FROM COACHING TO CO-RESEARCHING

Maria Meredith
Dr. Alex Masardo

UNIVERSITY OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE

REFLECTIVE CASE STUDY

A transnational Virtual Exchange (VE) project between the University of Gloucestershire (UoG), UK, and Universitas Ahmad Dahlan (UAD), Indonesia.

During its second iteration in 2024-25, this VE project introduced an innovative new feature: five doctoral students from UAD were invited to act as academic coaches for six Indonesian undergraduates, supporting them in developing their research confidence and critical engagement within the module.

UNEXPECTED INSIGHT

While the coaching was designed to enhance student agency and scaffold collaborative learning through peer collaboration, an unexpected insight emerged.

When asked to reflect on their coaching experiences, the majority of doctoral students wrote instead about their experiences as co-researchers.

We draw on those reflections, and our facilitation experience, to examine how **role clarity**, **affective safety**, and **intercultural communication** shape equitable participation in VE.

BACKGROUND: DESIGNING THE VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

The 12-week module, *Contemporary Issues in Education*, brought together 24 undergraduate students from UAD and UoG to explore and co-present on key global education topics that the students chose themselves.

Topics ranged from special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) to mental health, gender issues, and inclusive pedagogy.

The module was also summatively assessed through a written portfolio during which students critically evaluated six topics, including their own.

Grounded in a Cofi model (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Dewey, 1938), the course aimed to foster critical dialogue, empathy, and intercultural literacy by centring student voice and shared inquiry.

NOVEL INCLUSION OF UAD DOCTORAL STUDENTS

In line with Indonesian higher education reforms under the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka initiative (Anggara, 2023).

Their inclusion as academic coaches reflected a dual ambition: to empower undergraduates and to provide professional development for the doctoral students.

To prepare them for this role, UoG staff delivered an online coaching workshop which outlined key responsibilities and introduced peer support principles.

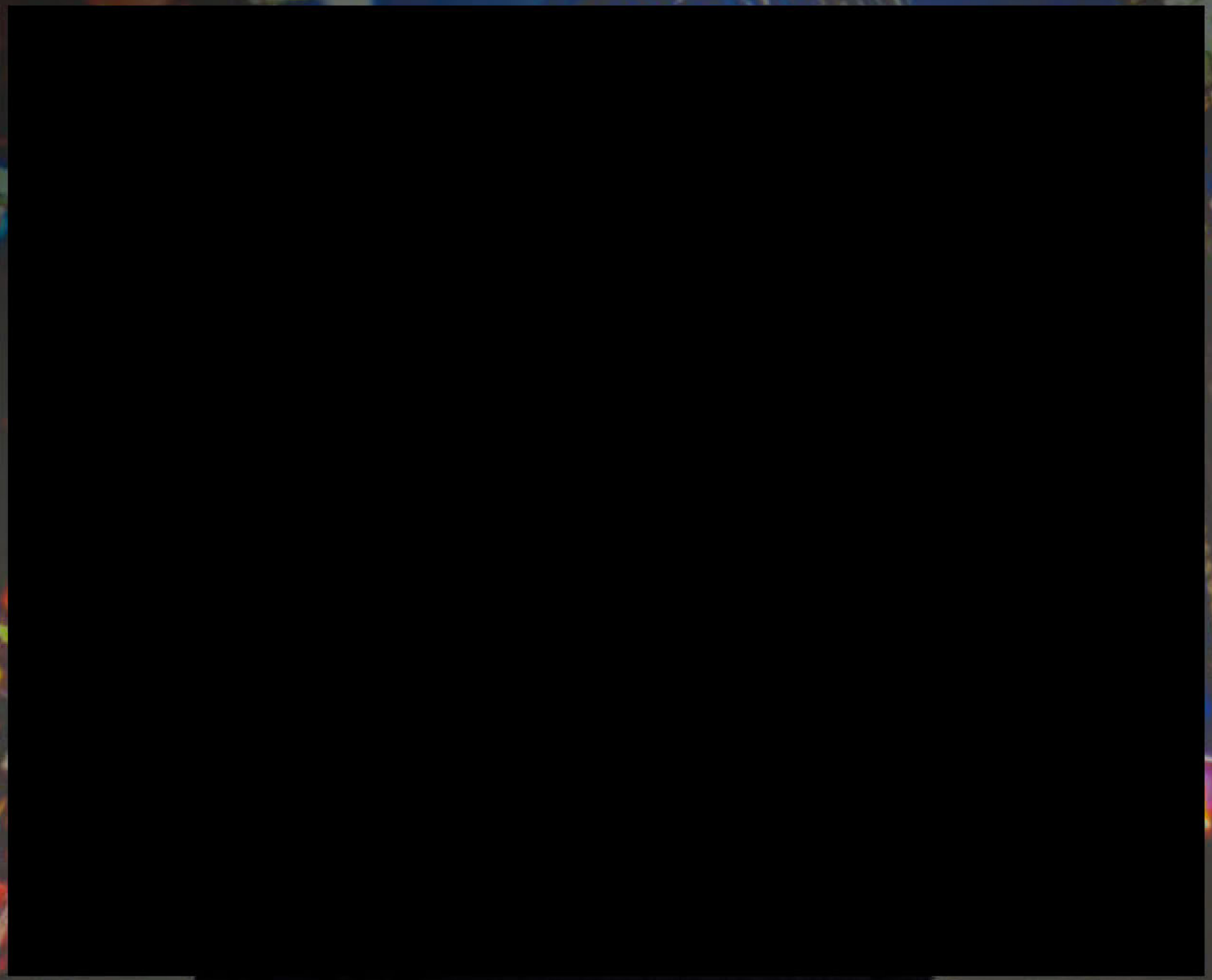
METHODOLOGY: A REFLECTIVE INQUIRY

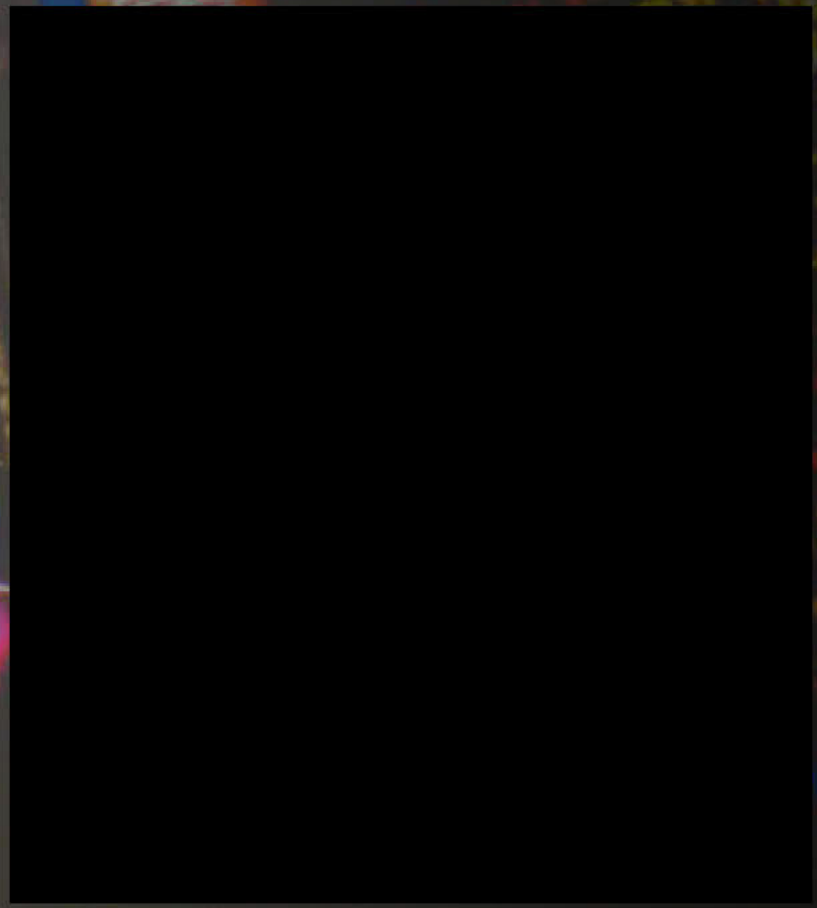
We adopted a reflective practitioner approach, informed by qualitative analysis of the doctoral students' reflective essays, facilitation notes, and post-module reflections.

Although these essays were intended to assess the coaching process, many instead discussed the shared experience of researching alongside undergraduates.

This pivot prompted us to reflect on our own assumptions as facilitators and to consider the affective and cultural dynamics that influence how tasks are interpreted in cross-cultural partnerships (Helm, 2024).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION





1. COACHING OR CO-RESEARCHING?

- The unexpected outcome of the doctoral initiative blurred the lines between expert and novice and disrupted the presumed hierarchy between postgraduate and undergraduate learners.
- While the coaching role was framed by Global North facilitators as empowering and relational – an opportunity to develop leadership through peer support – doctoral students may have interpreted the experience primarily as a joint learning venture.
- *Epistemic modesty* – often observed in Global South academic cultures, where authority is typically vested in formal teaching roles rather than peer mentoring (Louie, 2005; Zulfikar, 2009).

1. COACHING OR CO-RESEARCHING?

- Their reflective essays, then, may not indicate misunderstanding, but rather a culturally grounded redefinition of their role. They positioned themselves as students first, not supervisors.
- This reorientation illustrates how pedagogical intentions may be interpreted through different cultural frameworks.
- It highlights the importance of viewing student responses not through a **deficit lens**, but through a **culturally responsive interpretive frame**.

2. COMMUNICATION CONFIDENCE AND LANGUAGE ANXIETY

- The use of English as the primary language of instruction created both access and constraint – linguistic, emotional, and cultural.
- Although no doctoral student explicitly expressed anxiety during the programme, our facilitation experience and post-module reflections revealed a reluctance to ask clarifying questions or seek further explanations about the coaching role or assessment requirements.
- In our earlier evaluation of the initial VE project (Masardo et al., 2025), several undergraduate students from UAD reported fear of “sounding wrong” in English and highlighted the cognitive and emotional load of using a second language.
- In research on foreign language anxiety, **fear of negative evaluation inhibits participation and risk-taking** (Hashemi, 2011; Horwitz et al., 1986).
- **Silence**, in this context, may not reflect disengagement, but rather, **self-protection** – a strategy to avoid miscommunication or embarrassment.

2. COMMUNICATION CONFIDENCE AND LANGUAGE ANXIETY

- Further, norms of politeness and academic hierarchy in the Indonesian educational context (Hofstede, 2001) may discourage direct questioning, especially in relation to Global North educators.
- The idea of querying a task set by lecturers may conflict with expectations of **deference** (Dardiowidjojo, 2006; Zulfikar, 2009).
- Thus, communicative restraint should not be viewed as not as a lack of engagement, but as culturally and emotionally mediated.

3. ASSUMPTIONS AND POWER IN TASK DESIGN

- As Global North educators, we designed the task under certain assumptions: (1) that doctoral students would understand reflective writing in the way we did, and (2) that they would feel confident in asking questions, including clarifying questions if they were confused.
- These assumptions are rooted in Western academic values of critique, clarity, and communicative assertiveness (Delpit, 2006).
- This expectation reflects a low-context communication style, common in Anglophone contexts, where meaning is made explicit and inquiry is encouraged. In high-context cultures such as Indonesia's, meaning is often inferred through context, hierarchy and relational cues (Hall,1976)
- Student-teacher relationships are shaped by deference and respect for hierarchy (Zulfikar, 2009). Asking for clarification, especially when positioned as a leader – may be seen as exposing inadequacy or disrespect (Dardjowidjojo, 2006).

3. ASSUMPTIONS AND POWER IN TASK DESIGN

- By interpreting silence or deviation from the brief as a problem, we risked positioning Global South students as lacking. In doing so, we reproduced deficit perspectives, evaluating participation through a Western lens without attending to alternative communicative norms. This aligns with Bhabba's (1994) critique of the "fixity" of colonial discourse – the tendency to normalise one epistemic framework at the expense of others.
- Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality reminds us that educational experiences are shaped by intersecting vectors of language, nationality, institutional power, and role status.
- The doctoral students were navigating multiple, often contradictory, identity positions: Global South researchers in a North-led module (albeit as part of a co-created project), non-native English speakers, and postgraduate students expected to perform as coaches.
- It is possible that role confusion was not a sign of disengagement or misunderstanding, but an expression of careful negotiation across multiple, often contradictory identity positions.

3. ASSUMPTIONS AND POWER IN TASK DESIGN

- Even our assumption of “clarity” was culturally loaded. What is explicit to one educator may be ambiguous or inaccessible to another (Marginson, 2014).
- The feedback loop we expected, where students would ask if confused, may have broken down not due to unwillingness, but because of **asymmetries in cultural capital and emotional safety.**
- These dynamics are rarely visible in course design templates, yet they profoundly shape participation. Silence may have meant not “I don’t know”, but **“I cannot safely ask”**.
- Ultimately, what first appeared to be a misalignment between task and response revealed a deeper need for **humility** in intercultural teaching. As Bhabha (1994) suggests, the **“third space”** of cultural negotiation is where, meaning is not transmitted – but co-constructed.
- Our responsibility is not to enforce understanding but to make space for its emergence .

STEPS TOWARDS MORE DIALOGIC VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

- **Pre-module orientation and relationship-building**, to cultivate trust and psychological safety.
- **Iterative clarification points** throughout the programme, where students are encouraged to reinterpret roles and tasks in conversation with facilitators. Normalise clarification as a collaborative responsibility, not a remedial act.
- **Informal, peer-led digital spaces** (e.g., WhatsApp), where students can ask "unsafe" questions and explore ideas beyond institutional formality (Helm, 2015).
- **Dialogic modelling by staff**, including public reflection on uncertainty, open discussion of misunderstandings, and collaborative assessment design.
- Following Holley and Steiner (2005), we affirm that a **"safe space"** is not always comfortable, but it must be dialogic, inclusive, and built on reciprocal attentiveness. Facilitators must act not as guardians of clarity but as co-navigators of uncertainty.

CONCLUSION

- Virtual Exchange, is much about relational pedagogy as it is about content.
- Rather than viewing divergence from intended outcomes as failures, we propose embracing such moments as sites of pedagogical learning. **Divergence invites conversation, not correction.**
- To support students in becoming future-ready global graduates, we must not only develop their capacity to speak across borders, but ensure they are empowered to do so in environments that are inclusive, relational and reflexive.
- This means challenging assumptions about communication and expertise, and creating conditions in which learning emerges through shared negotiation.
- Equitable Virtual Exchange depends not only on digital tools or curriculum design, but on a deeper commitment to ethical listening – across cultures, languages and epistemologies.

REFERENCES

Anggara, S. (2023). Exploring the effectiveness of Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka policy in Indonesian higher education institutions. *Al-Ishlah: Jurnal Pendidikan*, 15(2), 1563-1570. https://doi.org/10.35445/alishlah.v15i2.3885

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.

Brookfield, S. & Preskill, S. (2005). *Discussion as a way of teaching: Tools and techniques for democratic classrooms*. Jossey-Bass.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*(6), 1241-1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Dardjowidjojo, S. (2006) The Implementability of Western Approaches in Eastern Societies. *Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching, 2*(1), 1-20. https://download.garuda.kemdikbud.go.id/article.php?article=313297&val=7524&title=THE%20IMPLEMENTABILITY%20OF%20WESTERN%20APPROACHES%20IN%20EASTERN%20SOCIETIES

Delpit, L. (2006). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. The New Press.

Dewey, J. (1938). *Logic: The theory of inquiry*. Henry Holt and Company.

Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond Culture*. Anchor Press/Doubleday.

Hashemi, M. (2011). Language stress and anxiety among the English language learners. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 30, 1811-1816. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.10.349

Helm, F. (2015). The practices and challenges of telecollaboration in higher education in Europe. *Language Learning & Technology*, 19(2), 197-217. http://dx.doi.org/10125/44424

Helm, F. (2024). *Intercultural communication in virtual exchange*. Cambridge University Press.

Holley, L. & Steiner, S. (2005). Safe space: Student perspectives on classroom environment. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 41(1), 49-64. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23044032

Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B. & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125-132. https://www.jstor.org/stable/327317

Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations*. Sage.

Louie, K. (2005). Gathering cultural knowledge: Useful or use with care? In J. Carroll & J. Ryan (Eds.), *Teaching international students: Improving learning for all*. Routledge.

Marginson, S. (2014). Student self-formation in international education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 18(1), 6-22. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315313513036

Masardo, A., Meredith, M., Maharani, E. A. & Puspitasari, I. (2025). Enabling ‘free speech’ through virtual communities of inquiry: When Global North meets Global South. In A. Scott-Baumann and H. Pandor (Eds.), *How to Develop Free Speech on Campus: International Controversies and Communities of Inquiry*. Edward Elgar. [Forthcoming]

O’Dowd, R. (2018). From telecollaboration to virtual exchange: State-of-the-art and the role of UNICollaboration in moving forward. *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, 1, 1-23. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2018.jve.1

Zulfikar, T. (2009). The making of Indonesian education: An overview on empowering Indonesian teachers. *Journal of Indonesian Social Sciences and Humanities*, 2, 13-39. https://doi.org/10.14203/jissh.v2i0.19