

9 Building empathy through a comparative study of popular cultures in Caracas, Venezuela, and Albany, United States

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Abstract

During our six-week Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) module (Oct.-Nov. 2019), 58 students jointly developed task-based projects on expressions of popular culture in Albany (USA) and Caracas (Venezuela). In teams of seven to eight participants, learners from both countries reflected on variations of popular culture through assignments to be resolved in teams that included summaries and critical assessments of readings, contextualization of theoretical concepts, the drafting of a joint video script, and finally creation of a ten-minute video that focused on popular expressions in both cities. All learners were native, fluent, or near-native speakers of Spanish. We experienced the topic of popular culture to be exceptionally well poised to help students engage with each other from the beginning, represent everyday realities and build empathy and transcultural understanding through written reflections and joint creative final projects in the form of documentaries that included slices of life from the two different realities. The small-scale, everyday popular cultural productions allowed for a connection beyond cultural divides, helped students discover novel terrain within their own contexts, and vice versa, find common ground in the new context, thus fostering empathy toward transcultural awareness and equitable collaboration.

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In their exchange students actively created a shared ‘third’ culture of collaboration.

Keywords: Venezuela, United States, popular culture, collaborative online international exchange.

1. Introduction

The State University of New York (SUNY) Center for COIL has existed since 2006. Its mission is to “develop collaborative projects that [...] students do together across time zones, language differences and geographical distance using online tools”, hence giving the professors and students “the opportunity to engage hands-on with [...] course concepts and new ideas and – most importantly – exploring them from different cultural perspectives”³. The authors of this paper met during a COIL academy in March of 2019 for faculty teaching at colleges and universities within the SUNY system and different Venezuelan universities. It was our initial goal to extend the benefits of international and plurilinguistic education beyond our own classes, become part of a network of faculty committed to online international education, and last but not least help our students meet future professional demands such as gaining multicultural skills in the workplace. The classes that collaborated were (1) at Andrés Bello Catholic University through the Department of Journalism and Audiovisual Studies, a course on ‘Documentary’, and (2) at The University at Albany through the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, titled ‘Popular Culture in Latin America. The joint examination of popular culture and new media were the objectives of both COIL modules.

Our initial research question was the following: is it possible to foster a sense of empathy, transcultural awareness, and equitable collaboration through the joint critical examination of popular culture within a virtual learning environment?

3. <https://online.suny.edu/introtocoil/>

And in relation to this, how can we formulate assignments that help students become aware of their peers' cultural differences in order to transcend stereotypical perceptions?

In a context of multicultural collaboration, students manifest their pursuit of understanding throughout the process of critical reflection and discourse while interacting with their partners abroad. Moving them beyond the restrictions of prior cultural views and developing a sense of awareness, empathy, self-control, and emotional maturity becomes the most important challenge in order to train individuals with a sense of responsibility as global citizens. Empathy then becomes the key ingredient for the success of cross-cultural experiences.

For [Santrock \(2007\)](#), empathy is a positive feeling that acts on the sentiment of others with an emotional response to them. According to [Budiningsih \(2008\)](#), empathy is the understanding of other people's emotions, accepting their point of view, and respecting their differences and their feelings. Moreover, in the Encyclopedia of Social Psychology, [Hodges and Myers \(2007\)](#) state that empathy is the understanding of another person's experience by imagining oneself in that other person's situation: "[o]ne understands the other person's experience as if it were being experienced by the self, but without the self actually experiencing it" (p. 297).

However, cross-cultural communications, oftentimes, confront a variety of obstacles, as [Amrina and Indriani](#) point out, due to differences in cultural backgrounds such as customs, traditions, beliefs, ideals, and so on. "If these obstacles cannot be overcome, there will be disagreements or even serious disputes" ([Amrina & Indriani, 2020](#), p. 159). This is when cultural empathy is needed for successful cross-cultural interactions; that way, learners can manage to understand cultures far different from their own, see their own culture from a more critical distance, and their interactions can run well and effectively ([Amrina & Indriani, 2020](#); [Jiang & Wang, 2018](#)).

To foster a sense of empathy, transcultural awareness, and equitable collaboration, a joint critical examination of the meaning of popular culture

is promoted in our COIL module. During the process, learners obtain new knowledge about popular expressions and traditions; new experiences with their peers abroad; and question and ultimately overturn previously held assumptions. Introducing cultural-empathize states to the cognizant transformation of cultural perspectives in the learning collaboration by a series of multicultural team challenges engages students to intentionally transcend the typecasts and frameworks of local culture, getting rid of the restrictions of their own culture, and placing themselves in another cultural mode to know, realize, and comprehend another culture (Yumin, 2019).

This goal is achieved by creating a ‘community of inquiry’ as Schertz (2006) states. For the author, a community of inquiry enables students to conjointly explore philosophical concepts, personal anecdotes, and stories through a “discursive structure that allows for and encourages the facilitation of these empathic modes through a dynamic system of interlocking subjectivities” (Schertz, 2006, p. 9). This methodology, as Schertz (2006) indicates, motivates learners to direct their chosen discourses and promote in them an intersubjective form, or ‘Gestalt’, allowing individuals “to engage each other in effective communication in a discursive context that is also cognitive and metacognitive” (p. 9). By the end of the module, learners manifest a critical reassessment of their psychoemotional responses to the multicultural experience in the form of a final questionnaire; they are able to track the development of their own awareness by comparing it with one of their abroad peers (a group of students involved in our 2019 exchange organized on their own a virtual reunion almost two years after their collaboration), and finally, they are able to identify new multicultural competencies, and acknowledge cognitive challenges from the collaborative experience.

Students’ ages at both institutions ranged from 19-71 years, they came from eight different countries in the Americas (North and South), and their educational levels ranged from undergraduate to graduate (Master’s and Ph.D.). While the Venezuelan learners were mainly of college-student age, the learners from Albany participated in a shared-resources class for advanced undergraduate students and graduate students alike. Given the fact that UAlbany is one of the most diverse

institutions of higher education in the US and an aspiring Hispanic-serving institution, and as a result of its geographical situation in the State of New York, students in the program are either US American students who learned Spanish as a new language, Latino/a/x students of Caribbean and Mexican descent, and Latin American students from the Hispanic Caribbean (Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic), Peru, Ecuador, and Mexico. All students who participated in this study were native or fluent speakers of Spanish, with a minimum of five years of college-level Spanish education.

In the context of an international educational exchange with Venezuela, it should be noticed that for the last ten years, the socio-political situation of the country has worsened to the point of developing into a deep humanitarian crisis. The students that participated in this virtual exchange were media and journalism college students, their ages ranging from 17 to 23 years. We want to highlight that Venezuelan learners experience the pressure of violence, lack of human rights, absence of public services, the lack of a transparent information structure, and a deteriorated educational system on a daily basis. These adverse social conditions affect the learner's overall well-being and by extension, their capacity to fully engage in a virtual exchange experience in the same way that their peers abroad can. In addition, the internet connectivity in Venezuela, according to a recent global average ranking of a total of 139 countries provided by *Speedtest*, was ranked 137, only ahead of Palestine and Afghanistan⁴. Power outages and internet connectivity made synchronous meetings difficult, and provided obstacles to establish communications for group activities. Students had to be resourceful and flexible as to the use of social media and collaborative practices.

2. Methodology

During a six-week period, two classes adopted the COIL methodology⁵ and engaged in a shared module titled *Popular Culture and Contemporary Media*.

4. <https://www.speedtest.net/global-index>

5. <https://coil.suny.edu/about-suny-coil/>

From October to November 2019, 58 students, 26 from UAlbany (SUNY) and 32 from the Andrés Bello Catholic University of Venezuela jointly developed task-based projects on expressions of popular culture in teams of seven to eight participants. Following a challenging learning curriculum, transformative learning, formulated by Mezirow (1997), goes beyond memorization of information and has both individual and social dimensions and implications. Rennick argues that this pedagogic method emphasizes high impact learning; it is experiential, collaborative, active, and engaging. While applied consciously, students become an active part of world citizenship and are committed to the great purposes of humanity (Rennick, 2015). Learners from both countries explored practices and reflected on variations of popular culture through descriptive and critical assignments and tasks, the drafting of a joint video script, and the creation of a ten-minute video that focused on popular expressions in both cities. Students chose their topics among their teams. Among the choices selected were practices of Indie music, graffiti and other street art, inclusive performance spaces, the creation of community sites among others, and media of contemporary social interaction that particularly communicated popular cultural content.

The methodology of the collaborative virtual module was concentrated on intensive weekly group activities and a learning challenge across the two institutions. The activities were chosen by both professors, they included readings, the watching of videos, and lectures in Spanish and English by cultural and media theorists and practitioners. The readings were between 2,000 and 7,000 words long and were dedicated to the topics of the impact of new media (processes of democratization, hypermediations, ecosystems) and cultural contrasts and comparisons (essays by Roland Barthes, Noam Chomsky, Stuart Hall, and Edward Said)⁶.

Teams were tasked to summarize and explain key theoretical terms and were invited to contextualize them using examples of their own life-worlds and cultural experiences.

6. <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2017/the-listening-post-media-theorised/index.html>

During the process, students read, orally discussed, and commented in writing on three essays chosen by the professors. Later, they carried out the activities on the readings in work teams that met virtually using communication tools of their choice, such as Facebook, FaceTime, Voice Thread, or WhatsApp chats. Our curriculum promoted activities that required students to have an effective communication process in Spanish (US American students as part of their class requirements should communicate in Spanish), the development of common agendas, and the formation of groups with learners of diverse origins to work cooperatively (professors arranged teams in such ways that the groups were as diverse as possible, taking into account age, gender, country of origin, and educational level). In addition, it encouraged learners to propose new, unconventional solutions to institutional, community, and social challenges. Learners skillfully used communication and information technology equipment and applications to interact with others in a global context, despite challenges of internet connectivity.

By discussing with their abroad peers on privacy issues and which safe applications to use to establish interactions and communications, the given assignments motivated them to update their knowledge on digital devices and in the security and protection measures needed to operate these systems. Students received a joint syllabus for the six weeks of the COIL module, each instructor defined the overall weight of the COIL module within students' overall grade (30% and 35% each, roughly proportional to the length of the collaboration during the semesters).

The three main learning objectives defined for this virtual exchange were:

- to practice the use of technologies of communication and information in order to interact with others in a global context;
- to become aware of and interact within a context of multicultural specificities and diversities; and
- to work in a collaborative manner.

The module was designed in four phases: a preparation phase (collaboration basics), engagement phase, reflection phase, and results phase.

2.1. Preparation phase: collaboration fundamentals

Prior to starting the COIL collaboration, students introduced themselves in the joint Facebook virtual classroom (a closed and invisible group) with introductory pictures and brief descriptions of their interests and expectations of the collaboration. After the learners were assigned their teams, during the first week of the module, they engaged in an ‘ice-breaker’ activity related to the topic of the module: they were tasked with selecting and presenting their personal popular hero to their teammates. In addition, teams also had to define their standards for fruitful collaboration and formulate a total of four criteria in their teams, according to which they evaluated each other’s participation at the end of the COIL module. This initial ‘ice-breaker’ activity, the only required synchronous meeting of the exchange, already opened up the broad scope of notions of the popular and definitions of hero figures, as some students presented for instance fictional comic heroes known to a global audience, others opted for singers or songwriters of regional and national stature, while others chose folkloric figures known only in their regions. Students were not required to summarize this discussion for their professors; instead, they had to take and share a screenshot of their synchronous group meeting and post it on the virtual classroom created on a joint closed Facebook group.

2.2. Engagement phase

During the next three weeks, learners performed joint writing tasks based on the reading of essays and viewing of videos that discussed critical terms, examples of cultural expression, the role of media in shaping popular cultures and stereotypes, and related transfer questions. The assignments consisted in the collaborative writing of short 300 word essays per assignment per team drafted and shared on Google Docs.

2.3. Reflection phase

The third assignment consisted in a progress report where students described the individual pieces of work performed by each of them within their teams, related to the progress of the script of the final joint documentary project. This helped conceive the final project as a true collaborative effort with shared responsibilities.

2.4. Final project

The final COIL project consisted in the creation of, and reflection on, a documentary of a ten-minute video per team dedicated to the theme selected by all team members, in which each teammate participated toward a joint popular culture experience (either personal practices or examinations of popular culture practices of others) in their specific living environments, Albany and Caracas. These videos were shared among all participants at the end of the COIL experience. In the future, we plan to stress the public aspect of this project-based learning and post examples of students' works on online video platforms. Among the topics selected were graffiti and other street art, grassroots music, inclusive performance spaces, and community sites. The final documentaries were shared in the joint closed Facebook group. The format allowed all students (and their instructors) to get insight into daily lives in their own and the respective other city, in addition to being introduced to a selected practice of popular culture. Students organized by teams, wrote the scripts jointly. Then, they went out in their respective cities and with their cellular phones recorded the topics selected by each team. Furthermore, the group members collected the audiovisual material from both countries and selected an editor per team to do the editing of the final production. Other team members from both countries did the voice over and the soundtrack. Each team had to submit one joint video project; teams divided this task differently: most created individual videos (visuals, interviews, etc.) that were then stitched together, while in other teams, one or two team members recorded while others worked in cutting, the adding of the sound track, and features such as split screen, subtitles, etc.

3. Discussion: building a community of best practice through partnerships and knowledge sharing

New communication technologies facilitate and promote free exchange of knowledge and information, becoming ideal platforms for high impact experiential learning in a virtual exchange experience. [Scolari \(2008\)](#), an academic specializing in transmedia education, indicates that transmedia narrative is characterized by the telling of stories complemented through various media, involving the participation of audiences for the joint construction of the narrative process, which aligned well with the aims of our collaboration. The primary goal of our Popular Culture and Contemporary Media module was to train global citizens and professionals to be able to function in a multicultural world through activities that encourage critical thinking, professional ethics, collaborative work, agency, and flexibility when faced with technological challenges. Using a wide range of technologies of information and communication, students were the protagonists and responsible creators of the content for their own learning. In order to build competencies on empathy and global citizenship, the module focused on three general skills: learn to interact in the global context; learn to collaborate with others; and learn to recognize cultural similarities and differences.

In the preparation phase of the module (icebreaker), learners met their international teammates and skillfully used communication and information technology applications to interact with each other in this inter-American context. As illustrated in the learner quote below, among the group leadership skills to develop during this phase were: collaboration, shared purposes, respect for diversity, assignment of responsibilities, and group learning.

“Through the length of a couple of months, I got the opportunity to know a small group of wonderful people over 2,000 miles away. Before this, I never even thought about this possibility, but now (thanks to that) I only think of doing it again. Now, I truly believe that this kind of experiences should be more widely available in universities and schools

from all over the world, because it is a necessary experience in the path of receiving an ‘education’, one which does not limit itself to a piece of paper or giving theoretical knowledge about the functioning of the world, but one that teaches about other people, about being humble and empathic... About being human” (Daniel Strocchia, 2021, student of class on ‘Documentary’, Venezuela, 2020).

This was echoed by a learner from Albany (who prefers to remain anonymous), who describes their broadening of transcultural experience and communication skills:

“my transcultural experience was excellent... I am fond of [it] and think that more classes should be taught in this modality, as they give us different perspectives on popular culture in general. [I was able to] expand my communication skills and got to know different dialects” (Student 1, UAlbany, 2021, student of ‘Advanced Oral Communication’, UAlbany, 2020).

Thus, during the engagement phase of the experience, students learned to collaborate with others by working in high impact experiential learning environments. Through the readings, viewings of videos, and analysis, they recognized the complexities of cultural representation and creation, and the role of the media in shaping popular imagery. This included the pernicious effects of media’s power to perpetuate stereotypes. In this hands-on way, learners appreciated and cultivated in a thoughtful, ethical, responsible, and committed manner their relationship with other people in a multicultural environment to contribute to the collective well-being. A second student from UAlbany describes as follows:

“I didn’t expect to create a relationship with students from such a different background... [but] especially the readings helped us get to the same mental ground, and allowed us to get involved more deeply in a discussion of big topics” (Student 2, UAlbany, 2021, student of ‘Advanced Oral Communication’, UAlbany, 2020).

In the reflection phase, participants practiced recognizing cultural similarities and differences through the use of cognitive strategies and processes that promote autonomous learning: observation, research, comparison, understanding, analysis, synthesis, discussion, and evaluation. In their teams, learners investigated, discussed, argued, and designed a documentary script on a comparative study of popular manifestations between the two cities.

Providing purpose and agency, students were challenged to develop a ten-minute documentary comparing popular culture of two cities, Albany and Caracas. During this process, we discussed with our teams and classes what it means to act with an ethical sense and to understand their own and their teammates' socio-cultural environments. Participants selected the topic according to their interest and motivations. They identified and assumed as their own the problems of their socio-cultural context. In this exercise, students observed their realities anew and allowed themselves to be challenged by them, and they connected knowledge with their multicultural reality. Among the examples discussed were the notion of the popular – is an activity popular if it is performed by many, if it is free of charge, or can an activity performed by a small group also become popular? Another discussion centered on the presence or absence of the state to define and make space for a cultural activity such as a concert or dance as popular. Students compared the benefits of large cultural organizations offering concerts free of charge to large audiences with grassroots events that bring together artists and listeners in smaller and more improvisational fora. During this process of action-oriented re-framing, the students developed new frames of reference. In her feedback, one student describes how she was able to track the development of her own awareness, identify new competencies, acknowledge cognitive challenges from the experience abroad, and identify competencies that facilitated active responses to the new perspectives developed in the learning process. This is illustrated from the quote below from a student who participated in the collaboration held in 2019.

“Making a recount, having an experience of collaboration with students from a different area, culture and reality was only the beginning, because

while we lived this exchange, I think that we hardly realized all the tools that we managed to apply as a group, in terms of our audiovisual training. We were completely immersed in the project and this is proven in the richness of the final documentary which, for me, is made up of all that learning” (Sofia Ruiz, 2021, student of class on ‘Documentary’, Venezuela, 2019).

This project promoted activities that required students to engage in a process of effective communication, the development of common agendas, and the formation of groups with people of diverse cultures to work cooperatively. In addition, it encouraged them to propose new solutions.

The module fomented civic responsibility, self-reflection on values and principles that guided participants, the acquisition of skills to evaluate, self-assess, and gain knowledge of leadership approaches and theories. And finally, the challenge-based learning model encouraged participants to get updated on digital technologies and in the security and protection measures of these systems. In addition, they properly managed, frequently used programs and applications, and interacted in working groups using such technologies. This is exemplified in the quote from a student who participated in our collaboration held in 2020. The student manifests his pursuit of understanding throughout the process of critical reflection and discourse with his collaborators abroad. He demonstrates having obtained new knowledge, having new experiences, and confirms he has overturned previously held assumptions. His explanation displays a critical reassessment of his psycho-emotional responses to the experiences.

“The COIL experience taught me many things; from a culture that I never thought of, to humbleness and accepting others. Getting to know people with such different values and perspectives of what life actually is, allowed me to realize and accept the immense variety of people and cultures that exist in our world. It also taught me that those differences do not actually separate us, but join us together. It is by accepting each other” (Daniel Strocchia, 2021, student of class on ‘Documentary’, Venezuela, 2020).

4. Conclusions and outlook

While we write this report, we are currently engaged in our second COIL collaboration of the same topic and course length, now with a new cohort and during times of the COVID-19 pandemic. This time, we are implementing evaluative measures, in addition to qualitative data, to also obtain a set of quantitative data. Among those are initial and final questionnaires for the two student groups that focus specifically on developing empathy and challenging stereotypes related to their own and the other's culture, and individual feedback during the COIL experience.

We experienced the topic of popular culture to be exceptionally well poised to help represent everyday realities and build empathy and transcultural understanding through written reflections, interviews, and joint final projects in the form of documentaries that included 'slices' of life from two different realities. While from a historical perspective, popular cultural production has often (rightfully) been criticized as partaking in imperialist endeavors and highlighted dichotomies – think of Walt Disney's work during the Cold War that offered Latin America as a fantasy land and celebrated the pleasure principle which freed from ethical considerations and responsibility – the small-scale, everyday popular cultural productions discovered in our module highlight instead similarities in variations, help students discover novel terrain within their own contexts, and vice versa, find common ground in the new context. In their high impact experiential learning exchange, they actively created a shared 'third' culture of collaboration. The critical examination of the popular within a virtual learning environment helped foster empathy toward transcultural awareness and equitable collaboration among learners and their instructors.

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