Quality Education for All

71

Facilitator positioning work in a Chinese-U.S. high school virtual exchange: “a way to learn about themselves in the world”

Sarah Bausell, Marie Himes and Andrea Gambino
Friday Institute for Educational Innovation, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina, USA

Received 18 March 2025
Revised 1 August 2025
27 October 2025
Accepted 28 October 2025

Abstract

Purpose – Instantiated in UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: Quality Education for All is the target that all learners acquire skills necessary for global citizenship. Cross-cultural virtual exchanges (VEs) using problem-based learning can be valuable for students’ global awareness and, relatedly, their intercultural communication competencies. In a VE, facilitators from diverse contexts collaborate to guide student discourse by making discursive decisions (planned and impromptu) that shape the course of conversation. This study aims to explore facilitator positioning, including their discursive choices, during a problem-based, SDG 4-focused VE that brought together secondary students situated in the USA and China, two countries facing heightened geopolitical tensions.

Design/methodology/approach – This case study used discourse analytic methods to examine the discursive roles that three facilitators took on during a cross-cultural VE between Chinese and US secondary students in fall 2023. Data sources included semistructured interviews with facilitators; transcripts of VE facilitator work sessions; and transcripts of VE sessions, including multimodal artifacts produced and shared by VE student participants.

Findings – Facilitators described “charged” moments as emotionally and socially tense instances, often triggered by student comments on geopolitically sensitive topics. Results revealed that facilitators enacted patterned, discursive positioning roles – e.g., framer, repair maker and amicable host – to manage these moments. Facilitators struggled to balance open dialogue with perceived geopolitical sensitivities; at times, conversations were constrained, limiting the intended purpose of shared exploration of SDG 4: Quality Education for All. The results point to some incongruence between facilitators’ beliefs in the value of open discourse and their impromptu and planned discursive choices, indicating value for improved preparation for VE facilitators. Positioning, as an anticipatory pedagogical frame for VE facilitators, is discussed as a tool to align facilitator discursive choices with pedagogical aims.

Research limitations/implications – As is true for any case study, the findings are not generalizable to a broader population and instead should be interpreted as a close analysis of phenomena that occurred in this bounded setting with this bounded population. The study demonstrates the value of research studies that examine discursive interactions and the ways facilitators influence dialogic, problem-based global learning experiences.

Practical implications – The study examines facilitator discourse and positioning work in a problem-based cross-cultural VE. It explores facilitator discursive positioning during perceived “charged” dialogue and introduces positioning theory as a useful anticipatory pedagogical tool for improved facilitator preparation.

Originality/value – The study examines facilitator discourse and positioning work in a problem-based cross-cultural VE. It explores facilitator discursive positioning during perceived “charged” dialogue and

© Sarah Bausell, Marie Himes and Andrea Gambino. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at http://creativecommons.org/licences/by/4.0/

Quality Education for All
Vol. 3 No. 1, 2026
pp. 71-90
Emerald Publishing Limited
2976-9310
DOI 10.1108/QEA-03-2025-0015

introduces positioning theory as a useful anticipatory pedagogical tool in preparing VE facilitators to navigate sensitive topics, promote inclusive dialogue and cultivate students' global citizenship competencies.

Keywords Virtual exchange, Cultural awareness, UN SDGs, Facilitators, Classroom discourse, Cross-cultural communication, Positioning theory

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), described as a "blueprint for peace and prosperity," are built on several premises: collectively, though to disproportionate degrees, humans face precarious conditions; in many cases, these conditions are consequences of inequitable human-created systems and, as such, can be ameliorated; working toward amelioration requires collaboration at local, regional, national and international levels. Collaboration is hard work that requires negotiation of conflict; it must explicitly and simultaneously recognize interdependence and unique contexts, experiences and identities and similarities and differences toward achieving a shared desired outcome.

In education, these same premises translate to innovative pedagogies that emphasize collaboration, inclusivity and global problem-solving. In particular, new literacies pedagogies (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007; Spires *et al.*, 2012) pluralize literacy practices and emphasize opportunities for collaboration across and within geographic, linguistic, social and political differences. Communication technologies that help connect teachers and students across time, space and cultures through virtual exchanges (VEs) enable students and teachers to engage in cross-cultural dialogue that closely approximates the consensus-building work of United Nations members. Additionally, problem-based (Lu *et al.*, 2014) and project-based inquiry pedagogies (Krajcik *et al.*, 1998; Himes *et al.*, 2023) engage students in critical analysis of current challenges and the exploration of solutions through dialogue. Inherent in these pedagogical approaches is encouragement for students to examine their own and others' perspectives (Spires *et al.*, 2021).

The context of this study is a problem-based, cross-cultural VE between one US southeastern public high school and one private internationalized high school in eastern China. Throughout the course of the VE, students met synchronously and communicated asynchronously to explore SDG 4: Quality Education for All. Given the significant role that VE facilitators play in planning an exchange and facilitating student dialogue, the study focused on facilitators' roles within the exchange. The study is guided by the research questions: How did facilitators position themselves during a problem-based VE program between Chinese and US secondary students? And how did facilitators' positions influence cross-cultural collaboration among Chinese and US secondary students?

To answer these questions, researchers analyzed facilitator interviews conducted at the conclusion of the project; discourse data from synchronous VE sessions, planning and reflection meetings; and multimodal artifacts created and shared by VE participants. Results from this study are primarily relevant from a social lens and highlight the discursive roles VE facilitators take on amidst VEs that bridge participants who are embedded within distinct sociopolitical and cultural contexts, including countries experiencing geopolitical tensions. Positioning theory is situated as an anticipatory pedagogical tool in supporting facilitators to prepare for cross-cultural VEs.

To address the research questions, this manuscript begins with a Review of Literature that maps the UN SDGs with attention to how the Global Goals address the context of education, and considers how VEs can contribute to increasing global competencies. We also weave in scholarship on teacher discourse and positioning theory to situate the study's participants and

clarify the theoretical lenses guiding our analysis. The Methods section outlines the case study design and discourse analysis tools used to evaluate the facilitators' discursive roles, three facilitators enacted as part of a cross-cultural VE. The Results section is organized into three parts: (1) facilitators' definitions and perceptions of *charged* moments, (2) patterns in facilitators' positioning across these moments and (3) two illustrative examples of facilitators' positioning moves that reveal their position taking. The Discussion section includes an examination of how the study's findings advance understandings of VE facilitation. Finally, the Implications section highlights how positioning theory can serve as an anticipatory tool for practitioners engaged in similar cross-cultural educational contexts.

Review of literature

The following review of literature is organized first around the study context: the UN SDGs and ways that the Global Goals have been leveraged as a framework for education and VE and ways that it has been leveraged to develop global competencies. In the latter half, we introduce seminal research about teacher discourse and its relationship with positioning theory.

UN SDGs: Launched in 2015, the UN SDGs represent a shared vision for addressing collective societal challenges by 2030 (Thomassen and Stentoft, 2020). The SDGs are the culmination of intensive discussions and negotiations among UN Member States, academia, civil organizations and other stakeholders. Undergirding the tremendous collaboration necessary for the construction and launch of the SDGs is the premise that social, economic and environmental challenges are shared across the globe, and progress in one area relies on progress in others (Bennich *et al.*, 2023; Scharlemann *et al.*, 2020). The SDGs include an ambitious completion timeline and associated targets and indicators.

As one of the 17 Global Goals, SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and ensure lifelong learning opportunities for all, is grounded in the belief that education is a key mechanism for sustainable development. It seeks to address disparities in access to and quality of primary, secondary and vocational education opportunities with an explicit focus on gender and high-conflict zones. Since 2015, scholars have pointed out myriad difficulties in defining and, therefore, measuring SDG 4, which calls for "inclusive" and "quality" education (Reimers, 2024; Wulff, 2020; Zickafoose *et al.*, 2024).

Difficulties stem, in part, from sociocultural differences and norms, which influence how educational goals are defined and addressed. Wulff (2020), for example, highlights "conflicting quests for quality education and for measurable and globally comparable learning outcomes" (p. 3) as one of many complicating factors. Instantiated in SDG 4 is the target that learners will "acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others […] global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development" (The Global Goals, 2025). Addressing this goal raises practical questions for education researchers: what does the *work* of acquiring skills of global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity toward sustainable development entail for teachers and students in diverse sociocultural contexts? For the purposes of this study, we draw from one of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's explications of operationalizing the term *inclusive*: "inclusive curricula are based on a view of learning as something that takes place when learners are actively involved in making sense of their experiences" (UNESCO, 2008). This perspective underscores the importance of relevant, real-world learning and collaboration, particularly when working toward fulfillment of the SDGs.

UNESCO (2017) publicly available guidance and frameworks help educators incorporate the SDGs across diverse age groups and subjects. SDGs have been leveraged as a tool within

the broader pedagogical approaches of problem- and project-based learning, which tend to engage students collaboratively in addressing real-world challenges while fostering critical thinking and academic rigor (Park *et al.*, 2023; Nguyen *et al.*, 2024; West *et al.*, 2013; Himes *et al.*, 2023). A key lever in problem-based learning is critical analysis of context (Walker and Leary, 2009; Yu and Mohamed Zin, 2023); as a global agenda, the SDGs also emphasize the importance of cultural and community contexts in making progress toward meeting the goals, particularly *vis-á-vis* cross-cultural communication (Aririguzoh, 2022). Through problem- and project-based pedagogies aligned with community policy agendas, students are empowered to explore glocally-relevant, i.e. globally and locally, challenges and, relatedly, are positioned as informed agents of change (Spires *et al.*, 2021; Himes *et al.*, 2023). Thus, designing learning around the SDGs that is problem- and project-based supports students in examining issues that are similarly and uniquely relevant across multiple contexts and in taking informed social action toward meeting the Global Goals because of their evolving understandings.

VE: Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange, a group that worked to popularize VE between institutes of higher education, defines VE as distance learning that emphasizes sustained, technology-enabled, people-to-people interaction among those typically physically separated and/or who come from diverse cultural backgrounds (EVOLVE, 2025). The majority of VE research falls into two broad categories: (1) case reports focused on instructional design and (2) research exploring VE participant outcomes. For the former, research has identified affordances, some best practices and common limitations to the approach (Symeonidis and Impedovo, 2023; Zak, 2021). As to the latter, research emerging within the field of language learning has pointed to distal but positive impacts on participants' language development (Dooly and O'Dowd, 2018; Godwin-Jones, 2019; O'Dowd, 2021a) and improvement in learners' intercultural competence (Avgousti, 2018; Akiyama and Cunningham, 2018; O'Dowd, 2021b; Wood *et al.*, 2022).

Increased accessibility to technology and access to broadband have catalyzed the popularity of VE in recent decades; yet, they are hardly a new phenomenon. In fact, VE was used as early as the 1980s to connect US and Soviet Union students as a pedagogical tool to "defuse the fear of the other" (ECA Evaluation Division, 2020). In the decades since, the principle that VEs can be tools to deepen cultural awareness has endured (Chun, 2015; Commander *et al.*, 2022; Zak, 2021). This optimistic view continues despite an abundance of research that highlights conflict and frequent breakdown of communication among exchange participants (Ala-Kortesmaa and Muñoz, 2023; O'Dowd and Dooly, 2020). These breakdowns in communication are typically attributed in the literature to cultural differences, including discourse norms (O'Dowd and Lewis, 2016).

The VE featured in this study was anchored by Mansilla and Jackson's (2022) iterative model of global competence, which depicts four learner domains: investigate the world beyond their immediate environment; recognize their own and others' perspectives; communicate their ideas effectively; and translate their ideas into appropriate action to improve conditions. All four domains are vital to the practice of global competence and highlight the investigation of the world beyond one's immediate environment.

Teacher/facilitator discourse: Both inside and outside of formal learning contexts, discourse matters. Discourse reflects how we see the world and ourselves in it and, simultaneously, shapes the world (Michugina and Lukoshus, 2021; Van Dijk, 1993). From a social constructivist perspective, classroom discourse is understood as a central mechanism for learning and sensemaking (Rogers *et al.*, 2005; Sóñora *et al.*, 2025; Vygotsky, 1978). A robust and still growing field of classroom discourse studies has taught us that teacher talk moves – defined as ways that a teacher progresses a discussion – impact student learning

(Tao and Chen, 2024) and influence students' engagement (Howe and Abedin, 2013) and behavior (Anderson, 2019). Literature has also demonstrated that facilitating classroom discourse is complex and unpredictable work (Cassar *et al.*, 2021; Lefstein and Snell, 2014) that often makes teachers feel discomfort (Rutten *et al.*, 2024). Inherent complexities in facilitating classroom discourse are further amplified with topical relevance (Karousiou *et al.*, 2025; Muth *et al.*, 2007) and when engaging across and within sociocultural differences (Beck, 2020). Researchers who focus on facilitation of controversial classroom conversations report that teachers grapple with institutional norms (Fredman *et al.*, 2015), cultural norms (Conrad, 2020), personal beliefs (Sinatra and Mason, 2013) and student spontaneity (Lefstein, 2010). Despite complexities, we know that when done "well" challenging conversations are significant levers in students' academic, emotional and civic development (Lin, 2021; Reznitskaya and Gregory, 2013). Given the immense value of dialogic opportunities, a growing body of research focuses on how to raise teachers' awareness of their discourse choices and how to better prepare them for this important work (Kraatz *et al.*, 2022).

Theoretical lens: Positioning Theory. To better understand patterns across VE facilitators' discursive moves, we rely on positioning theory. Since Davies and Harré (1990) first introduced positioning theory, it has been used widely across social science research to understand human behavior (Green *et al.*, 2020; Poole, 2024). Positions – the way that we are in relation to others and ourselves in various social contexts – shapes self-concept and behavior. Positioning is simultaneously a personal and social occasion; the act of positioning arranges others within the immediate social context and functions as a way to locate self in a social situation. Positions are activated by a fluid social context and are "inherent in the storylines that individuals construct and enact individually and interactionally" (McVee, 2011, p. 5). Positioning theory is often used to explore identity construction (Huang and Wang, 2021; Søreide, 2006) and power and social relations (Anderson, 2009; Drageset and Ell, 2024).

Given positioning theory's emphasis on interaction, discourse analysis is an appropriate methodological approach. Discourse scholars have long been interested in the relationship between language and identity, often noting the catalytic role that social groups play in shared language and communication norms and, relatedly, consequences for education (Rogers *et al.*, 2005; Russell *et al.*, 2024). In the field of teacher education, in particular, positioning theory has been used as a tool to help teachers tap into a reflective practice, wherein they identify how they see the world and their place in it so they can initiate situated pedagogies accordingly (Blasco *et al.*, 2021). As a lens to understand roles that facilitators of a cross-cultural VE enact, positioning theory is a useful addition in that it makes opportunities and missed opportunities in VE collaboration visible.

Methods

This study uses a case study design and discourse analytic methods to explore the discursive roles that three facilitators took on during a cross-cultural VE. A case study design was well-suited for this in-depth exploration of the context-dependent dynamics within a specific cross-cultural VE. Moreover, discourse analytic methods allowed for a close examination of language use to uncover how facilitators constructed and negotiated their roles within the VE. Although case study designs and discourse analytic methods may limit the generalizability of results, together these approaches provided rich insights into the nuanced, socially situated nature of facilitator positioning and interaction within the cross-cultural VE that was the focus of this study.

Study context: The study draws from a VE between a private internationalized high school in eastern China and a public high school in the southeastern USA. Students and facilitators met monthly (four times total) on Zoom during one semester in fall 2023. The language of instruction for the VE was English, as it was the primary language of instruction at both schools. School partners rotated synchronous session hosting duties. Hosting duties included student presentations of one school-related event and one national or international event that impacted their school community. To allow for simultaneous conversation threads, students logged on via individual laptops and were encouraged to use the chat feature, including emojis or unmute to respond to their partners. Students were also encouraged to create and share multimodal artifacts related to the VE on a Padlet. Outside of VE sessions, facilitators met regularly to plan future sessions and reflect on previous sessions.

Study participants: A convenience sample, drawn from an existing VE partnership, was used to identify three VE facilitators, one from each partner school (Facilitators 1 and 2) and one researcher (Author 2/Facilitator 3), to participate in this study (see Table 1 for facilitator/participant characteristics). The facilitators were in their second year of VE implementation. Though a convenience sample has limitations in terms of generalizability, in the case of this qualitative case study, it is strategic in that it ensures participant familiarity and engagement with the research.

Data sources: Data sources included semistructured interviews ($n = 3$); transcripts of VE facilitator work sessions ($n = 3$); transcripts of synchronous VE sessions ($n = 2$); and multimodal student artifacts ($n = 2$) produced and shared asynchronously by VE participants. Multimodal artifacts were created and shared by students in preparation for and as a reflection of VE synchronous sessions. Artifacts included Padlet entries, some of which included student artwork, external images and links to external online sources.

Data analysis: The interpretive nature of discourse analysis has the potential to introduce researcher bias in identifying and coding discursive patterns. Thus, the researchers engaged in the following data analysis process to account for this potential. In phase one, researchers used thematic analysis to understand facilitators' conceptualizations of *charged* moments, defined in results section below, via a set of post-VE interviews ($n = 3$), in which facilitators were asked to recall and reflect on recently completed problem-based VE sessions. Across interviews, two particular moments emerged from the VE as being *charged*.

Phase two of analysis began following the identification of shared *charged* moments via thematic analysis. During phase two, researchers used discourse data from the relevant bounded set of VE sessions ($n = 4$) and associated reflection and planning meetings ($n = 2$). Data were transcribed following a modified Jefferson approach (Sacks *et al.*, 1974) and subsequently analyzed. Both the act of transcript building and analysis allowed researchers the opportunity to better understand how facilitators positioned themselves and how they perceived student positioning activities during identified *charged* moments. In the case of synchronous data, researchers engaged a critical micro-analysis (Van Dijk, 1993) of facilitator discursive moves within these data, first isolating turns in talk and then segmenting noun/pronoun, adverb/adjective and verb use by speaker to understand topic, structure and

Table 1. Facilitator/participant characteristics

Facilitator/participant	Facilitator/participant characteristics
Facilitator 1	Chinese, woman, teaching high school in the USA
Facilitator 2	Filipino, man, teaching high school in China
Facilitator 3	American/white, woman, higher education/research in the USA

coherence. Finally, researchers reread across transcripts and segmented data for patterns in facilitator moves.

Results

Results showed that facilitators made patterned, discursive positioning moves when students initiated topics that facilitators perceived as being geopolitically sensitive. Facilitators struggled to balance open dialogue with perceived geopolitical sensitivities, and, at times, conversations were constrained, limiting the intended purpose of shared exploration of SDG 4: Quality Education for All. The results point to some incongruence between facilitators' beliefs in the value of open discourse and their impromptu and planned discursive choices, indicating value for improved preparation for VE facilitators. We organize our results section around facilitators' definitions and perceptions of *charged* moments; general trends in facilitator positioning across identified *charged* moments; and two illustrative examples of facilitators' positioning work in identified *charged* moments to demonstrate the dynamism of their position taking.

Facilitator definitions and perceptions of charged moments: In early planning sessions, facilitators described their vision for ideal VE sessions with students. Facilitator 2 characterized these sessions as "an actual exchange of ideas," while Facilitator 1 envisioned them as "a way to learn about themselves in the world." Facilitator 3 added that they could be "maybe a way to see beyond what they think is just the norm." Alongside these aspirations, facilitators also anticipated potential missteps. Facilitator 1, a Chinese woman living in the USA, led this discussion by referencing two instances in which she felt maligned by students based on her ethnic/cultural identity. Facilitators 1 and 3 agreed that it would take "effort to make sure students were always respectful" (Facilitator 2) and, similarly, Facilitator 1 commented, "this is our work, to ensure that students have the opportunity to practice dialogue with others."

In interviews, facilitators were asked to recall and describe particular moments that were tense or *charged*. At a high level, the facilitators' definitions of *charged* moments were largely congruent. Facilitator 3 explained, "What's at risk if that doesn't go well is people can get offended, and it can snowball, becoming the basis of ongoing negative feelings that extend beyond the peer-to-peer relationship. It can lead to further generalizations." Similarly, Facilitators 1 and 2 highlighted the potential for "longstanding bad feelings" (Facilitator 1) and noted that such moments can "shift their thinking and interactions with a whole group of people" (Facilitator 2). Each facilitator assigned significant consequences to the VE, noting that what happens in shared dialogue could either foster global competence and empathy among participants or exacerbate misunderstandings and stereotypes.

Taking a closer view at facilitators' definitions and descriptions of *charged* moments provides more nuance. Facilitator 3 described a visceral feeling. She noted, "my heart rate speeds up, because I know I probably need to intervene and frame or reframe the conversation or problem a little bit in a way that doesn't make it worse." Facilitators 1 and 2, however, aware of the *charged* moment unfolding, both described entering a measured, internal state typically focused on the logistics of student engagement and listening. Facilitator 1 shared, "I think to myself, 'Oh wow! OK, we will have to get through this moment and see what happens next'[…] maybe I start thinking about what I can do to reflect with them later." Facilitator 2 shared, "Definitely I experience frustration and also maybe a little shame on their behalf if they aren't prepared or engaging properly."

General trends in facilitator positioning patterns: Across the participant-identified *charged* moments, facilitators took on patterned distinct positions: framer, repair maker, amicable host, questioner and listener.

Framer: The facilitator positioned themselves as a framer by defining and protecting the conversational floor. Sometimes this looked like ensuring that all participants had the opportunity to speak without interruption and thus maintaining an equitable conversation space. They managed who spoke and when, while also maintaining the pace of the discussion, ensuring it moved forward at a productive speed without lagging or rushing. By actively controlling turn-taking, the facilitator promoted equitable participation, ensuring that everyone had a chance to contribute. At the end of the conversation, the facilitator initiated the coda, summarizing key points to bring closure to important topics and signaling the conclusion of the discussion.

Repair maker: Other times, facilitators positioned themselves as repair makers by reframing student comments through a diplomatic lens. In these instances, facilitators tactfully rephrased or clarified student comments to make them more palatable, clearer and/or inclusive, while also working to maintain the original intent. When taking on this position, facilitators used a strategy of adding contextual information, such as relevant background or supplementary information, to enrich the conversation.

Amicable host: When taking on the position of amicable host, facilitators addressed participants by name, working to foster a sense of communication and personalization within the broader interaction. The key discursive strategy that facilitators used included rephrasing a direct response. Here, they often reworded or rephrased the student's contribution, making subtle tweaks to the wording to ensure clarity and coherence of the contribution.

Questioner: In the questioner's self-positioning work, facilitators took a more direct approach by asking probing questions to encourage deeper thinking, challenge assumptions or address underlying issues within the group dynamic. Typical question stems included, "Can you tell me more about […]?"; "Where do you think that idea comes from?"; and "Where did you learn that?"

Listener: The final type of positioning work that was evident across charged moments included facilitator as listener. This positioning work was marked by a palpable shift from vocal participation to quiet listening. In these instances, facilitators deferred to their co-facilitator either explicitly, or other times, through *de facto* moves. On a surface level, this particular positioning work reflects common co-facilitation collaboration styles. However, when we dig a bit deeper into the timing and location of this self-positioning work, it becomes clear that self-positioning as a listener can also be an important signal to co-facilitators about an unfolding *charged* moment.

By positioning themselves as listeners, facilitators may be communicating to their co-facilitators that a delicate situation is unfolding – one that requires careful attention, rather than intervention. This act of stepping back allows the facilitator to gather insight from the group while providing space for the co-facilitator to respond to the moment in a potentially more attuned or nuanced manner. Ultimately, self-positioning as a listener is not only about managing facilitation but also serves as an important signal in navigating complex or emotionally-charged group dynamics.

Positioning based on conversation setting: Facilitators' positioning seemed to be correlated with setting; in *charged* moments that occurred within planning or reflection meetings, facilitators each took on questioner, listener, host, repair maker and framer roles. In contrast, in the VE *charged* moments, Facilitator 3 took on all roles aside from questioner, and Facilitators 1 and 2 took on roles of framer, host and listener only. Additionally, though these roles emerged across turns of talk within identified bounded *charged* moments, facilitators often took on more than one role simultaneously or switched between two within one conversation turn. Within the illustrative example below, in the third conversation turn (lns 10–15), Facilitator 3 oscillates between repair maker and amicable host. There are likely

multiple explanations, including multiplicities of identities and roles within contexts, as to why and when facilitators engage in this positioning work.

Illustrative Example 1: Responding to student examples: In early sessions, facilitators decided to engage students in the exercise of reporting a news event at the school-, national- or international-level related to quality education and/or international relations. Though the task was planned by facilitators, presentations and any subsequent student dialogue required facilitators to make impromptu decisions. In post-VE interviews, facilitators recalled one particularly charged moment that spanned 22 s (see Table 2 for transcript).

A US student highlighted the US National Zoo pandas being returned to China. The student's rhetoric mirrored some inflammatory headlines in US mainstream media, framing the pandas' departure first as a "thing China likes to do" and later, within the same turn, as a consequence of geopolitical tensions (lns 7–10). Finally, the student initiated a coda, "this might be good for us," which indicated hope for improved geopolitical relations. Within this frame, the student situated pandas as a proxy for diplomatic hopes. The student's use of subjects and objects within this conversation turn serves as a map for how they locate themselves and partners within the geopolitical context; initially, distancing self and others from conflict by using "they" indiscriminately to locate conflict at the national level and, later, "they" to signify respective presidents. Within the final coda statement, the student shifts to "us," locating himself and peers across partner schools within the problem and solution frame.

Early into the student's presentation, Facilitator 2 appeared to grimace, and the China partner school students, previously visibly engaged, became suddenly still. As the *charged* moment unfolded, the presenting student says, "well, that's it," signifying the close of their presentation and essentially skipping the second portion of the task, linking the news event to their collective cross-cultural learning in the VE.

Table 2. Transcript charged moment 1

Speaker	Speaker transcript	Transcript line number
US Student	And then, a few months ago, China likes to do this thing where they give pandas to other like countries that they're like allied with. And they took away like America's	1
Facilitator 2	[widen eye small brow furrow; shift in vocal/multimodal engagement from Chinese partner students that persisted throughout session unless directly called upon by facilitator]	
US Student	But then, on November fifteenth they, like Biden and Ping, talked in like a meeting to like, try and soothe relations with America and China. And they talked about giving pandas back to America. So it's probably a good sign of like, you know just them like cooperating, which is really [2] it's good for both of [us]	5
Facilitator 3	Awesome. Thank *you* so much for sharing [student name]. that was a really interesting event that *you* talked about at your school with doing a Turkey dance. It sounds like that sounds pretty cool	10
	And yeah, a big news story in the U.S. was that *our* pandas that China has so graciously shared *with the world*, and particularly in this case with the U.S. over many years. That they're being returned to China, *as expected.* This has been expected for a long time, but the really good news is that Xi Jinping and President Biden have met, and that we're hoping that relations are going to continue to improve between China and the U.S. And that maybe we'll get more pandas, because pandas are beautiful animals, and very exciting to see those diplomatic engagements happening again. Thank you so much [student name] okay	15

Facilitator 2 moved away from the screen. Facilitator 3 took on an amicable host role and responded by revoicing a portion of the student's presentation and adding factual context, explaining that pandas have always been on loan to the USA. In a subsequent interview, Facilitator 3 explained that they were "feeling so uncomfortable" and trying to be "a neutral fact finder, in an attempt to interrupt the student's Western imperialist attitude." Facilitator 1, a teacher of US students, who took on a listening role in the conversation, recalled feeling that the US student presenter was internalizing the feedback from Facilitator 3, "evidenced by the student nodding […] I felt that they are learning something about how limited their own understanding might be of a situation but if not for [Facilitator 3] he would not know that it was sort of rude."

Illustrative Example 2: Centering student questions: Not all identified *charged* moments occurred in synchronous VE sessions. Throughout the VE, facilitators emphasized two principles of their instructional design: centering students' lived experiences and question development. To that end, facilitators regularly asked students to contribute to Padlet posts about quality education problems or gaps in their local communities. Facilitators explained to students that the Padlet post should be thought of as a "window into what a quality education issue looks like in their community through a photograph/image" (Facilitator 2). Students were prompted to include a caption explaining how their selected image aligns with SDG 4 and its targets/indicators and to pose and reply to questions on partner student posts. According to facilitators, the intent of this asynchronous instructional design was to catalyze discussion, to compare experiences, discuss disparities and engage in knowledge sharing.

Facilitators recalled the Padlet interactions as a source of one particularly charged moment: a ninth-grade student from the US context posted about school shootings. The post featured an image of a chalkboard and a child's drawing of a handgun. The source of the image was cited correctly, and the post included data that the student had synthesized from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Colorado Department of Human Services. The post read: "Since 1970 there have been 2,057 [school] shootings. There have been 680 fatalities and 1926 injuries, there are very little safety rules in our school to stop this other than clear backpacks. How do your school safety policies look like where you live?"

Seeing the post prompted Facilitator 3 to ask co-facilitators about the possibility of enabling the "moderator" feature on the Padlet or disabling the comment feature. The rationale was that sensitive responses to this prompt might require teacher vetting beforehand to ensure that: posts adhered to school guidelines, norms and expectations; content would not be triggering for other students; and teachers could prepare students with guidance for discussing sensitive topics. Facilitators 1 and 2 agreed with the idea, and together they initiated a framer role. As a result, the facilitators decided that, moving forward, any questions posed by students to one another in this Padlet discussion would be collected and addressed during the next synchronous session through students' community lens slideshows. Consensus among Facilitators 1, 2 and 3 on this decision coalesced around the sensitive nature of gun violence discussions. From the US perspective, such topics can be emotionally triggering based on students' personal experiences. Moreover, in a reflection meeting, Facilitator 1 noted that this topic is controversial in the Chinese context, as concerns about gun violence in the USA can impact students' postsecondary aspirations abroad and might evoke pity for the US students.

Discussion

This paper explored how problem-based cross-cultural VE facilitators positioned themselves and, consequently, how that positioning shaped the shared discourse between students at Chinese and US partner high schools. By aligning the purpose and goals of the VE with a problem-exploration approach framed by SDG 4: Quality Education for All, students and facilitators expected community building to occur through student-developed questions and

student-directed dialogue (asynchronous and synchronous). Facilitators shared their belief that this process would allow participants to address cross-cultural misperceptions and enhance their global competence and "global citizenship" (SDG 4.7).

Dialogic interactions in a cross-cultural VE inherently mean empowering students to direct and shape their own learning to a greater degree with the still important role of teachers and facilitators as guides (i.e. positioning) as teachers and facilitators help make visible the complexities, nuances and interdependencies of students' distinct and shared perspectives, identities and communities – what positioning theorists would describe as moments of relational self-location (Davies and Harré, 1990). One key aspect of positioning theory in this context is the recognition of cultural differences in how individuals perceive and interpret social interactions (Luke, 1995). In terms of content, students, facilitators and educators explored how contexts influence our collaboration and shared understandings and can act as constraints or pave the way for mutually beneficial and sustaining relationships, policies and informed social actions.

In this study, the facilitator's positioning was evident in both explicit verbal moves and more subtle discursive practices that shaped conditions for student dialogue. As positioning is an inherently social and discursive act (McVee, 2011; Yep and Mutua, 2016), how facilitators framed, initiated and responded to dialogue offered insight into their own self-concepts and expectations of one another and student engagement. Research in teacher discourse reminds us that classroom talk is never neutral, but rather reflects and constructs our understanding of the world (Rogers *et al.*, 2005). While facilitators embraced their role as guides, they also contended with the complex and unpredictable nature of classroom discourse (Cassar *et al.*, 2021; Lefstein *et al.*, 2015). These typical challenges were further amplified by topical relevance (discussion anchored within the SDG framework) and by the need to facilitate meaning-making across sociocultural differences (Beck, 2020; Muth *et al.*, 2007).

It follows, then, that the analysis reported here reflects how we discursively navigate multiple identities, cultures and dispositions and how discursive navigation can be magnified by shifting geopolitical contexts. Facilitators 1 and 2 hoped to prepare their students for international postsecondary opportunities and, as such, were keen to engage in a VE. Similarly, Facilitator 3 was eager to support partner educators in different contexts through an exploration of SDGs. Yet, in opening and closing portions of VE sessions, the conversational floor was bookended with facilitator discourse moves that cordoned off explicit discussion of geopolitical tensions. Facilitator 2 surmised this tension in a follow-up interview: "the content we discussed, I think it can be more rigorous really because it became more about our cultures in a somewhat surface way. And how can we get as deep as we would like into the SDG of Quality Education?"

Charged moments like those analyzed in this study are both essential to the development and practice of global citizenship and inherent in VEs. Treating them as such, facilitators can better prepare themselves and students to engage in meaningful discourse – the sort of tremendous collaboration required among countries in developing and committing to the SDGs – and to ensure a more equitable, resilient global community. Doing so, however, requires attention to facilitators' own positioning and to raising awareness of their discursive choices. As Kraatz *et al.* (2022) note, helping educators reflect on and expand their discourse practices is an essential component of preparation for leading challenging conversations.

This study offers a micro-level view into the complexities of facilitating classroom discourse across differences. However, there are important limitations to consider. As is true for any case study, the results are not generalizable to a broader population and instead should be interpreted as a close analysis of phenomena that occurred in this bounded setting

with this bounded population. Additionally, the study design emphasizes positioning work within shared discursive moments (i.e. synchronous VE student and planning sessions) and, therefore, does not account for if, how and when facilitators engaged with students around charged moments outside of these venues. Future research that follows facilitators into interactions with students outside of the synchronous VE sessions would help extend our understanding of facilitators' positioning work. Finally, the study explores discursive work among facilitators who carry multiple intersectional identities. The study should be read as a snapshot in time that may not fully encompass long-term identity negotiations; intersectional identities are fluid and shaped by social, cultural and institutional contexts (Stamou, 2018). In the case of this study, institutional identities and related discursive norms are influential but not included in the study design or analysis.

Implications: Positioning theory as an anticipatory tool

This research adds both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it extends positioning theory by demonstrating its benefits as an anticipatory pedagogical tool for VE facilitators, particularly with attention to navigating *charged* moments from a space of respect, mutuality and empathy. In doing so, it expands the framework beyond individual identity and cultural development to guide collaborative, real-time negotiation of facilitator roles with cultural and geopolitical sensitivity. Practically, this research helps move theory into educational practice by offering tools for reflection and iterative VE design. Hennessy *et al.* (2018) highlighted the need for teachers to have opportunities to theorize their teaching, noting that such work contributes to increased confidence and awareness about their interactions with students. Thus, positioning theory can be a useful lens for teachers who want to improve their facilitation of challenging conversations. By taking up intentional roles that prioritize inclusive dialogues, educators can model strategies that honor cultural norms and value the conscientious sharing of differing perspectives.

To advance progress toward SDG 4: Quality Education for All, it is crucial to ensure inclusive and equitable dialogues that create opportunities for teachers and students to grow in their dialogic practices. Thus, we extend a "Preparing for Cross-Cultural Exchange Positioning Protocol" (see Appendix) that educators can use or adapt to reflect on practices that foster inclusive dialogues and for weighing subsequent adaptive instructional moves. It is important to note that this is not a one-size-fits-all or comprehensive tool and should be adapted to become more culturally relevant and connected with the context of facilitators and participants. We envision that this protocol can ground facilitators', primarily and participants', to some extent, reflective practice in VE, moving positioning theory into practical application.

From a research perspective, this study provides insights into facilitator positioning in VE contexts; however, additional research might interrogate how VE programming in varied geographic, institutional and political contexts yields similar or different approaches than this study. Subsequent research might trace how various linguistic repertoires, historical contexts and sociopolitical dynamics impact teacher and student positioning. Looking at the long-range impact of VE engagement on students' global citizenship skills might also offer new understandings around VEs and positioning as potent tools for more high quality and inclusive forms of education. The study demonstrates the value of research studies that examine discursive interactions and the ways facilitators influence dialogic, problem-based global learning experiences. Subsequent methods might take up multimodal analysis of VE sessions, including audio transcripts, classroom/video observations and/or postsession reflections from facilitators based on the Protocol (Appendix) prompts to unravel the interconnections between discourse and cultural positioning. Given the nexus among this

study, SDG 4: Quality Education for All, and related SDGs, like SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions and SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals, researchers might benefit from exploring how VE programs contribute to peace-building and international collaboration among educators and students globally.

Finally, the study reflects the role of educational cross-cultural exchange, specifically VE, in achieving SDG 4: Quality Education for All via pathways for students to participate in constructive conversations on glocally-relevant issues with culturally diverse peers. While *charged* moments might arise in VE discussions, they become invaluable opportunities for engaging in productive struggle toward cross-cultural understanding–providing a powerful object lesson around similar geopolitical tensions that might arise in online or offline discourse across differences. In the education and policy landscapes, preparing teachers and students well-poised to engage in constructive discourse that seeks understanding provides an important foundation toward subsequent cross-cultural dialogues. Guiding pedagogical structures and instructional tools that strengthen teachers' and facilitators' dialogic and intercultural competence may serve to help design and facilitate VEs that center constructive student discourse and deeper learning with geopolitically sensitive topics and during charged moments.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the teachers who participated in this study and generously shared their time and perspectives. We would also like to thank NC State University and the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation for institutional support.This study was conducted with approval from the NC State University Institutional Review Board (Protocol #25245).

Funding

This work was conducted without dedicated external funding.

References

Akiyama, Y. and Cunningham, D.J. (2018), "Synthesizing the practice of SCMC-based telecollaboration: a scoping review", *CALICO Journal*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 49-76.

Ala-Kortesmaa, S. and Muñoz, C. (2023), "Challenges in virtual team communication in the context of virtual exchange experience", *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning*, Vol. 25 No. 1, pp. 49-61.

Anderson, K.T. (2009), "Applying positioning theory to the analysis of classroom interactions: mediating micro-identities, macro-kinds, and ideologies of knowing", *Linguistics and Education*, Vol. 20 No. 4, pp. 291-310.

Anderson, M. (2019), "What we say and how we say it matter: teacher talk that improves student learning and behavior", ASCD, Alexandria, VA.

Aririguzoh, S. (2022), "Communication competencies, culture and SDGs: effective processes to cross-cultural communication", *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 1-11.

Avgousti, M.I. (2018), "Intercultural communicative competence and online exchanges: a systematic review", *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, Vol. 31 No. 8, pp. 819-853.

Beck, T.A. (2020), "Identity, discourse, and safety in controversial issue discussions", *Annals of Social Studies Education Research for Teachers*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 48-52.

Bennich, T., Persson, Å., Beaussart, R., Allen, C. and Malekpour, S. (2023), "Recurring patterns of SDG interlinkages and how they can advance the 2030 agenda", *One Earth*, Vol. 6 No. 11, pp. 1465-1476.

Blasco, M., Kjærgaard, A. and Thomsen, T.U. (2021), "Situationally orchestrated pedagogy: teacher reflections on positioning as expert, facilitator, and caregiver", *Management Learning*, Vol. 52 No. 1, pp. 26-46.

Cassar, C., Oosterheert, I. and Meijer, P.C. (2021), "The classroom in turmoil: teachers' perspective on unplanned controversial issues in the classroom", *Teachers and Teaching*, Vol. 27 No. 7, pp. 656-671.

Chun, D.M. (2015), "Language and culture learning in higher education via telecollaboration", *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 5-21.

Commander, N.E., Schloer, W.F. and Cushing, S.T. (2022), "Virtual exchange: a promising high-impact practice for developing intercultural effectiveness across disciplines", *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, Vol. 5, pp. 1-19.

Conrad, J. (2020), "Navigating identity as a controversial issue: one teacher's disclosure for critical empathic reasoning", *Theory and Research in Social Education*, Vol. 48 No. 2, pp. 211-243.

Davies, B. and Harré, R. (1990), "Positioning: the discursive production of selves", *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp. 43-63.

Dooly, M. and O'Dowd, R. (2018), "Telecollaboration in the foreign language classroom: a review of its origins and its application to language teaching practices", In Dooly, M. and O'Dowd, R. (Eds), *In This Together: Teachers' Experiences with Transnational, Telecollaborative Language Learning Projects*, Peter Lang, New York, NY, pp. 11-34.

Drageset, O.G. and Ell, F. (2024), "Using positioning theory to think about mathematics classroom talk", *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, Vol. 115 No. 3, pp. 353-385.

ECA Evaluation Division (2020), "Monitoring and evaluating of virtual exchange: lessons from literature and implications for ECA", Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, available at: https://eca.state.gov/files/bureau/eca_eval_division_virtual_exchanges_final_07.28.2020.pdf

EVOLVE (2025), "Erasmus+ virtual exchange (EVOLVE)", available at: https://evolve-erasmus.eu/

Fredman, A.J., Schultz, N.J. and Hoffman, M.F. (2015), "'You're moving a frickin big ship:' the challenges of addressing LGBTQ topics in public schools", *Education and Urban Society*, Vol. 47 No. 1, pp. 56-85.

Godwin-Jones, R. (2019), "Telecollaboration as an approach to developing intercultural communication competence", *Language Learning and Technology*, Vol. 23 No. 3, pp. 8-28.

Green, J.L., Brock, C., Baker, W.D. and Harris, P. (2020), "Positioning theory and discourse analysis: an explanatory theory and analytic lens", In N.S. Nasir, C.D., Lee, R., Pea and M.M., de Royston (Eds), *Handbook of the Cultural Foundations of Learning*, Routledge, London, UK, pp. 119-140.

Hennessy, S., Dragovic, T. and Warwick, P. (2018), "A research-informed, school based professional development workshop programme to promote dialogic teaching with interactive technologies", *Professional Development in Education*, Vol. 44 No. 2, pp. 145-168.

Himes, M.P., Spires, H.A., Krupa, E.E., Borden, M.L. and Eagle, J.L. (2023), "Project-Based Inquiry (PBI) Global du ring a pandemic: a new learning ecology perspective", *Education Sciences*, Vol. 13 No. 11, p. 1099.

Howe, C. and Abedin, M. (2013), "Classroom dialogue: a systematic review across four decades of research", *Cambridge Journal of Education*, Vol. 43 No. 3, pp. 325-356.

Huang, X. and Wang, C. (2021), "Pre-service teachers' professional identity transformation: a positioning theory perspective", *Professional Development in Education*, Vol. 50 No. 1, pp. 174-191.

Karousiou, C., Vrikki, M. and Evagorou, M. (2025), "Teachers' perceptions on introducing sensitive and controversial issues in the classroom", *Frontiers in Education*, Vol. 10, p. 1481173.

Knobel, M. and Lankshear, C. (2007), "Cultural studies and new literacies: theoretical and pedagogical issues", *Cultural Studies and Critical Methodologies*, Vol. 7 No. 3, pp. 333-346.

Kraatz, E., von Spiegel, J., Sayers, R. and Brady, A.C. (2022), "Should we 'just stick to the facts'? The benefit of controversial conversations in classrooms", *Theory Into Practice*, Vol. 61 No. 3, pp. 312-324.

Krajcik, J.S., Blumenfeld, P.C., Marx, R.W., Bass, K.M., Fredericks, J. and Soloway, E. (1998), "Inquiry in project-based science classrooms: initial attempts by middle school", *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, Vol. 7 Nos 3-4, pp. 313-350.

Lefstein, A. (2010), "More helpful as problem than solution: some implications of situating dialogue in classrooms", In *Educational Dialogues*, Routledge, pp. 182-203.

Lefstein, A. and Snell, J. (2014), *Better than best practice: developing teaching and learning through dialogue*, Routledge.

Lefstein, A., Snell, J. and Israeli, M. (2015), "From moves to sequences: expanding the unit of analysis in the study of classroom discourse", *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 41 No. 5, pp. 866-885.

Lin, A.R. (2021), "Exploration of civic education in the K-12 Christian school environment", *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, Vol. 30 No. 1, pp. 42-58.

Lu, J., Bridges, S. and Hmelo-Silver, C. (2014), "Problem-based learning", in Sawyer, K. (Ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Learning Sciences*, 2nd ed. Cambridge, UK.

Luke, A. (1995), "Chapter 1: text and discourse in education: an introduction to critical discourse analysis", *Review of Research in Education*, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 3-48.

McVee, M.B. (2011), "Positioning theory and sociocultural perspectives. Sociocultural positioning in literacy: exploring culture, discourse, narrative, and power in diverse educational contexts", In McVee, M.B., Brock, C.H and Glazier, J.A. (Eds), *Sociocultural Positioning in Discourse, Narrative and Power in Diverse Educational Contexts*, Hampton Press, Cresskill, NJ, pp. 1-22.

Mansilla, V.B. and Jackson, A.W. (2022), *Educating for Global Competence: Preparing Our Students to Engage the World*, ASCD, Alexandria, VA.

Michugina, S.V. and Lukoshus, O.G. (2021), "Modeling the world picture within education English language textbook discourse", *ARPHA Proceedings*, Vol. 4, pp. 627-639.

Muth, K.D., Polizzi, N.C. and Glynn, S.M. (2007), "Case-based teacher preparation for teaching controversial topics in Middle school", *Middle School Journal*, Vol. 38 No. 5, pp. 14-19.

Nguyen, L.V., Cleveland, D., Nguyen, C. and Joyce, C. (2024), "Problem-based learning and the integration of sustainable development goals", *Journal of Work-Applied Management*, Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 218-234.

O'Dowd, R. and Dooly, M. (2020), "Intercultural communicative competence development through telecollaboration and virtual exchange", Jackson, J. (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Intercultural Communication*, 2nd ed., Routledge, London, UK, pp. 361-375.

O'Dowd, R. (2021a), "Virtual exchange: moving forward into the next decade", *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, Vol. 34 No. 3, pp. 209-224.

O'Dowd, R. (2021b), "What do students learn in virtual exchange? A qualitative content analysis of learning outcomes across multiple exchanges", *International Journal of Educational Research*, Vol. 109, p. 101804.

O'Dowd, R. and Lewis, T. (2016), "Online intercultural exchange: policy, pedagogy, practice", Routledge, London, UK.

Park, S.H., Cho, Y. and Bong, H.C. (2023), "Action learning for community development from the lens of the UN's SDGs: a systematic literature review", *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, Vol. 20 No. 3, pp. 252-281.

Poole, A. (2024), "The discursive (re) positioning of the foreign teacher: understanding changing teacher roles in China's internationalised school sector", *International Journal of Educational Research*, Vol. 128, p. 102484.

Reimers, F.M. (2024), "The sustainable development goals and education: achievements and opportunities", *International Journal of Educational Development*, Vol. 104, p. 102965.

Reznitskaya, A. and Gregory, M. (2013), "Student thought and classroom language: examining the mechanism of change in dialogic teaching", *Educational Psychologist*, Vol. 48 No. 2, pp. 114-133.

Rogers, R., Malancharuvil-Berkes, E., Mosley, M., Hui, D. and Joseph, G.O.G. (2005), "Critical discourse analysis in education: a review of the literature", *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 75 No. 3, pp. 365-416.

Russell, S.G., Fabo, C., Jones, V. and Colic, A. (2024), "Language policies and ideologies for socialization and identity-building in U.S. schools: the case of newcomer and refugee students in Arizona and New York", *Social Sciences*, Vol. 13 No. 11, p. 601.

Rutten, L., Butville, D., Wolkenhauer, R. and Dvir, B. (2024), "When difficult topics bubble up: how K-12 teachers understand unplanned difficult-topics moments", *Action in Teacher Education*, Vol. 47 No. 3, pp. 1-16.

SØReide, G.E. (2006), "Narrative construction of teacher identity: positioning and negotiation", *Teachers and Teaching*, Vol. 12 No. 5, pp. 527-547.

Sacks, H., Schegloff, E.A. and Jefferson, G. (1974), "A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation", *Language*, Vol. 50 No. 4, pp. 696-735.

Scharlemann, J.P.W., Brock, R.C., Balfour, N., Brown, C., Burgess, N.D., Guth, M.K., Ingram, D.J., Lane, R., Oldfield, T.E.E., Smith, A. and Kapos, V. (2020), "Towards understanding interactions between sustainable development goals: the role of environment–human linkages", *Sustainability Science*, Vol. 15 No. 6, pp. 1573-1584.

Sinatra, G.M. and Mason, L. (2013), "Beyond knowledge: learner characteristics influencing conceptual change", In *International Handbook of Research on Conceptual Change*, Routledge, London, UK, pp. 377-394.

Sóñora, F., Sesto, V. and García-Rodeja, I. (2025), "Ninth-grade students' interactions and co-construction of arguments during a teaching unit on soil science", *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, Vol. 20 Nos 3-4, pp. 1-29.

Spires, H.A., Morris, G. and Zhang, J. (2012), "New literacies and emerging technologies: perspectives from US and Chinese Middle level teachers", *RMLE Online*, Vol. 35 No. 10, pp. 1-11.

Spires, H., Himes, M., Lee, C. and Gambino, A. (2021), "'We are the future': critical inquiry and social action in the class room" *Journal of Literacy Research*, Vol. 53 No. 2, pp. 219-241.

Stamou, A.G. (2018), "Studying the interactional construction of identities in critical discourse studies: a proposed analytical framework", *Discourse and Society*, Vol. 29 No. 5, pp. 569-589.

Symeonidis, V. and Impedovo, M.A. (2023), "Where internationalisation and digitalisation intersect: designing a virtual exchange to enhance student teachers' professional awareness as European teachers", *European Journal of Teacher Education*, Vol. 46 No. 5, pp. 821-839.

Tao, Y. and Chen, G. (2024), "The relationship between teacher talk and students' academic achievement: a meta-analysis", *Educational Research Review*, Vol. 45, p. 100638.

The Global Goals (2025), "Goal 4: Quality education", available at: https://globalgoals.org/goals/4-quality-education/

Thomassen, A.O. and Stentoft, D. (2020), "Educating students for a complex future–why integrating a problem analysis in problem-based learning has something to offer", *Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-Based Learning*, Vol. 14 No. 2.

UNESCO (2008), "Inclusive education: the way of the future", *UNESCO International Conference on Education*, available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000162787

UNESCO (2017), "Education for sustainable development goals: learning objectives, UNESCO education sector", available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000247444

Van Dijk, T.A. (1993), "Principles of critical discourse analysis", *Discourse and Society*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 249-283.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978), *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Walker, A. and Leary, H. (2009), "A problem based learning meta analysis: differences across problem types, implementation types, disciplines, and assessment levels", *Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-Based Learning*, Vol. 3 No. 1, p. 6.

West, R.E., Williams, G.S. and Williams, D.D. (2013), "Improving problem-based communities through effective group evaluation", *Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-Based Learning*, Vol. 7 No. 2.

Wood, E.A., Collins, S.L., Mueller, S., Stetten, N.E. and El-Shokry, M. (2022), "Transforming perspectives through virtual exchange: a US–Egypt partnership (part 1)", *Frontiers in Public Health*, Vol. 10, p. 877547.

Wulff, A. (2020), *Grading Goal Four: Tensions, Threats, and Opportunities in the Sustainable Development Goal on Quality Education*, Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands.

Yep, G. and Mutua, E. (2016), "Intersectionality, identity, and positionality", Sorrells, K. and Sekimoto, S. (Eds), *Globalizing Intercultural Communication*, A Reader SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 85-102.

Yu, L. and Mohamed Zin, Z. (2023), "The critical thinking-oriented adaptations of problem-based learning models: a systematic review", *Frontiers in Education*, Vol. 8, p. 1139987.

Zak, A. (2021), "An integrative review of literature: virtual exchange models, learning outcomes, and programmatic insights", *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, Vol. 4, pp. 62-79.

Zickafoose, A., Ilesanmi, O., Diaz-Manrique, M., Adeyemi, A.E., Walumbe, B., Strong, R., Wingenbach, G., Rodriguez, M.T. and Dooley, K. (2024), "Barriers and challenges affecting quality education (Sustainable Development Goal 4) in Sub-Saharan Africa by 2030", *Sustainability*, Vol. 16 No. 7, p. 2657.

Further reading

Hwang, Y. and Park, S. (2013), "Sustainable development education and problem-based learning: a mutual opportunity", *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, Vol. 14 No. 4, pp. 396-409.

McVee, M.B., Baldassarre, M. and Bailey, N. (2004), "Positioning theory as a lens to explore teachers' beliefs about literacy and culture", In Worthy, J., Maloch, B., Hoffman, J. V., Schallert, D. L. and Fairbanks, C. M. (Eds), *53rd Yearbook of the National Reading Conference*, National Reading Conference, Oak Creek, WI, pp. 281-295.

Spires, H.A., Himes, M.P. and Krupa, E. (2022), "Supporting students' science content knowledge and motivation through project-based inquiry (PBI) global in a cross-school collaboration", *Education Sciences*, Vol. 12 No. 6, p. 412.

Appendix

Table A1. Preparing for cross-cultural exchange: positioning protocol

Facilitator role	Guiding questions for reflective practice
Framer	*Defining and protecting the conversational floor* • Did I help facilitate equitable opportunities to speak and be heard during this [community of practice session, cross-cultural VE, etc.]? • In what ways did I contribute to a quality and inclusive learning experience for myself and my colleagues to help support UN Sustainable Development Goal (UN SDG) 4: Quality Education for All? Are there any areas I would like to adjust? If so, why/how? *Turn-taking and equal participation* • How did I feel about the ways I facilitated turn-taking to foster contributions from participants with different modes of participation (e.g. oral communication preferences, providing prethink or wait-time, etc.)? • What approaches can I embrace to further support balanced participation among colleagues and/or students across backgrounds? *Pacing and conversation flow* • How did the discussion pace feel (e.g. productive, too-fast, difficulties with participation, etc.)? How did I adapt my methods to encourage participation or shift gears to go at a steadier pace? • How can I revise my approach to facilitating discussions in ways that foster deeper reflection and critical thinking skills that align with SDG Goal 4's focus on lifelong learning opportunities? *Summarizing* • Did my summary of the conversation illuminate key points and ensure that all participants felt unified, achieved consensus and/or exchanged a clear understanding of the aforementioned conversation and next steps moving forward? • What strategies can I implement to ensure closing reflections connect back to participants' learning goals and SDG 4, such as advancing understanding and collaboration?
Repair maker	*Reframing participants' comments* • How did I reframe participants' comments in a way that offered care, while also promoting clarity and inclusivity for the group? • Did my reframing contribute to building a more equitable learning environment in alignment with SDG 4's intent of fostering an inclusive and quality education for all? *Diplomatic communication* • Did I carefully offer clarifying insights or address tension during discussions without othering participants? • What strategies might I try to further build constructive dialogues (e.g. rephrasing comments) while modeling respectful and open exchanges of ideas? *Adding contextual information* • How did I embed background information or provide additional context to foster participants' understanding and deepen the conversation? • What extra resources or tools could I use to provide context that connects with SDG 4's focus on building critical thinking and lifelong learning opportunities?

(*continued*)

Table A1. Continued

Facilitator role	Guiding questions for reflective practice
	Balancing clarity and original intent
	• Did my clarifying points help create a balance between maintaining the speaker's voice and ensuring the group's understanding?
	• How can I revise my approach to support balance in ways that model respect for diverse perspectives and foster inclusive conversations as supported by SDG 4?
Amicable host	*Self-reflection* (inward)
	• Did I use participants' names and other techniques for individualizing engagement to foster a welcoming and inclusive space for dialogue?
	• When rephrasing direct responses from participants, did I honor the integrity of their ideas while increasing clarity and honoring differences in perspectives/ideas? Are there any alternative approaches that I can try to make this technique more effective?
	Action-oriented reflection (outward)
	• How can I improve individualized techniques (like addressing participants by name) to increase participant engagement and confidence during discussions?
	• What techniques can I embed to make sure that my reframing of contributions emboldens deeper understanding without infringing on participants' voices?
Questioner	*Deeper thinking*
	• *(Self-reflection)*: How can I frame questions that inspire curiosity and cross-cultural understanding, rather than dominant or surface-level considerations?
	• *(Participant-reflection)*: Can you tell me more about that [idea, point of view or belief]?
	Challenging assumptions
	• *(Self-reflection)*: What implicit assumptions or biases are unexamined within myself? What learning and unlearning can I engage in to challenge these assumptions and foster a learning environment that prioritizes inclusion and quality education for all?
	• *(Participant-reflection)*: Where do you think that [idea, point of view or belief] comes from?
	Addressing underlying issues within group dynamics
	• *(Self-reflection)*: How am I fostering open conversations that promote learning and repair, rather than closed conversations that assume harm or stifle communication and cross-cultural understandings?
	• *(Participant-reflection)*: Where did you learn that [idea, term or framing, point of view, belief or information]?
Listener	*Verbal listening*
	• How did my word choices and voice inflection help create a learning environment to address *charged* moments?
	• In what ways might I maintain or adjust subsequent word choices and voice inflection to promote understanding and an inclusive learning environment for all? What sentence stems or question frames can I prepare to increase my confidence and comfortability addressing *charged* moments through verbal listening in the future?

(*continued*)

Table A1. Continued

Facilitator role	Guiding questions for reflective practice
	Gestural listening • How do I think my facial gesturing and positioning of my body (e.g. arms and hands) promoted active listening from a space of nonjudgment and repair during *charged* moments? • What physical positioning and nonverbal cues might I adapt in the future to promote peace-building and understanding, rather than judgment or punishment during *charged* moments? *Adapt-in-the-moment listening* • How did I respond when a co-facilitator or participant signaled a need for assistance to address a *charged* moment? • What additional culturally responsive strategies might I add to my toolkit to adapt-in-the-moment to address *charged* moments to promote inclusive learning, scaffold repair amidst challenging group dynamics, and foster deeper cross-cultural understandings?

Corresponding author
Sarah Bausell can be contacted at: sbbausel@ncsu.edu

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:
www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: **permissions@emeraldinsight.com**