1 Intercultural youth: the global generation and virtual exchange

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Abstract

Due to the interconnectedness of our world and the ubiquitous presence of technology, it is imperative that students be introduced to and be actively involved in cross-cultural activities. Generation Z (Gen Z) students have been raised with computer-based technology; and as a result, they are cognizant of social and global issues that transcend borders and require collaborative solutions. Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and other virtual exchange programs provide students with the opportunity to engage in real conversations and problem solving with students from other countries. Students connect asynchronously and/or synchronously to discuss, analyze, and solve problems together. Simplified short-term projects also have relevance as they provide the opportunity for communication leading to empathy and awareness of social and economic injustices around the world. While study abroad is considered a traditional method of introducing students to other cultures, most students do not have the time nor the financing to be able to travel. However, today virtual exchange empowered by technology is a viable, sustainable method. In this contribution, examples of tasks, activities, technologies, and challenges resulting from various collaborations around the globe, in particular with Morocco, Iraq, and China, are highlighted. Through these collaborations, students established personal connections and shared responsibility in addressing local and global concerns.

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> All of the collaborations underscore the value of virtual exchange activities, transcontinental partnerships, and collective action. The global pandemic has fostered the opportunity to explore more of these enriching exchanges.

Keywords: Generation Z, technology, virtual exchange, global, collaboration, digital divide.

1. Introduction

This paper will discuss Gen Z and their participation in virtual exchange. It will also highlight the value of adding a virtual exchange to enrich the higher education curriculum. Examples of virtual exchanges will showcase the student experience between Rockland Community College (RCC) and various institutions around the world.

Previous generations around the globe have displayed different characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes unique to their cultural environment. While this is true for Gen Z, they have the added attribute of being the first true global generation (Rapacon, 2019). This unique generation has come of age in an already technologically empowered world, with accessibility to information in real time. Information that is rapidly updated on 24-hour news cycles, coupled with the ubiquity of mobile devices, make Gen Z one of the most well-informed generations. They have taken up the challenge that their predecessors, the millennials, have initiated in recognizing and solving common global problems such as those identified in the United Nations[3]; 17 Sustainable Development Goals addressing the issues of *hunger*, *poverty*, *health*, *education*, *gender equality*, *clean water*, *clean energy*, *decent work*, *industry innovation and infrastructure*, *inequality*, *sustainable cities and communities*, *responsible consumption and production*, *climate action*, *life below water*, *life on land*, *peace and justice*,

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3. https://sdgs.un.org/goals

and lastly *partnerships to achieve the goal*. Gen Z is on the brink of maturity, cognizant of these worldwide issues and equipped with the tech savvy skills and determination to build partnerships around the world. Along with guidance from their respective professors, virtual exchange interactions provide students with the opportunity to develop meaningful conversations with like-minded students around the world. In this paper, collaborations that have occurred between our institution in New York, RCC, and institutions in the Middle East and China will be described.

2.   Gen Z activism

Gen Z has inspired activism throughout the world, notably in the current Black Lives Matter movement, sparked by the death of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer last spring (Hill et al., 2020). This event would set forth in motion one of the largest movements in history propelled by Gen Z (Bellan, 2020). At the grassroots level, this young generation used social media posts on various platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok to raise awareness and to communicate and connect with empathizing participants (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Also, another historical event, in 2019, a million students around the world followed 16-year-old Swedish student, Greta Thunberg, and walked out of classes to protest inaction on climate change (Burr, 2020). This generation is in classrooms today throughout the world – the generation that will continue their education in the coming years to prepare for career opportunities.

3.   Characteristics of Gen Z

Using 1996 as the birth year for Gen Z renders the oldest members 25 years old. Without any memory of a disconnected world, they are true digital natives, even more than their predecessors, the millennials. Each generation experiences events that are unique to them and shape their view of the world. Gen Z has experienced not only recessions but economic downturns intensified by the pandemic as well as several geopolitical conflicts resulting in international tensions.

The unique traits of Gen Z students make them ideal candidates for virtual exchange opportunities. Collaborative activities conducted through various e-platforms enable students to communicate, conduct critical analysis, and become aware of real-world problems with other students across the globe. Problems are no longer localized; through technology, students are aware of global concerns and injustices. Collaborations can underscore social problems, sustainability issues, and develop cultural empathy through the lens of intercultural awareness and understanding.

4.   Gen Z and higher education

Gen Z's enrollment in higher education surpasses the enrollment of previous generations (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Their perspective on college is viewed as a means to an end or as a gateway to world readiness (Mintz, 2019). Gen Z students are entrepreneurial, desire practical skills in their education, and are concerned not only about the realization of social injustices but also the ability to make change (Schroeder, 2020).

To address this goal, faculty should design curricula that prepare students and address their career ambitions, open windows to various career options, and incorporate more authentic, real-world projects into classes (Mintz, 2019). Traditionally, experiential learning activities have been conducted in the physical workplace. However, these activities cannot be simply abandoned now due to current limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic but must be adapted to the virtual environment. Since education has transitioned to the virtual world, so must experiential learning experiences.

RCC, one of 64 institutions in the State University of New York system of higher education, joined the COIL network in 2014. During the past six years, faculty have participated in professional development workshops and partnering activities in preparation to offer virtual international experiences to their students. Faculty in the Art, Business, English, Hospitality, Legal Studies, Multicultural Studies, Political Science, Science, and Speech Departments have developed

and delivered collaborations with partners in various countries. Most of these collaborations have been sustained throughout the years involving the same COIL partners. Partners continually update their collaborations by introducing new ideas, projects, and technological tools. Initially faculty used tools such as a closed Facebook group and Skype; however, more recently Zoom, Slack, Flipgrid, and WhatsApp among other applications have been utilized for communication. The following examples will showcase some experiences from RCC professors and their partnering institutions.

4.1.   Examples of virtual exchange – Morocco

Inclusive collaborations unite students across the world and allow for discussions of global problems as identified by the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals. In the Fall of 2019, a collaboration with Mohammed Premier University (UMP), Oujda, Morocco, and RCC examined the influences of young people and what encouraged them to join political, social, or at times radical movements. In RCC, 20 students were enrolled in an Intro to Multicultural Studies course and paired with approximately 20 students from an English course in UMP. All students initially introduced themselves via video or photos with corresponding text in a private Facebook group, describing their interests and studies, along with the best and worst thing about living in their country. This was the icebreaker, intended to formulate trust and foster community building. The second task was to compare concerns unique to their countries that create cause for such movements.

Students discovered that both countries were confronted with multiple layers of oppression that involved political, environmental, and societal constraints. For example, many students from RCC suggested that discrimination was a crucial issue, also climate change, and the political divide in the US. UMP students more often concluded religious discrimination was paramount to other issues. The students analyzed the intersectional challenges that inspired movements. Other issues recognized as typical motivators were the lack of financial security, the need for basic human rights, and governmental bureaucracy. UMP students noted that the youth in Morocco had little opportunities of engagement or activities, where joining movements offered defining moments to fight negative

social phenomena. Some students at RCC claimed that youth in the US were indifferent at times, but also suggested that youth are keen to the mistakes of past generations and highly motivated for change. Protesting is an active way for youth to contribute to the cause.

Student groups considered methods for societies that would encourage inclusivity for youth. Some group suggestions were to lower the voting age so that youth had a voice, create additional youth programs, continue to educate, and lastly for adults to actively listen and boost the morale of youth.

Another collaboration with UMP in Fall 2017 focused on courses in different disciplines. The Moroccan students were enrolled in English Fourth Year of Civil Engineering within the module of Langues et Communication, and the US students at RCC were enrolled in Principles of Management, a required course for business majors. Despite the disparity in subject matter, partners established common ground enabling both to achieve their respective course objectives. In Principles of Management, global business, cross-cultural communication, and human resources were the topics selected to pursue in the collaboration. The Moroccan course focused on professional writing in English for students preparing for careers in engineering. Since this project was awarded a Steven's Initiative grant, partners were trained in person in Lebanon and then traveled to Morocco for further discussion and planning of the collaboration. Partners determined that the following outcomes would align well with the disparate courses.

- Learning Outcome 1: explore cultural differences and similarities between Morocco and the United States.

- Learning Outcome 2: examine cross-cultural communication patterns regarding employment documents and practices.

Students were involved in an icebreaker activity, 'what would you do' scenarios, and then a final project in which they commented on each other's employment documents. For the 'what would you do' tasks, students were presented with

various real-life scenarios and were asked to react. In one scenario, students were told that they were on their way to a very important job interview, the job of their dreams. On the way to the interview, however, they met a close friend who was very upset and experiencing a personal crisis. The friend wanted to talk right away. However, if the student stopped to listen and to console the friend, the student would undoubtedly miss the bus and be late for the important job interview. Students were asked what they would do in this situation.

For the most part, the American students reacted in a manner that demonstrated their individual orientation. Although they did care about their friend, their personal priority was getting to the interview on time. After the interview, they would speak to their friend.

Conversely, most of the Moroccan students demonstrated a more collective style. They offered to stay with the friend or even asked a family member to take care of the friend while they were at the interview. Student reactions revealed behavior that was consistent with one of Hofstede's dimensions of culture, collectivism versus individualism[4].

4.2.   Virtual exchange – China

In the Fall and Spring of 2019, synchronous collaborations were conducted with students in a business course at Nanjing University, Nanjing, China, and students in a History of Multiculturism in American Business course at RCC. Each course had approximately 20 students. Students were placed in small groups where they met once a week for six weeks, using Skype as a platform to communicate. The main challenge for these collaborations was the time difference. Partners agreed that the students in China would return to their classroom at 11:00 pm, while the students in the United States would begin class at 8:00 am. For the first weekly activity, conducted live through Skype, the students analyzed and compared China's *social* credit score with the *financial* credit score used in the United States. Students considered the benefits, disadvantages, and ethical issues

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4. https://www.hofstede-insights.com/

of using a score. Students determined that while the scores in both countries had similar uses, there were concerns for privacy, ethics, and discrimination. Another topic discussed included sexual orientation provided by a guest lecturer who presented to both classes utilizing Skype. Students discussed various ways people identify in regard to sexuality and gender. The level of acceptance was also compared within each country. In the US most students raised their hand when asked if they knew someone who identified as gay. The number of hands raised from the students in China was significantly less. The students in China consider sexual orientation to be a private matter. The next activity involved the family structure and dynamics, where students considered the western influence in China. In China, more students had lived with their grandparents, and their grandparents were also the most respected. In the US, some students lived with their grandparents, but the breadwinner held the most respect. In each collaboration, it was realized that traditional values and roles continue to be prominent in China, more so than the United States.

4.3.   Virtual exchange – Iraq

The Global Solutions Sustainability Challenge[5] is a virtual exchange initiative that promotes career readiness in the United States, Iraq, and Jordan. The program is supported by the Stevens Initiative[6] and administered by the Aspen Institute. IREX (International Research and Exchanges Board) is an independent nonprofit organization dedicated to building a more inclusive world by empowering youth, cultivating leaders, and extending access to quality education and information[7].

During Spring 2020, teams from RCC and Anbar University in Iraq worked together to identify a common problem relating to the broad topic of sustainability and to create a business solution. Teams brainstormed ideas in class before attending Zoom sessions. During these virtual sessions, the misconceptions and inaccurate stereotypical accounts that are often portrayed by the media were

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5. https://www.irex.org/project/global-solutions

6. https://www.stevensinitiative.org/

7. https://www.diasporaengager.com/public/pdirectory/directory.php?

revealed and ultimately dispelled. By learning about life and the daily challenges faced by citizens in both countries, students were able to empathize and extract shared problems while becoming cognizant of problems indigenous to one country or the other.

Due to the global pandemic, both institutions were forced to transition to remote learning for the remainder of the project. Because of school shutdowns, both teams were asked if they would like to continue the challenge. When relying on technology available only at home, several Iraqi students were unable to continue as they did not have online access. However, the US students transitioned more easily to remote learning, and Slack, Zoom, and Google Drive became an integral element of remote learning. Since the collaboration was online, students were already accustomed to using Slack and Zoom to communicate with partners in Iraq. However, now these applications were also used for class meetings. Teamwork became even more crucial as the opportunity to be in one room in a face-to-face environment was no longer possible. Despite this extra challenge upon a challenge, the students continued to engage in problem solving, decision making, and negotiation skills. The result was a bi-country perspective on sustainability, familiarity with the human design process, and a firsthand experience with understanding and practicing empathy. Some of the comments in the post-collaboration reflection revealed increased student interest in sustainability issues, engineering, and learning Arabic.

5.   Inequality in education revealed

COVID-19 has demonstrated the interconnectedness of our world. It does not discriminate and has demanded paradigm shifts in our daily lives. Education is one of several sectors that has been deeply affected by the pandemic, revealing an even wider digital divide than previously acknowledged. The inherent inequities of education at all levels around the globe have become apparent as institutions rapidly transitioned to online, remote, and other newly created modes of digital learning. Virtual modes require specific hardware and/or

software, a dependable Internet connection, faculty preparation and training, and proper student habits such as self-discipline and time management. Lack of funding sources that would provide the necessary equipment and support as previously mentioned will contribute to an even larger divide with continuing inequities.

Since last spring, many faculty members have continued conducting classes remotely. Although this transition was not welcome by all students and faculty at the time, it was necessary. However, on the positive side, opportunities for virtual exchange and international partnerships became apparent. COVID-19 may be a positive black swan moment for higher education – just the impetus necessary to explore international collaborations (Mazzoleni, Turchetti, & Ambrosino, 2020).

Even prior to the pandemic, only a small percentage of community college students participated in study abroad programs. Time and financial constraints make it very difficult for them to take advantage of direct immersion in another culture through travel. Study abroad is the traditional method for introducing students to other cultures and has served to internationalize a course or curriculum; however, the pandemic has temporarily discontinued this traditional applied learning experience. As the world slowly returns to a new normal, many business practices and educational pedagogies will be reexamined. No doubt study abroad will be critically evaluated to determine its return on investment. Will the persistent anxiety regarding safety protocols and travel be worth the time, effort, expense, and possible risk involved? Can the objectives of a study abroad program be achieved through virtual exchange? Can virtual exchange achieve objectives that study abroad cannot?

Countries will continue to face challenges in terms of virus surges, testing, contact tracing, and vaccine availability and distribution. Closed borders and possible quarantines can wreak havoc on a carefully planned study abroad trip, especially one of short duration. In addition, the same constraints regarding study abroad are still apparent in a post-pandemic environment. For example, even if a student could afford to travel in pre-pandemic days, parents may not be able to finance a trip now due to lost jobs with ensuing high rates of unemployment.

For the time being, remote learning continues at home, but students do miss social interactions on and off campus. Although they fully understand the reasons for remote learning, the feelings of isolation and disconnectedness still prevail. Virtual exchange can address this issue through technology – connecting students on an interpersonal, human level. Virtual exchange is not a substitute for study abroad but simply another vehicle by which the playing field can become more level resulting in greater equity for all. Increasing numbers of students should have the chance to discuss and explore global issues with their peers in institutions around the world, resulting in awareness and possibly even viable solutions.

6. Conclusion

Gen Z and their future is somewhat on hold as international education opportunities are limited due to travel restrictions. Many countries are still not accepting visitors due to the spread of new COVID variants and low vaccination rates. Although this picture may appear bleak, it does present a perfect time for virtual exchange. As mentioned previously, virtual exchange has the power to level the playing field by giving all students the opportunity to work with students from other cultures. Students who were not able to travel even before the pandemic will be able to travel virtually and be connected with peers around the globe. Virtual exchange can unite this cohort of budding activists to come together in a welcoming, educative environment to make the world a better place for all citizens.

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