Creative Futures Exchange

Report 2 – Approaches to hybrid learning and collaborative online international learning

Introduction

This report builds on Report 1 – Approaches to Internationalising the Curriculum (IoC). The good practice for IoC discussed in Report 1 is relevant to collaborative online international learning (COIL) initiatives, and this report does not duplicate those findings. However, it does build on them to show how they apply when carrying out a COIL project. It is recommended to read Report 1 prior to this one.

Collaborative learning is a pedagogical approach that promotes proactive and deeper learning, and makes learning online more engaging (Kumi-Yeboah, 2018). Cross-cultural collaboration is understood to aid relationship building, help people value and promote interest in members of different cultures, help people negotiate ambiguity, and to translate and transmute knowledge into different contexts (Yamazaki and Kayes, 2004). Now that technology allows for Internationalisation at a Distance where students do not leave their home institution to engage in an international education (Mittelmeier *et al.*, 2021), COIL opens up new opportunities for learning, knowledge exchange, and personal development to many more students than traditionally benefitted from studying aboard (Marcillo-Gómez and Desilus, 2016; Kumi-Yeboah, 2018; Naicker, Singh and van Genugten, 2021). Taking all this into consideration, COIL is a suitable vehicle for the Creative Futures Exchange, even more so in the context of the Covid Pandemic.

This report focuses on the cultural, pedagogical, planning, technological, and logistical issues that recent literature explores in relation to COIL, and what good practice might be suitable for the CFE. In many ways, COIL builds on the development of blended learning which the University of Southampton has a strong track record in, particularly since the pandemic where blended

learning became widespread (Carmichael and Moore, 2020). While teaching has returned to majority face-to-face interactions, blended learning continues to varying degrees at the University of Southampton, including the use of blackboard/Panopto for lesson delivery and discussion boards, and Teams for meetings, seminars, sharing work and collaboration. However, where these uses of technology are to support learning at one institution, COIL is a collaboration between institutions across borders. This collaboration brings with it important considerations related to digital divides, working across time zones and schedules, and tensions that can arise from academic, cultural, and pedagogical differences, meaning there are additional considerations when approaching COIL.

In contrast to the more established IoC agenda, COIL is a relatively new development which reflects the recent development of the technology that supports it. As such, there is less literature which addresses the issues. Despite this, there is already a wealth of advice on good practice informed by evaluating what has and hasn't worked in previous settings, and this is what informs this report.

Preparation

Aligning Courses and Cohorts

Macleod, Yang and Xu (2016) argue that aligning courses at different HEIs minimises complexity and reduced preparation time. In order for these benefits to work with the CFE, recruitment of cohorts needs to be from the courses at WSA and UoG which align sufficiently so as to share a discipline/knowledge base in order for topic setting is straightforward. While this has been decided for 2021/22, revisiting this in future iterations may be useful, based on lessons learnt from this year. Aligning term dates is also recognised as important. This is something that the 2021/2022 CFE has already had significant problems with due to the impact of Covid and industrial action. Negotiating differences in time-zones is shown to be an issue (Macleod, Yang and Xu, 2016; Naicker, Singh and van Genugten, 2021), but as Ghana and the UK our an hour apart, this is less likely to be a problem for the CFE. Marcillo-Gómez and Desilus (2016) highlight the necessity for institutional engagement with any COIL programme, as support for technology, staff orientation, capacity building, and timetabling is vital for a sustainable

programme to be developed. It has been acknowledged in CFE planning meetings that previous IoC and intercultural exchanges have not had lasted over multiple cohorts, and the reasons for this need to be explored in order to try to avoid this for the CFE. It is thought this may relate to insufficient capacity in the institutions for the initiatives to be sustained after staff have moved on. Industrial action, as seen recently at UoG and potentially at UoS in semester 2, may affect the implementation of the CFE within this first year of delivery. How this impacts the success of the project and therefore institutional support for future iterations of the CFE should be discussed in evaluations.

King Ramírez (2020) explores how different academic cultures i.e., organisational cultures and values, set in national cultural contexts, can affect international collaborations. This study looks at the 'socioemotional responses that arose in the US and Mexican cohorts, and the resultant value that was taken from a COIL programme, where attitudes to student-teacher dynamics, learning styles, and models of teaching differ between institutions. As the COIL programme was often run in a US-centric academic style, many of the Mexican cohort felt it was poorly conducted as they were not used to the more individual-centred, student-led, exploratory learning style which was taken. An evaluation of existing academic cultures at the University of Southampton/WSA, and UoG should be undertaken prior to session planning, with accommodations made if points of tension are identified. This may be difficult to achieve, depending on what this evaluation reveals. This will also need to be done in conjunction with a consideration of what creative industries pedagogies are implemented with the CFE, which is the topic of Report 3.

Marcillo-Gómez and Desilus (2016) advise that to improve engagement, course credit should be offered. While it is unlikely that this is possible in the initial iteration of the CFE, it might be something to consider in future years. This author has experience of working in a COIL-like manner on an Open University module where meaningful participation was required to achieve a good grade, and this was perceived to make engagement very strong across the international cohort of Masters students. Naicker, Singh and van Genugten (2021) advise that expectations are set in terms of the level of engagement with other students, and turnaround times for communications. This will hopefully avoid some students feeling like they are always initiating discussion and not receiving responses in a timely fashion. In addition, the study reveals that some students did not show an interest in the culture of their international partners which caused unset and disengagement. Ensuring cultural engagement is maintained on a personal basis

beyond the recommended introductions discussed below will be something to promote when inducting students into the programme. Pre-sessional mapping exercises along with time in the first session to discuss these contributions should provide a good starting point for this cross-cultural work. Organising pods (study groups) or buddies based on data from the outputs from this first exercise can continue this work, as long as the administration is deemed possible.

Technology

As a technology-based endeavour, COIL relies on accessible and reliable hardware, software, and connectivity, as well as sufficient knowhow in order for everyone to partake on a level footing. While the literature reviewed on COIL addresses the pros and cons of the technology available at the time of writing (Macleod, Yang and Xu, 2016; Kumi-Yeboah, 2018; Naicker, Singh and van Genugten, 2021), the pace of change of online collaboration renders much advice redundant, and an up-to-date assessment of what is available, at what price, and with what drawbacks needs to be done for each iteration of the CFE. However, useful lessons have been learned in the literature which are useful to guide thinking in this area.

Macleod, Yang and Xu (2016) show that cloud-based asynchronous collaborative tasks result in students being able to see work being done my classmates in real time, and encourages better participation towards deadlines. They also recommend that technology is as streamlined as possible, and that there should be easy and timely communication between students and staff.

Naicker, Singh and van Genugten (2021) discuss the impact of poor connectivity in the context of South Africa, indicating that this had a particular detrimental effect on time-limited courses, where intermittent Wi-Fi ate into the time for collaborative learning and limited the use of video calling, meaning a less immersive experience. In the same vein, the CFE team have already had experiences with poor connectivity affecting planning meetings. While internet coverage in Ghana is wide, quality and speed are still poor. For students, the cost of using internet may be high and access both in ownership and use of the technology that support the kinds of things the CFE wishes to do may be a challenge. Naicker, Singh and van Genugten (2021) and Marcillo-Gómez and Desilus (2016) also discuss how some students had not used the technology before and found it to be a barrier, indicating that the CFE must be conscious that this may be the case with its cohort. Ensuring the project understands what digital skills students have and building in

time/budgets to develop sufficient capacities for those that need it. Prior to sessions starting, explainer videos/presentations will be included in preparations for delivery of the seminars to ensure an equitable learning environment.

Delivery

Cross-Cultural Introductions

As discussed in Report 1, it is important when internationalising the curriculum to make time for cross-cultural exchange to engage both home and international students. Kumi-Yeboah (2018) highlights how this is as important in online spaces as it is in traditional spaces where there is a culturally diverse group of learners, and explores how this can be best achieved. Based on research with 40 online instructors, findings show what best promotes cross-cultural collaboration, what challenges that are faced, and what resources are used in their work. From this, Kumi-Yeboah develops a range of good practice, detailed here, and echoed by other literature (Macleod, Yang and Xu, 2016; Marcillo-Gómez and Desilus, 2016; Naicker, Singh and van Genugten, 2021). The use of group work so that students can share ideas and make meaningful contributions to the co-construction of knowledge based on their own interpretations of and problem-solving approaches to the questions posed by instructors. The use of self-introductions and cultural awareness activities which enables all involved to understand the diversity that students bring to the online classroom and foster cross-cultural dialogue, understanding, and respect. Macleod, Yang and Xu (2016) argue that introductions must be individual and not in groups so that no one's voice is missing. Marcillo-Gómez and Desilus (2016) argue for the value of taking time to explore the different understandings of foundational things such as individuality, collectively, family, and time orientation and how this affects people's approach to a topic of study or attitudes to work. While this deep cross-cultural learning would no doubt by a valuable experience in itself, this should be weighed up with the time this would take away from other activities. However, where such cultural exchange impacts on the 4 topics of discussion in the CFE seminars, these could be explored, possibly in pre-session tasks such as photo-essays, blogs, or short videos. The use of a range of synchronous and asynchronous technology such as email, wikis, blogs, voice messages, shared cloud documents, and video conferencing to help students to engage with their peers. The use of an

internationalised curriculum, which is discussed at length in Report 1, is vital. Course activities should promote cross-cultural interaction that 'motivate students to collaborate with each other to master academic contents and concepts learned in the online learning community' (Kumi-Yeboah, 2018, p. 192), and instructors should be on hand to answer any questions and interact with students to aid the smooth running of the course.

Challenges include how to match up groups in a way that that will promote cross-cultural exchange. Within the context of the CFE, ensuring groups are made up of equal numbers of UoS and UoG students can ensure this to some extent, although the diversity of the WSA cohort may be something to think about when arranging groups. Drawing on the experience of CFE staff will help in the group organisation due to their prior knowledge of the cohort. How to design course content that meets the diverse needs of the students is also identified as a challenge. This is discussed in Report 3 in relation to the broad definition of the 'creative industries', which adds another layer of complexity to that posed by a diverse cohort. Conducting pre-sessional introductory activities which are shared either with the entire cohort or just staff may help with identifying diverse needs, and aid in the development of course content. However, it is tentatively proposed that 'creativity' is somewhat of a universal value, may transcend cultural barriers to some degree, and allow activities which are sufficiently open to invite the sharing of different experiences, rather than exclude people from participating. This will have to be tested in practice. Finally, language barriers are identified as a cause for trepidation. The use of language is discussed in Report 1.

Online Etiquette & Language

Macleod, Yang and Xu (2016) discuss existing good practice in terms of online etiquette, especially in the context of a cross-cultural exchange. This includes being comfortable with silence, being mindful of others, encouragement for different viewpoints, normalisation of diversity, and the avoidance of debates. Naicker, Singh and van Genugten (2021) discuss language barriers and the importance of avoiding slang when communicating in English. When people were using text chat, those in this study that struggled with English were able to make use of translation software. These issues have as much relevance to the diverse range of students based in the UK as it will for those in Ghana. Avoiding colloquial language and having an option to text with the aid of translation software should be something the CFE offers to support all

students. There are web extensions which can translate whatsapp messages which could be used, and the CFE team can provide recommendations to students.

Role of staff

In addition to curriculum planning which provides well-planned and sufficiently scaffolded activities which address the exemplify good practice in IoC discussed in Report 1 (Kumi-Yeboah, 2018, p. 194), it is recommended that staff should be available within and outside the synchronous COIL sessions in order to answer questions about the course, troubleshoot technical issues, and resolve and administrative or interpersonal issues that arise. Staff should also regularly initiate and moderate asynchronous discussions on the platforms being used to sustain engagement between sessions (Macleod, Yang and Xu, 2016; Kumi-Yeboah, 2018; Naicker, Singh and van Genugten, 2021). It might be useful for the smooth running for the synchronous CFE sessions to have one member of staff specifically focused on addressing technical and administrative issues while others focus on teaching and learning.

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