

VITALS in PRACTICE

A Practical Implementation of Annika Brück-Hübner's
Virtual International Teaching and Learning Skills (VITALS)

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Introduction

This volume is a compilation of the presentations given by Juliane Sommer and Anna Sophie Jäger from Justus-Liebig-University Giessen (Project NIDIT) for the *VITALS – BUILDING BRIDGES* workshop during the summer semester of 2024 and the collaborative outcome from group work conducted by the participants following the presentations. The workshop primarily drew upon the foundational concepts introduced in Annika Brück-Hübner's *VITALS – Virtual International Teaching and Learning Skills*. Its aim was to build on the presented ideas through practical application, in-depth discussion, and further development. The participants' interests and contributions sparked a dialogue that enriched the original framework to such an extent that the idea of publishing a second *VITALS* volume emerged. This script is intended to serve as both a record of the expanded content and as a quick reference guide for those interested in innovative teaching methodologies and collaborative learning environments.

The volume is organized into four main sections: The first presents a glossary, the second reflects on basic didactic principles, the third explores additional potential benefits of Virtual International Teaching, and the fourth discusses further challenges along with additional workarounds in Virtual International Teaching.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who helped bring this volume to life. I am especially thankful to my trusted collaborator, Juliane Sommer, and to the participants in our seminar: Teresa Ting, for her invaluable insights on how language shapes and reinforces hierarchical structures; Alina Sikatch, for her thoughtful reflections from a hard sciences perspective; Lauwrence Loock, for his expansive anthropological and practical knowledge; Ievgen Bilyk, for his sensitivity and perceptive observations on human character; Julie Lindsay, for introducing me to the concept of the 'flattened classroom'; and Elena Pupo, for generously sharing her expertise and use cases drawn from years

of teaching experience. Further thanks are due to my nationwide working group, *Communitybuilding für Communitybuilder*, for our collaboration on creating networks and communities in higher education, both within home universities and beyond. The insights we developed on effective collaboration have been applied within the context of Virtual International Teaching and are reflected in the chapter of the same name.

1 Glossary

Assessment refers to the process of evaluating learners' progress and performance through various methods, such as tests, projects, or presentations. By incorporating diverse assessment types, educators can not only gain a comprehensive understanding of their students' abilities but also guide their instruction more effectively. In **Virtual International Teaching**, assessment involves unique challenges, such as ensuring fairness across diverse cultural and technological contexts.

Asynchronous Teaching, in contrast to synchronous teaching, allows learners to study at their own pace. Learning materials, such as pre-recorded lectures and written scripts, are made available online, and educational forums provide opportunities for students to ask questions. **Assessments** can be completed online and through automated or self-assessment tasks. This teaching style offers the flexibility to participate at various times and from different locations, making it a highly inclusive approach.

Blended Learning / Teaching is a type of teaching/learning that mixes virtual and face-to-face interactions between educators and learners in a sequential manner.

Break-Out Room is a feature in online platforms like Zoom, Teams or Big Blue Button that allows participants to be divided into smaller groups to foster focused discussions and effective collaboration. It helps promote interaction, especially among diverse students, by enabling more personalized exchanges before returning to the main session.

Channel Reduction refers to the limitation (or 'impoverishment' [11]) of communication cues in online environments compared to face-to-face

interactions. In virtual settings, non-verbal and para-verbal cues like body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice may be reduced or lost, leaving communication to rely primarily on written or spoken words. This reduction can sometimes lead to misunderstandings or less effective communication, especially in diverse, international settings where cultural differences in communication styles are also present.

COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) is a mode of **Virtual International Teaching** and describes a course that is planned, hosted, and supervised by lecturers (C) from two different countries (I) with their designated seminar groups (L) taking place in **digital learning environments** (O). COIL courses itself are strongly focused on processes of student collaboration.

Community of Practice (CoP) is a group of people with a shared interest or expertise who regularly interact to exchange knowledge, learn from each other, and improve their skills. CoPs focus on a common domain, build a collaborative community, and share good practices, fostering knowledge transfer and innovation [20].

Constructive Alignment is a teaching approach that ensures all aspects of a course—**learning objectives**, teaching activities, and **assessments**—are aligned to support the intended learning outcome [4].

Didaktischer Doppeldecker (literal translation: didactical biplane) is a concept that describes two essential levels of teaching and learning: the content level and the relational level [25].

1. The content level refers to the substantive aspects of teaching, i.e., what is taught and learned, including the subject matter and methodology.
2. The relational level refers to the interpersonal aspects of teaching, i.e., the rela-

tionship between teachers and students, involving trust, respect, motivation, and the emotional climate in the classroom.

The concept emphasizes that both levels are equally important and influence each other. Effective teaching and learning occur when both the substantive and interpersonal aspects are considered and nurtured.

Digital Learning Environment describes all online platforms for **asynchronous** access to course materials or rather virtual spaces for **synchronous** interaction with instructors and peers.

E-Portfolio is a digital collection of students' work that showcases their learning progress and achievements. In **Virtual International Teaching**, it provides a flexible way for students to demonstrate skills across diverse contexts, allowing for personalized learning and **assessment**.

Feedback is a reciprocal process for teachers and learners, providing information about performance and guiding improvement. To encourage honest feedback and honour reservations through hierarchical structures, anonymous tools such as OnlineTED, ARS Nova, and PINGO can be useful.

Flattend Classroom refers to an approach that reduces traditional power hierarchies between teachers and students. It encourages collaboration, student-centered learning, and equal participation, often leveraging technology to connect students globally and create a more inclusive, interactive environment [12].

Flipped Classroom is a mode of teaching/learning where the traditional way of passing on knowledge is 'flipped': Instead of students passively receiving lectures in class and doing homework at home, they engage with

instructional content and learning materials (e.g., scripts, (explanatory) videos, technical literature, etc.) as well as learning tasks outside of class to actively prepare for the session. Then, class time is used for independent application, discussions, problem solving, questions and exercises. The teacher merely serves as a facilitator or guide rather than the primary source of information [13].

Glossary is a key tool in fostering effective communication, particularly in the context of **Virtual International Teaching**, where diverse backgrounds, languages, and terminologies converge. As highlighted in Brück-Hübner's VITALS-Script [8], a glossary supports both students and teachers by clarifying new terms and helping navigate words that may carry different meanings or connotations across contexts or languages. By providing clear definitions, the glossary ensures smoother interactions, reduces misunderstandings, and enhances the overall learning experience in a globally connected environment. Additionally, a glossary can serve as a starting point for discussion, encouraging deeper engagement and reflection. This process not only enhances understanding but also helps to develop own definitions and perspectives on the given subject, further enriching the learning experience.

Hybrid Teaching is a format that combines in-person sessions with virtual broadcasting, allowing participants to join either physically or online.

Impersonal Communication, in contrast to **personal communication**, entails general information/announcements posted on bulletin boards or sent via mass emails, automated **feedback** given through systems or platforms that may not address individual concerns, like chat bots, pre-recorded video lectures or presentations, standardized tests or **assessments** that provide **feedback** in a generalized format without personal

commentary on specific student performance.

Innovative Teaching involves using creative and modern methods to enhance learning, often by integrating new technologies, interactive activities, and student-centred approaches. In **Virtual International Teaching**, it includes leveraging digital tools like virtual classrooms, interactive simulations, and collaborative platforms to engage students, fostering a more dynamic and adaptable learning environment.

Intercultural Competencies is the ability to interact effectively and respectfully with people from different backgrounds. It involves understanding and adapting to cultural differences, communicating sensitively, and navigating diverse social contexts. Culture here does not only refer to the culture of a particular country but also encompasses professional culture, culture surrounding the research subject, ways of interaction, intergenerational differences, and other factors that shape how people engage with each other in various settings.

Internationalization Abroad as antithesis to **Internationalization at Home** and the traditional way to internationalize, provides a range of benefits that can enhance the educational experience and career prospects in the future:

1. Cultural Immersion: Direct experiences in a different culture enhance **intercultural competence**.
2. Global Networking: Opportunities to build an international network.
3. Enhanced Language Skills: Authentic application of language through daily interaction with native speakers.
4. Broader Academic Perspectives: Access to diverse teaching methods and global viewpoints.

Internationalization at Home is more inclusive, more sustainable for the environment and financially and responsibly less demanding as **Internationalization Abroad**. It can be achieved in four interrelated and combinable ways [8]:

1. Virtual Mobility: Participation in **virtual learning environments**.
2. Curricular Internationalization: Integration of intercultural and international dimensions into local curricula.
3. Lingua Franca: Teaching and learning in foreign languages.
4. Offshore Campus: Established universities building campuses in other countries.

Internationalization Policy is a strategic framework that promotes cross-border collaboration, global engagement, and the integration of international perspectives within institutional practices. Key objectives often include:

1. Developing university staff and students as global learners and citizens.
2. Preparing graduates to perform capably and sensitively in international and multicultural societies.
3. Encouraging staff to develop as international researchers and deliver teaching and training at international standards.
4. Facilitating collaborative links between international communities.

Learning Objectives are specific goals outlining what students should know, be able to do, or value by the end of a course. They guide the design of activities and **assessments** and ensure that they are relevant to a heterogeneous learning group and measurable across diverse cultural and technological contexts. They always follow the same structure [5]: Given a set of data (condition), the student will be able to calculate the

mean and standard deviation (behaviour) with 90% accuracy, within 10 minutes (criterion).

In **Virtual International Teaching**, they primarily focus on intercultural and communication competencies.

1. Condition: Given a virtual role-playing exercise with international classmates, simulating a business meeting...
2. Behaviour: ...the learner will communicate effectively, using appropriate language and tone to negotiate a solution to a cultural conflict in the scenario...
3. Criterion: ...through demonstrating clear, respectful communication, with at least 80% accuracy in using culturally appropriate language and strategies within the 20-minute exercise.

Lurking refers to the practice of participants observing online discussions or activities in **digital learning environments** without actively contributing—often indicated by a ‘black tile’ (i.e., leaving their cameras off). In international settings, this can occur due to language barriers or cultural differences, but also personal preference. While ‘lurkers’ do not engage directly, they may still learn by reading and processing the content. However, their lack of active participation limits their opportunities for collaboration and negatively impacts the group’s dynamics.

MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) stands for a course (C) that is a complete online (O) learning experience, designed for an unlimited number (M) of participants, accessible for free and without entry qualifications (O).

Para-Social Interaction (PSI) refers to an audience’s engagement with media that extends beyond passive observation. Instead, audiences are drawn into the program’s social dynamics

and action, with performers mirroring this interaction to create a simulacrum of real conversational exchange and para-social relationship. Modern broadcast and social media introduced new dimensions to PSIs:

1. Social Media and Live Streaming: Platforms where reciprocal interaction, community affiliation, and fandom play significant roles.
2. Artificial Intelligence and Avatars: Non-human entities that can create emotional engagement similar to human interactions.
3. Non-anthropomorphized Commercial Entities: Brands and characters that engage audiences in para-social ways.

Para-Social Relationship (PSR) is a phenomenon that allows even the most remote and public figures to appear through media as if they are within one’s personal sphere. From newer formats like YouTube-videos, streams, Instagram-post, etc. to movies, television, magazines and books, mass media has always given individuals ‘the illusion of a face-to-face relationship’ [17] with the characters presented. From a social cognitive perspective, PSRs share many psychological characteristics with real social relationships (reciprocal interaction, community affiliation, emotional engagement, wishful identification, presence), blurring the lines between reality and virtuality.

Understanding these dynamics helps in grasping how media figures can impact audiences deeply, creating relationships that, while not reciprocal in the traditional sense, hold significant emotional and psychological value. Moreover, it teaches us that “[i]f humans are instinctively primed to treat media content as real, we should form PSRs as responsibly as social ones.” [17]

Personal Communication in opposition to **im-personal communication**, includes face-to-face meetings and direct conversations during office hours, personalized emails or messages including individualized **feedback** or specific comments regarding work or progresses, classroom discussions and interactive dialogues as well as virtual meetings using conferencing tools that allow for visual and auditory communication.

Poll a quick, informal survey that captures student opinions, preferences, or understanding on a topic. Polls in **Virtual International Teaching** contexts encourage participation, facilitate real-time **feedback**, and allow students from different backgrounds to share perspectives, fostering an inclusive and interactive learning environment.

Quiz(zes) are structured **assessments** designed to evaluate students' understanding of course material, often through multiple-choice, true/false, or short-answer questions. In **Virtual International Teaching**, quizzes can be used to check comprehension, reinforce key concepts, and provide immediate **feedback**, allowing instructors to address knowledge gaps across international cohorts.

Rubric(s) are a tool used for assessing students' work by outlining specific criteria and performance levels. Rubrics provide transparency in expectations for assignments and help ensure consistent, objective and fair grading. Developing a rubric, when one is not provided by the institution, is a timely investment but it simplifies the grading process. Cooperating with colleagues promotes inter-rater reliability.

Sandwich refers to a communication strategy for giving **feedback**. It suggests beginning with a positive comment ('bun'), following with an area for improvement along with suggestions ('patty'), and concluding with an additional positive remark ('bun').

Synchronous Teaching, as opposed to **asynchronous teaching**, refers to a teaching style where instructors and students interact in real-time, in **Virtual International Teaching** through live video lectures, chats, or discussions. This method allows for immediate **feedback** and active participation.

Third Space is an informal space for spontaneous encounter, like the few minutes before or after class in a lecture hall, or in common areas like cafeterias or libraries. In **Virtual International Teaching**, such spaces need to be created deliberately.

Virtual International Teaching (VIT) is a structured learning process where participants from at least two nationalities use digital media for teaching, learning, and communication. As a form of distance learning, VIT enhances intercultural exchange without requiring physical mobility. It can be fully virtual, **hybrid**, or **blended** [9].

2 Basic Didactic Principles

2.1 Teaching Approaches

Teaching is never a one-size-fits-all endeavour. This chapter explores how educators can embrace diverse teaching styles to create dynamic and effective learning environments and equip students with both the hard facts and the soft skills, the autonomy and relationality, and the theory and methodology necessary for their future professional success.

Hierarchy Structures

A. Top-Down Approach: In subjects like chemistry and other ‘hard sciences’¹, the top-down approach often dominates due to the necessity of conveying established laws, mechanisms, and principles. The structured nature of these disciplines requires a foundational understanding before meaningful discussions can occur. Therefore, the teacher’s role is often more directive, ensuring students grasp the essential facts and methodologies. Interaction happens mainly when problems need to be solved or training exercises are conducted, allowing for practical application of the learned principles.

B. Bottom-Up and Horizontal Approach: Despite the constraints in hard sciences, adopting a bottom-up or horizontal approach can be highly beneficial. This method encourages an open exchange of **feedback** and criticism between students and teachers, fostering a mutual learning environment. One technique is to strive to create a ‘**flat classroom**’ scenario where hierarchy is minimized, and all participants are encouraged to speak freely and learn from each other.

¹See [3] for a critique of the rigid categorization of academic disciplines, which has become increasingly problematic in light of the growing emphasis on interdisciplinarity in higher education.

Desired Outcomes

C. Understanding and Mutuality: The ultimate goal is for both students and teachers to leave the class with a profound sense of understanding. This understanding encompasses not only the subject matter but also the mutual respect and collaboration among participants. By fostering an environment of mutuality, students feel more engaged and valued, enhancing their overall learning experience.

D. Motivation and Inspiration: It is crucial that students leave each class feeling motivated and inspired. They should feel that their time investment was worthwhile and be eager to return for future sessions. Building **communities of practice** within the classroom helps achieve these objectives; ensuring students remain committed and enthusiastic about their learning journey.

Fact-Based and Soft-Skilled

E. Integrating Humanities and Practical Tasks: In disciplines such as medicine, where the acquisition of concrete facts is paramount, the teaching approach must adapt to ensure students retain essential knowledge while also developing critical soft skills. For instance, while doctors must memorize the structure and function of the heart, it is equally important they learn to communicate effectively with patients. Incorporating elements of the humanities into medical education can enhance students’ people skills. After learning a fact (e.g., the heart has four chambers), students should be tasked with explaining it to a patient and their families. This dual-focus task reinforces their factual knowledge while simultaneously improving their communication abilities.

Language and Discourse

G. Teaching Disciplinary Language: As experts in their respective fields, university teachers have the responsibility to teach students the specific discourse of their designated disciplines. It is essential for students to learn how to articulate their knowledge accurately within their field's unique linguistic framework. However, according to Halliday and Martin [16], this can create an alienating force when learners are not yet familiar with the language. Maton's [22] concept of the semantic wave emphasizes the importance of moving fluidly—like a wave—between abstract theoretical concepts and concrete practical examples, as well as between disciplinary terminology and concepts that resonate with students' understanding. This dynamic process ensures that students not only grasp foundational knowledge but can also explain it to non-specialists and apply it in real-world contexts.

2.2 Feedback

Elements of Effective Feedback

Effective feedback should be:

- Concrete and promptly communicated.
- Relevant and delivered with care.
- Objective but tailored to the recipient.
- Focused on strengths and areas for improvement.
- Inviting discussion and dialogue.
- Practical and actionable.
- Descriptive and non-judgemental.
- Guiding not lecturing.
- Part of ongoing support.

Key Element of Effective Feedback

All of the elements that make feedback effective can be traced back to social competencies and educational psychology, including a deep understanding of hierarchies in learning environments, intrinsic motivation, and overall empathy. This is because the value and effectiveness of feedback depend greatly on the quality and nature of the relationship between the giver and the receiver: What is the organizational/structural context in which they operate? Do they like each other? Will bad feedback strain their relationship? Do both parties use the same communication style or adhere to the same values (depending on subject culture, local culture, and personality)? Which norms decrease in good relationships, and which increase?

Thinking about these questions is critical because teachers might fear voicing critique out of concern for damaging their bond with students. Meanwhile, although making mistakes is entirely human, being critiqued for them can lead students to become reserved and question their self-worth. Both scenarios should be avoided under all circumstances. In a thoughtful and positively established relationship, however, feedback can realize its full potential.

A. Communication: Communication between teachers and students can be **personal** and **impersonal**. It always occurs through representational systems, i.e., media. This includes writing, language, facial expressions, gestures, tone, vibes, air, etc. These factors, which are fundamentally influential, **appear altered in virtual spaces**. In offline-settings teachers are often faced with the problem of students communicating with each other instead of with them, which at least shows interaction with the learning environment. In online formats this differs because simultaneous oral conversation is impossible (parallel texting via chat is an option though), which makes online-learning spaces to very controlled areas for teachers. The challenge here

lies in how to engage participants.

B. Engaging Students: All sensory inputs are processed in a similar manner, except for auditory signals. According to Wolfe [26], auditory information is stored as echoic memory, which takes longer to process than input from other senses. Therefore, engaging a classroom using only voice, whether online or offline, would be a constrained approach, focusing on the least immediate sense of the participants. This highlights the importance of broadening engagement strategies beyond mere auditory input. For Bouvier [7], the key to effectively engaging students is one word—relationships! Feder agrees, noting that positive teacher-student relationships “can improve student self-confidence, academic performance, and mutual respect between the two parties. [...] [They] let students feel secure, so they can speak up in class and reach out when needed [...]” [14] In this context, learning occurs in an environment of trust, free from fear, judgment, or failure. This, in turn, “results in more-engaged learners who are willing to take risks while exploring new ideas.” [14]

C. Building Relationships: Both Bouvier and Feder advocate for intentional relationality based on measures teachers can take to be liked and respected by their students so that they want to engage. Here are their key points, which might seem arbitrary at times but are nonetheless crucial:

Respectful Communication

- Address students with genuine (academic) interest and as individuals with lives outside of university. Listen attentively, patiently and understandingly.
- Consistently use students’ names (consider cultural norms for formal or informal address, like ‘du’ or ‘Sie’ in German), say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’.

- Make students feel valued through establishing a mutual learning environment.

Support and Positivity

- Small but meaningful gestures, like starting and ending each day with a friendly greeting and encouraging words can make a big difference. Be in an ongoing conversation with your students and available for them to reach out.
- Encourage open dialogue and implement regular conversations in which students may share personal stories and interests to help them feel comfortable and connected.
- View mistakes as opportunities for growth to help students develop resilience and grit. Celebrate successes and offer incentives/extra credit.

Collaboration in Development

- Allow students to make decisions (like choosing projects) to develop problem-solving skills, independence, responsibility, and ownership about their learning.
- Use creative and collaborative activities, connect lessons to students’ interests, adapt teaching methods to meet individual needs, develop open-ended questions, and demonstrate the relevance of the material to student life.

Role Model Behaviour

- Exhibit the behaviours and attitudes you expect from your students, such as practicing self-care and encouraging them to do the same.
- Showing enthusiasm and passion for your subject is essential as a teacher for fostering an atmosphere of learning and exploration. Enthusiasm motivates students to

learn, while passion shows them how the lessons have relevance and purpose.

- Acknowledge your own mistakes, create a safe space for students to do the same, and deduce learning opportunities.

2.3 Assessment

A. Types of Assessment

Assessment types can be differentiated through their intent [10]:

- Diagnostic Assessment, *e.g. pre-tests, diagnostic quizzes, and initial observations*, to identify students' existing knowledge, skills, and any learning gaps before the instruction begins.
- Formative Assessment, *e.g. homework assignments and in-class activities*, to monitor student learning and to provide ongoing **feedback** that can be used by the instructor to improve their teaching and by the student to improve their learning.
- Summative Assessment, *e.g. final exams and end-of-term projects*, to evaluate students learning at the end of an instructional unit by comparing it against some standard or benchmark.
- Norm-Referenced Assessment, *e.g. standardized tests like SATs and IQ tests*, to compare a student's performance against the performance of their peers.
- Criterion-Referenced Assessment, *e.g. classroom tests and performance rubrics*, to measure a student's performance against a fixed set of criteria or learning standards.
- Ipsative Assessment, *e.g. self-assessments, reflective journals, and progress portfolios*, to compare a student's current performance with their previous performance to measure personal improvement.

B. Forms of Assessment

In addition, assessment falls more or less into the following formative categories. The categories of blocks 1 and 2 are mix and match able with each other:

Block 1

– Instructor-Assessment:

Advantages: Provides expert evaluation and consistent grading.

Disadvantages: Can be time-consuming and may not capture all aspects of a students' understanding.

– Self-Assessment

Advantages: Encourages self-reflection and promotes independent learning.

Disadvantages: May lack objectivity and students may overestimate or underestimate their abilities.

– Peer-Assessment

Advantages: Promotes collaborative learning, provides diverse **feedback** perspectives, and collaboration.

Disadvantages: Can be inconsistent and may affect student relationships potential.

Block 2

– Written Assessment

Best For: Assessing detailed knowledge, writing skills, understanding, reflection, improvement processes; may enhance critical thinking.

– Oral Assessment

Best For: Evaluating presentation skills, language proficiency, debating skills, and verbal expression in public speaking, language courses, and business.

– Performance-Based Assessment

Best For: Measuring practical abilities / real-world applications and project outcomes in engineering, performing arts, and medicine.

C. Assessment Rubrics

To design a clear, effective grading rubric follow these steps:

1. Select which elements (dimensions) must be present in a student's work to make it high quality.
2. Decide how many levels of achievement you include (scales), taking your institution's grading scheme into account.
3. Describe in detail what the performance at each achievement level looks like for each criterion, component, or essential element of quality.
4. Establish how you will derive the grade (formula, multiplier, ...) and if you want to include a hierarchy to various components of the assignment, but always be explicit.
5. Be absolutely transparent with your expectations – grading criteria is not meant to be a surprise.

3 Using the Potential of VIT

3.1 Hybrid and Online Teaching

In which situations does **hybrid teaching** make sense, and when is online teaching more appropriate?

Online teaching is best for theoretical, lecture-based courses that can be delivered through videos, readings, and online discussions. It provides accessibility and convenience for students balancing education with work or caregiving, and those who are geographically dispersed. Online teaching is scaffolded, cost-effective, and ensures continuity during disruptions such as health crises, wars, or natural disasters.

Hybrid teaching is ideal for courses that require both theoretical knowledge and hands-on experience, such as lab work, studio practice in arts, group projects, and courses that benefit from in-person brainstorming, teamwork, and access to campus resources like libraries, archives and specialized equipment, like software. It combines the flexibility of online teaching with in-person support services, like counselling, practicing, and tutoring. Choosing the right method enhances learning outcomes and student satisfaction.

3.2 International Networks

How to create digital and/or international opportunities for networking and cooperating in research and teaching?

A. Finding Like-Minded Professionals

Sign up for relevant events both offline and online to meet potential collaborators or initiate your own, using relevant keywords to attract and identify professionals interested in specific topics. Utilize social media platforms like LinkedIn, Reddit, academia.edu, or email newsletters to

engage with a diverse group of people across different age groups and geographic locations. For online research collaboration use VoiceThread and flip; both posit a video-based platform for the collaboration of thought and thus research.

B. Designing an Online Networking Event

Provide valuable content and co-creation opportunities. Include group tasks and clear reasons to connect and communicate in an organized framework. Facilitate finding common interests and chances for collaboration to create synergies.

C. Building (International) Communities

1. Leverage existing networks and structures by identifying and engaging specific groups that would benefit from joining the community. Contact multipliers and key figures such as deans, award-winning educators, and good practice exemplars.
2. Clearly define the community's objectives and the type of community you aim to create. Set an initial cooperative task to establish the scope and focus of the community. Establish a transparent framework by defining clear rules for meetings, including times and locations, and set participation guidelines such as keeping cameras on during meetings and using group interaction techniques.
3. Create incentives by offering appreciation, recognition, and visibility for contributions to motivate participation. Provide opportunities to expand teaching portfolios, gain accreditation, facilitate peer support, and share knowledge within the community. In the end, people stay in communities where they feel they belong, so prioritize sociality above all else.

D. Constructing a COIL Seminar

1. Identify and select a partner institution and individual to collaborate with on the seminar.
2. Agree on shared **learning objectives** and outcomes for the seminar, including soft skills, communication, and language proficiency alongside subject matter content.
3. Outline the seminar schedule, modules, and activities with your partner.
4. Decide on communication channels and platforms (e.g., email, video conferencing, shared documents) for collaboration and student interaction.
5. Design joint assignments and projects that encourage cross-cultural exchange.
6. Agree on methods and standards for evaluating students' work. Offer clear and precise instructions (**rubric**) to ensure active participation.
7. Prepare an introductory session to help students understand COIL goals, cultural considerations, and online tools.
8. Ensure all parties are comfortable with the chosen technologies and troubleshoot any issues in advance.

3.3 Hierarchy Structures

Evolving teaching styles in virtual settings are characterized by availability and connectedness. They reflect new educational paradigms where mentorship and interaction take precedence over traditional hierarchies and rigid structures. This shift challenges conventional power dynamics, offering opportunities to rethink how authority and hierarchy operate in educational contexts.

A. Vertikal Relationships

Digital communication platforms are part of the transforming force traditional teaching is under by dismantling hierarchical barriers, making teachers more approachable and personable. One reason for this is that both teachers and students are still relatively new to virtual teaching technology, often exploring these digital spaces together. In many cases, students may even be more technically adept than their instructors, creating a more balanced, collaborative dynamic. Another factor is the shift from formal settings to more intimate ones—teachers communicating from home, perhaps in front of a personal bookcase, feel more relatable compared to the traditional lecture hall.

This shift fosters deeper connections, allowing teachers to be more available and accessible for both academic and personal guidance. It encourages addressing personal concerns and enhances the overall learning experience. The informal nature of these platforms conveys a sense of humanity, leading to more effective mentorship rather than a rigid top-down approach. As consultation and mentorship become central to this new teacher-student relationship, it nurtures a culture of collaboration, care, and mutual respect, enriching the educational experience.

The concept of '**flattening the classroom**' offers valuable insights into reducing power dynamics, and its potential can be further amplified when combined with a reconsideration of how fields are structured overall. By acknowledging that expertise and authority are often conveyed through language practices, we can bridge the gap between teachers and learners. Addressing both the subject-specific content and linguistic barriers allows educators to create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment, making the flattening of the classroom even more effective.

B. Horizontal Relationships

Another key benefit of digital communication platforms and **digital learning environments** is the opportunity for enhanced collaboration among students and teachers. Working groups, discussions, and professional exchanges are made more accessible, as the need for in-person meetings is removed. This flexibility allows for more frequent and meaningful interactions, enabling spontaneous brainstorming, quicker feedback loops, and deeper engagement of all parties involved. The ease of communication across time zones and locations further empowers collaboration, making it possible for both students and teachers to engage in continuous learning and sharing.

This environment that not only strengthens personal connectedness but also facilitates the sharing of good practices, innovative ideas, and mutual support across borders, creates a more interconnected and supportive educational experience for everyone.

3.4 Learning Objectives and VIT

Fink's [15] taxonomy of **learning objectives** highlights the relational and interactive nature of teaching and learning outcomes, rather than a strict hierarchy. Different types of learning are interconnected and mastering one type of learning simultaneously boosts the potential for mastering other types. For example, when students participate in a virtual simulation of an international project—coordinating tasks, presenting findings, and resolving conflicts—they develop subject-specific knowledge, teamwork skills, and intercultural competence all at once. This interdependence is crucial for educators, as it underscores that various forms of learning work synergistically. As a result, teaching is no longer a zero-sum game; teachers do not have to sacrifice one type of learning to achieve another.

Similarly, when students collaborate across multiple time zones to produce a joint report

or create a shared digital resource, they reinforce their foundational understanding of the topic while practicing adaptive communication, cross-cultural negotiation, and digital project management. When educators embrace a holistic approach like Fink's, they can foster not only subject-specific knowledge but also soft skills, communication, and language proficiency, which are crucial in the context of a globalized world hence in internationalization.

3.5 Curriculum Internationalization

Creating an internationalized learning environment is often a key part of **universities' internationalization strategy**. To develop a more globalized approach it is necessary to offer suitable accreditation for international students, which brings in the need for internationalized curricula [1].

A study conducted in 2009 by Clifford [11] explores this topic. The data comes from interviews with staff and students at a large Australian university with eight campuses, including offshore campuses in Malaysia and South Africa, and various international arrangements in Hong Kong, Italy, and other countries. Her questions revolved around the motivation to internationalize per discipline. And she found out the following:

1. Lecturers in hard (hard pure (natural science and maths) and hard applied (natural science-based professions, i.e. engineering) disciplines believed their fields were already international, because they are based on universal principles. For example, an IT lecturer stated, "People are learning the same thing irrespective of their environment or country — IT is the same IT all over the world." [11] The theme of localising the curriculum, in opposition to internationalize it, was not prevalent in interviews with the hard pure disciplines either.
2. Lecturers in soft (soft pure (humanities

and social sciences) and soft applied (social science-based professions, e.g. education, social work) disciplines saw education as important for its own sake but emphasized the need to prepare students for employment. For that, their aim was twofold: On the one hand they tried to provide a knowledge base that extended beyond cultural boundaries creating materials where no single perspective is privileged, on the other hand they tried to construct relations to local matters and adapted their curricula accordingly.

3. No discipline group found multiculturalism inappropriate, but it fit more naturally into certain disciplines, i.e. hard pure disciplines found it more challenging to integrate multicultural issues and did not view it as a priority.
4. Besides the subject culture, another key factor for the motivation to internationalize was the level of internationalization among staff themselves, which influenced their ability to internationalize the curriculum, which is a widely acknowledged problem in the literature as well. [6][24]

These insights highlight the complexities and varying perspectives on internationalizing curricula. The findings suggest that not the culture of a particular nation influences the motivation to internationalize, but the culture across different disciplines does.

3.6 New Assessment Techniques

A. The E-Portfolio

All assessment forms and types can be implemented in online teaching contexts, but there is an emerging state-of-the-art method in online education: the ePortfolio. The ePortfolio is derived from the traditional portfolio, a physical collection of a student's work that demonstrates their skills, achievements, reflection skills and

learning progress over time. It typically includes a variety of materials such as written assignments, artwork, projects, and other tangible artefacts. The ePortfolio is the digital version of that offering more opportunities than its physical counterpart does:

1. It is highly accessible (and assessable) from anywhere with internet access.
2. It includes a wider range of digital artefacts such as text documents, images, videos, audio recordings, links to online resources, and interactive elements.
3. It can easily be shared via links or stored on cloud platforms.
4. It allows for dynamic content, hyperlinks, embedded multimedia, and interactive feedback.

B. Reflections on Learning

Reflection fosters deeper engagement with learning, prompting to examine aspects of learner's personal journeys and viewpoints, such as:

- Their learning processes, what works for them and what does not.
- Their existing knowledge and skills, and which pieces are still missing.
- Their relation to the content being studied, and whether it is useful for them.
- Their feelings and needs related to learning experiences.

Reflection enables learners to understand their development, identify areas for growth, and align learning with broader personal and academic goals. This approach has been shown to improve students' overall academic performance, as they not only enhance their subject knowledge but also develop their soft skills. Moreover, examples have shown that students

were able to build closer relationships by collaborating on constructing and reflecting. For this reason, reflection plays a major role in **e-Portfolio**, where it is often assessed at three levels:

1. Descriptive Reflection: Recalling and summarizing events or experiences.
2. Reflective Reflection: Analysing connections and evaluating personal knowledge and emotions.
3. Critical-Reflective Reflection: Evaluating insights and beliefs for consistency, gaining personal insights, and adapting behaviours based on new knowledge and skills.

C. Implementing E-Portfolio

When incorporating ePortfolios into the curriculum, several factors need to be considered:

- Is the content, which should be included in the ePortfolio, clearly outlined?
- What specific criteria will be used to evaluate the ePortfolios?
- Are workload and benefits in the right balance?
- Who will conduct the assessment—peers, instructors, or the students themselves?
- How often and at what points will reflections and assessments take place?
- Is the ePortfolio promoting the actual learning objectives of the course?
- Have all participants the chance to access the required virtual platforms?
- Are there AI detection programs in place to rule out plagiarism?
- How can students be given the courage to write authentically about their learning journeys even though they are being graded?

D. Using Case Catalogue

Each of the following use cases demonstrates how **e-Portfolios** can be adapted to meet the distinct learning needs of various fields, supporting both skill tracking and reflective practice.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

- Objectives: Enhance language acquisition and self-reflection on learning progress.
- Implementation: ePortfolios can act as ‘spaces’ where students and teachers track language skills and class contributions. Platforms like Google Classroom can be used to store materials, track work, and provide a digital repository of student progress.
- Benefits: Supports continuous learning and allows students to reflect on language skills over time, complementing traditional classroom interaction.

Role-Playing Games (RPG) for Skill Development

- Objectives: Test and develop soft skills in fields like language learning and medical training.
- Implementation: Incorporate RPGs as an ePortfolio component, allowing students to engage in role-playing scenarios relevant to their field, such as language practice or patient care.
- Benefits: Enhances practical application of soft skills in a controlled environment and provides material for reflective entries in the ePortfolio.

Chemistry and Hard Sciences

- Objectives: Track students’ progress and reinforce the process-based nature of scientific learning.

- Implementation: Use ePortfolios to document lab work, research projects, or progressive understanding of scientific principles under the concept of ‘learning science as a foreign language’.
- Benefits: Helps students and instructors monitor growth and learning processes in typically quantitative fields, supporting incremental improvement and reflection.

Anthropology and Humanities

- Objectives: Integrate writing and soft skills development within a structured ePortfolio system.
- Implementation: Incorporate ePortfolio entries such as reflective essays, case studies, or VR-based RPG scenarios that allow students to apply soft skills in social settings. For example, students could participate in a social observation and then write a report based on first-hand experiences, linking it to broader analytical essays.
- Benefits: ePortfolios provide a platform for capturing both the writing-intensive nature of humanities fields and the intangible soft skills like empathy and cultural understanding.

E. Para-Social Relationships

While online classroom relationships can exhibit para-social elements, they are not entirely para-social. The quality depends on the design of the learning environment, the instructor’s engagement, and student interaction:

Para-Social Elements:

- One-Sidedness: In large or pre-recorded classrooms, students may feel connected to instructors, similar to media figures, creating a one-sided dynamic.

- Illusion of Intimacy: Regular video appearances and personal anecdotes can create a sense of intimacy, like that with social media influencers or TV personalities.

Not Entirely Para-social:

- Two-Way Interaction: Unlike traditional media, online classrooms (and social media) offer direct communication through live Q&As, discussion forums, and office hours.
- Mutual Engagement: In effective environments, instructors engage with students through **feedback**, adapting their teaching to student needs.
- Community Building: Online classrooms foster peer-to-peer relationships, creating a supportive learning community.

Contextual Factors

- Class Size and Format: Smaller, personalized classes reduce para-social elements.
- Instructor Presence: Active instructor engagement makes relationships more interactive and reciprocal.

4 Challenges and Solutions²

4.1 Digital Learning Environments are Impersonal

Integrating into a group of strangers and building productive relationships is challenging in real life, even more so online and without a shared native language. Yet social inclusion is essential for open cultural exchange. Establishing third spaces—that are often missing in online events—can encourage personal connections and engagement. How to create **third spaces**:

- Provide platforms for informal interaction, such as chat rooms or virtual spaces like `gather.town` and `work.venture`.
- Design assignments that require participants to collaborate and solve challenges together, encouraging both synergy and constructive conflict.
- Invest in community-building activities, like online escape rooms, scavenger hunts, or interactive icebreakers (e.g., ball of yarn questions).
- Offer joint activities during breaks, such as themed **break-out rooms** or games on platforms like `gartic.com`.

4.2 The Lack of Adequate Infrastructure Makes VIT Non-Inclusive

Although opportunities are limited in the absence of a stable internet connection, there are options to provide participants in underdeveloped or crisis-affected areas with as much access as possible to events:

A. Using Low Data Platforms

- **BigBlueButton**, an open-source web conferencing platform designed for online learning, offering low data usage options.

²See [18] for more challenges and workarounds.

- **Element**, a decentralized and secure messaging platform that is light on data usage.
- **Google Meet**, can be optimized to work under low bandwidth conditions.
- **Jit.si Meet**, an open-source video conferencing platform that works well with lower bandwidth and does not require an account.
- **Moodle**, for educational purposes, offers tools for communication with relatively low data usage, especially when used with text-based features.
- **Microsoft Teams**, a collaboration platform that supports messaging, file sharing, and video calls, with settings to optimize for low bandwidth.
- **Signal**, a secure messaging app with voice and video call capabilities, optimized for low data consumption and strong privacy features.
- **Telegram**, known for being light-weight, is efficient for messaging and file sharing with an emphasis on privacy.
- **Tox**, a peer-to-peer messaging platform that is secure and less data-intensive.
- **WhatsApp**, popular for messaging and voice calls, uses relatively low data for communication and group chats.
- **Wire**, a secure messaging and collaboration platform designed to use minimal data.
- **Zoom**, while Zoom can be data-heavy, it has a low bandwidth mode that makes it more efficient.

B. Seeking out Places with Better Connections as Private Housing

- **Libraries**, public libraries often provide free, secure Wi-Fi. They are also quiet, making it a good spot for working or studying.
- **Cafés or Co-Working Spaces**, many coffee shops offer Wi-Fi, though you would want

to make sure it is a secure connection. Co-working spaces typically have more secure networks.

- **Universities or Schools**, if affiliated with an academic institution, offer access to their secure network, which tends to be more reliable and encrypted.
- **Government or Community Centers**, some municipalities provide free, secure Wi-Fi in community centres or public spaces.
- **Hotels or Hostels**, offer more secure connections, especially if you are a guest, but always verify the security level.
- **Tech or Innovation Hubs**, in urban areas might offer safe, high-speed internet.

4.3 Participants Won't Engage in Digital Learning Environments

While platforms like Reddit thrive on user engagement, such interactivity often fails to carry over into institutionalized, **asynchronous online teaching**, where participation remains minimal. This challenge is especially evident in **VIT** at universities, where diverse and dispersed student groups highlight issues of presence and connection. Lévinas's [21] interpretation of Kant's concept of the 'moral law inside me' [19] underscores an ethics grounded in concern for the other—a principle that holds particular significance in educational settings. Here, the imperative to regard others as free, dignified subjects endures, even when they are geographically distant and interacting through screens.

Historically, physical, and social proximity reinforced distinctions between neighbours and strangers, delineating moral responsibility along these lines. This separation carries the risk of dehumanizing those outside one's immediate sphere, a tendency exacerbated in virtual learning. The anonymity of black tiles—students who appear as names without faces on a screen (**cf. lurking**)—can depersonalize them, reducing their

presence and undermine a sense of mutual obligation. Such anonymity mirrors the notion of 'tele-mediated strangers' [23], individuals who lack substantial presence in virtual spaces. This instrumental engagement, where participants can be ignored or turned off at will, disrupts the integrity of a learning community. Visible students often bear the emotional and cognitive load, risking disengagement or discomfort in response to unequal participation. To foster equity, accepting 'black tiles' should be conditional, ideally with justifiable reasons, to maintain a balanced and engaged group dynamic.

The concept of 'telecity' [2]—experiencing enjoyment without moral consequence—illustrates the challenge of nurturing genuine responsibility in virtual classrooms. In ethical social encounters, face-to-face interactions deepen our responsibilities toward one another. Yet mediated encounters risk diluting this moral duty, creating impoverished exchanges.

Thus, it becomes essential to design **third spaces** in virtual settings that facilitate spontaneous, collaborative interactions. When possible, incorporating at least one **synchronous meeting**—whether virtual or in-person—can bridge gaps in relational presence.

Online interactions intensify the objectification of social relations, framing presence as a tool rather than a shared experience. This tension is central to modern virtual teaching, where spatial freedom contrasts with limited moral accountability. **VIT** must navigate these complexities, fostering meaningful, ethically grounded connections across the *digital divide*.

4.4 Competency Levels, Learning Cultures and Structures Vary Too Widely to Enable Effective Teaching

Adult education in general and **VIT** in particular deal with heterogeneous groups due to different biographical backgrounds. In an international teaching context, this situation is maximized.

Handling the variety in virtual international seminars can be challenging but also rewarding, as it provides opportunities for rich interactions and diverse perspectives.

A. Levels of Knowledge

The variation in levels of knowledge among students can be managed through differentiated instruction and peer learning. Conducting a pre-assessment helps gauge the knowledge levels of students, allowing to form mixed ability groups that facilitate cooperative learning. Providing supplementary materials for advanced learners and foundational materials for those who need them ensures that all students can progress. Regular (virtual) office hours offer personalized support in addressing the students' individual learning needs.

B. Academic Structures

Differences in academic structures can be handled by creating a standardized yet elastic framework. Clear and concise instructions and expectations, coupled with flexible assignments, to accommodate various academic requirements while ensuring that all students meet the course objectives.

C. Regard for Rules

Educating students about different cultural perspectives on rules helps build understanding and respect. Clearly outlining the rules and expectations at the beginning of the course eliminates confusion. Creating discussion forums where students can address ambiguities and share cultural insights further enhances this understanding.

D. Curricula

Encouraging cross-disciplinary projects fosters collaboration and ensures that students from different academic backgrounds can contribute meaningfully. For example, a module on research

methods could integrate perspectives from both the social sciences and natural sciences, promoting a broader understanding and application of research techniques.

E. Time Zones and Timing Habits

Time zone differences and timing habits can be managed through a blend of **asynchronous** and **synchronous** learning. Offering both live and recorded sessions provides flexibility for students in different time zones. Utilising global calendars and tools to schedule meetings ensures fair time zone coordination. Rotating meeting times allows equitable participation from all students, regardless of their location.

F. Access to Suitable Spaces

Offering access to virtual backgrounds and noise-cancelling software can help those who lack quiet or professional spaces. Designing assignments that can be completed in various environments ensures that all students can participate fully.

G. Knowledge of Rules for Scientific Works

Different levels of knowledge about the rules for scientific works can be standardized through training and resources. Conducting workshops on scientific writing standards and providing access to style guides and citation tools equips students with the necessary skills. Pairing students with mentors for guidance on scientific writing further supports their development.

H. Different Interpretations of Terms

Clarifying different interpretations of terms, such as 'essay', requires standardization and clarification. Creating a **glossary** of key terms with standardized definitions, helps eliminate confusion. Providing examples of different types of assignments and holding time for Q&A sessions to address misunderstandings ensures that all

students have a clear understanding of expectations.

I. Access to and Use of Digital Tools

Providing ongoing technical support and troubleshooting assistance helps address any issues that arise. Offering how-tos and time for familiarising with the tools can help immensely. Using accessible and user-friendly digital tools ensures inclusivity.

J. Teaching and Learning Styles

Since international students may be surprised by unfamiliar teaching methods, they might struggle to integrate into the new context automatically. To prevent them from dropping out, support during this process is essential. Regular reflection in groups or one-on-one sessions helps mediate between different pedagogical styles, understand them, and adapt accordingly. Creating opportunities to decode local rules is necessary to enhance and improve their learning experiences.

K. Tips for Implementation

1. Begin by providing participants with a comprehensive on-boarding package, either digitally or physically. This package should include a welcome message, an introduction to the facilitator, key information, clear instructions on technology and tools, preparatory materials, and an overview of what to expect. This approach establishes a positive first impression, offering reassurance and demonstrating awareness of potential challenges.
2. Continuous **feedback** loops help ensure the provided material remains relevant and meets the diverse needs of the students.
3. Foster a sense of community and inclusiveness through regular interactive activ-

ities.

4. Adapt strategies based on **feedback** and changing needs

4.5 Grading Soft Skills is Problematic

Individuals interact and express soft skills in very unique ways. Grading them presents several challenges, primarily due to the difficulty of establishing clear and objective **assessment** criteria. The diversity in character leads to speculations from students who may question their assessments, thinking, 'I don't think that's accurate', or 'I simply can't behave that way.' These doubts make it difficult to provide adequate explanations for grading decisions. Even with a **rubric** in place, to help alleviate some of the confusion and increase transparency, grading soft skills remains a challenge for instructors aiming to maintain an understandable and fair grading system. What exactly should be assessed, and how? Are human skills like cooperation and interactivity—particularly in online settings—truly assessable? Is it possible to document the acquisition of soft skills without reducing them to hard or traditional skill formats? Should communication skills be assessed summatively? Is it ethical to grade soft skills at all?

Grading soft skills should be applied only when it is relevant for specific learning objectives. In many cases, there will be other, more important goals to achieve for a class. But not only in **VIT** soft skills are part of the main learning objectives. Where interaction, e.g. between doctors and their patients, is part of the training, gaining soft skills is crucial for fulfilling the requirements. In giving students time, opportunity, and a controlled environment (Role-Play-Games, VR-Scenarios, group presentations) to develop, soft skills are learnable. However, assessing them may mean to embrace more flexible, innovative approaches to assessment in general.

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