The Effects of Collaborative Online International Learning on Intercultural Sensitivity in an American

Context

COIL, short for “Collaborative online international learning,” is a model for connecting higher-ed students around the world through global education that was pioneered by the State University of New York COIL center in the early 2000s. The COVID-19 Pandemic has forced schools globally to adopt online learning, creating unprecedented challenges in using technology to study remotely, but insooing also increasing interest in using technology to reach partners behind school walls, increasing the relevance and application of the COIL model. Intercultural sensitivity is both an essential ingredient and desired outcome for collaborative online learning across student groups, especially internationally.

What is ICS?

Intercultural sensitivity (henceforth ICS) is sensitivity or facility for awareness which is theorized to develop from a person’s experiences with people from other cultures, familiarizing them with the relativity of cultural constructs and bringing them into a deeper understanding of the interaction between their culture and others.

Research Question

What are the effects of Collaborative Online International Learning on Intercultural Sensitivity?

Hypothesis

Students participating in the collaborative online international learning experience will experience an increase in their intercultural sensitivity.

Method

In a class about International Topics in Sports Management at SUNY Cortland, 10 U.S. undergraduate and graduate students (N=10) collaborated with a class from the Finnish JAMK University of Applied Sciences in Jyväskylä, Finland, and Heilbronn University of Applied Sciences in Heilbronn, Germany. The students were divided into small multicultural work groups with the European students. The goal of these work groups was to collaborate on a case study presentation and present it to the class at the end of the intervention, during which the Finnish students actually visited the SUNY Cortland campus and participated in the presentations. Students were given Chen and Starosta’s Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (2000), a 24-question measure of various aspects of intercultural sensitivity, before and after the intervention. Additionally, students reflected on the experience before and after in a guided reflection paper. Data was then studied to determine the effect of the international intervention on the students’ intercultural sensitivity.

Sports Management Course

Tristan Ross, B.A, with special thanks to Alexandru Balas, Ph.D, and Tara Mahoney, Ph.D

Data collection

Students completed the first Intercultural Sensitivity measure in class the week before groups were assigned, and the second ICS measure the week before students met their international counterparts in person. Students also submitted their first international reflection papers before the collaboration began and another one after it ended. Participants consented to access to their international reflection papers and use of their scores in the study.

Results

Although the average score on the measure of intercultural sensitivity did increase by 3 points, the second survey’s administration near the end of the semester was probably responsible for a low response rate (4 of 10, 40%). Furthermore, this “quasi-experimental design” of one group with a pre- and post-test has also been widely criticized for its lack of a control group. Because we cannot rely on the validity of the quantitative data in this instance, instead, students’ reflections were qualitatively assessed for salient themes to determine if ICS was developed.

Findings

Students largely enjoyed the COIL experience, with their reflections being mostly very positive. In their qualitative reflections on the course, students showed growth in the affective dimensions – openness, curiosity, awareness of other cultures, and meta-cognition - associated with the increase of intercultural sensitivity. Students were more likely to employ meta-cognitive awareness about themselves and their cultural status as Americans in their post-course reflection, suggesting that they increased their ICS-associated ability to begin to evaluate their own encoded cultural values against others.

Students also reported developing new interests in global affairs, travel, and learning new languages. Some students expressed that without the virtual exchange, they would not otherwise have had the opportunity to engage in a global experience because of factors preventing them from engaging in a more traditional global experience such as study-abroad.

Cultural Factors: Finns and Americans

The only significant experiences of conflict in the course likely occurred as a result of differences in communication style between Finnish and American students. Finns culturally place value on patience and curbing aggressive behaviors. They also prefer to work independently. Americans, by contrast, adopt a “time is money” attitude and are uncomfortable with silence. They prefer to do group work as a team. One American student in particular seemed to attribute Finnish students’ silence and independence as a lack of interest in the work. Although we do not know about the inner experiences of the Finnish students, case studies from the business world suggest that Finns can sometimes be offended by what is perceived as “rude” or interruptive behavior on the part of Americans, while Americans are more likely to consider this behavior to be part of normal conversation.

Conclusions

COIL shows promise as a modality for global education and the development of intercultural sensitivity, as well as making global experiences available to wider ranges of students. It also shows promise as a preparation for exploring and developing one’s relationship to their professional field. Students bring varying levels of familiarity with international/intercultural contexts, as well as varying amounts of the affective and cognitive skills implicated in the development of ICS.

On the subject of the data, for this researcher, it was unfortunate that participation in the second half quantitative measure (and student interest in the study) was very low. Future studies could be more careful to incentivize participation through reward or further explication of the study and its goals and potentials for the benefit of its participants.

Further Research

Further research is necessary on the role of preparation and debriefing in optimizing students’ takeaways and reflections on intercultural experiences. Intercultural misunderstanding has been called a highly teachable moment, but the role of instructional context and instructor presence in creating knowledge from these moments of conflict and ambiguity is largely unresearched. Additionally, COIL as a modality may be relevant for other student age-groups, particularly adolescents. Future studies could focus on interventions done in high school or elementary school.