

Introduction

Developing intercultural competence is crucial for students entering a global workforce, yet only 34% of criminal justice programs offer comparative or international courses, often focusing on U.S.-centric regions (Cordner, Dammer, & Horvath, 2000). While previous studies have explored using technology to connect U.S. students with international peers, they do not emphasize virtual exchange, a structured approach that prioritizes cross-cultural interaction, dialogue, and relationship-building beyond project-based learning. Scholarship on global criminology has mainly focused on research integration rather than teaching strategies (Dmello & Kokklaera, 2025). The Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS) has recognized the need for cultural competency, technology, and global education in workforce preparation (Joseph, 2024), with globalization and international crime identified as future priorities (Boots & Kim, 2024). These findings highlight the need to expand global learning opportunities in criminal justice education.

Virtual Exchange Project Description

The 12-week virtual exchange assignment consisted of six bi-weekly Zoom discussions in small groups of students from UF and USFQ (Ecuador). Guided by instructor-developed questions aligned with course content, students explored justice system operations—such as policing, courts, and corrections—while examining cultural similarities and differences.

Research Questions

RQ 1) Is there a need to build international critical thinking and communication skills?
RQ 2) Does participation in a virtual exchange project significantly change international critical thinking and/or communication attitudes and beliefs from pre- to post-project? If so, in which specific areas?

Results

Table 1
Descriptives for Full Sample^a

Variable (n)	Percentage
Gender	
Female (35)	74.5%
Male (12)	25.5%
Class designation	
Second year (11)	23.4%
Third Year (23)	48.9%
Fourth Year (13)	27.7%
Race/Ethnicity*	
White (16)	53.3%
Hispanic (11)	36.7%
Other (3)	10%
Taken UF course focused on international issues*	
Yes (11)	36.7%
No (19)	63.3%
Intention to study abroad*	
Yes (13)	43.3%
No (17)	56.7%

Note. ^aN = 47; *N = 30

Figure 1. Survey Items

Item	Factor	Component
1. I consider different perspectives before making conclusions about the world.	CT	Analysis
2. I am able to manage when faced with multiple cultural perspectives.	CT	Solution Finding
3. I am open to different cultural ways of thinking in any international context.	CT	Judgment
4. I can make effective decisions when placed in different cultural situations.	CT	Reasoning
5. Knowing about other cultural norms and beliefs is important to me.	CT	Judgment
6. I am able to think critically to interpret global and intercultural issues.	CT	Analysis
7. I actively learn about different cultural norms.	CT	Solution Finding
8. Understanding different points of view is a priority to me.	CT	Judgment
9. I can recognize how different cultures solve problems.	CT	Reasoning
10. I can contrast important aspects of different cultures with my own.	CT	Judgment
11. Knowing about other cultural beliefs is important.	CT	Judgment
12. I am able to recognize how members of other cultures make decisions.	CT	Analysis
13. I demonstrate flexibility when interacting with members of another culture.	COMM	Adaptability
14. I prefer to socialize with people of my culture.	COMM	Adaptability
15. I am confident that I can adapt to different cultural environments.	COMM	Production
16. I am able to communicate effectively with members of other cultures.	COMM	Production
17. I like working in groups with students from other countries.	COMM	Acceptance
18. I feel comfortable in conversations that may involve cultural differences.	COMM	Sensitivity
19. When working on a group project, I enjoy collaborating with students from other countries.	COMM	Acceptance
20. I often ask questions about culture to members of other cultures.	COMM	Awareness
21. I enjoy learning about other cultures.	COMM	Awareness
22. I appreciate members of other cultures teaching me about their culture.	COMM	Sensitivity
23. I am able to interact effectively with members of other cultures.	COMM	Production
24. I appreciate differences between cultures.	COMM	Acceptance
25. I feel comfortable discussing international issues.	COMM	Adaptability
26. I can clearly articulate my point of view to members of other cultures.	COMM	Production

Figure 2. Average Scores Pre- and Post-Survey for Full Sample (n=47)

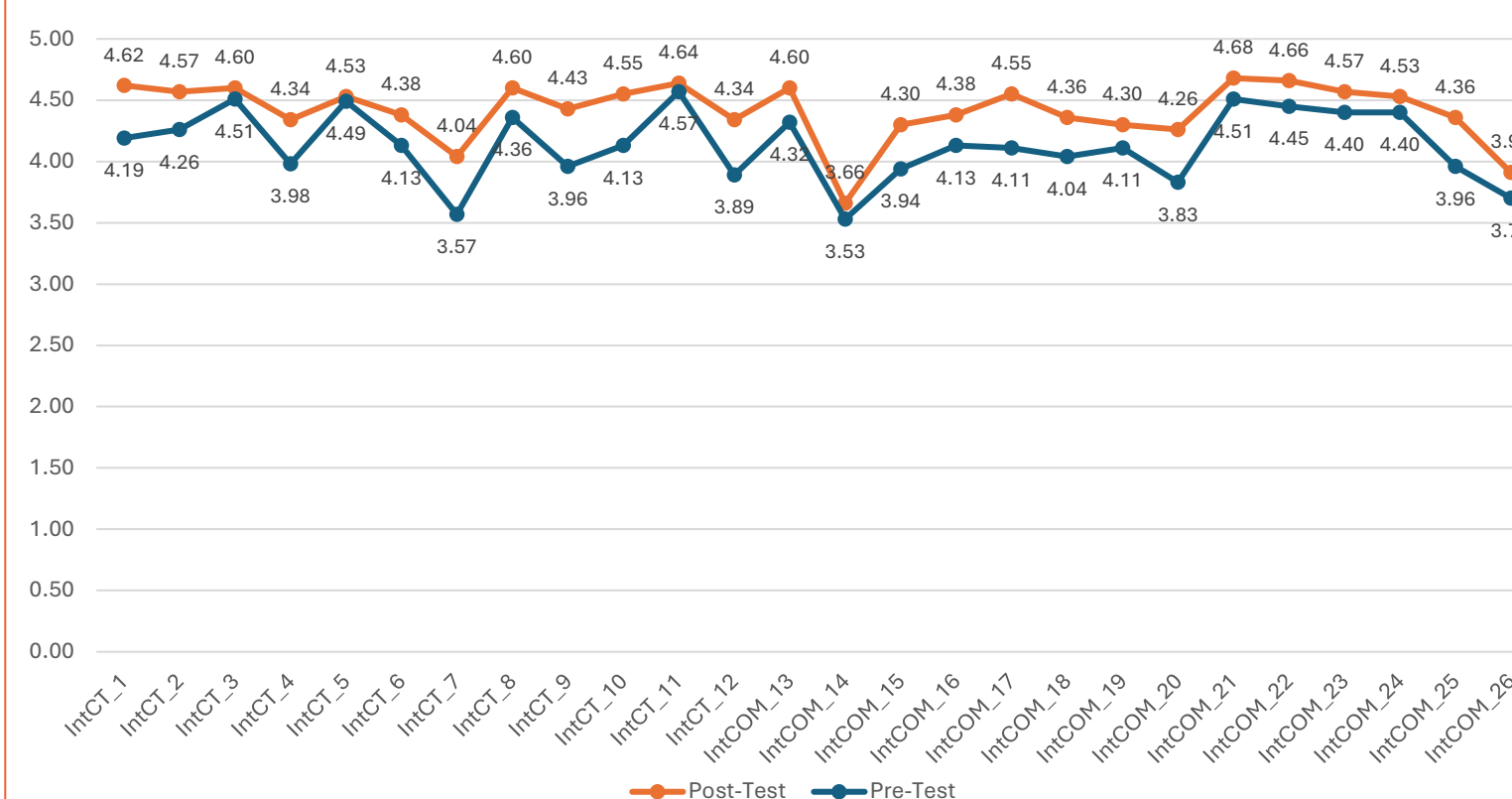


Table 2
Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test Results for Pre- and Post-Survey Scores on International Critical Thinking (IntCT)^a

Variable	Z statistic	p-value
IntCT_Item 1	-3.507	<.001***
IntCT_Item 2	-2.382	.017*
IntCT_Item 3	-.887	.375
IntCT_Item 4	-2.621	.009**
IntCT_Item 5	-.426	.670
IntCT_Item 6	-2.030	.042*
IntCT_Item 7	-2.757	.006**
IntCT_Item 8	-2.011	.044*
IntCT_Item 9	-3.247	.001***
IntCT_Item 10	-3.507	<.001***
IntCT_Item 11	-.758	.448
IntCT_Item 12	-2.914	.004**

Note. ^aN = 47; *p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01; ***p ≤ .001

Table 3
Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test Results for Pre- and Post-Survey Scores on International Communication (IntCOM)^a

Variable	Z statistic	p-value
IntCOM_Item 13	-2.982	.003**
IntCOM_Item 14	-1.015	.310
IntCOM_Item 15	-2.731	.006**
IntCOM_Item 16	-2.133	.033*
IntCOM_Item 17	-3.053	.002**
IntCOM_Item 18	-2.286	.022*
IntCOM_Item 19	-1.524	.128
IntCOM_Item 20	-2.587	.010**
IntCOM_Item 21	-1.795	.073
IntCOM_Item 22	-2.236	.025*
IntCOM_Item 23	-1.713	.087
IntCOM_Item 24	-1.015	.310
IntCOM_Item 25	-2.361	.018*
IntCOM_Item 26	-1.502	.133

Note. ^aN = 47; *p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01; ***p ≤ .001

Methodology

Students in a criminology course on careers in criminal justice at UF completed pre- and post-course surveys using the International Critical Thinking and Communication Attitudes and Beliefs Survey. Administered via email by a graduate assistant at the UF International Center, the surveys were collected before and after a 12-week virtual exchange. Responses from 47 students were gathered over four semesters (Fall 2020, Spring 2021, Spring 2022, and Fall 2024). The study was IRB-approved. To account for the ordinal nature of the survey items, a Wilcoxon signed-rank test was performed.

Discussion

Regarding RQ 1, findings indicate a clear need, as student responses increased across all survey items. Notably, post-survey scores improved for 7 of 9 items (77%) that had initially received neutral or less-than-agreeable ratings following the VE project. For RQ 2, results show statistically significant changes in students' perceptions of international critical thinking and communication after the VE. Significant improvements were observed in 9 of 12 international critical thinking items and 8 of 14 international communication items. Among the 9 items with initially neutral or less-than-agreeable ratings (see Figure 2), 6 (66%) showed statistically significant gains. The remaining 3 items improved, but not significantly. The most substantial gains were in international critical thinking, especially in the sub-areas of analysis, solution finding, and reasoning. The findings are suggestive of VE as an effective strategy for globalizing criminal justice education.

Future Directions

To address low response rates, future research should consider offering incentives to encourage greater participation. Efforts should also improve upon logistical challenges (e.g., coordinating across time zones, differing academic schedules, required assignments) to improve engagement. Expanding institutional partnerships in diverse regions can further enrich cross-cultural experiences, and incorporating qualitative measures will offer deeper insight into student perspectives.