

ADVANCES IN GLOBAL EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

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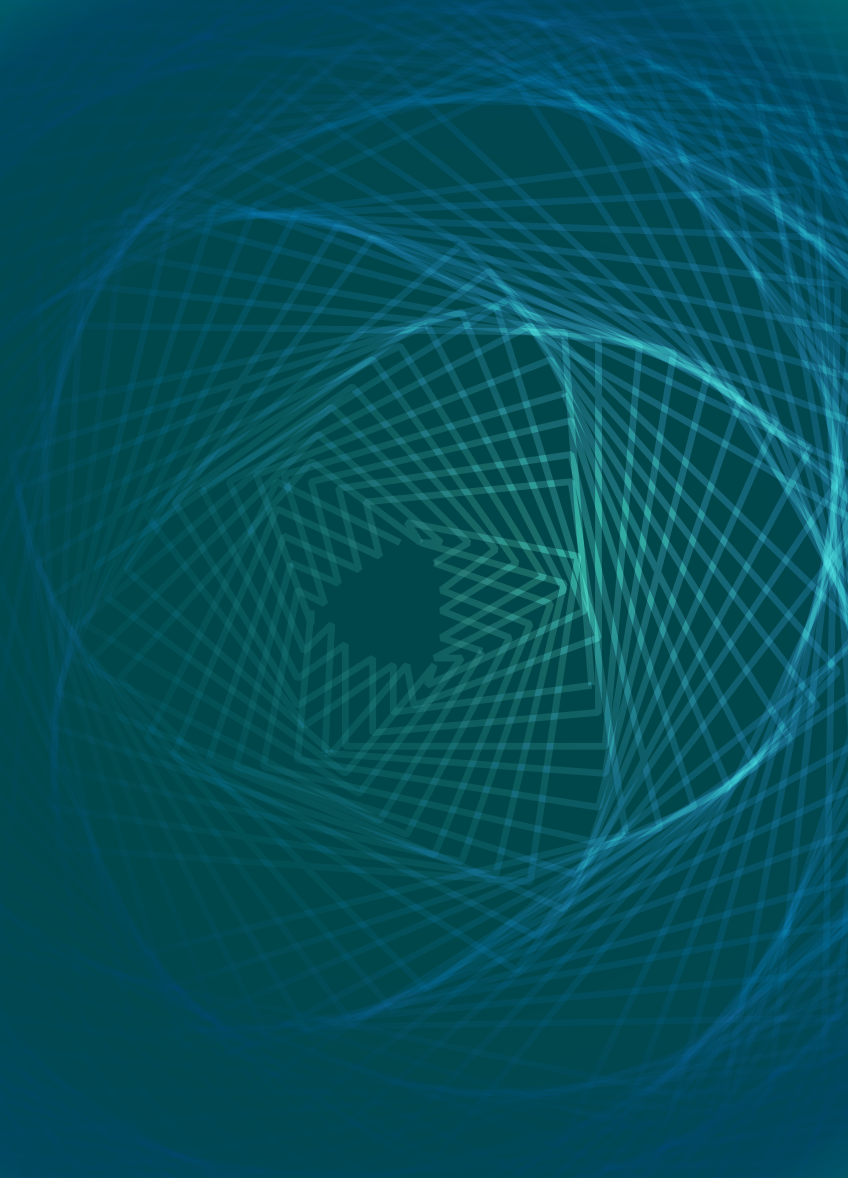
VOLUME 4

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ISBN 978-1-955833-04-2

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Using a Virtual Format to Support Student Learning Across Cultures, Countries and Disciplines

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Abstract

Today, an increasing number of higher education institutions are recognizing the importance of preparing students to communicate, live, and work effectively with others from different cultural backgrounds (Appiah-Kubi, 2020; Eliyahy-Levi, 2020; Iuspa, 2019). Providing opportunities for students to travel abroad has been an integral part of the higher education experience for many years. However, with the global pandemic resulting in limited travel, universities are developing new and innovative ways to provide international experiences for students. The purpose of this project was to explore an international virtual student collaboration between two universities, one in the United States and one in Australia. Eight students were matched across universities to examine how each of their countries approached identification, treatment, educational placements, and societal attitudes for children with disabilities. Each two-person team focused on one of these areas. Students worked together, using their choice of a social media platform, to conduct research and organize their own approach to completing the project. For the final product, students developed a presentation of their findings to share with the virtual class. Although it is important to have input from the faculty on the success of this project, it seems more relevant to hear from some of the student participants and their reflections on the international collaboration.

Keywords: culture, international, collaboration

Recommended Citation: Spencer, V. G., & Smith, C. A. (2021). Using a virtual format to support student learning across cultures, countries and disciplines. In W. B. James, C. Cobanoglu, & M. Cavusoglu (Eds.), *Advances in global education and research* (Vol. 4, pp. 1–5). USF M3 Publishing. <https://www.doi.org/10.5038/9781955833042>

Using a Virtual Format to Support Student Learning Across Cultures, Countries and Disciplines

Today, an increasing number of institutions of higher education are including a focus on expanding global, international, and multicultural education as part of the universities' mission to prepare students to communicate, live, and work effectively with others from different cultural backgrounds (Appiah-Kubi, 2020; Eliyahy-Levi, 2020; Iuspa, 2019; Lee et al., 2012). An emphasis on international partnerships began prior to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic which halted international experiences for most, if not all, universities both home and abroad. As a result, universities were forced to consider other alternatives as a means of providing multicultural experiences for faculty and university students.

In order to explore ways to continue providing these international experiences, most universities have begun finding creative methods of using technology to foster the exchange of ideas and build partnerships with communities in the global world. As the use of technology continues to expand, online collaborations or partnerships has led to social connections, sharing experiences, and creating new knowledge with rapid dissemination (Scott, 2015). The model described in this pilot study was solely based on the need to continue international student exchanges in a virtual environment.

Method

The purpose of the project was to examine the outcomes of an international virtual student collaboration and its effects on student learning and engagement. Two universities partnered in this collaboration. The first university was a large university in Australia. The undergraduate students were majoring in special education. The partnering university was a smaller, private university in the United States. The students were graduate students majoring in applied behavior analysis.

Procedures

The eight-week project was implemented on Zoom. After comparing semester calendars, it was evident that flexibility would be key in providing students with enough time to complete the project. Prior to the first full meeting, an instructor from each university program met via Zoom to discuss the project and identify four students from the university in Australia and four students from the university in the United States. During the planning process, the instructors chose four different topic areas that were relevant in both countries. The focus was on increasing the students' knowledge on how different countries approach identification, treatment, educational placements, and societal attitudes for children with disabilities and their families.

During the initial one-hour meeting with the students, the instructors introduced the virtual project and answered any questions about the project. Then, the students were asked to briefly introduce themselves. At the end of the first meeting, the students were told they would be assigned a partner the next day, and email addresses would be shared. The next day, students were assigned their partners and provided with the following four questions. Once the students connected with their partner, each group chose one of the questions to focus on. They reported their choice to the instructors so that we did not have any overlap.

- a) What is the identification process for children with autism and/or other developmental disabilities? Please include a detailed response to each of these questions. Include any additional information to fully explain the process.
 - How do the parents get a diagnosis for their child?
 - Who does the diagnosis? What are the benefits of obtaining an accurate diagnosis?
 - What assessments are used? Who does the assessment?
 - How are the parents informed of the diagnosis?
- b) What are the three most commonly used treatment/interventions for children with autism and other developmental disabilities - include pseudoscience treatments if they are popular in your country.

- Please explain what the treatments or interventions involve. Include who works with the children using these programs.
- Why do you think these are the most used programs in your country?
- c) What types of educational placements are available to the children with autism and other developmental disabilities? (clinics, public, private, free or paid services)
 - What is the process for getting students the services they need?
- d) What are the societal attitudes towards people with autism and other developmental disabilities?
 - Do they work in the community?
 - How do people treat them?
 - How have you seen society change towards having people with autism and other developmental disabilities out in public and in schools in the past ten years?

Group zoom meetings were scheduled every two weeks over the eight-week period. However, the students were encouraged to meet outside of the scheduled Zoom sessions to work on their assignment. The second and third meetings provided students with the opportunity to ask questions and obtain clarification on some of the components of the project. The fourth and final meeting was held for the students to present their projects. See Table 1 for Project Guidelines.

Table 1. Project Guidelines

Comment
Comparison in content area (between U.S. & Australia)
Addresses cultural context
(Consider differences in policies, funding, and attitudes- be objective.)
Used at least 6 valid sources
Presented in APA format
Professional presentation style/disposition
Innovation in presentation
(Think visuals – graphic organizers, PPT with animation, PREZI, etc.)
Encouraged discussion by asking questions
Visual – easy to follow with no grammatical errors

- Resources may include, but are not limited to government websites, national organizational websites, peer-reviewed journals, and government research centers, DSM V.
- Length of presentation: 30 minutes (20 minutes for presentation, 10 minutes for discussion)

The project assignments included an online presentation where students shared the findings of their question based on the research. In addition, students were given a Peer Feedback form to complete using Qualtrics Survey Solutions regarding the presentations and the project. The following information was included:

After watching all presentations, please choose two presentations that you can provide feedback on.

- Identify two concepts/facts that you learned and why you found *them* interesting.

- What were the strengths of the two presentations you focused on? Please be specific.
- What was unclear to you, or would have helped you to understand the concepts more clearly?

In participating in this pilot study, think about the challenges and benefits of doing an international project. Please identify one or two challenges and one or two benefits. Tell us what you liked and tell us what you didn't like. What do you think would strengthen the project going forward? As leaders in education, you have the opportunity to help structure the project to make it better for your peers who will participate in the coming semesters. Your thoughtful, constructive feedback is essential for the growth of the project.

Results and Discussion

All four groups successfully presented their finished products during the fourth and final Zoom session. The presentations were created in PowerPoint, and students shared synchronously so that they could lead a group discussion with their peers and instructors.

The results of the Peer Feedback provided valuable insights regarding the changes that should be made before expanding the project with other classes and topic areas. The first challenge that all students faced, including the faculty, was dealing with a twelve-hour time difference. Before the second Zoom meeting, the time changed to daylight savings time in the U.S., so everyone was caught off guard. Students also commented that communicating through email was a bit of a struggle as some of the emails would get lost in their mailboxes. One student suggested that we use an online learning platform, such as, Blackboard or Canvas to organize all of the materials and messages in one location. A few of the students stated that using Zoom for meetings and recording presentations made it easy to collaborate and work with their international partner.

Finally, all of the students expressed a genuine appreciation in working across cultures and stated that this would be the type of project they would be willing to participate in again if the opportunity arose. As for faculty input, we both learned a lot about setting up cross-cultural learning experiences and look forward to developing additional projects in the future.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Identifying ways to engage students in international learning experiences is a key component in preparing students to be globally competent citizens. Whether college graduates begin a career within the United States or in another country, they need to be prepared to live and work in a culture that may be different than what they have experienced. Institutions of higher education should continue to explore ways for students to broaden their international experiences even if those experiences are in a virtual environment. Travel can be very costly for both faculty and students while technology is cost-efficient and readily available at most institutions of higher education.

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