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Professional Learning Experience Through Coil: A Faculty Perspective

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Abstract

Collaborative online international learning (COIL) is not reserved for students, but rather can positively impact instructors through the exchange with colleagues from diverse institutions, backgrounds, pedagogies and practices. Instructors thereby gain global understanding which they can impart to their students and use to help facilitate intercultural curricula at their institutions. Creating global network learning environments (GLEs) means intense collaboration and agreement on assignments, deadlines, assessment and learning outcomes, which in turn force instructors to reevaluate their own values and methods of work. The following paper describes a COIL project involving instructors from four universities in the USA and Europe and the challenges they faced creating a common team culture. While overcoming technological, institutional and cultural differences, these instructors increased their own professional learning experience.

Keywords: collaborative online international learning; virtual teams; professional learning

1 Introduction

While most educators agree that internationalization is an important goal in the education of graduates, most institutions fail to establish it in a consistent, concerted effort across the board. Despite proclamations to the contrary, efforts at internationalization at university campuses have been instead “piece-meal and reactive, rather than coherent and holistic” (Leask and Bridge, 2013, p. 80). Internationalization is often compartmentalized under the auspices of international offices or centers for global experience. While sending students abroad is an important contribution towards encouraging global thinking amongst graduates, and the numbers of students attending a foreign university are rising (UNESCO 2014), nevertheless, only a handful of privileged students are able to take advantage of this opportunity. Efforts to incorporate global topics into curricula are sporadic and dependent on individual faculty members and chairs of departments, who may (or may not) recognize the value of intercultural experience. At the same time, the efficacy of these efforts may vary based on the level of staff experience and insight (Harrison, 2015). In worst case, attempts at internationalization could actually result in the opposite of what was intended – lack of understanding and desire to work with people of another culture.

In recent years there has been increased attention drawn to the need for internationalizing the curricula of higher education institutions (Leask & Carroll 2011; Leask & Bridge, 2013). In this context, educators must agree on the international learning outcomes required for graduates to be successful in a global workplace. Furthermore, a systematic approach is required with clear learning outcomes and the development of “authentic tasks that are structured in such a way that they cannot be successfully completed without a meaningful exchange of cultural information” (Leask 2009, p. 211). Leask and Bridge (2013) assert that “an important part of the process of internationalization is inviting, accommodating and nurturing new rationales, alternative paradigms and interpretations, providing a more open curriculum space than that offered by traditional Western approaches” (p. 97). This intercultural curricular approach should go beyond the classroom and encompass all university activities both on and off campus (Leask 2009). Instructors should function as facilitators for intercultural understanding and mutual respect between students of different cultures (Dunne, 2011).

The assumption in this approach to internationalization of institutions is that instructors have had considerable international exposure as well as possess intercultural competencies themselves. However, even instructors who have taken part in staff mobility opportunities do not necessarily possess an understanding of how to implement internationalization in their home contexts. According to Leask and Carroll (2011), high quality staff development training may be essential for instructors in order to establish and assess internationalization efforts effectively at their institutions.

While the internationalization of higher learning is not only the responsibility of instructors but must involve a concerted effort of all university stakeholders, there exist high expectations on faculty to be global educators and facilitators of change. Not only do they have to acknowledge the importance of global understanding for themselves and their students, but they may also have to reflect on their own (*mis*)perceptions and alter their behavior accordingly. At the same time, instructors are expected to guide their students through the same perceptual and behavioral transformations that they themselves may be going through. Introducing internationalization into classrooms requires new approaches to teaching, acquiring new skills, collaborating with external and internal partners as well as creating new global network learning environments (Agnew & Kahn, 2014). Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) projects are helpful in achieving these goals while offering instructors the opportunity to develop as global educators.

2 Literature Review

There has been a modest amount of work written about collaborative virtual learning of instructors (Schwartz, Weiss & Wiley, 2018). This is despite the fact that COIL projects, also called global network learning environments (GNLEs), are an increasing reality in higher education today, motivated by instructors’ desire to prepare students for a global workplace (Starke-Meyerring, 2007). GNLEs provide an important environment for a shared learning experience among professionals. According to Webster-Wright (2009), professional learning is an ongoing, interactive and complex process in which instructors’ knowledge impacts their teaching contexts and is constantly being impacted by them in turn. The collaboration between instructors in the designing, carrying out and evaluation of a virtual project facilitates a shared team culture (Starke-Meyerring & Andrews, 2006). Instructors interact with their diverse cultures, notions of pedagogy as well as share

knowledge and learn about each other's institutional constraints, thus increasing their own professional knowledge landscapes and impacting those of their colleagues (Bégin-Caouette, Khoo & Afridi 2015). The fundamental character of GNLEs forms the basis for professional learning among instructors: they are a grassroots initiative as opposed to a top-down administrative decree, and importance is placed on shared leadership rather than dominance by one instructor. Moreover, an emphasis is on relationship building and trust. Finally, the instructors share a common vision and are in agreement on approaches and practices (Starke-Meyerring, 2008). While collaborating with each other to link their classrooms, instructors do not only advocate global learning but also fulfill their responsibility as global educators to continually develop their own skills and the way they view their own work, guiding their students through transformation while transforming themselves (Agnew & Kahn, 2014).

3 Methodology

The authors described their COIL project carried out in the fall of 2018. During the course of the project, the authors experienced the professional development thus far described. The authors utilized an autoethnographic approach, in which data was collected through personal experience, collective narratives, interactive interviewing and experiential analysis (Ellis & Bochner, in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000: 733-768). Through illustrating their experiences, the authors hoped to encourage other faculty to incorporate COIL projects into their own curricula and by doing so, thereby advance the goal of internationalization at their institutions.

3.1 The Project

The six-week virtual teams project involved four universities in the USA, Germany, Scotland and Portugal. This COIL project began as a grassroots collaboration between two American instructors, one of which taught at a German university. The Portuguese and Scottish instructors joined the cross-cultural project involving undergraduate and graduate students of varying ages, ethnic backgrounds and disciplines. Approximately 60 students were put into ten heterogeneous groups of 5-6 students. They were given the task of analyzing the online presence of an international company and making recommendations on how to improve the cultural appropriateness and effectivity of the companies' presence on social media. Their recommendations were presented digitally as collaborative Prezi presentations. In addition, students were asked to reflect on the project experience in short, individual reports.

3.2 Challenges and benefits of the project

Before the project began, the instructors met virtually and communicated through email and the collaborative platform SLACK over several weeks. They tested out the software and platforms which the students were expected to use such as POWTOON and ZOOM as well as prepared demonstrations of the technology for the classroom. This included showing recordings with glitches in order to illustrate the instructors' experiences and make the project more tangible for students.

The instructors made sure to synchronize the assignment, the deadlines and the expectations across all courses. During the project, the instructors met regularly on ZOOM, shared feedback and provided each other with advice. They had access to all the students' SLACK workspaces, and while they agreed not to monitor the students on a regular basis, they were able to share information on students' participation. Final grades on the collaborative presentations were determined via a virtual grading session.

Throughout the project, the instructors stayed in regular contact with each other so that meetings became a habit; they shared personal information, and they developed close, personal relationships. Despite a potential language dominance of three native English speakers, there was mutual respect shown towards each other. Each instructor contributed their particular strengths to the team. One instructor's expertise in developing assessment criteria was utilized to create a common assessment rubric for the presentations and paper. As two members were interested in research, the instructors carried out project surveys to measure the development of intercultural competency among students and published their research (Swartz et al., forthcoming).

4 Reporting the Experiences of the COIL Project

While all four instructors shared a common understanding that a collaborative online international project would be beneficial to their students, they carried out the project within their courses but outside of any direct

institutional support. In fact, one of the instructors faced opposition from department heads and had to convince them of the importance of the project for student learning. Since their learning management systems were incompatible, the instructors resorted to open source programs, and taught themselves as well as guided each other through the use of the technology. The assignment as well as benchmarks and expectations for the project were developed out of trial and error from previous experiences and feedback from students. The differences in semester schedules and holidays presented the instructors with a large obstacle. Moreover, deviations in curricula and workloads needed to be factored into the project. For these reasons, the instructors found themselves working around the individual constraints of each member of the team in order to realize the project. Finally, changes in the data protection regulations in the European countries required the use of consent forms in order to exchange emails among students. The ethics boards of the Anglo-American institutions needed to be involved for the collection of data for research purposes.

5 Conclusion

COIL projects are time-consuming. They require instructors to acquire new skills as well as show understanding for the restrictions on as well as priorities of their colleagues. At the same time, the challenges that these instructors faced when engaging in this COIL project contributed to their professional development. As Herrington (2008) points out, instructors involved in a virtual collaboration must readjust their thinking if they are to identify both failure and success. Articulating one's own pedagogics to another's diverging set of values, teaching alongside other colleagues, sharing materials and knowledge, and agreeing on standards and grading rubrics, the authors had to leave their comfort zones. By flipping the classroom and empowering students – some of who are not one's own- as well as colleagues to take command of the course content and learning outcomes, the instructors gave up control and embraced the ambiguity of the project. Once the instructors were able to do exactly that, they could sit back and enjoy the fun, an essential element to the success of a collaborative online project (Starke-Meyerring & Andrews, 2006).

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