
- Incorporate IT service assistance and security recommendations into the entire design and implementation of the course.

¹⁴ Cahill, Doner, Su, & Thomson, 2018.

- Consider the use of Google Docs for student collaborative document building, research, and design.
- Expect the unexpected. Plan for the best, but expect the worst, and have back-up plans in place. For example, for web-based meetings, book a conference line with a call-in number in case the internet stops working.

7. Define student benefits and learning outcomes

- At the start of the semester, introduce the project as a part of course curriculum and highlight benefits to students in gaining transferrable experience in collaborative research that responds to practical questions. Explore:
 - What can students do at the end of the course?
 - What learning activities will help students achieve these outcomes?
 - How to know if students have achieved these outcomes?
 - What can students do with what they learned?
- Talk about specific learning outcomes, technical skills, and professional development, and how they may connect to future experiences and opportunities in the field.
- At the beginning of the course provide pre-placement orientation to share an overview of the sector or the project's context, workplace professionalism, and culture.
- Facilitate student readiness and success. Be clear about expectations and provide step-by-step instructions for all aspects of the project. Offer examples, tools, and templates, and design activities to help students meet learning outcomes.
- Be explicit about cross-discipline learning outcomes for the curriculum, such as:
 - Developing (intercultural) communication skills and managing interactions in diverse and complex situations;
 - Demonstrating the capacity to apply global standards and practices within the professional area;
 - Demonstrating a critical approach to study skills through global teamwork¹⁵

8. Progress through specific phases¹⁶

- Team building phase:
 - Use introductions and icebreakers with activities and discussions that help students get to know each other. Begin each class with an icebreaker as the first activity. These steps may help students feel comfortable working with one another online and across cultures.
- Planning phase:
 - Incorporate comparative discussions and organize the student projects.
 - This phase prepares students for effective collaborative project work.
- Project phase:
 - Focus on the main collaborative activity.
 - Students should conduct literature reviews to fill their gaps in knowledge about local or regional history and current affairs.
 - Students apply their knowledge, create something together, or have substantive debates about the topic of the collaboration.
- Final phase:

¹⁵ Coventry University Centre for Global Engagement, 2020.

¹⁶ State University of New York, 2020.

- Students complete and present their work.
- Students reflect on the content of the course and the intercultural aspects of the collaboration and its conclusion.

9. Develop a strong sense of team and personal commitment

- Be transparent with students about expectations of regular participation in class discussions, teamwork, and connections with the community partner organization.
- Encourage a sense of belonging and community among students. Set up regular virtual video chats, forums, games, and structured check-ins.¹⁷
- Continuously develop interpersonal relationships, rapport, trust, and unity among students. Facilitate cross-cultural teamwork, understanding, and problem-solving.
- Require that students share frequent group and individual progress updates to encourage accountability and reflect on the process, its challenges, and its success.
- Listen to students' experiences, and offer direction to guide the conceptualization and implementation of student projects.
- Each group should assign a communication liaison to encourage regular contact between the instructor and the group.
- Monitor group dynamics. Be ready to mediate issues and intervene when it is necessary to offer support and resources.
- Help students develop constructive feedback skills to share mixed-discipline knowledge and meaningful input about the work of other teams.

10. Emphasize humility and strengths-based approaches

- Practice cultural humility. Its principles include a lifelong commitment to self-reflection, self-critique, and the development of mutually beneficial partnerships.¹⁸
- Take a humble approach. Instructors have as much knowledge to learn from students, peers, and partners as they do to share. Show equal respect for academic and community experience.
- Recognize that the community includes knowledge-rich partners who can contribute to virtual exchange and co-create knowledge that maximizes the usefulness of research.
- Highlight community assets, strengths, resources, and opportunities rather than focusing on community deficits and limitations.
- Invite field experts as guest speakers who can share context and insight about course issues.
- Recognize that the healthy development of communities requires a holistic approach that addresses the social, economic, cultural, and ecological dimensions of community well-being.

¹⁷ Lowes, Goldman, & McMahon, 2020.

¹⁸ Abdi & Mohammed, 2017.

11. Facilitate critical reflection

- Build reflection into every class through activities and discussion.¹⁹
 - Critical reflection includes questions that prompt students to examine power relations, cultural norms, and existing institutional arrangements and policies that marginalize and oppress specific groups of people.²⁰
- Practice learning integration, which includes carefully facilitated dialogue and learning themes about responsible engagement, cross-cultural cooperation, and growth in the global community. Have these debriefs before, during, and after an experience.²¹
- Invite students to use theoretical discourse to demonstrate core concepts and gaps in knowledge in the relevant fields while considering multiple perspectives on issues and how people with various circumstances, values, and visions of life may experience power, situations, and decisions differently. Students should also identify personal strengths and opportunities for growth.

12. Bridge global and local issues

- Incorporate global/local community engagement, which is a particular form of experiential learning that can advance integrative learning and encourage social action.
- Combine attention to global/local issues can:
 - Remove artificial divides to connect domestic and global needs and solutions;²²
 - Expand the potential of community-engaged learning by promoting the “mutual constitution of global and local processes”;²³
- Promote global citizenship to understand the links between:
 - Global and local;
 - Campus and community;
 - Us and them;
 - Real-world and classroom;
 - Social and economic issues.
- Engage with course readings and academic literature rooted in ongoing and in-depth conversations about who drives knowledge production and how they drive it. In global/local community engagement, an analysis of knowledge is essential to build solidarity, as it requires careful attention to subject positions, power relations, and structural inequalities.²⁴
- Use continued class discussion to analyze the circumstances of identity, positionality, and power dynamics in the context of the partner or the country and how these relate to local issues.

¹⁹ Reflection is a key component of critical thinking. It provides students with the opportunity to make connections between formal learning and personal and intellectual development. It is vital to integrate during- and post-placement reflection throughout the reflective process.

²⁰ Kiely, 2016.

²¹ Tiessen & Huish, 2013.

²² Rowthorn, 2015.

²³ Houston & Lange, 2017: 1.

²⁴ Houston & Lange, 2017.

13. Select appropriate methods of assessment

- Assign a research paper as the rigorous academic research component of the curriculum.
- Ensure that areas of assessment evaluate the command of core theories in analysis and writing. Assessment may include a project work plan and proposal, critical reflection, final paper, research presentation, and knowledge mobilization materials.
- Assessment of final products and student projects should consider the extent that students:
 - Demonstrate mastery of course readings and central principles through writing, research and deep and insightful analysis about the main themes associated with the issue or challenge and its potential solutions;
 - Demonstrate an understanding of the context of the stakeholder(s);
 - Demonstrate proficiency in applying the theories, empirical contributions, and best practices used to undertake effective experiential learning partnerships.
 - Clearly address the challenges, insights, feedback, and revisions that the partner presents;
 - Provide research and evidence-based recommendations appropriate to the partner's context.

14. Foster effective communication about research

- Throughout the course, train students on how to transfer disciplinary knowledge and effectively communicate with practitioners and stakeholders through written and oral forms.
- Teach students to translate field/discipline-specific, jargon-filled research to accessible information that targeted audiences can understand, including scientists, policymakers, business owners, and community members.
- Provide an opportunity at the end of the course for students to share key knowledge they learned from engagement projects in a conference-style presentation.
- Invite input from partners, peers, and other relevant community stakeholders on students' research results.
- Create potential avenues to apply and share the findings.
- Learn from students' fresh insights, innovations, and suggestions about knowledge mobilization and turning research into action.

15. Strive for excellence and quality assurance

- Invest time to develop partnerships and agreements that can meet mutually agreed-upon objectives.
- Make a clear, mutually agreed upon plan about how to ensure the course outcomes meet the partner's expectations.²⁵

²⁵ Cahill, Doner, Su, & Thomson, 2018.

Key Values for Bridging Global and Local Community Engagement Practices

1. Practice equity

- Emphasize that community members should have equitable access to decision-making processes, resources, and the benefits of community engagement projects, regardless of race, sex, gender identity, country of origin, class, religion, sexual orientation, geographic location, income, age, and ability.²⁶
- Support partners with financial resources and other resources from the university and beyond, such as the University of Guelph Learning Enhancement Fund, College of Social and Applied Human Sciences Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) Grant and the CESI Community Engaged Learning Fund.
- Identify and overcome potential barriers to participation. For example, if partners or students have limited internet access, identify potential funding opportunities to provide financial support to use hotspot technology or a conference landline service.
- Utilize knowledge mobilization to ensure that project findings reach intended audiences.
- Provide language translation for research outputs if necessary.

2. Analyze contexts of identity, diversity, and power dynamics

- Honour the knowledge that exists in the people and the land.
- Assess local and regional history and context about topics such as colonialism, the ongoing legacies of colonization, race relations, and class tensions.
- Evaluate how intersectionality, identity, diversity, power dynamics, and leadership function in other cultures and societies.
- Understand privilege and oppression in cross-cultural settings.
- Respect differences and diversity.
- Mobilize local leaders and champions to engage community members in community-building and capacity development.

3. Raise awareness of global affairs

- Consider the implications of global politics, world issues, and current affairs on the partner's local context.
 - For instance, aid and development, trade, foreign policy, relationships between political entities, non-governmental organizations, multinational corporations, and the wider global system.

²⁶ Algoma University, 2016.



4. Promote intercultural competence and communication

- Build skills to respectfully and appropriately communicate with people of other cultures, backgrounds, and identities.
- Be mindful of language translation and the ethics of translation. Make space for informed consent and the development of participatory approaches.²⁷ This approach can help achieve local support for the research and sustainable interventions that result from the research and engagement processes.

5. Join global to local through experiential learning and community engagement

- The growth of interest in combined global and local issues is due to an increased university focus on community engagement and the needs of vulnerable local communities.²⁸
- Train students to understand the interconnectedness of health and social concerns and the need for culturally appropriate solutions. Such knowledge may foster greater humility, empathy, and ties between health care and community development professionals and communities.²⁹
- Give thoughtful attention to dignity in representation, reflexivity, and positionality when linking the experiences of other people and communities.
- Instructors must emphasize combined global/local community engagement rather than only local or global. Such an emphasis will encourage students to perceive the endless possibilities to link communities together to address injustices, understand relationality, and nurture responsibility effectively.³⁰

²⁷ Lynch & Mitchell, 2010.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Rowthorn, 2015.

³⁰ Houston & Lange, 2017.

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