Fostering Inclusive Virtual Learning Communities in Developing European Countries

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ABSTRACT

Aim. This article investigates how Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL) environments can be integrated into university courses and what their implications are so that

they promote more meaningful learning. Two pilot courses, which were part of the Erasmus+ CBHE Valeu-X project, Business Communication and Image Processing offered by "Aleksander Moisiu", University Durres, were part of this research. This study focuses on how the designs of VCL can help students improve problem-solving skills, confidence, and communication skills, encourage engagement and social interaction, and inspire creativity.

Methods. Qualitative research design was used in this study with data collected and analysed manually by the researcher. The participatory observation was used in the implementation of two pilot courses – Image Processing and Business Communication using Teams as their online learning platform. The data was gathered through the close observation of the dynamics in VCL environments focusing on the roles and interactions between the participants.

Results. This research proves that assigning roles to students during online learning group activity helps them collaborate effectively. At the same time, tutors were preferred as they are referred to as helpers among students. Teams were able to study together and socialise with one another by assigning specific tasks to the team members and by using the appropriate tools.

Conclusion. VCL ought to be taught in university courses, particularly in Europe's emerging nations. It involves assigning tasks to group members to foster productivity and cooperation. According to the study's participants, e-tutors play a critical role in the educational process.

Keywords: Virtual Collaborative Learning, e-tutors, social interaction, online learning, students

Introduction

The new technologies have come with various alternatives that have contributed to changes in communication, health aspects as well as education and business sectors. The use of the latest technologies in education could assist teachers' performance improve and aid students in learning better. Teachers' knowledge about ways to make students learn better is crucial. Students, regardless of their ability, can learn both in-person and virtually. This relationship makes it possible to integrate concepts from all around the world into study plans, which enhances student learning. As YanJun Wang (2007) states collaborative learning involves students interacting as members of a learning community, participating in activities such as problem-solving tasks via questioning and information exchange. Higher education may benefit from the cooperative method of virtual cooperative learning, and a strong link between the major ideas of technology-assisted learning must be established.

Online learning can facilitate learning without being treated unfairly and in the same way, regardless of their skills as well as specific circumstances (Capp, 2017). However, as collaborative learning includes new ways of interacting and cooperating, teachers must

adapt from the traditional position to one of facilitator and supporter. As Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean MacGregor (2009) state the concept of collaborative learning signifies a notable departure from the conventional teacher-centred or lecture-centred environment often seen in college courses. Lacking the right resources, VCL cannot be effective. According to Brunilda Zenelaga et al. (2024), university students in Albania lack adequate technology for using their gadgets for academic work. The two courses that were part of this research, encountered some setbacks especially technical equipment problems which included difficulties working with the Teams' platform. However, this research has served as a strong basis for more teaching and learning activities in online space within the context of Albania.

Moreover, this study identifies the importance of student collaborative activities that could be organised either on a class, faculty, or university scale and nationally or internationally. This study focused on engaging Albanian students and not only, by creating additional learning opportunities for less-favoured learners in the home setting. Additionally, collaborative virtual learning environments foster soft and transversal skills involving effective communication, intercultural competencies, and problem-solving. Conversely, as C. Jeba Evangeline (2016) it is the responsibility of the instructor to not only impart knowledge on a certain topic but also to educate students on various pedagogical approaches. Thus, this study has provided an effective model of online teaching and learning in Albania by using the VCL methods. The research is an important step towards improving education practices, promoting inclusivity, and allowing learners to apply technology skills that will help them overcome contemporary day challenges by collaborating virtually. The research questions that guide this study are:

- What role do VCL environments play in advancing inclusion and improving teaching methods in higher education in the Albanian context?
- What opportunities and challenges develop when VCL methodologies are used in higher education, considering technical equipment problems and platforms?
- What support systems are required for successful implementation and student involvement in VCL environments, particularly when shifting from traditional teaching roles to roles of facilitation and support?
- How do teacher roles change in these settings?

Literature Review

The Concept of Openness and Student Preferences as the Driving Forces Behind the Evolution of Blended and E-Learning

The recent evolution of student demands and a technological World drives the shift towards blended learning and e-learning. One of the cornerstones defining an equal

access, flexible model of education is the concept of openness. There is high dynamism, portability, and non-linearity of information flow through multiple modes of telecommunication. It can be said to offer one major benefit, which is its ability to respond to the practitioner's requirements.

Marc Prensky (2011) states that students who attend physically prefer interactive and hybrid classes. Students especially nowadays tend to prefer engaging and participatory learning experiences, with a combination of blending traditional face-to-face teaching with online or distance learning. Teachers are driven by these students' needs to modify their pedagogical approaches to suit the needs of their learners in a traditional classroom environment.

In addition, according to Klodiana Leka and Emilda Roseni (2022), there are more benefits from online learning like reducing costs, giving chances to working students, and faster learning among others. The benefits of Internet learning go beyond the traditional environments of the classroom, stressing here the possible advantages of education on the Internet mentioning here the affordability, easy access for those who work, and the potential for a faster rhythm in the learning process.

Possibilities for Collaborative Learning in Online Classrooms: Techniques to Increase Participation and Outcomes

The evolution of e-learning has focused on broader aspects other than just terminology and technology. Moreover, as Jeremy B. Williams and Michael A. Goldberg (2005) declare teachers are progressively occupying a peripheral position rather than assuming a prominent role. Nowadays, integrating collaborative learning into an online course is crucial since it helps students achieve better academic outcomes and online learning is becoming more and more popular. Collaborative student interactions not only promote the exchange of knowledge and active learning, nevertheless they also reinforce relationships. This strategy improves participation and cooperation among students in the online environment, which can potentially augment the holistic learning experience and yield positive educational outcomes. Anuradha K. Gokhale (1995) defines collaborative learning as an instructional approach where students with different levels of competence work together in small groups to achieve a shared objective. For this reason, techniques like group discussions, discussion leaders designated to the group, think/pair/share, write/pair/share, critical debates, and jigsaw puzzles are particularly effective in achieving collaborative learning in a virtual classroom. The shared characteristic among these strategies is the collaborative allocation of topics, projects, assignments, and similar tasks among group members, with each member contributing to the collective success of the group and the achievement of predetermined learning goals and objectives.

Examining Difficulties and Possibilities in Using Collaborative Learning in Online Classrooms

In a study with 100 students, in the Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt the major finding is that collaborative learning is not explored by students even in the presence of ICT facilities as "they still see themselves as rivals" (Williams & Augustine, 2015, p. 47). The lack of cooperation in the form of traditional individualistic and competitive behavior among students hindered the efficacy of collaborative learning.

For the effective usage of the VCLs, the students' needs should be considered, it should involve professors together with the students to adapt the program in the best possible way. Even if the best online platforms are used, without the right teaching strategies it is impossible for collaborative learning to be effective. The VCLs bring together students and teachers by making use of technologically mediated interactions Stefanos Nikiforos et al., (2020). It supports the development of a sense of community among diverse stakeholders in the learning process by facilitating connections across geographical barriers. The internet platform can be a location where people can flourish in a collaborative and co-generated knowledge culture in addition to exchanging information.

Enhancing Communication and Collaboration in Virtual Environments

Online education is crucial, particularly when face-to-face instruction is not available for a variety of reasons, but it can also be used as a supplement to conventional educational settings Nikiforos et al., (2020). On the other hand, the development of Collaborative Learning may be seen as a progressive advancement. As John Rae et al. (2006) state the primary feature of a "Learning Community" carries a responsibility to promote one another's learning. Furthermore, Adriana Dervishaj and Olivera Presi (2024) propose the use of online learning environments to improve capacities and foster collaborative techniques.

Communication and interaction can be encouraged among students with feelings of isolation because of being in a virtual environment which can make them feel more confident. Efforts are being made to promote constructive knowledge building and interactions as "collaborative learning demonstrates a huge potentiality in higher education" (Nikiforos et al., 2020, p. 3662). This requires the implementation of pedagogy with careful planning. Effective preparation and implementation of instructional strategies are crucial to ensure that cooperative learning in higher education is efficient.

In summary, technology and student needs have caused the educational environment to change, emphasizing blended and e-learning with a focus on openness for equal opportunity. Students favour interactive and hybrid learning environments, and while the advantages of virtual education are well acknowledged, there are drawbacks related

to collaborative learning as well. Online learning complements traditional institutions, and its effective use in higher education as Sohaib Alam and Ansa Hameed (2023) declare, requires careful pedagogical planning.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research strategy, specifically employing explorative case studies through the online participant observation. As Howard S. Becker (1958) claims in order to understand participants' views of the events they are involved in, participant observation involves talks that are similar to those that occur in daily life. As noted by Catherine Dawson (2019), online observation is also a way of conducting research that entails the careful and selective observation, tracking, gathering, and documentation of online events. It can be open, unstructured, adaptable, and diverse in qualitative research, as opposed to following a predetermined, fixed protocol.

Conducted within the framework of the CBHE Erasmus+ project Valeu-X at "Aleksandër Moisiu" University in Durrës, the research focused on two pilot courses: Image Processing and Business Communication, during the academic year 2021-2022. The primary aim was to investigate the incorporation and consequences of VCL environments in higher education courses, with a focus on improving students' problem-solving skills, confidence, communication abilities, engagement, social interaction, and creativity.

Study Participants

The research used purposive sampling to choose participants, in line with the purpose of gaining comprehensive insights on the formation of virtual learning communities in developing countries in Europe. This approach was especially appropriate considering the subjective character of the study and the relatively limited number of participants. The sample included a total of sixty-six students, including nineteen students from the Image Processing course and forty-seven students from the Business Communication course. The participants' average age was twenty (20) years old. Out of sixty-six students, thirty-five (35) were females and thirty-one (31) were males.

Table 1

The sample data

Name of the course	No of students	Females	Males	The average age
Image Processing course	19	10	9	20
Business Communication course	47	25	22	20
TOTAL	66	35	31	20

Source. Own research.

The sampling technique used in this study was purposive sampling. In qualitative research, purposeful sampling is frequently used to find and choose cases that are rich in information on the topic of interest (Palinkas, et al., 2015). This is in line with obtaining in-depth insights into development-oriented virtual learning communities in European developing countries from the perspectives of students enrolled in relevant courses, especially considering the qualitative nature of the study and the relatively small sample size.

Data Collection

The data collecting process was centered on gathering qualitative information to have a comprehensive picture of virtual learning groups that are focused on development in European underdeveloped countries. The researchers used participatory observation by fully engaging in online classes for an extended period of time, using Microsoft Teams as the medium. Throughout this time frame, researchers closely monitored the interactions, participation, and dynamics occurring inside the VCL settings and meticulously documented their findings. In addition, a pilot training session was organised to enhance comprehension of the VCL implementation and to collect additional qualitative data via active engagement.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this research was carried out using a method known as thematic analysis, which enabled the systematic identification and interpretation of patterns and themes that were present within the qualitative data that was gathered. For the purpose of answering the study questions and gaining a knowledge of the influence that VCL environments have on higher education, this procedure was very necessary.

A comprehensive evaluation of all the data that had been gathered was the first step that the researchers took. This review included observational notes, student comments, and interactions that were captured throughout the participatory observation sessions.

Results

The introduction of VCL at "Aleksandër Moisiu" University in Durrës, as part of the CBHE Erasmus+ project Valeu-X, indicated notable progress in promoting inclusivity and enhancing teaching approaches. The evaluation of the two pilot courses, Image Processing and Business Communication, revealed that the use of Virtual Classroom (VCL) settings facilitated a more comprehensive and equitable instructional environ-

ment. Students expressed a heightened sense of connection and involvement in their learning process, which they attributed to the interactive and collaborative features of the virtual classroom platforms.

The preparation phase for a smooth implementation of VCL is crucial for several reasons. As Miguel Ángel Herrera-Pavo (2021) found out in his research emphasizes the need for meticulous preparation, the establishment of effective collaborative groups, the significance of student behavior about daily technology use, the evolving role of teaching, and the necessity for autonomy in learning management.

Firstly, it provides students with the necessary background knowledge and skills to effectively engage in the virtual learning environment. This included the careful preparation of course syllabi with the implementation of VCL and then the presentation by the lecturers to students. The preparatory phase is essential in ensuring that students are adequately equipped and ready to engage in active participation and collaboration within the VCL environment. According to the study's findings, there are several benefits to using VCL in Business Communication and Image Processing courses.

Facilitated Collaboration

Collaboration was facilitated by having students work in small groups, which encouraged the exchange of information and collaboration among the individual students. On the other hand, students were able to utilise the Teams platform for these classes by pooling their combined expertise, which resulted in learning settings that were more engaging and collaborative. An increase in student engagement was achieved by the use of VCL, which created dynamic and interactive learning environments that stimulated student interaction. The two professors of the courses could improve their students' motivation and participation by incorporating technology and virtual learning platforms into their classrooms. This resulted in a learning atmosphere that was more welcoming to all students.

Increased Student Participation

VCL produces dynamic, interactive circumstances for learning where student participation is encouraged. Through integrating technology and virtual learning platforms, the professors of the two courses were able to enhance students' motivation and involvement, fostering a more inclusive learning environment.

The advent of online learning has brought about a transformation in the roles of both teachers and learners, leading to the emergence of novel interactions and dynamics (Collison et al., 2000; Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003; Pelz, 2010). Students in both courses were encouraged to participate in class through dynamic classroom

environments and interactive learning experiences created by Collaborative Virtual Lessons (VCL).

The use of virtual tools and learning platforms has enhanced student engagement and motivation, while also promoting a comprehensive learning experience. The study's findings demonstrated that the integration of technology into cooperative learning environments enhanced student engagement and heightened the level of interest in the learning process.

Promoted Application of Knowledge and Skills

Using VCL, students are able to apply their knowledge and abilities to scenarios that are based on the real world. Students were able to develop instructional material, work on practical tasks, and find solutions to problems via the use of virtual tools and platforms in both classes Image Processing and Business Communication. As a result, students were able to better comprehend the principles covered in the course

Improving the Crucial Interpersonal Skills of Group Work

Group projects and teamwork are highly valued in the VCL online learning environment because they help students build interpersonal and cooperative skills, which are very important for course achievement. These skills include communication, problem-solving, and flexibility. Group discussions and debates, in which students were encouraged to actively listen to one another, articulate their thoughts, and respectfully express diverse points of view, were the activities that students appreciated the most among the several activities that both instructors devised to enhance students' interpersonal skills. Collaborative research initiatives that, in addition to fostering successful teamwork and communication, helped participants strengthen their research abilities. Case studies and problem-solving tasks that fostered analytical thinking and collaborative problem-solving were included throughout the course.

Fostering Autonomy

Students have a feeling of control over their education via the use of VCL. Due to the fact that the platform was available online, students were able to participate in self-directed learning and experiment with a variety of learning formats and multimedia elements. A person's capacity to adapt, inventiveness, and critical thinking are all enhanced when they are autonomous. These features were investigated and improved

by the implementation of the following activities and tasks, which were carried out throughout the courses and were found to be successful:

- Students were able to strengthen their technical abilities and their ability to deliver information in a variety of ways via the use of multimedia projects, which also encouraged creative thinking.
- Students were given the opportunity to participate in individual research projects that helped them develop their critical thinking, research skills, and capacity to independently synthesize and present knowledge.
- Students were given creative assignments that helped them improve their capacity to think creatively and communicate their thoughts via novel means.

The research findings indicate that VCL has a substantial impact on the learning experience in higher education. It does this by fostering cooperation, boosting student engagement, and enhancing the practical application of information and skills. The successful implementation of VCL settings in the pilot courses at "Aleksander Moisiu" University demonstrates that these techniques may promote crucial interpersonal skills and student self-reliance. E-tutors play a crucial role in fostering these settings by offering essential help and direction to students. Hence, it is essential to include VCL into university curricula, especially in developing European countries, in order to cultivate effective and collaborative learning encounters.

Figure 1
Benefits of using VCL
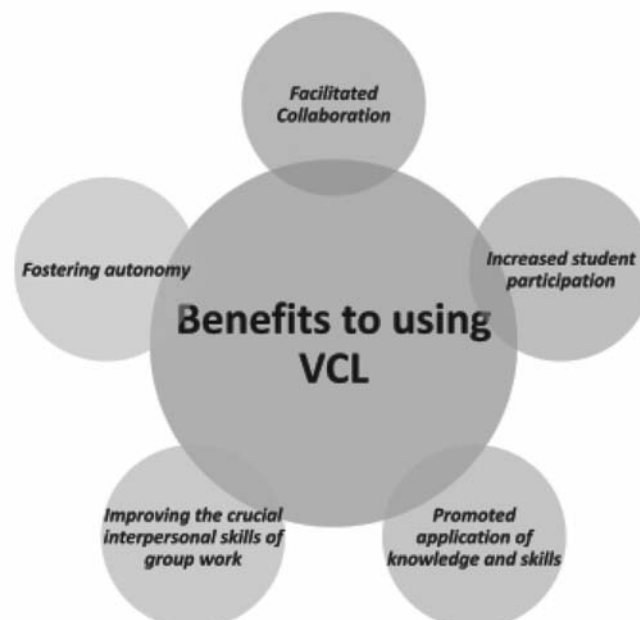
Source. Own research.

Conclusions

The study's results allow for numerous significant conclusions to be made about the planning and implementation of VCL environments in higher education. The first stage for VCL to be efficacious is the significance of the preparatory phase, which is pivotal for the triumphant execution of VCL. Herrera-Pavo (2021) emphasised the need of thorough preparation, forming productive collaborative groups, comprehending student behaviour in relation to technology use, adapting teaching roles, and promoting autonomy in managing learning. Adequate preparation guarantees that students possess the essential underlying knowledge and abilities to actively participate in VCL.

One further inference that may be made from this research is that VCL settings greatly improve cooperation among students. Through collaborative efforts in small groups and using platforms such as Teams, students may combine their skills, resulting in enhanced interactive and cooperative learning experiences. This cooperative method fosters the exchange of information and reciprocal assistance, which are crucial for more profound learning.

In addition, VCL facilitates the creation of dynamic and interactive learning environments that promote active student engagement. The use of technology and virtual platforms enhances student motivation and engagement, hence fostering a more inclusive and captivating learning experience. This change in learning dynamics corresponds to the changes in the roles of teachers and students that have been noticed with the introduction of online learning (Collison et al., 2000; Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003; Pelz, 2010).

The study's results indicate that group projects and collaboration in VCL)- settings play a crucial role in fostering students' interpersonal and cooperative abilities. Proficiency in communication, problem-solving, and flexibility is essential for achieving success in both academic and professional endeavors. The VCL method facilitates the development of these crucial abilities among students within a nurturing online environment.

VCL environments can help the promotion of inclusion and the enhancement of instructional methods. Environments for virtual collaborative learning, or VCL, have shown to be successful in advancing inclusivity and enhancing instructional strategies in postsecondary education, particularly in Albania. By creating dynamic and interactive learning environments that promote student collaboration, knowledge exchange, and active involvement, VCL promotes inclusion and engagement. Since the preparatory phase guarantees that students have the abilities essential to navigate these environments, it is easier for students to transition into VCL experiences.

Learning via virtual collaboration presents both opportunities and challenges. Using VCL strategies has several benefits, including increased student engagement, easier collaboration, and the application of expertise and abilities in practical settings. Nevertheless, challenges such as malfunctioning hardware and limited platforms may

impede the successful execution of VCL. Despite the tangible difficulties for implementation in a real-life educational setting as Alam et al., (2022), says, incorporating technology into cooperative learning settings enhances student engagement and makes the classroom more inviting.

It can also support systems for the successful implementation of the programme and the participation of students. Adequate support mechanisms and a change in teachers' roles from traditional instruction to facilitation and support are necessary for the successful implementation of VCL environments. Teachers are crucial in establishing inclusive learning environments and preparing students for active engagement. Providing students with the necessary guidance and support fosters their independence, critical thinking, and creativity. To enhance student achievement and engagement in mixed and virtual learning environments, technology constraints must be resolved, and critical interpersonal skills must be developed through group projects.

To sum up, this study has demonstrated the efficacy of VCL in fostering student creativity, teamwork, and digital proficiency. A successful implementation requires careful planning, which includes tool availability and training. In higher education settings, virtual and comparative learning (VCL) has great promise as a tool for encouraging student participation and multidisciplinary collaboration.

Study Limitations

While the implementation of VCL in the Image Processing and Business Communication courses provided valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study.

- *Sample size*: As the sample was small and purposive, the results cannot be extrapolated to broader populations or a wider range of educational environments due to the small sample size.
- *Subjectivity*: Due to the nature of the thematic analysis, subjectivity and biases may be present throughout the theme discovery and analysis process. involves the researchers' interpretation. Diverse scholars may arrive at various conclusions based on different analyses of the data.
- *Temporal Context*: The dynamic character of virtual learning communities and their evolution over time may not have been adequately captured in the study. A single data-gathering snapshot may not adequately account for all the factors that could affect the success of virtual learning communities, such as legislative changes, technical developments, or changes in cultural norms. The study focused on courses conducted at the University "Aleksandër Moisiu" Durrës within the Albanian context. results can be influenced by the specific setting of the institution, course framework, and cultural elements.
- *Absence of student e-tutors*: The degree of support and mentoring provided to students in the Business Communication course may have been hampered by the absence of student

e-tutors. A thorough investigation is still needed to determine the full impact of this factor's absence on learning outcomes and student engagement.

These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings and implementing them in various learning contexts. To address these issues and provide more convincing data about how VCL affects student learning outcomes and retention, more studies with greater sample numbers, control groups, and longer observation times are required.

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