

INVESTIGATING INFLUENCES ON INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY THROUGH UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS ON IDENTITIES

Abstract

Due to a shifting global environment and unique personal circumstances, traditional in-person learning experiences that foster cross-cultural interactions and learning, including study abroad programs, have become unavailable to many. In light of this issue, we investigated how a virtual cross-cultural course, such as Global Social Justice in Education (GSJE), could allow undergraduate and graduate students to explore their cultural identities and enhance their intercultural sensitivity. Data for this study was collected via three distinct GSJE reflections completed by a single cohort of 11 Purdue graduate and undergraduate students who interacted with international participants. Purdue participant reflections were analyzed and coded for descriptors using an emergent identity framework created for this study. Textual evidence was then gathered from participant reflections and was used to inform which cultural identities participants reflected on most often in the context of GSJE and how exploration of cultural identities enabled participants to develop their intercultural sensitivity. Overall, the findings of this study suggest that GSJE enabled undergraduate and graduate students to draw personal connections between themselves and diverse others, address personal bias, and gain awareness of diverse perspectives.

Keywords

social justice, personal identities, virtual learning, intercultural sensitivity, global learning, social justice education, education, virtual study abroad

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2021 cohort of Global Social Justice in Education, and this is her first time engaging in an undergraduate research study. Currently, Kathryn is actively involved on campus as a member of the Purdue Women's Swim Team. She is also a newly inducted member of the Phi Beta Kappa honor society. After her anticipated graduation in December 2023, Kathryn hopes to teach English abroad in a Spanish-speaking nation. She also hopes to continue her studies in graduate school and earn a master of education. Ultimately, she hopes to teach history or economics in a diverse high school in the Chicagoland area.

Mentors



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With the rise of globalization and rapid technological innovation, cross-cultural interconnectedness has become a defining feature of many academic and professional communities (Matthews & Thakkar, 2012). Especially as virtual classes and work from home options become more widespread—increasing accessibility for those from diverse geographic regions—it will be critical for people to develop a sense of cultural awareness in order to adapt and succeed in ever-evolving places of work and study (Altan, 2018; Matthews & Thakkar, 2012). Even for face-to-face interactions with those from one's own community, a better grasp of one's own cultural identity and internal bias could improve interactions with peers and result in more inclusive conditions.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how a virtual cross-cultural course, Global Social Justice in Education (GSJE), provided opportunities for undergraduate and graduate Purdue University students to explore and reflect on cultural identities to enhance their intercultural sensitivity. For the purposes of this study, intercultural sensitivity was defined as an individual's ability to understand, appreciate, and recognize the diverse viewpoint of someone from a different culture (Altan, 2018; Chen & Starosta, 1997). Additionally, cultural identities were defined as participants' self-ascribed cultural traits that they deemed important to their self-image or identity.

GSJE was designed as a virtual course because traditional opportunities for cross-cultural interaction have been deemed inaccessible by many students and aspiring professionals in recent years (Kang & Megehee, 2014). Health and safety concerns arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, financial constraints, and family commitments, among other factors, have diminished access to study abroad experiences and other in-person forms of global engagement (Kang & Megehee, 2014; Liu & Shirley, 2021). Such factors have necessitated the development of multicultural learning experiences conducted virtually. Arising out of the adaptation of educational technology during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a new form of "virtual study abroad" conducted via online meeting platforms, such as GSJE, has recently gained recognition (Liu & Shirley, 2021).

GSJE began in fall 2020 with two professors and three graduate students. At the time of this writing, GSJE has had four iterations (spring 2021, summer 2021, fall 2021,

and spring 2022). More than 150 graduate and undergraduate students as well as educators from seven countries—China, Nepal, Kenya, Turkey, Tanzania, the United States, and Zambia— have participated in GSJE so far. One of the primary goals of GSJE was to provide undergraduate and graduate students with the opportunity to engage in cross-cultural interactions through online discussions, premeeting activities, and postmeeting reflections that address social justice and education-related issues. Course participants engaged in discussions during one-hour biweekly course meetings and then individually reflected on their experiences based on the given prompts. Specifically, activities and discussions of GSJE focused on fostering the intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes of participants while simultaneously spreading awareness of global education inequity. In addition to a focus on social justice issues within the field of education, GSJE also sought to inspire participants of all fields of study to self-reflect on aspects of their personal identities as an attempt to understand how individual identities are shaped by cultural contexts and inform interactions between diverse groups of people.

The goal of this study was to investigate how GSJE provided opportunities for educators to explore and reflect on cultural identities in order to develop their intercultural sensitivity. The following two research questions guided this study:

1. What aspects of cultural identities did educators reflect on when they engaged in GSJE?
2. What do educators' reflections on their own and other educators' cultural identities suggest about their intercultural sensitivity?

METHODOLOGY

Context and Data for the Study

For the purposes of this study the participant data utilized came from a single cohort of 11 Purdue University graduate and undergraduate students enrolled in the course alongside international participants during spring 2021. Participants completed an in-class or preclass assignment associated with each activity, came to class ready to both discuss and complete the activity, and wrote a postclass reflection on completion of the activity and the related course discussion. Each participant's works

were deidentified and the participant was assigned a pseudonym by which participants are referred to throughout the data analysis. The postclass reflections for three curricular activities from spring 2021 were used as data for this study for a total of three reflections being analyzed per Purdue participant. The reflections that were analyzed were the Environmental Diversity, Personal Identities, and Meta-Reflection postactivity reflections. These three activities, out of the seven completed during GSJE class sessions, were chosen for analysis due to their explicit connection to (1) participant identity exploration and (2) participant's personal growth in terms of intercultural sensitivity throughout the course.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze how the participants' discussion on cultural identities cultivated intercultural sensitivity, an emergent identity framework was developed through the synthesis of existing literature centered around understanding and classifying components of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000; Kaplan & Garner, 2017; Vignoles et al., 2011). One framework, developed by Jones and McEwen (2000), defines one's identity as consisting of a "core sense of self" surrounded by intersecting circles that "represent significant identity dimensions (e.g., race, sexual orientation, and religion) and contextual influences (e.g., family background and life experiences)" (p. 405). The framework illustrates that other identity dimensions, such as gender, race, culture, and religion, surround this core sense of self and tend to be more "externally defined" according to an individual's "family background, socio-cultural conditions, current experiences, and career decisions and life planning" (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 409). Additionally, the framework of Kaplan and Garner (2017) informed the emergent framework. Kaplan and Garner (2017) define identity in terms of the complex dynamic systems (CDS) approach in which dimensions of identity "are reciprocal and interdependent, so that change in any one element will reverberate throughout the system" and impact an individual holistically (p. 2037). Both of the aforementioned frameworks describe identity as a multifaceted and everchanging concept, but one that can be contextualized at single point in time.

Drawing from these sources, a visual model was developed to differentiate between various components of identity

TABLE 1. Descriptions of Analyzed Activities and Associated Prompts

Activity Name	In-Class Activity	Postclass Reflection Prompts
Environmental Diversity	After reading an optional excerpt from <i>Covering</i> (Yoshino, 2006), participants filled out a chart listing the race, gender, ethnicity/tribe, and religion of specific people within their social, professional, and wider circles (ex: friends, coworkers, country leaders, teachers, etc.) in order to analyze how culture, history, personal experiences, and personal identities shape others and themselves.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What did you learn about yourself and others from this activity? 2. How do you see yourself using what you learned in the future? 3. How does environmental diversity connect to social justice, particularly in education?
Personal Identities	After an optional reading of <i>The Complexity of Identity</i> (Tatum, 2000), participants filled out a chart listing 12 key personal identities that they prescribe to themselves and feel comfortable sharing with the class.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Which 2–3 of your identities are most important to you? Why? 2. What did you explore about the role of a person's cultural and social values in shaping their personal identities? 3. Which of your identities are you the least/most comfortable with? Why? 4. What did you learn about yourself and others from this activity? 5. How do you see yourself using what you learned in the future?
Meta-Reflection	Participants analyzed all their previously written reflections as well as two other participants' Meta-Reflections to review their learning and experiences throughout GSJE.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What did you learn about yourself and/or your culture while doing this activity? 2. What did you learn from other participants and/or their cultures while sharing and discussing this activity? 3. What have you learned about social justice from this activity that you might use in your future work, particularly in educational contexts?

(Figure 1). The outer circle of the framework consists of personal identity descriptors, which combine to form an individual's holistic identity. This comprehensive identity is represented by a single circle located in the very center of the model. The personal identity descriptors that the authors found to be most relevant in the context of GSJE were gender, LGBTQ+, race/ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, religion, social role, professional role, and health status. The emergent model also contextualizes identity development in terms of external influence at a given moment in time via a square that forms the outer layer of the model. Specifically, personal, social, cultural, and environmental contexts were seen as most informative of personal identities. The framework is meant to demonstrate how external contexts and distinct identity facets inform an individual's holistic identity at any single point in time. Table 2 describes how the research team defined each identity descriptor as well as the four relevant developmental contexts. Overall, the

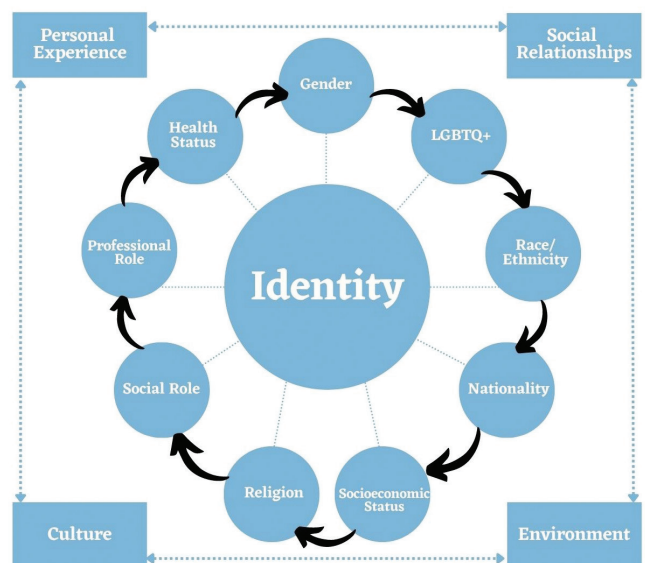


FIGURE 1. The emergent personal identity framework, adapted from Jones & McEwen, 2000; Kaplan & Garner, 2017; and Vignoles et al., 2011.

TABLE 2. Definitions of Identity Descriptors and Contexts for the Emerging Identity Framework

Term	Definition
<i>Personal Identity Descriptor Definitions for the Emerging Identity Framework</i>	
Gender	An individual's gender (example: woman)
LGBTQ+	An individual's identification with the LGBTQIA+ community
Race/Ethnicity	An individual's racial or ethnic group of identification
Nationality	An individual's country of identification
Socioeconomic Status	An individual's access to financial and social resources
Religion	An individual's spiritual belief system
Social Role	An individual's community position
Professional Role	An individual's profession
Health Status	An individual's identification with physical, mental, or emotional health conditions and diagnoses
<i>Developmental Context Definitions for the Emerging Identity Framework</i>	
Personal	The personal experiences from which the identity is being explored
Social	The people with whom the identity is being explored
Cultural	The cultural environment with which the identity is being explored
Environmental	The immediate environment in which the identity is being explored

emergent framework pictured in Figure 1 was developed to facilitate a comparative study of how participant identities manifested throughout the GSJE experience and how identity exploration enhanced participants' empathy toward diverse others.

GSJE participant reflections were analyzed and coded for markers that related to the identity descriptors of the emergent framework. The process of data analysis was influenced by a set of questions adapted from those set forth by Vignoles et al. (2011). The following questions were considered extensively as reflections were coded to inform a holistic identity view:

- Has the identity been formulated and perceived in a personal or social realm?
 - Is the identity one that has been encoded as a result of the participant's personal upbringing or social experiences outside of GSJE?
- How does a particular identity relate to a participant's social roles?
 - Does the particular identity entail specific rights, privileges, or obligations? Does it fit within a perceived social or professional role?
- Has the identity been perceived and or adjusted in the context of GSJE experiences?

- After making cross-cultural comparisons with other participants, has the individual reanalyzed and/or reframed a particular identity?

As common identity markers became increasingly apparent across participant reflections, textual evidence was gathered to infer how GSJE inspired participants to explore certain themes in a multicultural context. Examples of how participant reflections were coded for identity descriptors are evident in Table 3, where specific textual evidence that implicates a particular identity is underlined. Reflections were reviewed under pseudonyms to determine how GSJE activities and discussions encouraged participants to analyze and compare their own personal and communal identities with those of others.

FINDINGS

Participant reflections completed after each of the three activities were analyzed to gain an understanding of how GSJE fostered intercultural sensitivity when educators reflected on their personal identities. Table 4 illustrates a breakdown of identity descriptors as they were assigned to participant reflections completed

TABLE 3. Textual Examples That Describe How Participant Reflections Were Coded for Personal Identity Descriptors

Term Coded	Textual Example
Gender	"I chose <u>the identity female</u> because I think that it is important to understand someone's preferences and I would hate to use wrong pronouns."
LGBTQ+	" <u>My least comfortable identity is being queer</u> , as I am currently in a period of introspection and since I'm not sure who I am, I'm not comfortable sharing, especially due to differing opinions on sexuality."
Race/Ethnicity	"My ethnicities are also important to me but more as something I'm desperately trying to hold onto what little connections I have in the face of the atomized isolation of America."
Nationality	"In this activity I examined parts of myself that I am unused to separating, such as being both a <u>U.S. citizen</u> and an English speaker."
Socioeconomic Status	"Something I felt less comfortable sharing was <u>my family's economic status</u> . I noted that before coming to Purdue, I hadn't felt uncomfortable with it (or even aware of it) at all; <u>the town where I come from has mostly blue-collar workers</u> , and there's very little <u>judgment related to financial status</u> ."
Religion	"My <u>Christian identity</u> is the one I am most comfortable with and, depending on the context, the most difficult to share. <u>My relationship with God is the most important part of my life</u> . I love Jesus, and <u>my faith shapes how I approach every area of my life</u> ."
Social Role	"I think that it is nice to see everyone and all the similarities we have. Such as <u>being a family member (son or daughter)</u> , to me that connectivity is special."
Professional Role	"First, <u>I value my education and I aspire to be a future educator</u> ."
Health Status	"The identity that I shared during class that I am the least comfortable sharing is that <u>I am an anxious person</u> ."

TABLE 4. Number of Personal Identity Descriptors Coded by Reflection Across All Participants from Purdue University

Identity Descriptor	Environmental Diversity Descriptors	Personal Identities Descriptors	Meta-Reflection Descriptors	Total Descriptors
Gender	5	4	3	12
LGBTQ+	0	6	0	6
Race/Ethnicity	6	5	2	13
Nationality	4	4	5	13
Socioeconomic Status	2	4	1	7
Religion	6	5	2	13
Social Role	1	10	6	17
Professional Role	5	6	9	20
Health Status	0	5	0	5

following each of the three activities. All of the identity descriptors were mentioned in at least five different reflections. The least discussed component of identity was health status and the most discussed was professional role.

As is evident in Table 3, while completing the Environmental Diversity activity and reflection, GSJE

participants were encouraged to examine the identities and backgrounds of their social and professional acquaintances, their local community members, and the citizens of their respective nations. The goal of the activity was to inspire participants to consider how their cultural surroundings have impacted their personal views and experiences. As can be seen in Table 4, race/ethnicity, religion, gender, and professional role were the

four most common identities explored by participants through the Environmental Diversity reflections.

With respect to race/ethnicity, seven participants (Sarah, Anna, Kate, Pamela, Elle, Kathy, and Cindy) identified this particular facet of identity as being highly influential in their environments. In addition, six of these participants (Sarah, Anna, Kate, Pamela, Elle, and Kathy) mentioned in their reflections how the course activity forced them to recognize that their communities generally lacked racial/ethnic diversity. The participants who considered racial and ethnic identity in relation to their environments generally acknowledged that GSJE provided them with exposure to diverse people and helped them to advance their multicultural awareness and empathy—two core components of being able to appreciate one's cultural background. For instance, Sarah noted how “coming from a white person perspective it [was] nice to see the [expression of] different cultures” through the activity discussion. Sarah expressed gratitude for exposure to different racial/ethnic histories and traditions through the course as it allowed her to expand her knowledge of distinct backgrounds and in turn, her ability to work with diverse groups in her future classroom.

Furthermore, six participants (Sarah, Anna, Kate, Pamela, Kathy, and Mary) incorporated a discussion of religion within their Environmental Diversity activity reflections, and three of these six participants (Anna, Kate, and Kathy) noted that their communities were predominantly Christian. Most of the participants observed that they surrounded themselves with individuals who reflected their own religious ideologies. A couple of participants (Kate and Mary) remarked how national traditions have been adapted to suit the needs of dominant religious groups. For example, Mary notes that school calendars in the United States have been “set to accommodate Christian holidays” and thus fail to consider the beliefs and holidays of other religions. In general, course participants admitted that GSJE instilled them with a curiosity to explore and consider diverse religious views, an attitude that indicated increased intercultural awareness through recognition of how religion affects their own and others' perspectives.

Moreover, gender and professional role were often discussed in tandem. In total, five participants (Kate,

Pamela, Kathy, Josie, and Cindy) acknowledged gender and five participants (Sarah, Pamela, Josie, Mary, and Cindy) discussed professional role in their Environmental Diversity reflections. Likewise, three participants (Pamela, Josie, and Cindy) discussed gender as it related to professional role. These three participants discussed how women, particularly female educators, often receive low pay and limited respect, and are restricted from leadership roles around the world. For instance, Josie noted that in some nations, such as in the United States, “teaching is looked down upon and almost like a backup option” as it is primarily viewed as the domain of women. Overall, several participants attributed completion of the Environmental Diversity activity toward developing an enhanced awareness of global gender inequality in the workplace, specifically due to an increase in understanding of cultures different from their own.

As noted in Table 3, participants who completed the Personal Identities activity and reflection were asked to examine 12 of their self-described identities and characterize their most important identities as well as their most/least comfortable identities. The goal of this activity was to inspire participants to internalize their personal identities and recognize how social and cultural influences shape their own and others' identities. As evident in Table 4, social role was the most common identity descriptor explored in Personal Identities reflections, and gender, socioeconomic status, and nationality were the least discussed identity components.

All of the participants except for Kristy discussed their social role within their Personal Identity reflection and indicated that their social role was an important aspect of their personal identities. Of the 10 participants who brought up topics related to their social role, eight of those participants explicitly described a familial social role (ex: sister, daughter, aunt, wife) as being a meaningful part of their identity. The other two participants identified with the social roles of youth (Anna) and being a student (Cindy) and the social and cultural implications of those identities. While explicitly identifying as a student, Cindy contextualized their relationship as a student to their role within their family and their family's socioeconomic status: “My being a college student is more than just a reflection of my capabilities; since both my parents and their families come from

poorer backgrounds, my ability to attend college is a reflection of three generations worth of dedication.” In addition to being discussed the most, the social role descriptor elicited the highest response for being the most comfortable identity for participants.

While not all participants noted their most and/or least comfortable identities during the Personal Identities reflection, more than half of the reflections that included descriptors for LGBTQ+, socioeconomic status, or health status indicated that one or more of the associated identities was their least comfortable. Kristy described their interrogation of their own least comfortable identity in terms that were associated with oppression: “I’m least comfortable with my identity regarding mental illness in general, but I’m also hesitant to outwardly share my gender in a lot of contexts because of transmisogyny, homophobia, and etc. I’m much more comfortable expressing identities that don’t interact along an axis of oppression.” While other participants were less explicit about the role historical oppression played in their view of their own identities, many noted feelings of discomfort from identities for which they feared judgment. Elle explained her newfound discomfort with her socioeconomic status after realizing it might alter how others view her: “I noted that before coming to Purdue, I hadn’t felt uncomfortable with [my family’s socioeconomic status] (or even aware of it) at all; the town where I come from has mostly blue-collar workers, and there’s very little judgment related to financial status. Here at Purdue, I quickly realized that there were a majority of students of privileged backgrounds, and that my parent’s jobs/

income meant something to them that I didn’t understand.” Additionally, two of the participants who expressed a discomfort in their LGBTQ+ identity felt so due to their uncertainty about their own sexuality and a cultural background of not discussing sexuality within social and familial groups. Generally, many participants expressed gaining a deeper awareness and connection with other participants with a different cultural background than their own due to the similar identities they felt comfortable or uncomfortable with.

As described in Table 3, participants completing the Meta-Reflection were asked to analyze all of their previously written reflections as well as the Meta-Reflections of at least two other participants in order to compile a comprehensive review of GSJE learning experiences. The goal of the activity was to help participants examine their growth in intercultural knowledge and empathy throughout the semester. The activity was also designed to motivate participants to recognize key takeaways and cross-cultural comparisons from the course. As noted in Table 4, nationality, social role, and professional role were the three most common identity descriptors explored by participants in their Meta-Reflections.

Each of the five participants (Kathryn, Anna, Josie, Mary and Cindy) who discussed nationality within their Meta-Reflections either explicitly stated or implied that GSJE broadened their understandings of the diverse cultural histories, practices, and traditions of distinct nations around the globe. For instance, Kathryn noted

TABLE 5. Identities Described by the Participants in the Personal Identities Reflections.

Identity Descriptor	Most Important Identity Descriptors	Most Comfortable Identity Descriptors	Least Comfortable Identity Descriptors
Gender	2	1	1
LGBTQ+	2	0	4
Race/Ethnicity	2	0	0
Nationality	2	1	0
Socioeconomic Status	0	0	3
Religion	2	1	1
Social Role	10	4	0
Professional Role	1	0	0
Health Status	0	0	3

TABLE 6. Select Passages from Meta-Reflections That Describe Key GSJE Takeaways

Participant	Textual Example
Kate	"This course has allowed me to see and emphasized that everyone sees things differently, and that is okay! I have learned to be more open to the ideas of others and have ultimately grown as a person and as a future educator as a result of GSJE."
Pamela	"I have been surrounded by identities very similar to mine throughout my life, and being a part of this community has deepened my curiosity about other people, cultures, and traveling to different places."
Kristy	"In the future, what I've learned in this course will provide me with better vocabulary and examples to describe social justice issues and how they play into education across the world."
Elle	"Throughout sessions, I learned a lot about how to check my assumptions before judging a conversation. . . . Developing this ability over the semester has helped me be more open to other perspectives and processes, and has made me a more empathetic and sensitive person. . . . The ability to recognize and overcome implicit bias and judgment is invaluable, and I'm very glad I was able to have the experiences of this class to gain those skills."

that "interacting with participants from around the world who engage with their own cultures daily helped [her] get a much clearer perspective on non-U.S. culture, and how it differs from what [she] is used to." Likewise, Josie discussed at length how the course helped her to decentralize her own "constructed cultural narrative" rooted in a distinctly American way of life and gain awareness of "non-U.S." participant experiences. These responses indicated a gain in intercultural sensitivity for these participants, as they examined their own national identities and how they impacted their lived experiences and understanding of others.

Moreover, 9 of the 11 participants reflected on professional role within their Meta-Reflections, specifically addressing teaching as a career. The frequent mention of professional role can likely be attributed to the Meta-Reflection prompt that asked participants to consider how GSJE lessons could be applied to their future careers, particularly in an educational context. Many of the participants discussed how lessons on intercultural sensitivity gleaned throughout GSJE could benefit their future classrooms and instruction. Specifically, many of the participants noted that GSJE helped them to recognize personal biases and become mindful of how their experiences and identities could impact their interactions with diverse others, as described in Table 6. Additionally, the most commonly discussed takeaway from GSJE related to views of teaching as a career. Participants described being shocked by the difference in attitudes toward teaching as a profession in China versus the United States. Specifically, American participants described their view that while

they associate teaching in the United States with poor pay and limited respect, Chinese participants consider teaching a well-respected profession.

CONCLUSION

Overall, participants reflected on their own identities within the context of GSJE in order to gain a better understanding of intercultural sensitivity. The identities were contextualized through activities and group discussions with fellow classmates from around the world. Participants often reflected on their social and professional roles but were more uncomfortable considering identities that they believed could be stigmatized. Additionally, all participants found that their environments were not as diverse as they had previously considered, and began to consider how their personal identities impacted their relationships with others. Overall, by considering and reflecting on personal and communal identities throughout GSJE, course participants were able to draw connections between themselves and others, address personal bias, and gain awareness of diverse perspectives—suggesting an increase in intercultural sensitivity.

While interesting artifacts from the course were analyzed, there are limitations and areas that require further study in order to fully analyze participant outcomes in GSJE. A fuller picture of student outcomes could be reached if the reflections of international participants could be analyzed in addition to participants from Purdue University. All the participants were white women or nonbinary

participants, which could have skewed results in favor of specific identities. Additionally, a standardized baseline for student intercultural sensitivity would have provided a clearer picture of growth throughout the course and across specific activities instead of participant-assessed growth at the end of GSJE.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The research team extends their deep gratitude to all the GSJE participants and instructors who worked to create an inclusive, welcoming, and educational environment for intercultural growth. A special thanks goes to Bima Sapkota for her mentorship and support of the undergraduate researchers throughout the entirety of the research process.

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