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Understanding the Impact of Collaborative Online International Learning on Employability: a Stakeholder Comparison

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Abstract

Emerging pedagogical theory identifies a growing need for innovative, student-centered, experiential approaches to learning within a context of rapidly evolving conversational media, the commodification of education and changing perceptions of the academy and lifelong learning. This paper presented an overview of a PhD project which will investigate the value of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) as an innovative pedagogical approach and its possible impact on graduate employability, from the perspective of students, curriculum leaders and employers. The research paradigm is interpretivist and an inductive approach will be used to generate a phenomenological epistemology of COIL strategies within universities. Primary qualitative data collection will involve a series of in-depth interviews with students, curriculum leaders and employers in four different countries, and will seek to develop a new conceptual model for COIL programmes within Higher Education which will address the need for future ready graduates in a rapidly transforming employment market.

Keywords: collaborative online international learning; globalization, technological change, experiential learning; graduate employability

1 Introduction

Neoliberalism could be described as the dominant but invisible ideology underpinning western democracies (Curtis, 2016). Key features include the supremacy of the market, economic globalization, meritocratic principles, commodification of all forms of labour (including education), postmodern consumer capitalism, hyper-normalization and results oriented managerialism as a governing framework (Monbiot, 2016; Curtis, 2016; Harvey, 2005; Klein, 2006; Mirowski, 2013; Davies, 2014; Brown, 2015; Peck, 2010). Meritocratic principles embedded within this ideology suggest that if you work hard you are rewarded, however McNamee and Miller (2004) argue that higher education “is not governed by strict principles of meritocracy, but instead, reflects, legitimizes, and reproduces class inequalities.” Neoliberal concepts such as these have been applied to students within academic studies however further research is needed to examine how this philosophical paradigm relates to the specific learning and teaching strategies adopted by universities and the implications for graduate employability.

2 Communication’s new Frontiers

The multitude of communication channels available to organisations and their stakeholders requires an integration of communication strategies. Many of the channels enable multi-way conversation and according to Capozzi and Zipfel, this “new climate requires organisations to engage in a two-way dialogue with their constituencies” (2012: 336). This point is reinforced by Groysberg and Slind who argue, “Traditional corporate communication must give way to a process that is more dynamic and more sophisticated. Most important, that process must be conversational” (2012: 77). Within an era of digitised, conversational communication active stakeholder engagement is regarded by industry and academia as a pre-requisite for organisational success (Galilee et al, 2011; Mitchell, 1997; Welch and Jackson, 2007). To achieve this goal universities might be expected to employ the most effective range of multi-way communication channels to facilitate fast, meaningful, borderless and democratic discussion and collaboration online as part of their learning and teaching strategies.

3 Proposed Idea

To remain competitive in a dynamic and uncertain global environment employer need graduates who have knowledge, competency, creativity, confidence, flexibility and resilience which is future proof. It is therefore incumbent on Higher Education to deliver new pedagogies which will deliver these graduate attributes with programmes that focus on experiential learning, problem solving, soft skill development, interdisciplinarity and digital literacy (SUNY COIL Center, 2019; Deardorff, 2009; Essig 2013; Tucker et al, 2013). Innovative, borderless education initiatives such as COIL can enhance students’ employability and career capital through pioneering educational innovation and strong links to the real world of work. Experiential learning commonly takes place through home-based initiatives such as live client projects, work experience opportunities, industry led workshops, site visits and mentoring, however COIL pedagogy which is linked to the emerging field of Globally Networked Learning (GNL) takes the principle of experiential learning onto a world stage.

4 Proposed Research Questions

The core research questions which underpin this project include:

- How are universities engaging with emerging pedagogical theory in the field of borderless experiential learning and how far have their learning and teaching strategies evolved to reflect this?
- How do different stakeholder perceptions of borderless experiential learning influence the adoption, design, delivery and evaluation of COIL projects within universities?
- What impact do COIL projects have on graduate attributes and employability?

5 Proposed Research Objective

The ontology for the proposed research is subjective because it will involve multiple realities which exist within the minds of the stakeholder participants. Consequently, an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that human experience and understanding of the world is socially constructed, will underpin the research, because COIL and borderless experiential learning is likely to be perceived in a myriad of ways by the participants. The subjective, dynamic relationship between the researcher and the participants also corresponds with an interpretivist paradigm (Kiergaard, 1846; Packer, 2010; Roulston, 2010; Lapan, 2012).

The research therefore seeks to understand if and why different social constructs of borderless experiential learning exist, how they relate to employability, and the implications for COIL strategies within universities. A

phenomenological epistemology will be produced by studying the perceptions of key stakeholders and expanding existing knowledge of borderless experiential learning. The stakeholder sample will include students, curriculum leaders and employers in four countries where the researcher has previously conducted COIL projects. All the data collection will take place during 2019-2020 to enable a focused analysis of stakeholder perceptions during a specific moment in time.

It is hoped this research will contribute to the existing body of knowledge relating to international collaboration in teaching and research; intercultural knowledge and understanding; more effective borderless course design and delivery; and the nurturing of graduates with a more adaptable, solution focussed mind and skill set matched to the needs of the 21st century workplace.

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