UNPACKING THE THREE SPHERES OF INTEREST IN A BLENDED INTENSIVE PROGRAMME: COLLABORATIVE LEARNING, BLENDED LEARNING AND INTERNATIONALISATION

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ABSTRACT

As innovative activities and methodologies bloom in the panorama of education, three areas of particular interest in the security and defence education field are collaborative learning, blended learning, and internationalisation. These elements are the pillars of Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs), short mobility activities that combine residential and online phases in a collaborative environment. This study aims to understand the effects of collaborative learning, blended learning, and internationalisation on security and defence education. The context of the research is a set of BIPs designed and implemented by the Interdepartmental University School of Strategic Sciences of the University of Turin in the 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 academic years. The sample is composed of 209 students who filled out a questionnaire about the effectiveness of the learning modalities and the outcomes achieved after attending one of the seven BIPs. The methodology adopted is the thematic analysis of the students' open answers, chosen to highlight the impact of collaborative learning, blended learning, and internationalisation on their academic path. The results show the effects of elements combination, such as the development of critical thinking and transversal skills, which are fundamental in the officers' training.

KEYWORDS

Blended Intensive Programmes, Blended Learning, Collaborative Learning, Internationalisation, Military Education

1. INTRODUCTION

The military education landscape is not just a field, but an ever-expanding galaxy, dotted with many new stars that promise a flourishing future. It serves as a guiding star for many actors in the field of education, including students, teachers, and staff. These stakeholders need to continually broaden their horizons and scrutinise new educational elements, methodologies, instrumentations, and activities that can add value to the educational sphere. This sphere, which plays an extremely important role in the military over the long term, is the first step that every military officer, as well as civilians, go through before putting boots on the ground of operation. Its role is vital to be efficient and must be maintained over time since it must lead to benefits in terms of saving time and costs, employment of personnel, and maintaining high professional standards (Gell 2017; Paile-Calvo 2016; Marchisio and Spinello 2021; Barana et al. 2024). A new educational format which blends new methodologies, new tools and new approaches in the field of military education is the Blended Intensive Programme, BIP. The design of BIPs includes several elements considered innovative and efficient to meet the needs of the armed forces through the blended learning, collaborative learning and internationalisation (Barana et al. 2024; Cambria et al. 2023a). The three elements' international blueprint can spread the defence and security culture in the military environment and in the civilian and European spheres of education. Therefore, it is necessary to understand how these new methodologies evolve and analyse the early results to see how they can be improved and how it is suitable to adapt them to be as efficient as possible. In this way, a management and quality check process can control where programmes are going and also understand the modalities of evolution and which quality effects would be produced. Once these effects are identified and compared with the practical needs of the armed forces, they can be improved, tailored and adapted. For this reason, the paper

attempts to analyse the results collected from the responses given by the students' final feedback during 7 BIPs conducted at the Interdepartmental University School of Strategic Sciences (SUISS) of the University of Turin in cooperation with the IT-Army Education and Training Command and School of Applied Military Studies (ETC&SAMS) concerning their experience and contact with courses that implemented blended learning, internationalisation, and collaborative learning. These elements merged are important because they can produce new efficient and effective methodologies in learning and teaching, especially in military education. (Laal and Laal 2012; Wilson and Wilson 2019; Namyssova 2019; Barana et al. 2024).

This paper aims to understand the effects of innovative approaches based on blended learning, collaborative learning, and internationalisation in defence and security education. The methodology is based on a thematic analysis. The research group wants to track other studies or experiences dealing with these elements, with the aim of introducing the seeds of investigative purpose in the academic research landscape and the outcomes of innovative research results in the field of military education. The following section reports the theoretical framework on the topics, consolidating the most important terms of the research and defining and describing them for subsequent use in the practical research process. The methodology section highlights the research question and explains the coding and merge process step by step, trying not to overlook possible methodological gaps and explicitly setting out the research question. In the fourth part, the results section, a representation of the results of the thematic analysis is shown, and quantitative results are structured in a matrix to analyse data and create graphs, later discussed in the fifth part. Lastly, conclusions are drawn, answering the research question and highlighting possible future research programmes using this paper as a stepping stone for further research and contribution to other papers.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is important to involve military students in blended learning, collaborative learning, and internationalisation activities to develop highly professional personnel ready to operate, able to interact, and comfortable with national and international colleagues. Similar methodologies can affect the young officers' aptitude when managing their operational career by training in any place and at any time. Still, above all, they can satisfy the needs of the armed forces with cost reduction and specialised training personnel (Barana et al. 2024). The European frameworks (EU 2016; Gell 2017) state that it is important to include blended, collaborative, and internationalisation experiences, but there are not many examples. It is still a fertile ground that this work could contribute to nurture.

2.1 Blended Intensive Programmes

Blended Intensive Programmes are a new Erasmus+ 2021-2027 Programme funding scheme. They consist of international educational activities that combine virtual collaboration and short physical mobility, proposing "challenge-based" activities. Intensive mixed programs must assign at least 3 ECTS credits to students and involve the participation of at least three universities from three European Union Member States.

2.2 Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning (CL) is a powerful classroom approach used in different contexts, from classroom games and project work to team-building activities. Working collaboratively helps students gain knowledge from the interaction. When the interaction is on a higher level, the CL helps students build knowledge through discussion, peer collaboration, interaction and evaluation (Kimmerle et al. 2021; Onrubia and Engel 2009). A comprehensive definition was provided by Laal and Laal (2012), who defined Collaborative Learning as follows: "CL is an educational approach to teaching and learning that involves groups of learners working together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product. In the CL environment, the learners are challenged both socially and emotionally." Collaborative knowledge construction is a multi-level approach that requires individual students to take on cognitive responsibilities. During this process, students become aware of their shared knowledge and develop collective knowledge (Barana et al., 2023; Lund, 2019). Wilson and Wilson (2019), after Johnson et al. (2007), advocated a theory of social interdependence, where three ways in which students can learn in a context of reciprocal relationships were proposed: they can work together

cooperatively to achieve their learning goals; they may compete against each other; or they may work individually. In military education, collaboration is an important indicator in developing officer and civilian actors' professional paths. Their roles will be complementary and useful for both parties one day. Let officers and civilians collaborate since they are in the educational and vocational training path is strategic. Education cooperation and knowledge exchange foster a wide range of aspects in the learning process to increase global competitiveness, help tackle global challenges, transform higher education through capabilities and capacity building, and nurture equality (Cambria et. al, 2023b).

2.3 Blended Learning

The handbook (EU 2021) explains that blended learning (BL) in formal education happens when a school, educator, or learner takes more than one approach to the learning process: blending school sites and distance learning environments. The most important element is when the institution blends different learning tools, including digital (e.g., online platforms, instruments such as artificial intelligence, digital environments, and the delivery of lessons) and non-digital tools. Through BL in multiple contexts, students experience the possibility to be independent and autonomous in their learning and study at their own pace. They can be the owners of their personal laboratory where it is possible to experiment with new forms of learning. BL classes include integrating the face-to-face session and the online learning phase, which is assumed to involve students in active learning through diverse learning approaches (Cambria et al. 2023c; Namyssova et al. 2019). In the context of military environment and education, young officers and new leaders must be able to perform their duties in mixed environments and manage digital tools on a master level. These activities allow students to get used to digital learning environments and exploit their massive potential. In line with this description and definition, BL is a flexible approach that helps improve the inclusiveness of education (EU 2021).

2.4 Internationalisation

One of the first aspects that highlight the importance of this third ingredient is stated in the definition as follows: "The intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society" (De Wit et al. 2015). The quality that people want to seek is measured in terms of increasing the number of exchanges, the mutual recognition, the use of Erasmus mobility, the opening of national educational opportunities to young European officers, and the learning and teaching about Europe and its defence, such as the creation of common modules as well as the promotion of learning foreign languages (Paile-Calvo 2016; Gell 2015). It also allows them to practice oral communication and leadership skills and develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. All these features and elements in the career of personnel in the field of security and defence pave the way for greater integration and coherence of our future actions in favour of peace and security (Gell 2017). Internationalisation (I) answers the needs expressed by the current scenarios depicted by EU, NATO and UN. The aim is to develop officers' ability to work in any international operating theatre with colleagues worldwide, to fit into different cultural contexts, and to create collaborative networks (Marchisio and Spinello 2021; Cambria et al. 2023b).

3. METHODOLOGY

The research question we want to answer with this paper is the following: what effects do blended learning, collaborative learning, and internationalisation have in the context of BIPs applied in military education?

In 2012, the IT-Army Staff invited the ETC&SAMS to join the "European Initiative for the exchange of young officers, inspired by ERASMUS" programme, also known as Military ERASMUS or EMILYO, in line with the rules established by the Implementation Group. The first Erasmus exchange program was launched (2013-2014) (Marchisio and Spinello 2021). The first Common Module on Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) was organised in December 2013. Based on this experience, the first BIPs were launched in 2023 (Cambria et al. 2023b). In 2024, BIPs were developed and improved per the ERASMUS+ 2021-2027 criteria. These programmes were designed and implemented to merge the paramount elements of BL, CL, and I within the condensed environment of Military Education. For this study, we considered the 7 BIPs held at the

SUISS during the 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 academic years: 2 editions of “Biosafety and Bioterrorism” (Bio&Bio); 2 editions of “Problem Solving and Critical Thinking” (PSCT), 2 editions of “Law of Armed Conflict” (LOAC) and one edition of “Common Security and Defence Policy” (CSDP). During the creation, management, and development of the BIPs at the SUISS, a digital learning environment was used to deliver theoretical lessons and create a digital environment where participants could meet and put the knowledge gained into practice. The digital tools were also used during the residential and practical phases. The BIPs were attended by 290 students, of which 40% were international, and 60% were local students; 35% were civilian, and 65% were military personnel; 41% were female, and 59% were male students. The data were collected through a final questionnaire that students were asked to fill out at the end of each BIP after the exam. In particular, the study focuses on questions Q5, Q6, Q7, Q10, and Q11, which were included in the questionnaires of all the 7 BIPs. The items were formulated to collect the motivation and engagement of the students immersed in the activity. The items related to CL were designed to understand how students interacted among themselves. The question related to I aims to investigate the opportunities and the critical moments the students faced during the activities in international environments, especially considering the hyperconnected world we live in. The items related to BL investigate how students used digital tools to solve problems in a blended environment. They are listed in Table 1 and organised according to the area of interest.

Table 1. Questions selected for the analysis

N°	Text	Area
Q5	What activities did you carry out? Indicate shortly the goal, the role and the main contribution.	CL
Q6	What was accomplished by your team?	CL
Q7	How did you take advantage of the international interaction and collaboration with peer students from different countries?	I
Q10	What technology and virtual tools did you use?	BL
Q11	Did you use Artificial Intelligence tools during the BIP? If so, briefly explain how it helped you.	BL

The research approach of this study is based on the thematic analysis applied to the set of student responses. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data. It minimally organises and describes the data set in rich detail (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis can be an essentialist or realist method, which reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants, or it can be a constructionist method, which examines how events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society. It can also be a 'contextualist' method, sitting between the two poles of essentialism and constructionism, in which case it is characterised by theories such as critical realism (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We have decided to apply the middle way, i.e., contextualism, and the various steps taken will be explained in the following paragraphs.

The first step was to collect and organise all the answers to the selected items of the final questionnaire of the seven BIPs mentioned earlier. This phase consists of familiarising ourselves with data: transcribing data in an Excel file, reading them, and noting initial ideas. All the answers were analysed, trying to summarise the effects of CL, BL, and I on security and defence education through annotations. Once all the answers were analysed, we moved on to the thematic analysis’s second step: generating initial codes, which consists of coding interesting features of the data systematically across the entire data set and collating data relevant to each code. To do this, brief sentences were formulated for each area of analysis (CL, BL, and I) that reflected the main elements included in the students' responses. Lastly, descriptive statistics were run to highlight the occurrence of the various codes.

4. RESULTS

Through the thematic analysis process, we obtained nine codes organised by category. Three belong to the area of CL, two to the area of BL, and four to the area of I. They were created in such a way as to describe concisely the effects of BL, CL, and I on learning.

The three codes related to Collaborative Learning were the following:

- **CL1: Work closely together to solve the problem.** It contains/includes all the answers that refer to the students' joint effort in achieving the set objective and solving the task, which could be solving a

problem or creating a presentation. The answers also address the proper student role and one's contribution to achieving the goal.

- **CL2: Build knowledge process through discussion, interaction and peer collaboration.** It concerns a more advanced state of response, which implies higher phases of collaborative knowledge construction through discussions, debates, and presentations. Therefore, all answers that reported training or improvement due to an exchange of discussions were included in this group. For a practical example, those who gave answers such as "*stimulating the working process and giving the right direction to the team*" or "*we were discussing and creating a final product in the group with the exchange of ideas*" were coded with CL2.
- **CL3: Gain theoretical and practical knowledge.** It concerns a more general aspect, where knowledge is acquired in a theoretical and practical manner but without specifying the method. This code indicates that, by working in a group and collaborating, it was possible to acquire both practical and theoretical training.

The two codes related to Blended Learning are the following:

- **BL1: Use of a Virtual Learning Environment**. It identifies all those response areas that involve using any learning management system or virtual environment during the various courses. Moodle, SELENE, and the SUISS learning platform are examples of virtual environments. All answers addressing such elements were coded with this sentence.
- **BL2: Use digital tools for enhancing interaction**. It aims to codify all those answers that refer to the use of digital tools, such as ChatGPT, PowerPoints, Canvas and other digital tools that increase interaction and achieve a result in solving the assigned tasks of solving the problems or delivering public presentations. These were tools that they needed to use collaboratively to provide a common solution to tasks assigned to the group altogether.

The four codes related to Internationalisation are the following:

- **I1: Foster and practice a foreign language**. It concerns one of the most critical consequences of international activities: practising, improving, and using a foreign language, which also breaks down linguistic barriers. Linguistic barriers are also a significant obstacle to work mobility. Students appreciated the opportunity to practice and use English during WGs, lessons and public presentations.
- **I2: Interact with foreign cultures and develop transversal skills and competencies**. It categorises a wider selection of answers. It includes all those that mention the interaction between cultures for the development of transversal skills. Moreover, task sharing based on the specialities of foreign personnel is an element of selection in this area.
- **I3: Develop critical thinking.** It collects the most student responses. It includes answers that involve an exchange of opinions, ideas, experiences, and points of view, which are fundamental elements of the critical thinking process. For this reason, answers such as "*an exchange of ideas"*, "*share points of view*", or *"exchange opinions*" were assigned this code.
- **I4: Expand one's knowledge internationally**. It refers to something general about an international overview. It aims to collect and codify all answers that include a cognitive aspect of other nations' cultures, situations, and historical events, expanding participants' knowledge internationally.

Once this phase was completed, we moved on to the following steps, thus creating a thematic map to delineate an analysis that culminated into the drafting of the conclusions. After collecting the 290 responses, a quantitative analysis was conducted to compute the frequencies and percentages of the codes. Results are shown in Table 2. The answers that could not be coded with the identified codes were labelled "Empty answers." No reference to the effects of CL, BL, or I could be detected in these answers.

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage of the codes in line with the answers provided by the students

Codes	Frequency	Percentage
Collaborative Learning		
CL1: Work closely together to solve the problem	148	51%
CL2: Build knowledge process through discussion, interaction and peer collaboration	79	27,2%
CL3: Gain theoretical and practical knowledge	59	20,3%
Empty answer	4	1,4%
Total	290	100%
Blended Learning		
BL1: Use of a Virtual Learning Environment	57	19,7%

BL2: Use digital tools for enhancing interaction	81	27,9%
Empty answer	152	52,4%
Total	290	100%
Internationalisation		
I1: Foster and practice a foreign language	88	30,3%
I2: Interact with foreign cultures and develop transversal skills and competencies	73	25,2%
I3: Develop critical thinking	90	31%
I4: Expand one's knowledge internationally	35	12,1%
Empty answer	4	1,4%
Total	290	100%

The responses show the students' engagement with the activities, although the sample comprises students who participated in different BIPs about different topics and with different teachers and teaching modalities. In Table 3, we report some significant examples of students' answers coded, organised by thematic area.

Table 3. Examples of students' answers per code

Code	Examples	BIP
CL1	"We worked in group to achieve a common goal; my role was the spokesperson so I would curate the final aspects of the press release and the presentation."	Bio&Bio 2024
CL2	"I was Echo's Head of the Industrial Development Organisation, but also, I did a lot of the speaking in the presentation. I came with the proposals of what actions the organisation should take. I, but also one of my colleagues, helped with the math problems and explained to the others the mathematical process"	PSCT 2024
CL2	"I attended all the lectures and I did not hesitate to ask questions whenever I needed. I kept my personal notes. In the workshop I participated actively in the structure of argument and the presentation."	LOAC 2023
CL2	"We had to discuss issues regarding security and to find a solution or express our opinion. We had to research, form our own opinion, discuss, and present the final result"	CSDP 2024
CL3	"I was the biological analyst in our group. I had to study the scenario carefully and try to find out what was the kind of the contagion that has spread through the nation. I also did an experiment with a fluorescent agent and samples taken from the river in our scenario."	Bio&Bio 2024
BL1	"E-learning and Moodle. I also used powerpoint to make a presentation"	LOAC 2024
BL2	"Especially Chat GPT. But not in the sense that is the instrument that has to work for us, but for support and to have a faster response"	PSCT 2023
BL2	"Only on the biology lessons, because they were more specific than my skills"	Bio&Bio 2023
I1	"It was an opportunity to enhance my English-speaking skills and discuss the aspects of LOAC"	LOAC 2024
I2	"Improve language skills. See how people from other countries respond to the same problem"	LOAC 2024
I3	"I had the chance to speak English and ameliorate the fluency, and also to exchange experiences and personal knowledge. It was unique to investigate the cultural differences and approaches to problem solving and communication"	PSCT 2024
I3	"We exchanged different points of view on this delicate subject as protection of cultural property or civilians."	LOAC 2024
I3	"I had the opportunity to share different opinions (somewhat culturally based) and to find common ground."	LOAC 2023
I4	"I talked with professors and students from other countries inside and outside the school. It was interesting to learn new things from them."	CSDP 2024

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

A common element observed from the students' responses is that the combination of CL, BL, and I creates high student engagement and satisfaction. It can be seen from the contents and the type of responses given. Considering the examples of students' answers presented in the previous paragraph, one can perceive the feeling of belonging to the group and the immersion in the task assigned to solve altogether (PSCT 2023, PSCT 2024, Bio&Bio 2024). Immersion in working groups in contact with foreign officers, military personnel, and students with other backgrounds allowed the participants to be motivated. From the results, a good percentage of students (51%) highlighted in their responses the necessity to work in groups and solve the tasks assigned.

The use of digital tools is both an aid in facilitating problem solving, but also an excellent, always accessible source from which to draw information that can then be useful for student growth and learning. Almost 50% of students reported using digital environments and tools efficiently. The other half of the students did not mention the use of the tools, probably because one in the group was elected to use that tool. This shows a good division of tasks among the members of the groups to minimise the efforts and maximise the results.

To top it off, the phenomenon of internationalisation and contact with other cultures and foreign personnel provides an excellent opportunity to improve one's language skills quickly and focus on a specific topic. This allows students to not only break down language barriers but also develop critical thinking skills as a result of exchanging experiences, viewpoints, and opinions. Indeed, 61% of students' responses reported the usefulness of international learning in improving language skills and exchanging opinions, thus consequentially developing critical thinking. The peculiar example reported for code I4 shows that there was also the possibility of increasing knowledge with international inputs. Even if this percentage was around 12%, it is possible to say that the predisposition for in-depth analysis with teachers and peers who gained a different background is present among the students. In the internationalisation area, another important element is that 25% of students were trying to achieve and improve those transversal skills that someone can learn with experience (e.g., the capacity to talk about different cultures in international environments, or the capacity to recognise the values of personnel from another country and try to make them feel better, the capacity to understand some way of thinking and anticipate some outcomes, the capacity to mediate conflicts that can rise in a discussion). This experience did not only draw from the face-to-face lessons but, as written in some responses, also from the time spent visiting together, during the time for homework at home or during the time spent out the lessons.

The feature that makes the BIPs unique and innovative is the union and fusion of CL, BL, and I. This creates a student-centred learning environment focused on the students' learning journey. Motivation, engagement, simulation, and teamwork are facilitators that allow students to integrate their cultural and academic background with a significant experience for their future. Almost 98% of students' answers show they benefited from the courses with different highlighted aspects. Indeed, only 1,4% left empty answers or wrote something that could not be coded. The reason may be a lack of interest in the activity or in completing the questionnaire.

In military education, the characteristics of BIPs make them optimal mobility experiences that do not affect operational activities with excessive costs. Moreover, civilian-military collaboration in an international perspective and sharing a European security and defence culture are precious learning occasions in officers' training. It is crucial to evaluate how these innovative training modalities can help develop officers' mindsets, availability, and adaptability for the missions they will have to undertake. The BIPs can be fertile ground for expressing how the complex environment of theoretical knowledge is translated into the concrete form of experience and practice in the real world. Students must build their knowledge in a social and collaborative environment, thus becoming useful for their entire community (Cambria et al. 2023b). The results allow us to affirm that CL promoted the development of skills such as teamwork, communication and problem solving in a real and practical context. Indeed, almost 71% of students collaborated and participated actively in the knowledge-building process. I exposed officers to different cultures and perspectives, preparing them to operate in a global environment, and almost the entire sample (98%) of students was aware that the BIPs are great opportunities for making experience. The BL combined traditional teaching methods with digital technologies, offering a more flexible and personalised approach to learning, and half (50%) of the students affirmed it in their answers. These approaches can help create well-rounded officers and civilians ready to face the complex challenges of the modern world. From the analysis of the answers, 98% of the sample found some opportunities to exploit in the BIPs. Therefore, the BIPs can be considered valuable for the student's career path; they are an opportunity to be introduced to a new and innovative learning approach. This air of innovation answers the current context and scenarios that EU Member States and other institutions face.

To sum up, the answers of the students who participated in these seven BIPs have shown that CL, BL, and I can bring significant innovations to the field of Military Education. We are on the brink of a new beginning of exploratory learning and innovative didactic methodologies. The advantages are very clear in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. BIPs are safe laboratories where it is possible to gain a wide range of experiences, skills and knowledge specific to the military environment without suffering from the critical consequences of mistakes made in the real world. The acquisition of transversal skills and soft skills adds value to the initiative, allowing the students to gain theoretical knowledge and put that knowledge into practice. Thus, they acquire awareness and capabilities to interact in a complex, volatile, and uncertain environment. To develop this study further, we will organise interviews with participants in future BIPs to gain an in-depth understanding of the effects of CL, BL, and I on their career paths and to map specific teaching modalities to the various effects.

This work, in a long-term view, stresses the importance of developing the three components to become pillars in the world of military education. The research is a stepping stone for further analyses and comparison with the experience evolution over the years. The paper shows a picture of an evolving analysis process that absorbs various elements of education and tries to make them unique through combination and design related to Military Education.

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