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Facilitating the Development of Intercultural Competence *via* Virtual Internationalization

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This perspective article details a semester-long "internationalization at home" project that was piloted during Fall 2021 as part of emergency remote teaching and learning. By presenting the project's components and overall student feedback, I demonstrate how virtual international collaboration contributes to the development of students' intercultural competence. Additionally, I emphasize that one-off faculty initiatives focused on collaborative transcultural learning will not suffice to embed this model into the local institutional matrix. Accordingly, the article concludes by advocating for stronger institutional support to leverage the promise of virtual internationalization.

Keywords: intercultural competence, intercultural communication, virtual internationalization, communication education, pandemic pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Along with advancing digital technology and expanding globalization, communication curricula are increasingly incorporating global and intercultural dimensions. According to the latest survey of National Communication Association (NCA) department members' course offerings (Myers et al., 2021), intercultural communication currently ranks as the fourth most popular communication course in the United States, with more than 80% of the surveyed departments offering it. This ranking also indicates the steady growth of intercultural communication as a communication subfield when compared with what was found in a similar survey (Bertelsen and Goodboy, 2009) conducted over a decade ago. Additionally, as many countries become more culturally diverse, intercultural communications these days take place during international travels as well as everyday interactions, which further underlines the importance of developing students' intercultural competence.

Following Wolff and Borzikowsky (2018), this article defines intercultural competence (IC) as "a complex of abilities that are needed to interact with people from other cultures adequately and effectively" (p. 488). Previous scholarship on IC has identified it as a heterogeneous construct involving multiple dimensions such as self-knowledge, social interaction, and synergy creation. But in its broadest sense, the concept underlines the interrelated affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of intercultural interactions: the affective dimension refers to an individual's willingness to learn about and appreciate cultural differences; the cognitive dimension refers to an individual's comprehension of cultural practices that influence how individuals interpret and behave; and the behavioral dimension refers to the skills necessary for individuals to behave effectively during intercultural encounters (Zhang and Zhou, 2019).

While various pedagogical strategies can be used to foster the development of IC, study abroad programs have been considered as the most impactful option due to the intensive intercultural experiences they provide. Take Wolff and Borzikowsky's (2018) longitudinal study of 199

student participants who spent at least 3 months abroad as an example. It found notable increases in these students' IC scores (particularly in the dimension of cultural identity reflection) in comparison to the control group.

Nevertheless, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges to instructors' and students' international mobility, effectively suspending most study abroad programs worldwide. This situation has prompted growing scholarly interest in exploring novel ways to sustain international cooperation and exchange among higher education institutions. Internationalization at home (IaH)—the idea of incorporating virtual international and intercultural activities into curricula (Beelen and Jones, 2015)—is frequently at the center of such explorations. For example, Li and Xue's (2021) (2021) recent review of how IaH is perceived by Chinese higher education scholars and policymakers noted that the development of IaH programs is increasingly recognized as necessary for "cultivating students' international vision, international competitiveness, and cross-national feelings" (p. 7) for now and future.

Similar to collaborative online international learning (COIL), IaH is not a one-size-fits-all template but a highly flexible framework that requires active adaptation by instructors to fit specific courses in various disciplines (Rubin and Guth, 2015). As such, while adhering to IaH's emphasis on cultivating students' intercultural competence through online intercultural activities, the semester-long collaborative project discussed below is designed considering rising racial tensions during the pandemic. Fostering IC is critical to the development of equity and community inclusion because a lack of it inevitably leads to prejudice, discrimination, and hostile speech during intercultural encounters (Suen and Suen, 2019). By virtually connecting students from Canada and China and encouraging them to discuss their cultural perceptions and practices, the project's activities aim to increase students' critical awareness of sublet forms of stereotypes and racial bias.

THE SEMESTER-LONG VIRTUAL INTERNATIONALIZATION PROJECT

As the pandemic shifted teaching and learning online, my home institution (Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada) stepped up its virtual internationalization efforts, with this project—"intercultural conversations"—being one of them. Prior to enrolling students in the project, it is necessary to secure an international collaborator from another institution. When piloting the project in fall 2021, I collaborated with a colleague from Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU). I chose BFSU as my partner institute primarily because it is among the few universities in Mainland China offering undergraduate communication courses in English. The outstanding English skills of BFSU students helped in reducing language barriers. Additionally, students at BFSU were familiar with intercultural communication since the institution is known for its foreign language training programs.

The project was incorporated into an upper-level undergraduate course titled "Contemporary Intercultural

Communication." The course was taught independently at Ryerson and BFSU using two comparable syllabuses, and students from both institutions only collaborate on the group project component. This arrangement aimed to mitigate the difficulties associated with time zone differences and academic credit transfer.

Many instructors (e.g., Anderson-Lain, 2017; Suen and Suen, 2019) have noted that there are three distinct but sometimes related approaches to researching and teaching intercultural communication: functionalist, interpretative, and critical. The functionalist approach primarily focuses on identifying macro and meso cultural patterns and analyzing how they function in communication. The interpretative approach, on the other hand, views culture as a socially constructed system and prefers to study how it is shaped by economic, political, and other forces through qualitative interpretations rather than quantifiable variables. Lastly, the critical approach defines culture as a site of conflicting interests, values, and ideologies. It thus encourages scholars to attend to how power structures influence communications between individuals and within groups.

The design of my intercultural communication syllabus is guided by the critical approach. By emphasizing issues such as settler colonialism and systemic racism, the syllabus encourages students to reflect critically on Canadian multiculturalism. As the syllabus was originally intended for in-person lectures, its classroom activities used to be dominated by instructor-student interactions. The frantic shift to remote teaching and learning prompted by the pandemic, however, presents a unique opportunity to experiment with more learner-centered and flexible assignments. Additionally, students' familiarity with video-conferencing platforms like Zoom and Google Meet permits the testing of asynchronous peer learning activities that can incorporated into hybrid courses in the post-pandemic era.

In consideration of the pedagogical concerns outlined above, the "intercultural conversations" project engages students in group discussions with peers from another cultural background, thereby assisting them in thinking about the presence of concepts such as cultural identity, stereotypes, and perspective-taking in their daily lives. As the syllabus' major semester-long group assignment, the project was delivered to the course attendees in three stages over the course of 7 weeks.

Stage 1: Introduction and Forming Student Groups

Prior to the project's start, students were assigned readings on fundamental intercultural communication theories such as cultural identity, ethnocentrism, and uncertainty reduction. In my case, the project was formally introduced to students during Week #5, as the weekly topic "culture and identity" provided an ideal opportunity to discuss the project's expectations. My faculty's international program coordinator also visited my class during that week to inform students about the benefits of participating in virtual global collaboration and offer advice on how to communicate effectively with international peers. Given the time zone difference between Toronto and Beijing, most activities in the next stage need to be completed outside

regular class hours. I thus offered alternative arrangements for students who were unable to complete such activities. In total, 14 students (divided into three groups) from Ryerson and 29 students from BFSU (divided into six groups) opted in the project.

Stage 2: Weekly Virtual Group Conversations

At the beginning of Stage 2, the project was laid out for both Ryerson and BSFU students as follows:

Overview: The goal of the collaborative project is to investigate a critical issue of intercultural communication through teamwork. Your group may choose one of the suggested topics or come up with a research question of your own. If you opt for the latter option, please email your question to me for a quick review so that I can ensure your group is on the right track.

Deliverables: (1) Five meeting minutes that document the weekly process of your group's work and discussions on the project; (2) A multimedia presentation to be shared with the entire class in Week #12, based on one of the following options: (a) a narrated slideshow, (b) a podcast, (c) a short explanatory video, or (d) a website utilizing visual storytelling; (3) A 1,000–1,200 words report summarizing the project's key message and design thoughts underlying its multimedia presentation.

Students were then given four suggested topics that covered a wide range of intercultural challenges. Each student group may focus on one topic. These topics were purposefully general and illustrative so that each group could adapt them into specific research questions that meet the needs and interests of its members.

1. Many of our intercultural communications today are mediated by social media. Present a case study showcasing social media's impact on intercultural relationships and analyze it. How do intercultural communication theories help us to better understand the complexity of intercultural interactions, both online and offline? This could build upon a more theoretical discussion of one specific theory we introduced during the course, or a theory you found via reading external references.

2. Conduct a critical review of Canada's multicultural policies. For example, you may focus on recent public debates such as those on Quebec's Bill-96. If you search for "multiculturalism" in Google News, you will find numerous articles discussing various aspects of multiculturalism's future. The key is to focus on one specific policy and then provide your thoughts on how course theories have renewed your understanding of it.

3. Pick a movie or podcast that discusses intercultural communication challenges and make a multimedia presentation reviewing it. For example, on a podcast about handling cultural identity crises, your review may address how effective strategies discussed in the podcast help with intercultural competence.

4. The COVID-19 pandemic has both amplified racialized inequalities inherent in society and intensified public attention to them. Based on what you have learnt from the course, design and propose a creative communication campaign that advocates for equality. If you opt for this option, a website or a short video would be the preferred deliverable.

Intercultural conversations occurred during the five weekly meetings. Ideally, both institutions should have the same number of student groups participating in the project. In the current case, however, BFSU students significantly outnumbered Ryerson students, necessitating a revision of the weekly meeting schedule. Students met with their own group members during the first week of the revised schedule to establish a consensus on the focus of their project. Then, over the course of the next four meetings, one Ryerson group met separately with two BFSU groups to peer-review each other's project ideas and discuss how cultural differences influence their understanding of these ideas.

For example, Ryerson Group #1 met BFSU Group #1 in weeks 2 and 4, and BFSU Group #2 in weeks 3 and 5. Each week's intercultural meeting lasted about an hour and was conducted via Zoom. Although these meetings had default topics (see the list below), students were encouraged to share their perspectives on intercultural competence and discuss questions such as the following: (1) How easy or difficult is it to identify cultural values during everyday conversations? (2) How would you reduce uncertainties associated with meeting peers from a different cultural background? (3) How have your initial perceptions of your partner group's culture changed? (4) In light of these altered perceptions, how does communication aid in the fight against stereotypes and implicit biases? In short, these questions assist students in identifying potential gaps in their intercultural competence's affective and cognitive dimensions.

Default Topics of Weekly Meetings
- Week 1: Group member greeting, distribution of responsibilities, and creation of actionable items.
- Week 2: Confirmation of project's key message, storyline (if opt for video), or website structure.
- Week 3: Discussions on report writing
- Week 4: Discussions on video or website details
- Week 5: Preparation for the final week presentation

The groups were required to submit meeting minutes (graded as part of class participation) following each week's virtual meeting. This requirement served two purposes: (1) It aided each group in documenting key points discussed during meetings; and (2) it ensured that each group made consistent weekly progress, ensuring the effectiveness of intercultural conversations. Students were provided with the following meeting minutes template.

Meeting Minutes
- Your Group Number: [Add your group number here.]
- Meeting Info: CMN 443 Weekly Meeting [Meeting Number] was held on [Date]. Attendees included [list attendee names]. Members not in attendance included [list names].
- Updates on Unfinished Actionable Items: [Add your text here.]
- Weekly Focus: [You may follow the default topics or add new items depending on your group's own situation.]
- Actionable Items: [Add your text here. What need to be finished before next week's meeting.]

- Notes from Group Discussions: [Add your text here.]
- This Meeting Minutes is Prepared by: [Add your name here.]

Stage 3: Debriefing

During the final stage, student groups were asked to share their multimedia presentations with the entire class. Among the four possible options, my class's student groups (including those who chose not to participate in the intercultural conversations) preferred the narrated slideshow and website. The goals of this debriefing session were to present the group projects' findings and to share students' teamwork experiences. By listening to each other's research on a variety of intercultural topics (e.g., cultural differences in online dating, the representation of identity struggles in Hollywood films, etc.), students can gain further understanding of the nuances of intercultural competence and how critical cultural messages are encoded in popular cultural products. Meanwhile, the 1,000 to 1,200-word written report was designed to elicit self-reflection from each group regarding their study of intercultural communication. Each group's presentation and report were assessed comprehensively in terms of their content and communication strategies.

Additionally, the debriefing session may use the following questions to guide class discussion: (1) What was the most surprising finding in your project regarding cultural differences? (2) How did conversations help in forming intercultural friendship? (3) How did you resolve divergent viewpoints in intercultural communication? Additional questions may be added as deemed fit.

APPRAISAL AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

Overall, my students responded positively to this IaH project. They reported that the weekly meetings facilitated constructive discussions about cultural differences and implicit biases, and that the multimedia component of the project enabled them to express themselves creatively. As the project spanned the second half of the semester, it provided an excellent opportunity for student groups to incorporate weekly course concepts into the creation of their multimedia presentations.

Although the overall quality of these presentations was satisfactory, several of their associated project reports lacked the desired theoretical depth: these reports discussed the importance of intercultural competence to various extents but lacked substantive reflections on how it contributes to reduce cultural biases. This was likely due to the lack of experienced moderators at the weekly meetings, which were held outside of regular class hours. Thus, the weekly meetings could ideally take place immediately following each week's lecture, allowing the instructor and the teaching assistants to offer support as needed.

Having said that, the de-emphasis on power relations had pedagogical benefits of its own. Several students praised the laid-back atmosphere of the intercultural conversations they had and reported that they planned to stay in touch with their new international friends. Such transnational friendship would be beneficial to the long-term development of students' intercultural competence.

The benefits outlined above demonstrate the potential of virtual internationalization in assisting the development of students' intercultural competence across affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions (Zhang and Zhou, 2019). Not only does the virtual learning environment enable students to reflect on their knowledge of intercultural communication because of real-world intercultural encounters, but it also motivates them to be more attentive to cultural differences.

Following the completion of the IaH project, several students reported to me that they were genuinely surprised during the early weekly meetings by how their BFSU peers' opinions and thoughts on issues such as online dating and parent-child relationships were in stark contrast to what they took for granted in the Canadian context. These differences then prompted more in-depth discussions about how to maintain mutual respect in the face of cultural clashes.

What I observed throughout the IaH project is also consistent with recent scholarly discussions (e.g., Li and Xue, 2021) about virtual internationalization as a major new direction in higher education. While exchange programs are only available to a limited number of students, virtual internationalization significantly increases access to intercultural resources, allowing students to learn how to be global citizens at no additional cost. Even though many institutions around the world have already resumed in-person teaching and on-campus activities as of 2022, it remains worthwhile to investigate the implications of virtual internationalization for modifying traditional classroom settings. We, as communication instructors, should also conduct further research on how to develop a symbiotic relationship between in-person and online learning activities.

One notable limitation of the IaH project is that as the number of participating students increases, so does the workload of managing student groups and responding to project-related emails. Accordingly, the project is ideal for collaboration between two small classes (20–30 students). Due to the constraints imposed by a large class size (80+ students) in fall 2021, I was forced to impose a cap on students participating in the intercultural option.

Furthermore, selecting an appropriate class to collaborate with is critical for students to succeed in this project. Yet not all universities have resources to support virtual internationalization. Despite careful planning and coordination, unexpected language and cultural barriers may still arise. There were instances in the current case where unintended arguments resulted in tensions surrounding politically sensitive topics. Finally, students may express dissatisfaction with issues such as time zone differences and internet connectivity. In my case, the 16-h time difference between Toronto and Beijing proved to be the most difficult barrier for students to overcome when looking for possible time slots to meet virtually.

Overcoming the above limitations requires not only innovative pedagogical interventions but also increased institutional support, which must be recognized as a critical criterion for selecting partner institutes. As noted in Rubin and Guth (2015), one-off faculty initiatives on

collaborative transcultural learning will not be sufficient to embed this model into the local institutional matrix. Meanwhile, instructors may consider the following options when adapting this IaH project to their intercultural communication or related courses. When weighing these options, instructors also need to consider the decline in academic motivation experienced by many students during the pandemic.

To begin, instead of weekly meetings, an online discussion forum can be set up to facilitate asynchronous intercultural conversations among students. This option circumvents the time zone issue but requires the use of a third-party application since many institutions' learning platforms do not support guest posts. Alternatively, instructors may incorporate intercultural conversations into class sessions and moderate them with the assistance of teaching assistants. Instructors and teaching assistants would contribute to a more robust theoretical context for student interactions, but this arrangement would be possible only in synchronous co-teaching scenarios. Third, to alleviate the heavy workload associated with this semester-long project, it may be revised into a unit-length activity that can be completed in two or three class sessions.

In conclusion, this IaH project increases students' awareness of how their worldviews are shaped by cultural differences while also allowing them to demonstrate their intercultural competence in creative ways. Collectively, the meeting minutes, multimedia presentations, and project reports submitted by my students indicated that the project achieved its intended learning objectives. Further development and revision of the project may emphasize students' ability to interact with diverse communities as well as their knowledge of systemic racism.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board, Ryerson University. Written informed consent for participation was not required for this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

SC wrote the manuscript and led the virtual international collaboration activities discussed in it.

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