

The Heritage Conversation Partners Project: Virtual Cultural Heritage Exchange in an Anthropology Course

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ABSTRACT

We describe the structure, benefits, and challenges associated with a virtual cultural heritage exchange (VCHE) between undergraduate students in an applied anthropology class and a group of English language learners (ELL). Using qualitative data collection and analysis methods, the project aimed to teach anthropological methods and perspectives to the students while investigating three research questions: Will a VCHE (1) build social bonds and bridges, (2) improve English language acquisition, and (3) raise “heritage consciousness” (awareness and appreciation of, along with an associated sense of agency toward, cultural heritage) among participants? Results support the research questions and show the effectiveness of VCHEs when they are designed to meet the interests and needs of ELL participants and students.

Keywords: immigrants, social integration, English language learners

Social connections play key roles in the successful integration of people from underrepresented groups into their larger social environments. According to Ager and Strang (2008), social bonds, i.e., the “establishment of connection with ‘like-ethnic groups’” (p. 178), and social bridges, i.e., constructive relations between members of an underrepresented group and those within their dominant society, provide the “connective tissue” (p. 177) these groups need to survive and prosper. The challenges of social integration are especially significant for immigrants and refugees in the United States. Those who seek or wish to seek a new home in the United States face significant challenges associated with being accepted by the dominant society, successfully integrating to obtain social and financial security and opportunity, and avoiding the unintentional or forced loss of their tangible (e.g., arts/crafts, food, dress) and intangible (e.g., language, knowledge, practices) cultural heritages through prejudice or internal or external

pressure to assimilate (Chu et al., 2014; Hinton, 2008).

Research shows that engagement with tangible and intangible “living” (i.e., alive in memory and experience; see Poullos, 2014; Kimball, 2016; Kimball et al., 2013) cultural heritages builds and strengthens social bonds and bridges (Barenboim, 2018; Smell & Kimball, 2017). Moreover, the results of a 2019 project conducted by the first author and colleagues suggested that virtual cultural heritage exchanges, i.e., online as opposed to in-person interactions, seem also to be effective in cultivating the kind of social connections that foster healthy integration (Kimball et al., 2019).

The case study we describe here represents the latest permutation in an evolving series of collaborations aimed at fostering social bond- and bridge-building among members of local immigrant and refugee communities through in-person and virtual cultural heritage exchanges. The “Heritage Conversation Partners Project”

(HCP) was supported by a 2022 grant from the Engagement Scholarship Consortium. This project consisted of a virtual cultural heritage exchange (VCHE) embedded in the curriculum of an upper-division applied anthropology methods course. The HCP aimed to address three research questions, namely, whether and how a VCHE (1) builds social bonds and bridges, (2) improves English language proficiency, and (3) raises heritage consciousness (awareness and appreciation of, along with an associated sense of agency toward, cultural heritage) among immigrant participants. In the following paragraphs, we provide more details on the background of the HCP, its protocol, structure, and outcomes, lessons learned, and our findings' general implications for the benefits of embedding VCHEs in college curricula.

CASE STUDY BACKGROUND

Four prior collaborations provided the foundation for the HCP: the Roots Project (2013), Heritage Voices Project (2015), Reclaiming Heritage Project (2019 and 2021), and Immigrant Cultural Heritage Recognition & Reclamation Project (2020). The launch of the Roots Project (Smell & Kimball, 2017) aimed to build social bonds and bridges through interaction with agricultural heritage at a local living history museum. In 2015, the Heritage Voices Project, supported by a grant from the then-Colorado Campus Compact of the Mountain West, advanced the mission of the Roots Project by allowing us to translate short descriptions of eight of the museum's exhibits written in English into eight additional languages for inclusion in museum brochures and on its website.

In 2019 and 2021, we conducted the Reclaiming Heritage Project (RHP; Kimball et al., 2019), a VCHE sponsored by the U.S. State Department's Communities Connecting Heritage Program and the educational nonprofit, World Learning, that brought together partners from Northern Colorado and Gujarat, India, to share cultural heritage both

in person and virtually. During the 2020 spring semester, in between the RHP's first and second parts—and just before and just after the COVID pandemic hit—we conducted the Immigrant Cultural Heritage Recognition and Reclamation Project with financial support from the University of Northern Colorado's (UNCO's) College of Humanities and Social Sciences, which allowed us to begin to examine a more holistic definition of heritage that includes affective (felt) as well as cognized experience (Kimball et al., 2020).

Our assessments suggested that English language instruction should play a central role in our development of the Heritage Conversation Partners Project recruitment, retention, and engagement of English language learners (ELL). This conclusion hinges on two factors: (1) *mutuality*, defined by Chen (2017, p. 330) as “the level of engagement with each other's contributions,” and (2) *practical relevance*, i.e., the relevance of the project to ELL participants' respective availabilities, needs, and goals (see, e.g., Kyeremeh et al., 2021).

When prospective ELL participants see that the project has practical value for them (practical relevance), they will join; when enrolled ELL participants feel “seen,” they respond with a higher level of engagement that supports their own learning and inspires others' investment of time and energy (mutuality). We also discovered that, due to their perception of the value of their own involvement, our student participant-researchers tended to feel a high level of investment and engagement in the course. This conclusion in particular is generally corroborated by scholars of community-engaged teaching and learning, even when program delivery is entirely online (e.g., Warren-Gordon & Jackson-Brown, 2022).

CASE STUDY

In 2008, the first author developed the curriculum for UNCO's undergraduate applied anthropology methods course and has

continuously updated the curriculum to accommodate new information and projects. From its inception, community engagement has been central to this curriculum’s design for all the excellent reasons teacher-scholars have been articulating for decades (e.g., Boyer, 1996; Welch & Plaxton-Moore, 2019).

Classes met weekly for three-hour workshop-style sessions in which students discussed course content, learned anthropological methods, collaborated on research, and reported out on their progress and interactions with ELL participants. Table 1 shows the course’s learning outcomes and assessment instruments.

Table 1. *Learning Outcomes and Assessment Instruments*

Learning Outcomes	Assessment
Recognize and recall the differences and similarities between applied anthropology and anthropology’s traditional subfields	Response papers on the history and practice of applied anthropology and the Heritage Conversation Partners project
Demonstrate understanding of and sensitivity to the ethical dimensions of applied anthropology	Response paper on the “four ethical considerations” in Zhao et al (2021); production of a “reflexivity journal” in which students reflected on their experiences of VCHE sessions and interactions with participants
Apply qualitative methodologies to collect data	Production of clean transcripts from recorded VCHE sessions
Affectively use data analysis methods as part of an applied anthropology project	Transcript analysis; production of coded transcripts, a coding manual, final report on results; production of materials for digital archive, including metadata
Demonstrate an ability to function effectively as part of an applied anthropology team	Team-produced products; results of hotwashes
Produce and deliver a professional-quality presentation at the university’s annual spring semester Research Day conference	Research Day oral presentation by research teams

English Language Learning Curriculum

Adult English language learners face several hurdles when it comes to gaining communicative competence in English. Canale and Swain (1980) first defined communicative competence as the appropriateness of language use in context, including not only grammatical knowledge and skills, but also the contextual/sociolinguistic proficiency to effectively use the language (i.e., knowing the rules of how language is used and then using that knowledge and those skills in meaningful contexts). The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach emerged from their work and became a strong influence in teaching English to speakers of other lang-

uages. The goal of using CLT is to ensure that ELL students can put together the discrete parts of language learning (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, writing, pronunciation, and grammar structures) and then use all the integrated parts to negotiate meaning and have successful authentic interaction in the target language. For adult ELL students, gaining communicative competence can be difficult because of external factors, e.g., not having enough time and energy to devote to practicing English (many adult learners have jobs and families that compete for their time and resources), the lack of opportunities to speak with people proficient in English, and lack of learner confidence and needing to break down

the barriers of fear of using the language to communicate (Krashen, 1981). However, time for language practice with people in authentic situations is critical to gains in learning another language, just as is reducing fear.

With these things in mind, the second author developed a curriculum for use with ELL and anthropology students that would activate mutual interest and exchange and offer the ELL students time to practice in a safe environment with the goal of bolstering their communicative competence over the VCHE sessions (six sessions for content-based practice and one additional session for wrapping up the time together). Best practice in adult learning and education to increase confidence and decrease fear means providing a secure environment free of judgment and full of opportunity, where confidence can blossom (Gass, Beheny & Plonsky, 2020; Salva & Matis, 2017; Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012; Knowles, Swanson, & Holton III, 2012). Matching the English language learners with the anthropology students was a win-win situation for both: The anthropology students could practice data collection methods and ELL students could have access to proficient English speakers with whom to access this much-needed practice in a safe and supported environment; that is, in small teams of learners with high-interest topics to talk about.

The insight behind developing a curriculum for use in the small teams of ELL and anthropology students was to choose high-interest conversation topics that also lent themselves to data collection on tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The six major topic areas were: (1) talking about oneself (basic information as well as the meaning of one's name); (2) holidays and celebrations; (3) money and finances; (4) home, family, and housing; (5) food and health; and (6) work. Further, the second author devised questions on her own and with the online resource ESL Discussion Topics (O'Leary, J., n.d.) to select questions that would lend themselves to authentic, small-group exchange. The anthropology students used the curriculum and

questions as a guide to facilitate conversations with their team's ELL participants.

Virtual Cultural Heritage Exchange

Our project comprised a total of five ELL participants and 22 anthropology students (15 of whom were VCHE participants and seven served in support roles because their schedules prevented them from attending sessions). Our VCHE consisted of three teams engaging in a series of seven weekly, one-hour video call sessions (via online platform Zoom) focused on cultural heritage-related conversations among three to four anthropology student participant-researchers and one or two local and international ELL students. Team membership was based first on the availabilities of our ELL participants, followed by those of our student participant-researchers. Thus, there were several of the latter whose schedules would not permit them to attend the sessions. Consequently, these students assumed support roles that we consider further in the next section and in the Discussion section.

ELL participants were recruited based on an interest survey and call for participation via the second author's network of adult students from her previous classes. In addition, the fourth author—one of the ELL participants who volunteered—recruited two more of her friends to participate. The participants all volunteered based on their interest in obtaining additional English practice. The ELL participants were predominantly immigrants to the United States from Mexico, El Salvador, Venezuela, and Brazil. For reasons of confidentiality, we did not ask participants whether they were or were not documented immigrants. One participant had not yet immigrated to the United States, but planned to do so. The other four immigrated as early as one year before and as much as 15 years before. All participants were adults, ranging in age between late 30s and early 60s. Three were female and two were male. All team members stayed in touch between Zoom sessions via WhatsApp or other messaging software to facilitate information sharing.

While remaining adaptable to change, each VCHE Zoom session aimed to reference one of the topics in our ELL curriculum. In addition, the anthropology student participant-researchers who facilitated the VCHE were guided by the “four ethical considerations” of positionality, intersubjectivity, openness and care, and power, as explicated in the book, *Making Sense of Social Research Methodology*, by Zhao et al. (2021). We achieved this through a written assignment, due in the semester’s third week, in which each student applied the ethical considerations to our project, using the prompt: “How might each of the four ethical considerations be used to prevent or produce ethical issues?” This was followed by an in-class discussion of their results and continued reference to the ethical considerations in subsequent discussions as the project ensued. As they facilitated and contributed to their respective team’s conversations, students were also encouraged to be attentive to equity, inclusiveness, and Chen’s (2017) concept of mutuality (defined above). These were also incorporated into ongoing in-class discussions.

We assessed the VCHE via a mid- and end-of-semester “hotwash,” i.e., an intensive, in-class discussion with students about what was and was not working well within and between sessions and their ideas for improvements. This process would begin with the VCHE teams (minus the ELL participants) meeting to discuss three questions: What is working? What is not working? How can we improve our project? Following this, each team would report out on their responses to each question. This hotwash process, which was a new addition to the curriculum, turned out to be valuable because it allowed students to air their concerns before they became serious, highlighted those concerns so we could address them, and because it engaged students in solution generation, which increased their buy-in and led to improvements in project coordination and communication.

Three of the Zoom sessions (weeks 2, 4, and 6) included time reserved for 15- to 20-

minute focus groups in which the anthropology students facilitated a discussion with our ELL participants about their assessments of the project and their own progress in learning English. Outside of the context of the VCHEs, we also conducted an online summative evaluation of our ELL participants’ experience via a Google survey in which they were invited to offer self-assessment of the project’s impact on their English language learning, their level of engagement with and comfort in talking about the project’s topics, and their suggestions for improvement; qualitative and quantitative results are summarized in [Figure 1](#). All five ELL participants responded to the survey. Their scores ranged between 3 and 5 (mean 3.8) for Question A (“How much has your confidence increased in using English?”); Question B (“I made connections with my own culture and with other cultures from participating in this project”) ranged between 4 and 5 (mean 4.6). Question C (“Would you recommend this project to other people?”) consisted of all 5s (“strongly agree”).

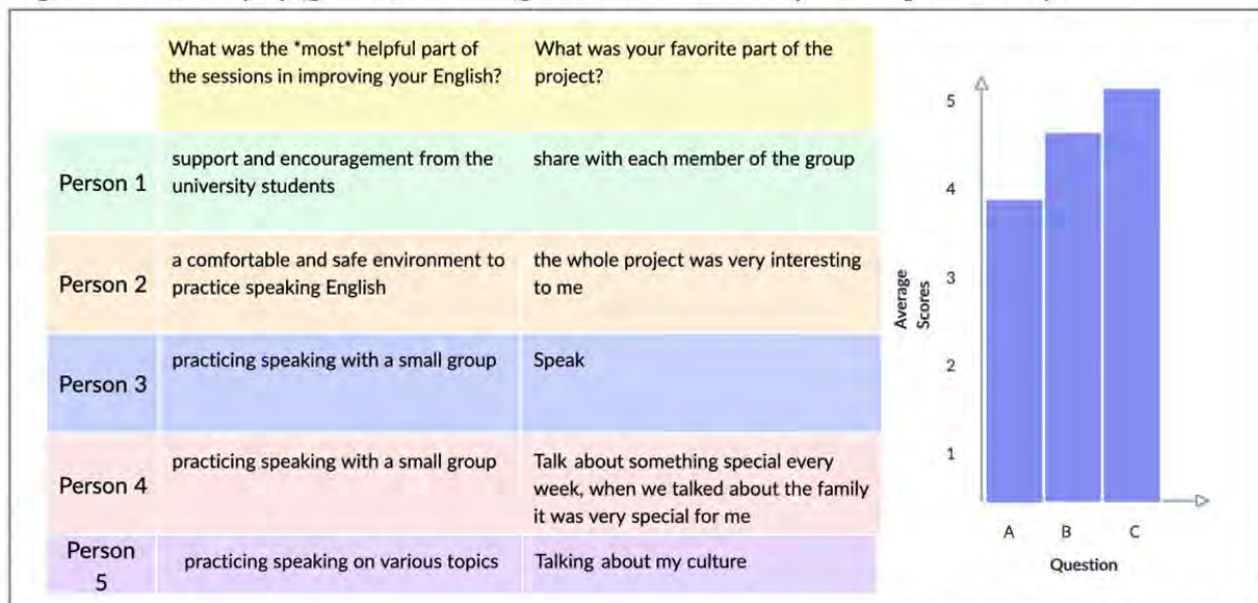
The Research Component

As the anthropology students had no prior background in qualitative research methods and, therefore, the rigor of their analyses varied across individuals and teams, the value of this project lies primarily in the realm of methods training and ethnographic research experience. To support these objectives, opportunities to collect, analyze, interpret, disseminate, and preserve anthropological data produced by our VCHE were central to the HCP. In the following paragraphs, we discuss this component and provide examples to illustrate its elements.

Data Collection and Analysis

This project received an “exempt” IRB designation. In keeping with research conduct protocol for prospective participants with insufficient English reading comprehension, during the first Zoom session, the student-researchers carefully read aloud to their ELL

Figure 1. Summary of Qualitative and Quantitative Results of Participant Surveys



Note. These data represent self-assessments from the participants, which included both short response answers and a 1-5 Likert scale (1 = very little/disagree). Question A: “As a result of this project, how much has your confidence increased in using English?” B: “I made connections with my own culture and with other cultures from participating in this project.” C: “Would you recommend this project to other people?”

participants a consent letter that defined what we mean by “cultural heritage, the project’s structure and purpose, how and what data would be collected, how the data would be used (including its preservation in a publicly accessible online archive), an option for confidentiality (no participant chose this option), and the option to opt out of the project at any time. Students then invited, received, and recorded each participant’s verbal consent to participate according to the terms of the consent document.

For each of their sessions, student participant-researchers used Zoom to cloud-record (i.e., store recorded content on Zoom’s remote servers) its content. These recordings included video and audio content, and, importantly, also a transcript of each session’s conversation auto-generated by Zoom’s transcription software. Designated members of each team then downloaded these transcripts and, over the course of the semester, edited them into a comprehensible format amenable to analysis.

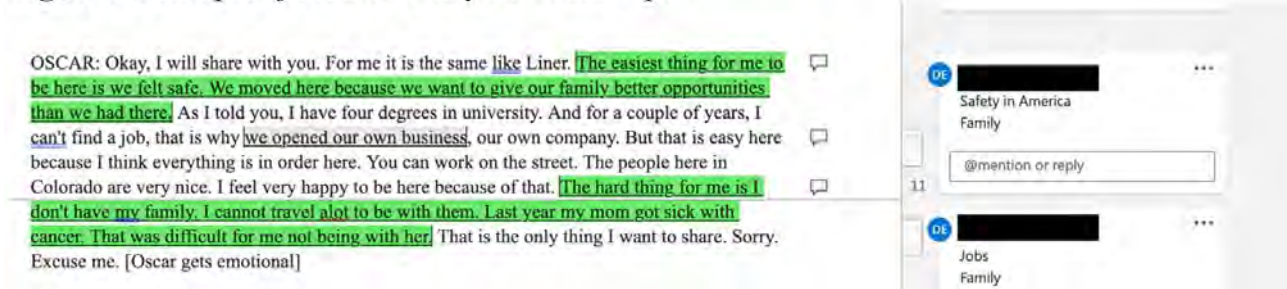
Based on instruction in content analysis (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005), students then inductively (i.e., guided by the project’s research questions) analyzed their session transcripts in two steps. The first step involved each student individually analyzing a session transcript to independently identify themes related to the research questions. The second step involved a collaborative effort in which each team met during class to discuss the themes they found and reach consensus on a single set of prevailing themes for a given session transcript. These themes addressed one or more of three research questions: How does a VCHE (1) help participants build social bonds and bridges, (2) improve English language learning, and (3) foster “heritage consciousness,” i.e., awareness and appreciation of, along with an associated sense of agency toward, one’s cultural heritage? This process resulted in two products for each team: a set of analyzed session transcripts (see [Figure 2](#)), and a final coding manual that summarizes

information about each theme, namely, its code/label, definition, a representative example from the transcript of a coded passage (word, phrase, or sentence), and which research question(s) the theme addresses (see Figure 3).

In total, our three teams identified and defined 41 themes across the VCHE sessions, the most frequent being family, food, language learning, and money/finances. With respect to the project’s research questions, namely, whether

our VCHE built social bonds and bridges, improved English language acquisition, and raised heritage consciousness, results from students’ analyses supported all three, with the first two questions receiving the strongest supporting evidence. Our VCHE’s positive results regarding the second question align with other research, e.g., García-Sampedro (2018), which shows that cultural heritage heightens the motivation of language learners.

Figure 2. Example of Student Analyzed Transcript



Note. Figure 1 represents an excerpt of a VCHE analyzed transcript with student-identified themes, which are compiled in the coding manual (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Example of Coding Manual

Code	Definition	Example	RQ
Family/ Relationship Connections	Verbal and nonverbal content describing, explaining, and expressing family members, familial memories, and familial traditions. Includes pets.	"I- I- I live in- in boulder [points down] [mumbles] with my wife and my daughter and 20 years 20 days." (transcript p. 7)	2, 3
Language/ English Proficiency Growth/ English Learning	Verbal and nonverbal content describing, explaining, and expressing language proficiency, enjoyment, and mechanics.	"...Yes, is very difficult, but in Brazil, I don't study English. I don't- no necessary English" (transcript p. 10)	1, 3
Holidays/ Celebrations	Verbal and nonverbal content describing, explaining, and expressing holidays and celebrations, memories surrounding holidays, and traditions surrounding holidays.	"In Brazil, um, several holiday, 12 holiday national [shakes head]. [Thumbs down, laughs] Workers [gestures around with hands]. Many holiday. But my holiday favorite, um, Christmas. Christmas." (transcript p. 12)	2, 3
Weather	Verbal and nonverbal content describing, explaining, and expressing the weather and activities that depend on the weather.	"Yeah, yeah, I live in Boulder Colorado. It's a very beautiful city, I like it is walking [using fingers to show walking] the mountain. This is snow, no, Brazil. Is no- [hugs himself, mimicking being cold]." (transcript p. 18)	3
Expression of Personality	Verbal and nonverbal content describing, explaining, and expressing personality (included joking around and hand gestures).	"[Acting as a child] Ah, father, father! Come on puppet snow! I froze, it's snow [miming being cold]. [Acting as a child again] No papa, come out!" (transcript p. 19)	3
Brazil and Colorado Compare/Contrast	Verbal and nonverbal content describing, explaining, and expressing the similarities and differences between Colorado and Brazil (includes climate, culture, economy, and every other facet of living and existing in a place).	"Many peoples in celebrations in beach, in- in- in the- the mountains. Is- is- is different [rocks hand side to side], is different. In the USA, I think more, celebration in the- in the Jesus. In Brazil more- [throwing hands out] fun, more party, more party [laughs]." (transcript p. 15)	2, 3

Note. The Code section refers to the theme identified, followed by a definition, and example directly from the transcript reflecting the research question(s) it addresses. “RQ” refers to the research question addressed by a theme.

Dissemination of Results

Every April, the first author’s university hosts a Research Day in which undergraduate and graduate students, as individuals or groups, have an opportunity to formally present their scholarly work. Employ-

ing the traditional academic conference format, prospective presenters or their faculty sponsors must submit abstracts for refereed review and, if their proposal is approved, present their work in an oral or poster session. In addition to providing an opportunity for

members of the university community to explore the diversity of student scholarship and network, Research Day also advances students' professional development by giving them a platform on which to practice presenting research in a professional setting.

In the capacity of faculty sponsor, the first author submitted an abstract for the HCP to the Research Day committee. Upon receiving approval, he used class sessions to facilitate teams' development of their respective parts of a 60-minute oral presentation. At this point in the project—late March—teams had not yet collected and analyzed all of the project's data, so they prepared a presentation of preliminary results. The final product consisted of a single, seamlessly integrated oral presentation supported by Google Slides in which, after an introduction to the project and a description of its design and methods led by student presenters, members of each team shared the themes they had thus far identified in the transcripts, how these themes were related to the project's research questions, and, based on focus group results and ethnographic observations of verbal and nonverbal (e.g., body language) behavior, how the ELL participants were responding to their heritage conversations. To support their arguments, the students shared quotations they selected from the transcripts and video clips from the Zoom recordings. They concluded with a summary of findings, discussion of research limitations and implications (presented by this paper's third author), and acknowledgements.

Data Preservation

Digital UNC is an online, publicly accessible archive for special collections and scholarship and creative works that is maintained by the UNCO Libraries. In partnership with Digital UNC archivists, to preserve cultural heritage data and analysis results generated by the HCP, the research teams produced a set of video clips representing each of the themes they identified through their transcript analyses. For each clip, they entered metadata that included information such as

interviewee name(s), coding manual entries (code, definition, example, research questions), recording date, etc. Thus, HCP project results are available in relative perpetuity (as much as digital objects can possess) for anyone with Internet access who wishes to explore the results or integrate them into their own research.

DISCUSSION

The grant-funded Heritage Conversation Partners project, conducted as a Virtual Cultural Heritage Exchange embedded in an upper-division undergraduate course, was designed to teach applied anthropology methods to university students while also facilitating the construction of social bonds and bridges, English language learning, and heritage consciousness among immigrant participants. Based on previous experience with community-engaged teaching and learning and VCHEs in particular, the first and second authors developed an ELL curriculum and VCHE structure that emphasized mutuality, i.e., a high "level of engagement with each other's contributions" (Chen, 2017) and practical relevance for our ELL participants. The content and quality of the students' presentations, research reports, and research products demonstrated their learning and effective application of anthropological methods and perspectives. Student participant-researcher feedback from "hotwashes" and other discussions as well as focus group and participant survey results suggest that we were reasonably successful in this regard (but see below). The results of the summative evaluation in particular affirmed the project's prioritization of the needs of ELL participants and the anthropology students' considerable investment of time and energy in its execution. We will use these results to inform the project's next iteration and improve the continued development and implementation of its formative and summative evaluative tools.

There were three areas that call for improvements in the course's design: (1) interaction medium, (2) team dynamics, and

(3) mutuality. Regarding the first category, although Zoom provides a sophisticated platform for virtual exchange, it is no substitute for in-person interaction. Students voiced their preference for having in-person conversations, but also acknowledged that the virtual medium was more inclusive, allowing people to participate who, due to their constraints, might not otherwise have been able to do so.

Regarding the second category, we identified two areas for improvement: team-based interpersonal relations, and division of labor. First, more planning time must be dedicated to finding ways to assess and support interpersonal relations within research teams. When students are randomly assigned to teams, one never knows which students will work well together and which will not. This is, of course, a perennial problem with group projects, but it is also a challenge outside of academia or in graduate school, where college graduates will inevitably encounter team-related interpersonal conflicts in their workplaces. As course-based group projects can offer safe spaces for students to develop resilience and conflict management techniques that will serve them well in their careers, we need to dedicate more effort to teaching these skills in the context of the project's research teams. Second, students were frustrated with the loose way in which work was distributed across their teams, which included both active (Zoom participants) and passive (support) personnel. To address this problem, future iterations will focus on a well-defined division of labor that emphasizes personal accountability and clearer job descriptions.

Finally, although student and participant feedback demonstrates the project's achievement of mutuality, there is still room for improvement here as well. One participant noted in their survey response that some students had patchy attendance, and some were very quiet during the conversations. We can address this problem with more targeted assessments and clearly articulated expectations. Likewise, students noted that the questions asked during the conversations tended to be one-sided (students asking

participants). This is predictable given the students' higher English proficiency, but with more preparation of students prior to the VCHE, it will be possible to bring this factor more into balance as well.

In summary, the advantages of embedding a virtual cultural heritage exchange in an anthropology course include experiential learning, intercultural communication, scholarly inquiry, professional development, and personally relevant outcomes for non-college student participants. Aside from its curricular benefits, one of our project's most salient outcomes was showing that VCHEs are aligned with the needs of ELL students to improve their confidence and motivation to learn English. With respect to our other research questions, although our conclusions must remain tentative until more rigorous research is conducted, current evidence suggests that a VCHE can strengthen social bonds and bridges, a key component in immigrant social integration (Ager & Strang, 2008). We have less evidence to support an increase in heritage consciousness, which we will consider more carefully in the project's next iteration. In conclusion, we contend that a VCHE could be easily designed to fit the needs and learning outcomes of a variety of disciplines, such as other social sciences, humanities, health fields, education, and business—essentially, any field whose students and communities would benefit from engagement in semi-structured cross-cultural conversations.

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