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**Virtually there:  
Examining a collaborative online international learning  
pre-departure study abroad intervention**

**Problem of Practice**

Until recently, education abroad professionals believed that study abroad participants automatically gained global competencies, such as intercultural communication skill, and became more culturally aware simply by being abroad (La Brack, 1994). We now know that this is not the case. Study abroad participants need to receive guided education and training so that they may successfully navigate new cultures, as well as recognize and understand their own cultural beliefs and values as related to their experiences abroad (Paige, 1993). To address this need, some study abroad programs offer intercultural interventions before, during, or after the study abroad experience.

Access to a diverse set of technological tools has enabled more and more of these interventions to be offered online and to virtual groups of students. Today, numerous online learning interventions are used to bring together far away populations, to explore new ways of disseminating orientation information, and to teach intercultural learning and intercultural learning theories (La Brack, 1994; Lou & Bosley, 2008). Studies of such online interventions explore changes in students' pre/post intercultural development, but do not examine the factors that contribute to the intervention outcome such as social interactions, technology, and perceived learning (Lou & Bosley, 2008). As more study abroad interventions move online and into a collaborative format, it is important to examine these processes.

This study was designed to address this gap by in the knowledge base on collaborative online international learning (COIL) pre-departure study abroad interventions. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between participants' experiences in a COIL intervention and their intercultural development, as well as to understand which variables influence the success of an online intervention. Understanding these factors can help education abroad professionals design more effective online interventions for pre-departure study abroad students. The research questions posed were: (a) what is the influence of a collaborative online international learning intervention on pre-departure study abroad students' intercultural development; (b) how do social interactions influence pre-departure study abroad students' experiences within the intervention; and (c) what are the affordances and constraints of collaborative learning in an online, international intervention? For the purposes of this paper, only findings and implications related to research questions b and c are addressed.

**Research Background**

Intercultural awareness is a process of growth and development acquired as a person comes to understand and accept cultural differences encountered at home and abroad (Bennett, 2008). The Georgetown Consortium Study researchers found that an on-site "cultural mentor" is potentially "the single most important intervention to improve student intercultural learning abroad" and exposure to another culture is a necessary, although not always sufficient, condition for intercultural learning (Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009, p. 25). Continuing this line of thought, the assumption is that combining an online intervention with guided support can facilitate intercultural development (Lou & Bosley, 2008). Cunningham (2009) and West (2010) found that creating connections like these between domestic and international students increases the likelihood of critical thinking and reflection on the nature of *the other* because course discussion can be enriched and deepened by the diversity of opinions, experiences, and cultures of the participants (Cunningham, 2009; West, 2010).

Although researchers have not explored peer interaction within collaborative online interventions, nor have they examined the relationship between collaborative learning and intercultural development in a study abroad context, studies in other contexts have documented the benefits and challenges of online, computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL). The primary focus of CSCL research, however, is the understanding and analysis of how computer tools aid learning and facilitation of knowledge sharing and collaborative meaning making.

Research in the fields of collaborative learning and CSCL demonstrate that learning in an online environment comes with many design and social challenges, among them encouraging the use of tools, helping students to understand the value of collaboration, and social isolation (Muilenburg & Berg, 2005; Vonderwell, 2003; Volet & Wosnitza, 2004; Fung, 2004). An added challenge is creating and maintaining social presence in a non-traditional academic environment. Yet, despite the challenges, when collaborative learning is successful it can foster meaning making and shared knowledge creation (Resta & Laferrière, 2007; Stahl, 2006).

Much like the finding that study abroad students do not automatically gain intercultural competence while abroad, it is not enough to place individuals in a learning environment and hope that learning will occur (Wegerif & Mansour, 2010). Students' prior knowledge and experience, the design of the curriculum, the role of the instructor, choice of tool use, a secure sense of community, and group cohesion must be purposefully addressed and carefully integrated to foster a successful CSCL environment (van Aalst, 2009; Resta & Laferrière, 2007; Hmelo, Guzdial, & Turns, 1998). In addition, CSCL must be designed around authentic and engaging activities and be prepared to work in collaborative groups prior to engaging in the online environment (Hmelo-Silver, 2006; Wegerif & Mansour, 2010).

### **Study Context and Design**

To explore my research questions, I designed a non-credit bearing COIL seminar for university level, semester study abroad students. Topics of the seminar include study abroad preparedness and intercultural communication theories. In academic year 2012/13, two groups of pre-departure U.S. study abroad students and international students coming to study in the U.S. participated in an online, collaborative seminar. The first seminar was six weeks long and was conducted using Sakai, a learning management system. A revised design for the second seminar took into consideration feedback from fall participants. It was five weeks and a social media platform, Facebook, instead of Sakai.

The seminar design reflected Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) Community of Inquiry (COI) model. This framework suggests that learning occurs when interdependent elements of social, cognitive, and teaching variables are aligned within an educational experience (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). The research environment was designed to explore how social interactions influence students' experiences within a COIL intervention, and investigate their experiences in the intervention environment. Data collected included: (1) a needs assessment; (2) focus groups; and (3) seminar discussions. The two forms of data analysis used in this study were the COI framework and a phenomenological review of participants' text.

### **Lessons Learned**

This research highlighted variables that influence learning outcomes and experiences within a COIL intervention. Lessons learned are as follows:

- Students' experiences and engagement within an intervention are intimately connected to the social interactions experienced. Both groups reported that interacting with other participants was the most educational, developmental, and enjoyable aspect of the seminar.

- Students who participated actively in the seminar demonstrated more of the intended learning outcomes, felt more socially connected, and had a more positive seminar experience. Active participation was also connected to the quality of reflections.
- Factors that inhibit social connectedness included overall participation rates, individual insecurity, and technological challenges.
- Different technologies, which offer different affordances and constraints for supporting a COIL community, greatly influence learning and social experiences. Choice of platform and integration of tools influenced seminar students' motivation and perceived socialness, as well as perceptions of the value-added affordances of technology.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study highlights challenges, which led to implications for designing an effective online Community of Inquiry and how intervention design can influence outcomes.

### ***Challenges and Implications for Practice***

- Initial technological constraints, such as connectivity, lack of embedded collaboration tools, and disjointed flow discouraged participation and thwarted the success of the intervention. Technologies used in COIL environments must support the social connections necessary to create a collaborative community; otherwise, students will not achieve the desired learning outcomes.
- Some students were not prepared with the technical skills necessary to navigate the technologies used in the first seminar, which detracted from interacting with others and participating in activities. This suggests the importance of utilizing technologies that are familiar to participants and afford the desired activities, as well as supporting social, cognitive, and instructional development.
- While both groups felt engaging with other study abroad students and learning about other cultures provided some incentive to participate, as the weeks progressed participation steadily declined. Intrinsic motivation is not enough to sustain motivation and encourage quality academic learning or reflection. An intervention of this nature should be offered for credit.
- After an initial virtual meet-and-greet, few students took the initiative to begin their own discussion threads due to fears of interrupting the academic, facilitated nature of the seminar. Special care should be taken to balance the instructional and learning outcomes with an environment that affords sociability, because students may not otherwise feel at liberty to socialize and develop bonds in an academic environment, even if the platform is informal in nature.
- Most students in the first seminar did not feel socially connected with their peers, and students in the second enactment felt only superficially connected. More time and opportunities for synchronous web conference or video chat interaction is recommended. Both groups of students indicated that virtual face time was the most enjoyable and educational aspects of the seminar, as well as when they felt most connected.

There is more to study in COIL seminar than its outcomes. It is equally important to understand what happens cognitively and socially within a seminar because these elements contribute to its success. Purposeful design and greater understanding of the factors that influence students' learning and experiences are imperative to the successful creation and deployment of COIL seminars.

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