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# What has this done for me? Qualitative student reflections on intercultural experiential learning.

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### What Has This Done for Me? Qualitative Student Reflections on Intercultural Experiential Learning

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#### Abstract

This project incorporates globalisation, technological progress, intercultural and inter-disciplinary experiential learning using real life clients to prepare graduates for the future workplace. Intercultural competence is possessing the necessary attitudes and reflective behavioural skills and using these to behave effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations. This understanding can facilitate success in achieving goals set out for cross-cultural interaction in a business context. Experiential learning through a collaborative project across cultures exposes students to differences in a real-life situation. By stumbling over intercultural blocks and emerging unscathed, students begin to appreciate the ambiguity inherent to multicultural interactions. This paper presented the qualitative findings from a collaborative online international learning project between four countries which took place in autumn 2018. It assessed the impact of the project on the students who participated through their own vivid reflections and testimony, and identified the key challenges and potential solutions associated with these constructs.

**Keywords:** collaborative online international learning; experiential learning; intercultural sensitivity; reflective behavioral skills, qualitative perceptions

## **1 Introduction**

This project can be categorised as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) which is part of the emerging field of Globally Networked Learning (GNL). GNL promotes intercultural competence and the attitudes and reflective behavioural skills which are vital for a globalised economy (SUNY COIL Center, 2019; Dearnorff, 2009; Tucker et al, 2013). The future workplace will also need employees who are innovators and disruptors if Capitalism is replaced by Talentism (IMF, 2017). Essig (2013) suggests that heterogenous groups can provide fertile ground for entrepreneurial thinking. The highly heterogenous nature of COIL projects positions them well to encourage new ways of looking at the world and promote creative problem solving through experiential learning. COIL projects enable innovative, cost-effective, internationalisation strategies for any educational discipline, level or context because they embrace emerging cloud-based communication and learning technologies (SUNY Center for COIL, 2019). Students acquire the skills, confidence and mindset that will help them to navigate the work based technological challenges of the fourth industrial revolution.

Instructors in four countries (the USA, Scotland, Germany and Portugal) created a 6-week, cross-cultural, virtual teams' project designed to address these needs in the autumn of 2017. The project was repeated in 2018 based on learning from the first. Conducted with students in university business programs whose courses ranged from organizational communication and multicultural teamwork to social media communication and public relations, the project aimed to improve English language skills, working with non-native English language speakers, intercultural competencies, use of digital channels in cross-border communication and team project management skills.

## **2 Evaluation Methodology**

In order to determine whether students increased their intercultural competency through this project, instructors had their students complete an online intercultural sensitivity survey based on the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale created by Guo-Ming Chen and William J. Starosta for the University of Rhode Island (2000). At the end of the project, students were asked to complete the survey again but this time the research included additional qualitative survey questions and a more in-depth de-briefing exercise concerning their personal feelings towards the project, what they found most difficult, their satisfaction with the project, and what they would do differently next time. In addition, they were asked to rate the activity and evaluate both their own and their team members, both at home and abroad, concerning commitment and active participation. These qualitative reflections and what they reveal about the impact of the project, were the focus of this paper and have not been published before. The conference presentation included video testimonials from some of the participating students which helped to inform the research.

## **3 Impact**

The research demonstrated that there were more positive than negative constructs among the qualitative reflections of the participants, however in some cases the things that students viewed as positives were also viewed as negatives e.g. stepping outside the "comfort zone" and using new technology. Students perceived trying something new as a simultaneously exciting and scary prospect. Differences in geography, culture, age, experience, personality, motivation were challenging but interesting and gave a fresh perspective. They found it beneficial to learn new virtual communication applications e.g. Slack, Zoom, Prezi, Powtoon and said they would use these online tools more confidently in future as well as being more open to trying new software. Where the team bonded in a friendly, supportive and safe environment they enjoyed the experience more and were sorry when it came to an end. Many teams functioned better as time went on and familiarity with the context, challenges, tools and personalities grew. Clear leadership, time management, roles and expectations were pre-requisites for success and if positive outcomes were achieved, the fear of working with people from different countries online was reduced. Students believed the project inspired creativity, innovation and thinking outside the box, and felt they had learned a lot about themselves and others. They believed COIL projects are relevant and highly beneficial practice for future employment in the global, digital era and should be more common in the curriculum. Intercultural projects were found to help with tolerance and respect and to greatly improve communication knowledge and competency. Effective communication was seen to be central to the success of an intercultural project.

Conversely there were a number of negative outcomes which the project tutors will seek to address in future including challenges with time differences, IT reliability, conflicting study, work and personal schedules, varying levels of motivation and language barriers. Students proposed that more clear, consistent instructions

and guidance across all the programmes would help to overcome some of these barriers. Additional software and communication demonstrations in video format, longer lead in-times and more time to socialize at the start would help the teams to bond. A more reliable technological infrastructure, connectivity, and not having to pay for extras were also cited as project enablers.

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