Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL): Fighting Hunger During a Global Pandemic

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Abstract

Today, an increasing number of higher education institutions are recognizing the importance of preparing students to communicate, live, and work effectively with others from different cultural backgrounds (Appiah-Kubi, 2020; Eliyahy-Levi, 2020; Iuspa, 2019). Providing opportunities for students to travel abroad has been an integral part of the higher education experience for many years. However, with the global pandemic resulting in limited travel, universities are developing new and innovative ways to provide international experiences for students. The purpose of this cross disciplinary project was to explore an international virtual student collaboration between two universities, one in the United States and one in Southeast Asia. Twenty students were matched across universities to examine one of the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals: #2 Zero Hunger (https://sdgs.un.org/goals). Fighting hunger is not a new problem in our world, but the focus has been greater in the midst of a world-wide pandemic. Many people have lost jobs or had their income severely impacted. Students from both universities worked collaboratively to explore the issues of fighting hunger during a pandemic and focused on finding solutions that can last long after the end of this current pandemic.

Keywords: virtual exchange, COIL, international, university, collaboration

1. Introduction

Today, an increasing number of institutions of higher education are including international, and multicultural education in order to support the universities' mission to prepare students to work and live cross culturally (Appiah-Kubi, 2020). Thus, an emphasis on international partnerships began prior to the Covid-19 pandemic; however, the pandemic halted international travel for most universities both home and abroad. As a result, universities began to explore other alternatives for providing multicultural experiences for faculty and university students. The exploration of virtual education became increasingly more common (Mazarra et al., 2022).

In order to explore ways to continue providing these international experiences, most universities have begun finding creative methods of using technology to foster the exchange of ideas and build partnerships with communities in the global world (Eliyahu-Levi, 2020). As the use of technology continues to expand, online collaborations or partnerships has led to social connections, sharing experiences, and creating new knowledge with rapid dissemination (Scott, 2015). The framework used in this project was based on the need to continue international student exchanges in a virtual environment.

The purpose of this project was to explore an international virtual student collaboration between two participating institutions, a small private university in the northeast region of the U.S. and a large public university in Southeast Asia. Students were placed into one of four groups which were made up of three first year undergraduate students from the university in Southeast Asia, and two second semester graduate students from the U.S. institution. Based on the U.N. Sustainable Development Goal #2: Zero Hunger (https://sdgs.un.org/goals), the driving question for the assignment was: *What can we do to ensure that people have access to food during a pandemic?* Using messenger apps and social media platforms to communicate with each other, students examined what is already being done to address hunger, and then searched for ways to expand or create new solutions to the problem. As students worked collaboratively on this project, they examined how these challenges and solutions differed between their cultures. Last of all, students developed a visual presentation to share with peers from the partnering university.

2. Institutions and Participants

This project involved two participating institutions. The first institution was a large university from Southeast Asia and the course of study was a Sustainable Development course for undergraduate first year freshman. The partnering institution was a small private university in the northeast region of the United States and the course of study was a graduate Research Methods course for second year students pursuing a Master of Science degree in Applied Behavior Analysis. The Sustainable Development course was made up of twenty-four students, but the professor chose twelve students to be a part of the project. The Research Methods course was made up of eight students who chose to be a part of the project. All of the students from Southeast Asia spoke English as their second language, but not all of the students were considered fluent. The project was conducted in English which was the primary language for the U.S. students. The Sustainable Development course was taught by a Professor and Dean in Halal Research and Training while the Research Methods course was taught by a Professor and Program Director in Applied Behavior Analysis.

3. Faculty Training

Prior to the implementation of this project, both professors completed a semester long Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) virtual training provided by the private university in the U.S. The two professors were assigned as partners and encouraged to develop their project as they completed the training. COIL is a model that was developed over 15 years ago at the State University New York (SUNY) Coil Center (https://coil.suny.edu/). The purpose of COIL is to partner faculty and students from different countries to work together on collaborative projects embedded within their coursework. With a focus on preparing students to become global citizens, COIL provides faculty a framework for providing international experiences without the cost and time of traveling. These collaborations include cross-cultural student interactions and collaborative learning and can be cross-disciplinary.

4. Objectives

The following objectives were chosen based on the requirements for both courses. The Sustainable Development course was focused on five dimensions: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership. The focus of this project was on the first dimension: People: "*We are determined to end poverty and hunger, in all their forms and dimensions, and to ensure that all human beings can fulfill their potential in dignity and equality, and in a healthy environment.*" The Research Methods course focused on providing a working knowledge of databases that provide access to scholarly research including but not limited to, literature reviews, research reports/briefs, organizational reports and statistical information. With the ability for the graduate students to research any disciple while learning research skills, the following course objectives were identified for the COIL project.

Course Objectives:

1) Provide data that demonstrates the significance of the problem in both countries.

2) Identify and analyze challenges that people are encountering when trying to feed their families.

3) Work collaboratively to develop alternate and creative solutions to address the issues of hunger sustainably.

4) Develop a visual presentation to share with peers from the partnering university.

5. Planning and Implementation

After comparing semester calendars and recognizing the limited overlap of the two course schedules, it was evident that flexibility would be key in providing students with enough time to complete the project. Therefore, four one-hour meetings were planned for students to complete their COIL project.

Prior to the first full meeting, the two professors met via Zoom© to discuss the project and identify twelve students from the university in Southeast Asia who would be partnered with the eight students from the university in the United States. During the planning process, the instructors agreed that the objectives for both courses could be met by having the students examine one of the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals: #2 Zero Hunger (https://sdgs.un.org/goals).

The four-week project was implemented on Zoom© on Saturdays because of the twelve-hour time difference. During the initial one-hour meeting with the students, the instructors introduced the virtual project including the guidelines and assignments. Next, the students were asked to briefly introduce themselves. At the end of the first meeting, the students were told they would be assigned to a group the next day, and email addresses would be shared. They were also informed that one student from each group would be identified as the group leader, but the group leaders only responsibility was to reach out to the other group members and set up a WhatsApp© group. The professor from Southeast Asia placed one of the students who had stronger English skills in each group. Once

the students connected with their group, they set up their own meeting schedule outside of the remaining three Zoom© meetings. It was up to each group to decide how they wanted to connect, either by email, WhatsApp©, or both.

During the second and third one-hour meetings, groups were placed in breakout rooms and the professors briefly joined each breakout room so students had the opportunity to ask questions and obtain clarification on any of the components of the project. The fourth and final meeting was held live for the students to present their projects. See Appendix A for Project Guidelines and Meeting Schedule.

6. Evaluation/Discussion of Outcomes

The one assignment that all students were required to complete was the development and final video presentation based on their research. Students from both universities had additional assignments embedded into the COIL project and those can be seen in Appendix B. Additionally, the point system used for all of the assignments was specific to the university course they were enrolled in.

All four groups successfully presented their finished products during the fourth Zoom© session. The presentations were created in PowerPoint and/or iMovie. The graduate students completed reflection papers which provided valuable insights regarding the changes that should be considered before expanding the project with other classes and topic areas. The undergraduate students provided similar feedback to their professor via a class discussion.

The first challenge that all students faced, including the faculty, was dealing with a twelve-hour time difference. Before the second Zoom© meeting, the time changed to daylight savings time in the U.S., so everyone was caught off guard. Students also commented that communicating through email was a bit of a struggle as some of the emails would get lost in their mailboxes, therefore, communicating through WhatsApp© was much more reliable. One student suggested that we use a learning management system for future projects, such as, Blackboard© or Canvas© to organize all the materials and messages in one location. A few of the students stated that using Zoom© for meetings and recording presentations made it easy to collaborate and work with their international partner.

All of the students expressed a genuine appreciation in working across cultures and stated that this would be the type of project they would be willing to participate in again if the opportunity arose. The undergraduate students also stated that they liked the opportunity to practice their English skills. They also reported that as the groups continued to meet outside of the full scheduled Zoom© meetings, they became more comfortable with each other and enjoyed learning more about each other's interests outside of the university.

Interestingly, the graduate students talked about an event that was not planned for, but was considered a highlight. At the time of the project, it was Ramadan which is a month-long religious holiday for Muslims as a time of self-reflection and strengthening their relationship with God. During one of the Saturday meetings, the students could see and hear the celebrations and the fireworks through the professor's window in Southeast Asia. The students started asking questions about the celebration, and the professor spent some time explaining Ramadan, breaking the fast, and the cultural and religious significance.

As for faculty input, both faculty learned a great deal about setting up cross-cultural learning experiences and addressing some of the unexpected challenges that arise when you are working across cultures, disciplines, academic levels (undergraduate/graduate), languages, and time differences. The success of the video presentations provided evidence that the students were successful in working together and overcoming the challenges to complete a successful COIL project.

7. Conclusions and Implication

Developing a COIL project while faculty were going through the training was challenging, but it also provided an opportunity for ongoing support from Going Global U who was conducting the training (https://www.goingglobalu.com/about.html) as we planned and implemented the project. The benefits outweighed the negatives.

7.1 Lessons Learned

You cannot plan for unexpected challenges, but it is possible to find creative solutions, and including the students in resolving those issues is another important benefit of an international collaboration. Why? Because what might work in one country, may not work in another country. It requires flexibility and a willingness to consider points of view that may differ greatly between students.

In regards to the student's comment about using a learning management system such as, Canvas© or Blackboard©, not all universities use these platforms. However, LinkedIn© might be a more viable option when working on international projects since anyone can get a free account and access it from anywhere in the world. It is possible

to set up private, unlisted groups that can only be accessed by invitation from the administrator(s).

Finally, university students understood technology better than the faculty. The students were creative and willing to learn from each other when designing their visual presentations. Once the students were provided with the project guidelines, the faculty role became more of a facilitator. Giving students more freedom to use their technology skills without placing a lot of criteria on the presentation resulted in visually, dynamic presentations.

7.2 Future Projects

Moving forward both faculty agreed that learning more about how to develop and use assessments requires additional training. Since the project ended, faculty have learned about additional resources that are available to assist in developing assessments for international projects. Connecting with others who have implemented COIL projects has been enlightening in regards to measuring student success. "Outcomes assessment is one of the key priorities we need to focus on in international education in the coming years, as it makes us accountable for what we are doing, while providing us with better insight in the kind of impacts is has on students, faculty, and policy" (Deardorff, 2015, p. 14).

8. Concluding Thoughts

Speaking only for American universities, numerous university mission statements include a goal that focuses on preparing students to be global citizens. Programs that focus on international student and faculty exchange and study abroad can be found on most campuses. However, those programs have their own limitations. The expense involved in traveling abroad can be a roadblock for many students and parents might be concerned about safety. Although some universities have been using virtual exchange programs to help alleviate the financial burden and provide international opportunities for more students, the pandemic was instrumental in charging universities to rethink international opportunities. COIL is a virtual learning model that has allowed universities to move towards meeting that goal. Thus, barriers of finance and safety are removed and the number of students who can participate is unlimited.

Did the students in this project propose solutions that may address food insecurities in the respective countries? Yes, but more importantly, they understand that combining the research and knowledge across countries and cultures to address world problems benefits all of us. It is imperative that students acknowledge the differences between and across cultures, and learn to appreciate that our similarities can bring us together. There is great value in belonging to a global community. In closing, this quote exemplifies an unexpected benefit. "Experiencing Ramadan is probably a once in a lifetime experience, and although we were not actually in Southeast Asia, to learn about the celebration and to see the excitement of our peers as they talked about breaking the fast and the variety of foods they would eat was amazing" (U.S. graduate student). One can argue that this statement was not about the content of the COIL project, but it can also be argued that it supports the value of appreciating and learning from other cultures.

Authors' contributions

Dr. Spencer and Dr. Salleh were responsible for developing and implementing all aspects of the project. Dr. Spencer drafted the manuscript and Dr. Salleh provided edits and revisions. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Competing interests

Sample: The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Obtained.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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Appendix A

Project Guidelines and Meeting Schedule

Week #1:

- Faculty and students will meet via Zoom© for an initial meeting. Faculty will present the project. Examples will be provided.
- Students will participate in activities that will allow them to get to know each other.
- Faculty will brainstorm with the students as to possible solutions that may be examined.
- After the first on-line meeting, students will be placed in working groups. Faculty will email each participant to inform them of the group participants and provide contact information to each student within 24 hours of the first meeting.
- Students will schedule a suitable time and date for the second on-line meeting for week #2. Faculty will be available to check in with the online group.
- Students will work asynchronously to identify and analyze challenges that people in their local community encounter when trying to feed their families. What are the solutions? (Supply chain, homeless shelters, food banks, soup kitchens)

Week #2:

- Faculty will briefly join to respond to any questions or concerns.
- During this meeting, students will choose a focus for the research for their group and develop an outline for the project.
- Assign project roles: What will each student do? For example, what are the challenges in each country to access food? In Southeast Asia, the climate impacts perishable food items. In the U.S., perishable items may last longer.
- Students will schedule a suitable time and date for the next on-line meeting for week #3.

Week #3:

- Faculty will briefly join the student meetings to respond to any questions or concerns.
- During this meeting, students will plan for the development of their presentations.
  Students schedule a time to meet on-line to work on their project. They may choose to meet synchronously or asynchronously to complete the presentation.

Week #4:

- Students will present their visual presentations (5–6 minutes) to both classes via Zoom©. The students will have an additional 7–8 minutes to lead a question-and-answer period.

Appendix B

Assignments for Each University

Video presentation	Both universities	Students will conduct research to identify and examine the factors that have contributed to an ongoing food shortage. Based on their findings, students will work collaboratively to develop a visual presentation to share with their peers. Create a 5 - 6-minute video on the topic. The video will be developed by your group and presented via Zoom© to students on both campuses. The goal is to make the video engaging, interesting, and relevant. Be creative – you can use art or other visuals to present the information. This is NOT just a simple PowerPoint presentation with facts from resources. Think about what would be interesting on social media!
Written report	Southeast Asia – undergraduate students	Guidelines, rubric, due date posted by professor.
Attendance at meetings	U.S. – graduate students	Yes or No
Reflection paper	U.S. – graduate students	Guidelines, rubric, due date posted by professor.
Annotated reference list		