Preparing College Students for World Citizens through International Networked Courses

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Abstract. In today’s global society, higher education institutions are charged with preparing students to be world citizens who possess holistic perspectives on diverse international cultures. Many colleges and universities in the United States of America actively seek international partners to offer technology enhanced global networked courses. All members, including faculty, instructional designers, information technology support staff, and administrators, in the partner institutions play essential roles in developing and delivering international networked courses. In this paper, the researchers share the journey, offer course development models and lessons learned as they sought international partners, collaborated globally, developed international curricula, and team taught with colleagues from diverse culture and linguistic backgrounds. The purpose of this paper is to introduce practices that can be implemented in international networked teaching to help college students to increase intercultural and diversity awareness, explore and develop cultural competencies, and gain experience in communication and civil engagement in a global context through a more cost-effective pathway.

Introduction

In order to better prepare students to become world citizens and to meet the challenges caused by globalization, many colleges and universities in the United States of America actively seek international partners and offer technology enhanced global networked courses. During the process of developing and delivering the international networked courses, all members, including faculty, instructional designers, information technology support staff, and administrators, in the partner institutions play essential roles.

This paper reviews the existing literature regarding international learning, its benefits and current trend in higher education. It then introduces how State University of New York (SUNY) and one of the SUNY campuses, the College at Brockport, support faculty to develop and implement international networked courses. It examines a course development model used and lessons learned as they sought international partners, collaborated globally, developed international curricula, and team taught with colleagues from diverse culture and linguistic backgrounds. It also discusses benefits, challenges and lessons learned through the process of course development and implementation. The purpose of this paper is to introduce practices that can be implemented in international networked teaching to help college students to increase intercultural and diversity awareness, explore and develop cultural competencies, and gain experience in communication and civil engagement in a global context through a more cost-effective pathway.
International Learning and Higher Education

Traditionally, learning emphasizes on the product, or “what” is learned. In a traditional classroom, the teacher is the center, gives lectures, and focuses on the content; while students are the learners, study materials given by the teacher, and are evaluated by how much they have learned at the end of a learning phase. The traditional higher education institutions are organized with “disciplinary boundaries” such as different schools and departments, and “campus organizational units” such as different divisions [1]. They are set up with “time-honored governance structures” such as school years, semesters or quarters [1]. They often adopt “traditional approaches to study” and have “anchored identities of educator and learner”, such as teacher-centered and content-focused approaches [1]. In the 21st century, however, learning has shifted and focused more on the process, or “how” students learn [1]. Accordingly, the process of learning has become more engaging, interactive, applicable, collaborative, and international [1, 2]. To meet the changes, more effective approaches of learning have emerged, including but not limited to student-centered learning, applied learning, interdisciplinary study, learning community building, and international learning [1]. In a 21st century learning setting, the identities of teachers and students may be vague, since both are considered as members of a learning community, within which they learn from each other, and grow together during the learning process.

In today’s global society, higher education institutions are charged with preparing students to be world citizens who possess holistic perspectives on diverse international cultures. Thanks to the development and utilization of new technology, nowadays, learning does not have to occur within a certain physically bounded classroom. Instead, it can take place anytime, anywhere, and with anyone across disciplines and across nations. New technology, pedagogy and methods of teaching provide tools for members within the international and multi-disciplinary learning community to exchange ideas, analyze their own identities, biases, and prejudice [3]. Through the process of idea exchanges and discussion, and self-identity examination, members in the learning community challenge existing perspectives and stereotypes, develop better understanding towards diversity, reshape their worldview, and practice communication skills [3]. Thus, international learning promotes diversity, inclusion, and community engagement [3, 1].

Despite the benefits of international learning, there are many factors which prevent college students from studying abroad, such as the cost, work and family obligations, health concerns, or just the fear of the unknowns. The Institute of International Education reports only 24 percent of minority students take part in study abroad programs in the year of 2017 [4]. As many colleges and universities in the United States of America actively seek international partners to provide their students international learning opportunities, the technology enhanced international networked course can be one cost-effective solution. It uses technology innovatively to foster collaboration between faculty and students in the partner institutions worldwide. When taking a technology enhanced international networked course, students do not need to make a huge commitment financially or time wise, compared to what their peers who study abroad usually do. Instead, they take the course in their current institute and use existing networking technology for communication, which adds no additional cost. In the meanwhile, they get the opportunity to collaborate with students in the partner institution(s) on one or more projects facilitated by their instructors, through which they increase intercultural and diversity awareness, explore and develop cultural competencies, and gain experience in communication and civil engagement in a global context.

To achieve the goal of providing international learning opportunities to college students, all members, including faculty, instructional designers, information technology support staff, and administrators, in the partner institutions play essential roles in developing and implementing international networked courses. In the process of planning and delivering the courses, faculty members from the partner institutions collaborate and decide the learning objectives, outcomes, methods, materials, and assessments. They also work closely with instructional designers, information technology support staff, and other professionals from both institutions to get the support
needed to make the course go smoothly. The support from administrators is critical to a successful international networked course, since it is a time consuming process for individual faculty members to seek partners, plan and implement these courses, and provide students a positive and productive learning experience.

**Case Study: Supporting Faculty to Develop and Implement International Networked Courses**

As one of the largest and most comprehensive system of public institutions of higher education in the United States, State University of New York (SUNY) is composed of 64 campuses, more than 7,000 academic programs, and over 6 million students, including 20,000 international students [5]. In addition to hosting international students on SUNY campuses and offering students study abroad opportunities, SUNY encourages and supports their faculty to develop and implement Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) Courses around the world. Using technology innovatively, COIL courses help build bridges between the study abroad programs, instructional design, and teaching faculty communities, in order to promote, integrate and enhance international learning experiences across cultures, languages, disciplines, and countries [6]. The SUNY COIL Center provides networking and professional training opportunities to encourage and prepare faculty for planning, developing, and offering international networked courses. In its first pilot circle of three years, 2010-2013, 21 U.S. institutions and 25 international partner institutions from 20 counties participated in the COIL Institute for Globally Networked Learning in the Humanities [7]. It impacted a total number of 650 students and more than 100 faculty members [7]. The number of participating institutions, faculty, and students is growing continuously over years. The Center found campuses that engage in COIL use these courses as preparatory experiences leading to study abroad programs or as a wrap around courses with travel in the middle of the semester [7].

Being an important member of the SUNY family, founded in 1835 and located in the upstate New York, the College at Brockport SUNY is committed to preparing student to be world citizens who possess holistic perspectives on diverse international cultures, global economic structures and policies, and environmental health. In support of this commitment, the college offers study abroad programs, hosts international student partnerships, participates in the SUNY COIL courses, and assists faculty in developing international networked learning courses that partner Brockport and international institutions’ faculty and students. All these international learning opportunities provide students with experiences that prepare them the skills to work in a global economy, including but not limited to developing relationships with international faculty and students, possessing deeper understanding of cross-cultural global issues, and being more open to and better prepared for enriched travel abroad experiences. Participating in the online or blended international networked courses, Brockport students gain international learning experiences and interacting with international faculty and peer students without enrolling in study abroad programs.

The Brockport faculty is supported in several ways to develop an international networked course. They are encouraged to participate in an online SUNY COIL introductory course to learn about COIL and the process of COIL course development, to network with other faculty, instructional designers, and technology support staff, and to build their own profile with the potential courses or disciplines for collaboration. The College provides an Investment Fund in the school year of 2017 to support participants financially with related professional development events, such as conference attendance. The Brockport faculty is well supported from the SUNY COIL Center, the College’s 2017 Investment Fund, the College’s Senior Instructional Designer and information technology support staff.

In addition to all the support embedded in the system mentioned above, the Brockport faculty is also supported by grassroots Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs), which are established of the faculty, by the faculty, and for the faculty. A faculty learning community (FLC) is composed of six to fifteen faculty and professional staff across different disciplines to build a genuine community [8]. Together, the FLC members make a year-long commitment and engage in active and collaborative professional development conceived as learning [8]. Despite the development of educational
technology and the increasing demand from higher education institutions on online and blended teaching, the results of the survey of faculty attitudes on technology indicate that the old concerns still remain among faculty members regarding the role of technology in and outside of classroom [9]. From the school year of 2013-2014, four FLCs on Blended Teaching and Learning, Mobile Learning, Online Tools for Teaching, and Online Refresh were initiated and run by faculty and staff members across disciplines. These FLCs have offered a safe, collaborative and interdisciplinary platform for faculty and staff members, on a regular basis, to exchange ideas and share experiences, pilot different technology tools and strategies of teaching, reflect and improve their teaching practices, and support each other to provide quality learning experiences with the ultimate goal of better facilitating students’ learning. With the combined support from SUNY, the College at Brockport, and FLCs, Brockport faculty and staff members who are interested in developing and implementing international networked courses are well supported financially, technologically, pedagogically, and through networking with other faculty and staff members.

Technology is used as a tool to facilitate student learning in the international networked courses. Usually, no additional expensive technology is required. Instead, existing hardware and software available on the partner campuses and instructors and students’ homes/dorms are used. In addition to synchronous class-to-class video conferencing during fact-to-face class time, instructors discuss and decide which tool(s) to be used for student interaction. An increasing number of online collaboration tools are existing on partner campuses or available for free, such as online chats and video calls (e.g., Blackboard Collaborate, Skype), shared workspaces (e.g., Blackboard, Google Docs, Google Slides), social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) and so on [10]. Different online collaboration tools provide options for asynchronous and outside of the scheduled class time use, which help overcome the possible time difference across countries, and enhance continuous collaboration at students’ own pace. The instructors from the partner institutions explore, discuss, and decide which technology tools are to be used in the course for collaboration and communication.

**Discussion: Benefits, Challenges, and Lessons Learned**

International networked courses offer college students a platform to enhance student-to-student interactions, emphasize experiential and collaborative learning, engage students in learning course content through their own and the other’s unique cultural lenses, encourage students to build knowledge together and build diverse personal relationships through negotiation of meaning when working in virtual teams. Accordingly, international networked courses help increase not only intercultural awareness but also online intercultural communicative competence, so that students are better prepared for work and civil engagement in a global context [10].

In addition to the benefits to students, international networked courses offer professional development opportunity to faculty and staff members through networking and collaboration. The technology integrated international networked course is a cost-effective pathway to internationalize curricula and an avenue to develop new partnerships globally [10].

The development and implementation of international networked courses are time-consuming and require collaboration beyond the faculty/course instructors from partner institutions. Thus, it is important for the administrators to support and recognize the work of the participants. Technology can be one obstacle. For example, some campuses may not use Blackboard as their teaching and learning system, while others may not have access to certain free online collaboration tools. Lack of funding can prevent participants from attending the necessary professional development events. To conclude, lack of understanding and support, time, technology, and funding/resources are all the possible challenges for the success of international networked courses [10, 1]. Given the benefits international networked courses bringing to the students, faculty, and the partner institutions, it is worthwhile for higher education institutions to explore the possibility of overcoming the challenges and offering the courses.
References


