DEVELOPING 21ST CENTURY INTERCULTURAL AND COLLABORATIVE COMPETENCIES THROUGH TRANSFORMATIVE INTERNATIONALISATION PROJECTS: A POST NEO-COLONIALISM APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

There is widespread agreement that collaboration, teamwork and intercultural competence, among others, are essential 21st century skills. Higher education teaching and learning initiatives tend to have a significant focus on developing these skills through assessments and other in-class activities, and yet often do not take advantage of opportunities to collaborate with other institutions located in different countries to give their students an authentic, globalised learning experience. Previous transnational education projects have tended to encourage cross-institutional collaboration through engagement with host institution subjects/courses that are delivered at off-shore locations. Although these initiatives are valuable, they tend to impose a 'neo-colonialism' approach and therefore may not develop 'transformative' international perspectives.

This paper will present an initiative that was developed between two institutions located in Australia and Hong Kong, where their students collaborated on an assessment *for* learning task that involved developing a real-life solution for not-for-profit organisations, often located in a third country. The ideas discussed in this paper will be useful for anyone who is trying to create a more immersive, authentic learning experience for their students. These initiatives developed in our students a heightened sense of belonging to a truly globalised world we live in and instilled a shared responsibility of care. Ideas discussed in the presentation will also be useful for policy makers about how to go about creating more supportive policy and governance frameworks to encourage greater collaborations with off-shore institutions in a truly respectful arrangement.

KEYWORDS

Assessments, Internationalisation, Trans-National, Collaboration, Communication, Social-Responsibility

1. INTRODUCTION

A number of universities in Australia and elsewhere are keen to forge their presence overseas. This has been reflected in the establishment of numerous off-shore campuses and collaborative arrangements by many institutions in various countries around the world, particularly in Asia due to the rapidly increasing education sectors and demand for higher education services in these countries.

These relationships provide institutions with strategic opportunities to deliver their courses off-shore and ultimately provide increased 'pipeline' of students to other on-shore (and off-shore) courses. As the number and types of these transnational education and alliances increase, so does the research into transnational alliances (Melano, Walker and Maureen, 2014) often focused on quality and compliance, rather than educational outcomes.

In Australia, most of these transnational initiatives tend to focus on appropriate ways to deliver Australian courses at off-shore institutions, and therefore, even with the best of intentions, tend to 'impose' an 'Australian way of doing things' on the off-shore campuses, often to the detriment of promoting true collaborative partnerships in developing and providing internationalised learning experiences for students in Australia and off-shore locations (Ling, Mazzolini and Giridharan, 2014, Clifford and Montgomery, 2017).

Developing collaborative assessments that enables students from Australia and off-shore locations to work on activities while enrolled in their respective campuses, in their own courses can provide more enriching learning experience in a truly respectable, understanding environment, without imposing off-shore institutions to change their local 'styles' of teaching and learning and other inherent educational practices (Barker, 2011).

An innovative, collaborative assessment has been designed between an Australian higher education institution and a similar higher education institution in Hong Kong, where small groups of students from each institution collaborate with each other to develop and implement a social media strategy for a 'real', not-for-profit organisation located in a third developing country.

Based on our experience and research implementing this initiative, now with two different institutions, from different countries (Anand and Latt, 2015), we feel that there is scope to expand this initiative as a generic assessment that can be 'plugged' into most courses at different institutions, giving students a truly internationalised learning experience, while acquiring essential 21st century skills.

2. EMBEDDDING TRANSFORMATIVE INTERNATIONALISATION INTO THE LEARNING ACTIVITIES

This project involves small groups of students from Australia and Hong Kong working together to identify a real not-for-profit organisations in developing countries to develop and implement a social media strategy for them. This project runs for about 6 to 8 weeks and during this time the students have to be able to organise themselves, develop project plans and tasks the needs to be completed, identify and contact the not-for-profit organisations, identify their social media needs, develop and implement the strategy using one of the social media platforms, develop appropriate training materials and then deliver all this back to the organisation.

This process involves significant collaboration between the students, dealing and negotiating between the cultural and language differences, and yet be able to deliver a service that is expected from their chosen organisation. This project is significant as the students engage with the project and their chosen organisation emotionally which is difficult to replicate in other types of assessments. More specifically the project fulfils the following aims:

a. **Develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes for 21st century learning and collaborative learning:** Shultz and Adams (2007) suggests that education, and indeed global education, that aims to develop 21st Century skills needs to be transformative "where citizens have and understanding of a common humanity, as shared planet and a shared future". Students need to develop appropriate skills, and attitudes to engage in collaborative activities within complex cultural and social domains.

b. **Develop a digital and social media mindset through appropriate digital and technology based teaching and learning:** Students engage in this project using digital communications platforms. They also have to adapt to use appropriate platforms, in some cases platforms that they may have not used previously. Not only do the students use and learn about social media, they have to very quickly become competent enough to be able to advise an external organisation about using social media effectively (Chigona, 2018).

c. **Develop appropriate systems and ideas to enhance teaching and learning across multiple-locations:** Although various approaches to internationalisation can be demonstrated by other initiatives, this project is different as it develops students' internationalisation skills through transformative approaches, while ensuring true collaborative partnership between Australia and the off-shore institutions, not imposing 'Australian' way on other cultures, therefore benefiting both groups of students (and teachers) equally (Keevers, Bell, Ganesharatnam, K.P. Dawood Sultan, Lim, Loh, Lefoe, Hall and Scholz, 2014).

3. RESULTS

This initiative is still in its early days, and has not been thoroughly evaluated about its impact on students academic outcomes, not just for the course and subject involved, but also in the long term to develop students attitudes and ability to cope with the challenges of higher education studies, and beyond.

However, anecdotal observations from teachers indicate that students are a lot more motivated in class, and a number of negative classroom behavioral issues have disappeared. Feedback from students also indicates that they feel a lot more engaged with the subject and find the assessments relevant and challenging. Students also had the chance to learn another's cultural backgrounds and gave them the opportunity to gain knowledge about another part of the world.

This assessment was designed to instill a sense of purpose in the students, where they could feel that they have contributed in some way for the betterment of society. The following feedback from students suggests that this initiative has been a success.

"Very different to any other assessment, will help improve communication and cooperation skills." Student's anonymous feedback after being introduced to the assessment for the first time, October 2018

"This is a very useful lesson, whether it's learning and living." Student feedback

"While the task seemed challenging to me it could also be more interesting than a lot of other assessments as the work I'm doing could have a positive impact on someone other than myself providing a greater sense of accomplishment when completed. One of the things a lot of people used to say about classes when I was in high school was 'when am I ever going to use this', what this task provided me with is a clear example of how we can use the knowledge learnt in the classroom in the real world. Working with students in another country was another big challenge for me as we had to work around language barriers, time zone differences and amount of work done so far. But it was also helpful to me to have the input and ideas from other people to help complete the task. Overall this task was a uniquely fun and challenging experience for me". - Australian student

I am hereby writing this e-mail to give feedback on one of our teammates, student1 who is a Japanese. Frankly speaking, I think she is really helpful and she contributed her effort and time in this project. For example, she gave us lots of ideas or advice. She was even willing to listen to us and follow our instructions. In the future, I am looking forward to doing the project with such hard-working groupmate. - Hong Kong student

It is pleasure for us to work with an overseas student. He (student2) help us a lot in doing our project The most interesting thing is that he can already share his work related to the NGO with us and we include his work on our report as well. His work is quite effective and useful for us which shows that our group member is hardworking and responsible student. We are very thankful to him for helping us a lot. - Hong Kong student

Similarly, the NGOs that the students helped seemed pleased with their contributions. Even though the organisations were not required to give any feedback, some, off their own back gave positive feedback, and for some groups of students, some organisations even provided them with an acknowledgement in the form of a certificate of appreciation. (Figures 1 and 2 below)

There were however some significant challenges that needed to be addressed by the subject coordinators and teachers. These were:

1. Students were unfamiliar with these types of assessments. Significant amount of time had to be devoted to helping students understand the requirements of the assessments.
2. Students did not feel comfortable or confident contacting the not-for-profit organisations. Lots of modelling and examples were provided during class and students were encouraged to role play telephone conversations before they contacted their chosen organisations.
3. Students needed to explore a method to communicate with other students from different countries and needed to overcome the time differences with different time zone. For sometimes email is not an effective means of communication, especially there is a time zone different.

A thorough evaluation is planned through student surveys, analysing samples of students work, and conducting focus groups in Hong Kong and Australia. The Kirkpatrick model of evaluating interaction for learning framework (Paull, Whitsed and Girardi, 2016) and the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) (Pintrich, Smith, Garcia and McKeachie, 1991) will be used to guide this evaluation exercise, and results will be used to improve the approach, and also to inform the wider academic sector about effective internationalisation of the learning experience.
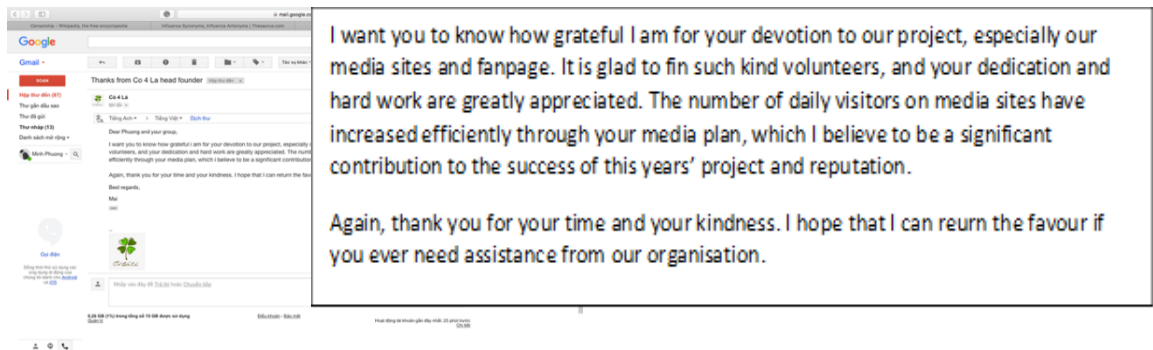
Figure 1. Feedback from NGO

Figure 2. Certifications of Appreciation from NGO

4. CONCLUSION

This initiative is still in its early stages of implementation. Although we have now implemented it for two sessions, a thorough evaluation has not yet been conducted to see how the students were able to develop to the stated objectives of developing 21st century collaborative skills and attitudes, apply appropriate current and emerging digital technologies and deal with teaching and learning activities across different geographical locations.

Early indications are however very positive and encouraging, and provides confidence for the academics in Hong Kong and Australia to continue to use this approach.

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