

JOINT BULGARIAN-COSTA RICAN STUDENTS PROJECTS: AN ATTEMPT AT COLLABORATIVE ONLINE INTERNATIONAL LEARNING

Senior Lecturer Aneta Stefanova, University of Economics, Varna,
Bulgaria, Aurora Gómez Jiménez, MA, Universidad Nacional
de Costa Rica (UNA)

Abstract: *In a changing world, future professionals need to engage in active thinking as global citizens for a sustainable and balanced development of societies. Study abroad programs offer students an opportunity for intercultural experiences. However, the real number of students who can take these opportunities to study abroad is still limited: only 1,8%; meaning that only 2 students in 100 go to study abroad globally¹ (UIS, 2016). There is an urgent need to incorporate an additional tactic and blend the physical mobility with a technology-based modality to enhance intercultural dialogue and promote global understanding, to overcome stereotypes and intolerance among cultures. Technology becomes a key source to reach this objective.*

Using technology to facilitate these exchanges is known as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)². It refers to the collaboration with peers from partner institutions in geographically distant locations, under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators to foster intercultural dialogue and the development of digital and critical literacies as well as foreign language skills.

Key words: *collaborative online international learning, intercultural competence, students' projects, sustainable tourism, language skills*

Project rationale

This paper describes an exchange project carried out in stages via a virtual classroom portal, partnered among 24 students from Universidad Nacional (UNA) in Costa Rica and 10 students from the University of Economics in Varna, Bulgaria. The former ones are students of Computing Engineering taking a Business English course and the latter ones are students from the Tourism major taking a course in English for Tourism.

The task assigned within this joint project was to establish an intercultural dialogue among students from very different geographical, linguistic, political and cultural backgrounds, resulting in the establishment of sustainable tourism joint ventures. This online exchange was expected to facilitate the practice of collaboration skills, to enhance students' interest in cultural diversity, and to show the dynamics of this online learning experience and motivate higher

1 UNESCO Institute for Statistics.(2016,February). <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-student-flow-viz.aspx>

2 Position paper: Virtual Exchange in the European Higher Education Area. http://uni-collaboration.eu/sites/default/files/Position%20paper_0.pdf

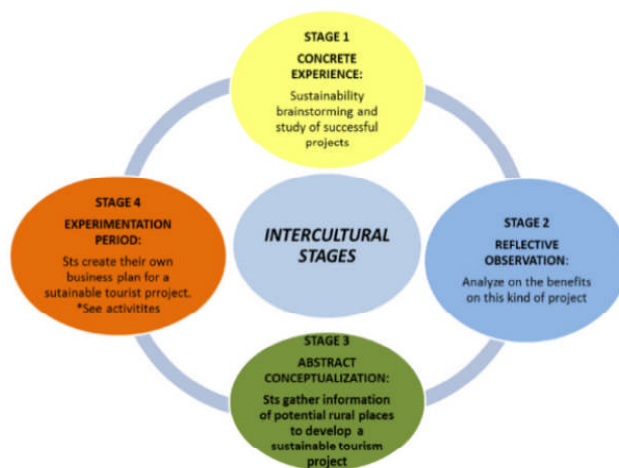
education officials to include this modality of technology-based education in curricula within all disciplines as an internationalized pedagogical practice.

The experiment used a culture-specific approach to show how virtual mobility is a feasible, valuable, and rewarding educational tool that engages students and professors from different backgrounds. At the end of the intercultural online cooperation the students had enhanced their ability to take business risks, negotiate, and adapt their working styles to reach a final and concrete outcome which not only benefited their language and professional skills but also their intercultural competences.

Format and preparation

Students from the two universities were divided into six groups and each group had the task of researching less developed areas of Costa Rica where to locate their tourism project. Different classroom activities were aimed to prepare students from the Tourism degree course to think in terms of sustainability and responsible attitude to the tourism resources and the social development of the host country. The whole project had to integrate the main principles of sustainable tourism. In line with the 2002 Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism in Destinations³, development of responsible tourism practices must be seen as the balanced interaction between the use of natural and cultural resources, the improvement of the quality of life among the local communities, and the economic success of the industry, which also contributes to national development.

Based on these principles, the students worked on the following intercultural stages to reach their final goal which was to develop a Sustainable Tourism venture to attract Bulgarian tourists in Costa Rica.



³ “Responsible Tourism minimizes negative economic, environmental and social impacts, generates greater economic benefits for local people and enhances the wellbeing of host communities, improves working conditions and access to the industry, involves local people in decisions that affect their lives and life chances, makes positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage embracing diversity, provides more enjoyable experiences for tourists through more meaningful connections with local people, and a greater understanding of local cultural, social and environmental issues, provides access for physically challenged people and it is culturally sensitive, encourages respect between tourists and hosts, and builds local pride and confidence”.

Their task-specific knowledge was tested at the start and then upon completion of the project. Bulgarian students were given different assignments requiring research into the natural and man-made resources of Costa Rica.

The tourism ventures designed within this international online project included a tree-houses complex, homestay projects in which tourists are accommodated in local people's houses in the north part of Limon, a tent-camp in the Grandoca area built of recycled materials with eco-paths leading to the place to avoid the use of motor vehicles. All groups tried to avoid investing in traditional tourism infrastructure and instead strived to minimize the effect of their business projects on the environment.

The following is a description of the intercultural stages used to develop this sustainable project and their respective activities:

1. Concrete Experience

Bulgaria and Costa Rica are in two different continents and it is easy to assume that the geographical distance between them reflects a compatible difference in people's attitudes, social experiences and lifestyles. The first stage in the project focused on forming ideas about a foreign culture and its representatives and monitoring the possible changes in their expectations of an unknown culture as a result of research, discussion and constructive feedback. The first step was to ask students to write down the first thing that came to their minds when they heard about Costa Rica or Bulgaria respectively. While most Bulgarian students have some idea, often stereotypical, of other European cultures and of the North American culture, they hardly have any idea of the Central American cultures, but nevertheless their Costa Rican counterparts thought Bulgarian students knew quite a lot about Costa Rica already from the start of the project. During the first brainstorming session Bulgarian students produced information about Costa Rica's location, tourism profile, language, climate and music. Understandably, students from UNA did not know much about Bulgaria. They only knew it was a country in Europe and in the past it was affiliated to the Soviet Union. The next step was for students to get access to the UNA virtual classroom where they could meet and introduce each other, share and watch cultural videos about both countries and form a better idea of each other's backgrounds. Thus students started raising their cultural awareness and getting used to functioning on a common virtual territory. The students had an online space called "forum" where the professors posted open questions for them to break the ice and get to know each other better before they start working on their sustainable projects.

It is important to point out that at this first stage, the students were free to participate as many times as they wanted. The goal was to identify how interested they were to meet their peers from the other university. One of the questions posed in the "forum" was: "What new things did you learn about the other country?" To this question 18 out of 24 students from UNA replied. Some of the students shared their interest in Bulgaria as a tourist destination; others were intrigued by the

country's national cuisine. One student wrote: "I didn't know about their national drink. It is made of grapes. I bet it tastes amazing".

2. Reflective Observation

The next activity was to write a short personal description. This activity was very popular because it bridged the geographical, cultural and time-zone differences as students realized that they shared many similarities in their daily routines. All the 24 students from UNA wrote their personal description and they were excited to get questions from their peers in Bulgaria. They got replies from 5 out of 10 students in Bulgaria. At this point, the students were exchanging emails, WhatsApp and Facebook information. They were sharing information about their countries but also about their daily habits and university backgrounds.

At this stage the teams were formed and were assigned with the task of developing a sustainable tourism project. The students from Costa Rica formed 6 groups of 4 students each and each of these groups was joined by one or two students from Bulgaria.

3. Abstract Conceptualization

Once the groups were formed, the students were introduced to the concept of sustainable tourism and examples of successful sustainable projects around the world were provided. The students from UNA had to provide information about rural areas in Costa Rica with potential to develop a sustainable project. Bulgarian students also researched possible locations in the host country. Being in their 3rd year of the Tourism degree course, they used their theoretical knowledge to make SWOT analyses of possible locations and had strong ideas about which of those had the greatest potential for the project they wanted to develop. Their findings included lots of statistics concerning incoming tourists and markets in Costa Rica, as well as main attractions and potential for sustainable tourism activities. The different aspects of sustainability were introduced and students researched examples of tourist products in which these aspects were accounted for. Different case studies were discussed where students had to come up with solutions to issues related to the different stages in the development of a tourism product.

Before starting work on their respective projects, students filled out an online survey called: "What Kind Of A Team Player Are You?" This short survey included questions whose answers helped identify the following types of team workers: the Peacemaker, the Socializer, the Director and the Analyzer. 23 students from UNA out of 24 filled out the survey and 5 out of 10 from Bulgaria did it too. The results showed the following:

	Total of Students	Peace Maker	Social-izer	Director	Ana-lyzer	Total of Replies
Students from UNA	24	9	6	4	5	24
Students from Bulgaria	10		2	3		5

Most of the UNA students were in the Peacemaker and Socializer category while the students from Bulgaria were mostly in the Director category. The students were asked to read the results of their team mates and make a comment if they wanted to learn more about their working style. This exercise helped students realize the significance of uniting their efforts towards a common goal and using each team member's skills and strengths in making progress with a task or project.

4. Active Experimentation

During this stage, the teams had to organize themselves independently to develop their business project. They had to use the structured planning method: SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats), an executive summary that described their business's purpose, name, location, personnel needs, tourism business management staff, market sector, competition, marketing plan and financial projections. The team approach was emphasized also by the students' different field of study: Bulgarian students had previous experience in tourist product development and used their expertise in planning and marketing their joint venture. On the other hand, UNA students had advanced computer skills that allowed them to produce catchy videos advertising the products the teams had developed. These are the final products of the process:

1. Sustainable Project, Costa Rica and Bulgaria: Friendly-Nature Adventure

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NIE8_xg5nkY

2. Maleku Between the Trees: New Concept of Guest-Host

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRWxDQMIhmc>

3. Talamanca SA: Volunteer with Indigenous People

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKwIdBHKNaG>

4. Manzanillo Project: Eco-Tent Camping (Promoting Bicycles use)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14PVLhmQzsA&feature=youtu.be>

5. Arenal Volcano

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTHX9dR9pZg&feature=youtu.be>

6. Eco Project

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGXdH3jp-TY>

At the end of the project work students were asked to provide feedback about their experiences. Most students said they enjoyed learning about their peers' culture and would like to do the exchange again. Some students said they liked the interaction they built as a team, others stressed on a skill they developed working with people from a different country through virtual media like the university platform, whatsapp, or facebook and how this helped them learn to be more patient and tolerant. On the downside in this cooperation experiment was a factor like the time difference because students would have preferred a live interaction instead of waiting sometimes 8 or 9 hours for their counterparts at the other side of the globe to reply because they were still sleeping.

Students Testimonials:

"We learned about different activities to be sustainable persons like: recycling and saving water"

"I learned more about my country guiding my coworker from Bulgaria to explore Costa Rica"

"The best part of the Project was to work in a team with people from another country. We use Whatsapp to talk together. I need to improve my patience to work in a group and organize my time better"

"My favorite part was to create a video and show others about this natural place"

"I learned that I can help the environment with simple actions"

"I learned how to develop a business plan to create a "Green Enterprise"

"At first, I thought it was going to be difficult because they are different to us but in general I saw that they are similar to us."

Outcomes of the project:

Enhancing curricular internationalization and intercultural competence

The project built a bridge between the two educational institutions by uniting students from different backgrounds for the purpose of creating a tourist product that required the efforts and skills of all participating students. By researching different aspects of Costa Rica's economy, natural resources and degree of tourism development, the Bulgarian students involved in the project had the chance to get to know this Central American country and learn about its culture and traditions. The students from Costa Rica put their IT skills to use by designing the promotional materials and animated presentations of the projects that were then circulated online. The three-month exchange between the students from the two universities allowed them to compare ideas, approaches and attitudes to everyday situations that they discussed and to issues related to business development, entrepreneurship, responsible tourism and the role of future professionals in its promotion, thereby integrating and enhancing international education experiences across the curricula.

Team work

Team work is not an easy task, especially for people of different backgrounds, 9 hours away from each other on the time scale, united only by their youth and the desire to learn and succeed. Getting in touch was sometimes a problem, achieving common ground in some of the discussions was not easy either, but in the end students came to realize that achieving a common goal is more important than asserting your opinion and that sacrificing your views can be worthwhile if it benefits the work of the whole team. Apart from teamwork, other soft skills that the project work helped enhance in students include problem solving, thinking inventively, the ability to compromise, negotiate and persuade, communicate and network – all of them sought after by employers worldwide.

Language skills

Working in international teams requires good command of a common language, in our case English. Students had to rely on their English language skills to engage in interaction with their peers from the other university and had to enhance their subject-specific knowledge by reading recommended literature and browsing through Internet resources to design their projects.

Awareness-raising about sustainable economic and social development

The topic of the project work is closely related to developing eco-consciousness and tourism business responsibility along with general employability skills. Armed with the new insights into these specific areas in business in general and tourism in particular, which can be the first step to educating responsible future role-players and decision-makers in both countries' industries.

To sum up, the described projects foster computer-aided internationalization of higher education, develop various employability skills, build on subject-specific knowledge, enhance corporate responsibility, promote in our students active citizens' position, thus aiming to put both students' knowledge and their own tourist experience in this meaningful framework. Students' projects in the area of responsible tourism are a beginning rather than a culminating point in the development of their appropriate attitude towards tourism resources and destinations both as consumers and as future decision-makers in the two countries' industries. Their exposure to a multicultural learning environment helped them grow as globally competent students equipped for work in an international context.

References:

1. Huber Josef. Developing Intercultural Competence through Education. (2014) Pezztalozzi Series N.3. Strasbourg, France. Council of Europe.

2. European Commission Position paper: Virtual Exchange in the European Higher Education Area.
3. The Economist (2008). The Future of High Education: How Technology will shape Learning. Economist Intelligence Unit.
4. Moran P. (2001). Language and Culture. In Teaching Culture: Perspectives in Practice (pp. 34-47). Boston MA. Heiley & Heiley.
5. UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2016, February). Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students.