

How to facilitate peer interactions in virtual intercultural learning

An example in the DIVA project

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1. Background

In 2021, I got an opportunity to participate in an intercultural learning activity between Germany and Australia, organized by the Ludwigsburg University of Education in Germany through its DIVA project (Digital and International Virtual Academic Cooperation). During this part of the project¹, I cooperated with two Ludwigsburg students to do a comparative study on the education systems of China, Croatia, and Germany. The final product was an online presentation in front of all participants.

It was a pleasure working with the team members. However, when I reflect on my experiences in the project, I find that I could have had more opportunities to communicate with my team members and learn about their cultures.

Probably because we were all busy, there was not much opportunity for us to take some time to chat freely about each other's culture. The only virtual meeting that we had was organized by professors, who sent us to breakout rooms to meet team members after the project opening ceremony via Zoom. We quickly moved on to the discussions on our project after a few minutes of chatting. After this, we completed most of our communications through a messenger app, on which our messages were serious and mainly focused on our project. We decided on a shared structure composed of three aspects of education systems, and we worked independently to collect information on the

¹ The other part of the DIVA-project comprised a collaboration between the Kibbutzim College of Education in Tel Aviv and Ludwigsburg University of Education in the field of language education.

countries that we each focused on. After we finished our parts, we combined the slides and concluded similarities and differences between each country's parts. In the final presentation session, some teams seemed to have had abundant discussions. However, although our team completed the work, there were not many casual chats where we could learn from and about each other beyond the project task. Surprisingly, the project was completed without abundant peer discussion or educator support, which raises my interest in the generality of such phenomena where students in an online cooperative learning program complete their tasks without many interactions, especially in an intercultural education program where social interactions could enhance mutual and cross-cultural understanding and contribute to the achievement of the goal of the program.

2. Intercultural Education

As early as 1951, prompted by the social problems after WWII, Redden and Ryan (1951) were already discussing the importance of intercultural education in promoting international understanding, reducing international conflicts, and improving international relations. However, cultural conflicts arise between countries and within states and societies in an even more radical form, which has prompted an imperative to promote intercultural education inside different societies (Jones, 1997).

To better understand the meaning of “intercultural”, a comparison between “intercultural” and “multicultural” might be of some help. While multiculturalism focuses on the recognizing differences based on equality and variety, interculturalism emphasizes coexistence in diversity with an additional principle of positive interaction (Guilherme & Dietz, 2015). To summarize, intercultural education emphasizes positive interactions in a diverse and equal society.

Intercultural education can benefit the education system and the wider society. As Ghosh (2021) points out, education should help to reduce conflicts and promote social cohesion, especially during the coronavirus pandemic. Intercultural education could promote social cohesion, but there are further benefits. By addressing critical literacy and culturally responsive instructions, intercultural education could effectively improve academic achievements of students from minoritized backgrounds by challenging the inequality and discrimination they often suffer (Cummins, 2015).

Despite the benefits of intercultural education, it should be admitted that its implementation still has challenges (Steinbach, 2011). Merely celebrating the diversity of cultures is insufficient because students also need to learn how to recognize themselves (self-identity) and their relationships with their cultural backgrounds and other cultures (social identity) so that they can find their position in social relationships and make sense of their subjective experiences (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004). In addition, the prevalence of a folkloric approach in intercultural education might objectify cultures into cultural products like food and clothing at the cost of further understanding cultures (Gérin-Lajoie, 2011). While intercultural education could benefit students and a wider community, successful intercultural education is not only about celebrating folklore or the diversity of student cohorts but must also involve critical reflection on inequality and appropriate guidance from educators.

3. Virtual Learning

Alla (2005) uses “virtual learning” as an umbrella term to describe a learning process based on technology, with teachers and students possibly separated by time and place, yet more flexibility for the learning pace of individual students. The tools used for virtual learning include virtual meetings, online courses, and virtual learning environments (Kerimbayev, 2020).

Discussions on new forms of education based on technologies and the Internet started as early as the end of the 20th century. Virtual learning can make learning more efficient, individual, timely, and task-oriented (Mueller & Strohmeier, 2011). However, to realize the full potential of virtual learning, learner-centred course design and social interactions between learners are also vital, in addition to using technologies (Stiles, 2000). The advent of COVID-19 further highlights the imperative of up-skilling teachers’ digital technology repertoires, which can, for instance, help to ensure that teaching activities in relatively poor areas can continue just as in metropolitan counterparts and thus improve the social equality of education (Maloney & Moorthy, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual learning was widely implemented, with increasing popularity in academic discussions (see, e.g., Marín-Díaz et al. (2021) or Torres Martín et al. (2021)).

An important focus of studies on virtual learning is virtual learning’s potential to facilitate social interactions among students. The interactions between educators and students have been an essential consideration in devel-

oping virtual learning (Brent, 2000). However, the style of social interaction online could vary for people with different personalities (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2002). Students' willingness and participation style could also differ between classroom and virtual learning environments (Caspi et al., 2006).

Besides focusing on social interactions, relevant research addresses the need for learning strategies, learning support, and possible obstacles. As early as 2000, Stiles (2000) noticed that virtual learning requires effective learning strategies instead of merely focusing on technology, or the learning will still be unengaging for students. Besides learning strategies, students also need training on the potential functions of virtual learning environments, educators' monitoring of their learning progress, and stable Internet connections (Marín-Díaz et al., 2021). In addition, certain obstacles to social interactions in virtual learning environments need to be addressed, such as participants not turning on cameras or microphones during a meeting and other hindrances to fluid online communication (Finlay et al., 2022).

4. Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning, which is about organizing students to work in small groups, has been the object of a vast amount of related research worldwide (Slavin, 1989). As one type of peer learning, cooperative learning is a learning process in which students work in groups towards a goal the teacher sets with the teacher's facilitation (Topping et al., 2017). Furthermore, cooperative learning requires training in participating in and contributing to group work (Topping, 2005). Cooperative learning has been widely used in educational contexts and discussed by scholars, for example, Boud et al. (1999), Topping et al. (2011), and Thurston et al. (2010).

Cooperative learning has apparent advantages. As early as 1980, Slavin (1980) found that cooperative learning was beneficial for both the academic and affective development of students compared with traditional teaching techniques; it led, for example, to better academic achievements, consistent improvement in the relationships of students from different cultural backgrounds, more profound mutual understanding, improved self-esteem, and more positive attitudes towards school. While cooperative learning could be a beneficial practice for students, many challenges remain to be dealt with. At the beginning of cooperative learning, there should be training on interpersonal and cooperating skills (Jolliffe, 2007). In addition to structuring teams

and learning tasks, the implementation of cooperative learning demands essential changes in the focus of assessments, from the current individual-centred approach to a new form of assessment and from the significant focus on cognitive skills to a combination of cognitive and non-cognitive skills such as social skills (Huber & Huber, 2008). Besides the need for more support from teachers on both group work and individual work of students, students also have more responsibilities for their learning, which could be challenging for students (Cooper, 2002).

5. Discussions

My learning path in the project was completely online, and involved a Zoom opening ceremony, office hours with professors on Zoom (optional), online group discussions (on a messenger app), and a Zoom closing meeting where each group gave a presentation. During the opening ceremony, I had the first opportunity to meet and communicate with my group members when students were sent into breakout rooms after the professors' introduction to the DIVA project. After self-introductions, our group discussion soon moved to discussions on possible topics and the separation of tasks. My group members were efficient and work-oriented. However, if there had been some casual conversation, we might have been able to get to know each other better and learn more about each other's cultures. Maybe my group members were also eager to have some personal conversational exchange, but as people meeting for the first time, they may have found it difficult to start chatting. This difficulty in initial engagement seems to align with the research of Pricope (2013), who finds that students from different backgrounds do not necessarily communicate with each other and learn about other cultures when they are on the same campus. Extra efforts might be needed to stimulate discussions among students in an intercultural education project, especially if the project is online. When students are learning online, social interactions between them need to be facilitated, and the use of cameras and microphones might need to be encouraged and checked (Finlay et al., 2022; Laffey et al., 2006). When participants from different backgrounds meet for the first time in a Zoom breakout room, it is natural that they could feel it challenging to start a casual conversation. Educators could improve peer interactions by setting some icebreaking tasks to encourage students to understand each other. During the activity time, educators might consider joining breakout rooms to check on

the progress and offer support for less active members of the group. While an intercultural cooperative learning program is running, it is important to realise that students might feel much more challenged due to cultural differences. Therefore, explicitly teaching intercultural skills and group work processes before the work starts could be significant (Huber & Huber, 2008; Jolliffe, 2007).

6. Recommendations

Based on my reflections on my experiences during the DIVA project, I would like to offer some recommendations for implementing online intercultural cooperative learning projects.

Firstly, as mentioned above, educators could use icebreaking activities to involve students in initial communication and encourage peer interactions. The activities should be designed to encourage students in an online environment to interact further with each other when they are working together. Students might not necessarily interact with each other and learn about other cultures just because they are in an intercultural environment, so the actively stimulated engagement of students with each other is necessary.

Secondly, educators could monitor the progress of students. By frequently checking with students, educators could discover how they might provide spontaneous help in facilitating contact, while participants might also feel greater motivation or pressure to work hard on the project.

Thirdly, building an online learning space where students could create and design together might help to build a more cohesive community that generates a sense of belonging. A possible learning space might be a website that every student could edit. Educators could encourage students to devise web pages, publish blogs, and share resources on the website together. To effectively engage students in the website activities, educators should help students find their motivations in building a website together and offer training in the skills students will need.

To summarize, online intercultural cooperative learning certainly benefits educators, but there are also challenges. While it is possible to overcome geographical barriers through virtual learning, educators need to engage students in the learning by facilitating peer interactions, by progress checking, and by constructing shared cyberspaces like websites that every student could edit.

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