



SUCCESSFUL E-LEARNING: INTERCULTURAL DEVELOPMENT IN GPE'S GLOBAL UNDERSTANDING PROJECT

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Abstract: *This paper presents the learning outcomes of the Global Understanding (GU) project, run and coordinated by the Global Partners in Education (GPE), an organisation established to create educational and research opportunities for member institutions. The GU project involves the use of telecollaboration as a means of developing students' intercultural (IC) competence. The author discusses the learning outcomes of the GU project, as evidenced by survey-based data collected from the participants with regard to cognitive, behavioural and attitudinal components of intercultural intelligence and IC intelligence.*

Keywords: e-learning, telecollaboration, intercultural competence, Global Understanding, learning outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

"Virtual exchanges are technology-enabled, sustained, people-to-people education programs" (Virtual Exchange Coalition 2019). The UniCollaboration (2019) website, defines Virtual Exchange (VE) simply as "(...) (telecollaboration) that is: technology-enabled, sustained, people-to-people dialogues which use new media platforms", while the EVOLVE (2019) website describes it as "(...) a form of computer-mediated learning whereby students from geographically remote classes work together online (in pairs or small groups) on learning tasks developed by teachers or educational facilitators".

All in all, it may be stated that in educational settings VE involves the use of telecollaboration, i.e. teamwork, facilitated by means of information and communication technologies, whereby a common goal is achieved which fosters, or results in, learning.

As O'Rourke (2016) suggests, over the past twenty years telecollaboration has developed from a niche educational practice that it used to be into a commonly used pedagogical solution. As he observes, the reasons for which telecollaborative learning is being used to such a great extent today are numerous. Firstly, telecollaboration is the mode in which professionals ubiquitously work today. Secondly, it assists societies in disseminating and interpreting knowledge. Thirdly, it involves the use of technologies that students use routinely on a daily basis. Thus, it constitutes a seemingly perfect environment in which students can learn by interacting with their online partners.

In the light of the above, it is far from surprising that telecollaboration is being implemented at all levels of education, "from kindergarten through university" (European Commission 2018a) and that it has begun to break the boundaries of its major domain so far, i.e. language studies (Jager, Kurek, O'Rourke 2016). Hence, one can easily find VE projects today in areas such as: "Geography, History, Translation, Public, Administration, Political Science, Cultural Studies, and Foreign Relations" (Jager, Kurek, O'Rourke 2016, p. 11).

Traditionally, telecollaboration has been implemented as a form of intercultural education (cf. Marczak 2013; O'Dowd 2018), and it has been used either to supplement real life exchanges or to substitute for them (O'Rourke 2016; European Commission 2018) in circumstances where international travel is difficult or downright impossible.

As Hagley (2016) remarks, virtual exchanges resolve the problem of monocultural classes, which lack contact with representatives of other cultures by permitting students to involve in virtual mobility and collaborate with colleagues from distant locations. He also confirms that, as a teaching and learning mode, VE is an effective solution through which students' communication skills and cultural awareness can be developed.

Chen and Yang (2014) report on their research results which confirm a number of learning outcomes – based on Byram's (1997) classic model of intercultural competence – likely to result from telecollaborative learning. Their data indicate that – in students' views – telecollaboration may facilitate the development of:

- knowledge of one's own culture and partners' culture;
- intercultural attitudes, e.g. an attitude of curiosity and openness to learning about one's own culture and partners' culture;
- skills of discovery and interaction: the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture through interaction with others in real time;
- critical cultural awareness: ability to evaluate a particular culture;

However, students in the same study also reported other learning gains from the telecollaboration in which they had participated, including language skills,

ICT skills, and collaboration skills. As it can be seen, these could be labelled as transferrable skills which will equip students for their professional lives, irrespective of the actual career path they choose to follow.

To demonstrate how telecollaborative projects can be implemented, the Global Partners in Education Global Understanding project is discussed below, together with its goals, procedures and outcomes.

1. IMPLEMENTING OF INTERCULTURAL TELECOLLABORATIVE LEARNING: THE GPE GLOBAL UNDERSTANDING PROJECT

1.1 Global Partners in Education (GPE)

Global Partners in Education is an international organization promoting educational collaboration between academic institutions located worldwide. Its scope of interest comprises the organisation and administration of a number of ventures, including discipline-specific semester courses, course modules, research projects and the Global Understanding – a telecollaborative intercultural course. GPE was established in the year 2007 at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina, USA and is administrated by ECU's Global Academic Initiatives.

GPE, which currently unites 45 educational institutions from 25 different countries, aims to promote intercultural education, the use of new technologies in education, create collaboration opportunities for its member institutions and facilitate joint inter-institutional research activities. Most importantly, however, its goal is to support quality performance in its flagship virtual learning project – Global Understanding.

1.2 Global Understanding (GU)

The Global Understanding project constitutes the foundation of GPE in that the former preceded the latter. In fact, GPE per se was launched by universities involved in the initial iterations of the GU project (GPE 2014a).

Global Understanding was piloted by East Carolina University in the year 2003, and in 2004 the first official edition of the project was held. The project aims to develop students' intercultural competence, including a range of knowledge, skills, attitudes and awareness. According to Leibowitz and Luchsinger (2013), the project is supposed to promote cross-cultural communication, permit collaboration with representatives of other cultures and help the participants perceive the world from another perspective.

The project involves international student-student collaboration realised by means of digital technologies, which are used both inside and outside the classroom. In-class work takes place in a synchronous mode and involves videoconferencing,

chat, Web communicators, while out-of-class work may involve a combination of telecollaboration performed in both synchronous (online chat, audio-video communicators, social networking) and asynchronous (email) modes (GPE 2014b).

In-class meetings may involve sessions of different length: 50 minutes long, 75 minutes long and two hours long, depending on the circumstances in which particular project partners function. Classes at the partner institutions are synchronised to permit synchronous communication (GPE 2014b).

In every in-class meeting, students in each classroom are divided into two groups. While one of them participates in a group videoconferencing session which permits audio-video communication via a videoconferencing system (e.g. Polycom) or a videoconferencing platform (e.g. Zoom), the other works in individual partner chat via an Internet Relay Chat (IRC) tool (e.g. IceChat). However, the groups alternate both work modes from class to class, so that all students are given an opportunity to gain experience in videoconferencing and chat (GPE 2014b).

As the *GPE Core 2015* (GPE 2014b) document stipulates, particular institutions are partnered with institutions from abroad and project meetings are set by the master schedule, which is announced before an edition of the GPE GU project begins. The number of partners each member institution has in a single edition of the GPE project, i.e. in each academic year, depends on its logistic and educational circumstances, e.g. the availability of adequate equipment and IT support as well as provisions made in particular course programmes and the timetable to be followed.

A total of six linking days must be held between each pair of partner institutions, but additional hours may be devoted to local in-class work, which could be used for pre-linking work and follow-up work.

The linking days are devoted to the discussion of core project topics, which include:

- College Life;
- Family and Cultural Traditions;
- Meaning of Life and Religion;
- Stereotypes and Prejudices;
- Free Topic.

Out of class work is largely devoted to the performance of what is called the *Telecollaborative Project*. The project is usually completed by pairs of students from the partner institutions; it may happen, however, that students work in groups of three, but even in that case each partner institution is represented by at least one student (GPE 2014b).

The idea beyond the collaborative project is to involve students in work which requires the preparation of a negotiated product, which usually is a multimedia presentation illustrating the project partners' perspectives on selected aspects of culture. What is interesting, while delivering the final presentation the students present one another's perspectives, which requires not only a mere exchange of information but also a degree of reflection and readiness to understand other people's vantage point (GPE 2014b).

The *GPE Core 2015* (GPE 2014b) provides a provisional list of topics for the telecollaborative project, which include *inter alia*:

"1) Describe your life at 35.

Global Question/Negotiation Product (GQ/NP): What do most people around the world want in life by their mid 30s? (...)

3) How do you define success in life?

(GQ/NP): What might be a global definition of success? (...)

5) Choose a song to share with your partner. Describe what it means to you, and how it reflects an aspect of your culture (e.g., College Life, Family and Cultural Traditions, Religion and the Meaning of Life, etc.). Is there a typical dance that goes with this music? How does the music reinforce the message (e.g., melancholy music for song about breaking up)?

(GQ/NP): Together, write lyrics to a song that reflects something that is important to both of you.

6) Discuss your culture's nursery rhymes/traditional children's songs. Identify several ones and what they show about the country's attitudes and values.

(GQ/NP): Together, write a folktale/nursery rhyme/traditional children's song that reflects something you both value."

(GPE 2014b, p. 17)

As it can be seen above, the topics are varied and they each consist of two components: a general theme to guide the project work and a question to which partner students attempt to provide an answer or the final product, which can be, e.g. song lyrics or a nursery rhyme. All in all, the topics are to stimulate students' active involvement in intercultural exchanges, informed reflection but also creativity. The collaborative project is supposed to permit intercultural learning which the students would really enjoy.

Again, this part of the GPE GU project is student-centred, thus the students involved take decisions about the actual topics which they choose to follow, the tools they utilise to communicate in the course of the project and the work

modes they engage in. Partner teachers are on stand-by, ready to help with the topic choice or provide any other kind of assistance, but they only play a facilitative and advisory role (GPE 2014b).

The telecollaborative project is worked on out-of-class, with partner students being able to utilise synchronous and asynchronous online communication tools to proceed with the project work, and ends with the delivery of the final multimedia presentations on the final linking day.

The presentations are supposed to contain a total of 4-6 slides: 2 slides to present individual students' cultural perspectives (presented by their project partners), one slide featuring a tabular summary of the cultural similarities and differences discovered in the course of the project work, and 1 slide containing the students' answer to the global question.

A number of important issues relating to the GPE GU project work at large must be made at this point.

Firstly, as the project is designed to be heavily student-centred, the topics are formulated very broadly so that they can serve as starting points for further intercultural discussion. To what extent students stick to the topics and whether they digress and ultimately direct the discussion towards other issues remains largely at the students' discretion.

Secondly, students are given the opportunity to work on the same topics in videoconference or in chat so that they each can contribute to the discussion, irrespective of the level of their confidence and language competence. It is possible because the synchronous mode favours students with higher levels of confidence, while the asynchronous mode permits contribution from those students who might feel intimidated performing in real time in front of a group.

Thirdly, the format and content of the free topic class may be negotiated by particular partners but in the *GPE Core 2015* (GPE 2014b) it is recommended that the day is used for the presentation of the outcome of collaborative project work performed by the students out of class.

Fourthly, the GPE GU project places a very strong emphasis on systemic reflection on the intercultural experience that the project participants become a part of. *GPE Core 2015* (GPE 2014b) states that students should be encouraged to record their intercultural experience, e.g. by means of a blog, discussion forum or a personal journal. Students are encouraged to reflect on each linking day with regard to:

- "Highlights of discussion of the day.
- Surprising comments or attitudes of classmates & partners at both universities .
- Thoughts on the day's discussions" .

(GPE 2014b, p. 5)

It is particularly important that reflection on experience does happen; otherwise, students' work may be limited to a mere exchange of standpoints on the issues at hand and the furthering of stereotypes by involvement in a superficial identification of intercultural similarities and differences between the project partners. To what extent, genuine intercultural development occurs in the course of the project depends on its actual implementations at individual partner institutions. That is why, the GPE GU documents leave room for student and teacher independence in decision-taking as intercultural education cannot be simply sanctioned, it may only be stimulated and facilitated by provisions which are conducive to students' intercultural development.

2. THE LEARNING OUTCOMES OF THE GPE GU PROJECT: EVIDENCING STUDENTS' LEARNING GAINS IN THE GPE GU PROJECT

The potential learning outcomes of the GPE GU project were measured on two levels: local and global. At the local level, an attempt was made at gathering students' reports on their perceived learning gains in a particular context, which was achieved by surveying students who participated in the 2017/2018 edition of the GPE GU project at one institution only, which was the Chair of Translation Studies and Intercultural Communication at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland. At the global level, however, all the participants of the 11th (2017/2018) edition of GPE GU project were pre- and post-surveyed to measure their perceptions of the potential benefits that the project participation had brought them. The reason for examining the learning gains at both levels was two-fold.

Firstly, since teachers and students participating in the GPE GU project exercise are fairly autonomous in how they perform the project work and the details of the actual learning experience at particular institutions are likely to differ, the local context serves as a cross-sectional image of how the GPE GU project may potentially be implemented. Yet, by no means should it be treated as representative of all the other contexts. In effect, although it provides some insight into the manner in which the GP GU project may work, it cannot serve as a basis for any generalisations.

Secondly, in the light of the above, it appeared desirable to present data which would provide a more general picture of how the GPE GU project functioned and what learning gains it was believed to generate on a much larger scale, i.e. in the eyes of a broad population of students who had been involved in the 11th iteration of GPE GU.

As a result, one can gain a better understanding of how the GPE GU project is likely to benefit its participants at large, while also being able to analyse a cross-section of the project work.

2.1. Local context: Students' perspectives on learning gains

The learning context and research sample. As it has been mentioned before, the local data were gathered in the Chair for Translation Studies and Intercultural Communication at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland, where the participants of the GPE GU project were student translators in their first year of an MA programme in Translation Studies. The students took part in the project as part of an elective course entitled *Intercultural Communication in the New Media*, whose goal was to develop the students' intercultural competence and intercultural communication skills with a view to equipping them better for their future roles as intercultural mediators in the language provision industry, where they would potentially work as e.g. translators, interpreters as well as international project managers. 13 students (N=13) participated in the project, and they were all involved in the research. They were all in their mid-twenties; 11 of them were females (N=11) and 2 were males (N=2).

Research goals, method and instrument. The research goal of the study at the local level was to gain insight into the Jagiellonian University students' learning gains from their participation in the 11th edition of the GPE GU project by gathering their individual, retrospective reflections on selected intercultural experiences that they were asked to report on. Thus, the research involved participant observation in the course of which students' retrospective reports of intercultural incidents yielded descriptive data in the form of close- and open-ended written responses, which were subjected to qualitative (for open-ended questions) and quantitative (for close-ended questions) analysis.

The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (Council of Europe 2009) was used as the research instrument. It is a ready-made document which is to help students foster the development of their intercultural competence by making them reflect on actual instances of intercultural encounters and intercultural incidents. The document contains a number of questions through which students can look at intercultural experiences in retrospect, break the situations in question into parts, reflect, objectivise and conclude on what actions to take in similar circumstances, should a given intercultural incident repeat in the future. Individual students were asked to fill out pages 6/20-13/20 of the document, which stimulated reflection on the very intercultural encounter (*The encounter* section), the other person or people involved in the encounter (*The other person or people*), the given student's feelings at the time of the encounter (*Your feelings*), the feelings of any other people involved (*The other person's feelings*), and the possible similarities and disparities between the thought patterns and feelings of all those involved in the encounter (*Same or different*) (cf. Council of Europe 2009 for details).

Individual responses to the questions contained in the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* were analysed and scoured for information relating to the following: (i) the feelings the students experienced at the time

of their intercultural encounters; (ii) the actions they took to handle the incidents they experienced; (iii) the significant verbal and nonverbal clues the students used to judge the other party's active involvement, or lack of involvement, in the project tasks; and (iv) perceived learning gains. Therefore, the above-cited elements may be viewed as the operationalisation of successful e-learning adopted for this part of the research. The responses were grouped within relevant categories and analysed for regularities, which produced the final results.

2.1.1 Results

Feelings. The results of the research revealed that the most frequently experienced feelings during the project were: disappointment (8 students, 27%) and surprise (7 students, 23.3%). The range of other feelings that were reported to have been experienced by lower proportions of the participants included: anger, shock, sadness, and pleasure (2 students each), as well as hurting, a scare to ask further questions, frustration, irritation, perplexity and disrespect (1 student each). What shows is that the majority (12 in total) of the feelings evoked by the students' intercultural encounters in the course of the project were negative, while only two of them were positive.

However, it must be underlined that such negative feelings do not – by any means – indicate failure. In fact, quite the opposite may be true; negative feelings experienced in intercultural interactions provide room for learning as they bring to light disparities between cultures, other people's thinking patterns, beliefs and attitudes as well as areas of potential conflict in intercultural communication. In other words, room for reflection is created, which may result in metacognitive and cognitive development, attitudinal shifts or modifications in communicative behaviour, which are all part of intercultural learning.

Actions taken. The actions that the students took to handle the intercultural incidents that they faced in the course of the project included: asking questions in order to learn more, online information searching in order to explore cultural phenomena (e.g. gun possession in the USA), speaking openly about taboo topics, trying to find common ground (bonding), and trying to rehabilitate their own culture to counteract their project partners' negative perceptions of it. There were also behaviours through which particular students attempted to continue their conversation with the project partners without acting on the problems experienced, e.g. by continuing the conversation regardless, pretending there were no issues involved and avoiding exploration of cultural issues in order not to confuse the project partners.

Thus, two stances on intercultural incidents were identified: pro-active behaviour displayed in an attempt to mediate intercultural differences and ignorance of difference. While the former can be considered as a form of intercultural mediation and learning, the latter is not likely to be conducive to the students' intercultural development.

(Non)verbal clues used to judge the other party's involvement. The markers by which the participants reportedly judged their project partners' involvement in the tasks at hand involved: visual cues, e.g. body language (yawning, stretching), gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact, which were perceptible in synchronous audio-video communication formats (videoconferencing), and audio cues, e.g. the tone of the voice, which were noticeable in synchronous audio-video and audio-only communication. Interestingly enough, the students judged partners' involvement also by the degree to which partners had prepared for a given task or active performance. In other words, they treated their partners' actual in-project actions as evidence of involvement.

While all of the conceptualisations of involvement reported by the students may have been right, it is worth underlining that the conceptualisations themselves were very subjective and may be attributed to individual student traits or cultural differences between them. Again, the very conceptualisations might have led to intercultural learning; yet, much depends on how far individual students went trying to reflect on their perceptions of involvement and their interpretations of their partners' behaviour.

The *learning gains* that the students reported retrospectively can be ascribed to a number of categories, including: cognitive, attitudinal, pragmatic, behavioural and affective.

The *(meta)cognitive gains* reported by the students included the opportunity that the project assignments created for learning about representatives of other cultures and other people, their own colleagues and themselves, e.g. how students could, or could not, cope with uncooperative partners. Some students also realised that their vision of the world was to a large extent shaped by their own beliefs.

The *attitudinal gains* which the students reported were triggered by their new realisations about the world, other people, other cultures, themselves and intercultural learning, *per se*. In effect, the participants reported that the project experience had made them more open towards other people, changed their view of other peoples (e.g. the Americans) and their attitude to the world.

The students also maintained that after the project they felt readier to be more watchful and consider which views originating from the culture they lived in might narrow their vision of the world. They added that they had increased their awareness of the fact that what one person takes for granted may not be recognised as such by another person at all, and there is no one to blame in such a case. Thus, the students declared they would try harder to understand their future project partners' perspectives.

The students also stated that after the project they had more appreciation for both the good and disappointing aspects of their project partners' attitudes and behaviours as both increased the students' cultural awareness. Very much

in the same vein, some students stated that if they met a person from another culture, they would not only try to display more curiosity about the other, but they would also bear in mind that other people's different opinions originated from their different cultural background.

The *pragmatic gains* identified within the students' responses regarded the development of receptive and productive language skills. Thus, the students believed the project had given them the opportunity to listen to native speaker English, e.g. an American accent, and practise speaking skills in English in genuine communicative situations.

The *behavioural gains* the students reported involved the effects that the students' project performance was likely to have on their future behaviour. To begin with, for some students the project work resulted in them feeling ready to increase their engagement in project work to be performed with another GPE partner.

Interestingly enough, for others even the very follow-up work, which was the filling in of the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters*, was a lesson to learn, as a result of which they had familiarised themselves with the instrument and believed that they would use the document, out of their own accord, in other projects.

The *affective gains* that transpired through the students' responses related mostly to the positive feelings evoked by the project experience. The students stated that they had enjoyed the project work and found some moments funny. One might expect that such an experience may easily translate into increased overall motivation to involve in other forms of intercultural learning, which will certainly create more opportunities for the students to develop their intercultural competence further.

2.2. Global context: Overview of learning gains in project report data

The context and research sample. The local context discussed above seems to support the statement that the GPE GU project is an example of a successful implementation of the idea of telecollaborative intercultural learning. However, since at each GPE institution the details of the project work may substantially differ, it is desirable to find out to what extent the entire GPE GU project may be perceived as successful. That may be judged on the basis of data collected globally, i.e. from a much larger sample of student participants based at a large number of diverse educational institutions located in different parts of the world. Thus, this part of the present paper contains an analysis of selected results of unpublished survey-based research conducted and outlined in poster format by Eppler (2018) and Eppler and Wynn (2019).

Two iterations of the research will be discussed. The first iteration was conducted in the year 2017 and involved data collected from 1312 students (N=1312) who participated in the 12th edition of the GPE GU project. The students surveyed represented 35 universities from 20 countries located worldwide.

94% of the students surveyed had participated in the GPE GU project for the first time. Out of the 1312 students who took part in the survey, 497 responded to both the pre- and post-surveys (Eppler 2018).

The second iteration of the research was administered in the year 2018 on the basis of data obtained from 1245 students (N=1245) who participated in the 11th edition of the GPE GU project. At the time of the survey the students represented 28 universities from 17 countries located worldwide. 94% of the students surveyed had participated in the GPE GU project for the first time. It is important to observe that out of the 1245 students who took part in the survey, only 603 responded to both the pre- and post-surveys.

While the academic background of the students who participated in the 2017 iteration of the research was not examined, it was done in the 2018 iteration. In the latter case, those students who disclosed their academic background (N=691) represented a wide range of university programmes and majored in areas of study such as: social sciences (25%), business (21%), health and natural sciences (20%), engineering and technology (9%), education (8%), languages (7%), communication (5%) and humanities and fine arts (4%).

Research goals, method and instrument. The goal of this part of the present analysis is to state to what extent the GPE GU project could be considered an example of successful intercultural learning research on the global level. This will be done on the basis of research data which come from two unpublished documents: *Global Understanding (GU) Survey Results Assessment Report Spring 2017 and Fall 2017* (Eppler 2018) and *Global Understanding (GU) Survey Results Assessment Report Spring 2018 and Fall 2017* (Eppler and Wynn 2019) – each displayed at the annual GPE conference in order to provide an overview of the GPE GU experience, as reported by the student participants.

Eppler's (2018) and Eppler and Wynn's (2019) research was survey-based and cross-sectional in that it involved data collection executed through a pre-course and post-course survey for each of the two iterations of the GPE GU project examined. The information collected concerned the project participants' profile, their project experience, the challenges that they faced and a variety of perceived learning gains, including the development of the students' Cultural Intelligence (CQ). The CQ scale comprised a set of 20 questions in total which fell into 4 categories that measured: knowledge (metacognitive and cognitive), motivation and behaviour. The CQ scale questions can be consulted in a publication by Ang et al. (2007) from which they had been excerpted.

The pre- and post-course surveys were administered online in the spring and fall semesters of 2017 and 2018 and contained a number of close-ended and open-ended questions. The online forms were distributed via a custom-designed GPE GU project platform which the project participants accessed through hyperlinks they had obtained from their teachers. The students' participation was voluntary, although their teachers were supposed to strongly recommend

to the students that they took both the pre- and post-course survey in each project iteration. The responses were analysed quantitatively for close-ended questions and qualitatively for open-ended questions. In the latter case, individual students' responses were scoured for recurrent themes and response categorised were identified which would illustrate more general trends within the opinions expressed by the survey participants at large.

2.2.1 Results

The results of the survey research which will be discussed here relate most of all to the students' perceived learning gains in terms of: (i) the development of their communication skills; (ii) their experience of collaboration and relations with project partners; (iii) the development of Cultural Intelligence; (iv) interest in further intercultural/international experiences; and (v) course satisfaction. Therefore, the above-cited elements may be viewed as the operationalisation of successful e-learning adopted for this part of the research.

Communication skills. The results obtained revealed that the GPE GU project appears to have contributed in a number of ways to the development of the students' intercultural communication skills. It finds confirmation in the fact that 63% of the students surveyed in 2017 and 61% of the students surveyed in 2018 claimed that after the GPE GU course they felt more competent while interacting with representatives of other cultures. What is more, among the reasons for taking the GPE GU course, which the 2018 respondents listed as write-in options, the second largest response category identified (22% of the 315 of those students who responded to the question) was the development of communication and language skills.

At the same time, 72% of those surveyed in 2017 and 75% of those surveyed in 2018 declared that after the project they felt lower levels of anxiety and fear while interacting with representative of other cultures. In addition, the course apparently also contributed to reducing the students' levels of speaking anxiety at large. 54% of the respondents surveyed in 2017 and 52% of the respondents surveyed in 2018 declared that they felt more competent while speaking in classes, while 64% of those surveyed in 2017 and 65% of those surveyed in 2018 claimed that they felt less anxious about it after the GPE GU course than they did before.

In the same vein, the proportion of students examined in 2018 who claimed that they did not feel anxiety while speaking with their colleagues rose by 11% (from 34% before the course to 45% after the course), as did – by 9% in 2017 and 8% in 2018– the proportion of students who felt confident while speaking in class in general (from 32% before the course to 40% after the course and from 34% before the course to 43% after the course, respectively).

The above-cited benefits of the GPE GU project were unwittingly summarised in a write-in response from the 2018 iteration of the research in which a GPE GU student from India wrote that: "Students should take global understanding course to improve one's communication skills and confidence".

Experience of collaboration and relations with project partners. It seems that the respondents found the GPE GU the tandem project work, which involved the performance of a telecollaborative project in pairs, very interesting because a very large proportion (97.75 in 2017 and 85% in 2018) participated in two or more such projects, while over a half (59% in 2017 and 53% in 2018) participated in three or more projects.

Further support for the apparent success of telecollaborative work in the GPE GU project comes from the vast majority of the respondents (89% in 2017 and 87% in 2018) who stated that they were in favour of that kind of work mode in the GU classes to come. The support for telecollaborative work is even more valid when one realises that the positive opinion about telecollaboration was expressed by such a large proportion of students despite the two most important challenges to telecollaboration:

1. having to negotiate time differences between the partner institutions, which was reported by 57% of the respondents in 2017 and 55% of the respondents in 2018;
2. lack of responsiveness on the part of project partners, reported by 51% of the respondents in 2017 and 50% of the respondents in 2018.

While the former challenge is self-explanatory, the latter might be attributed to a number of factors, e.g. (i) the students' extensive involvement in various forms of virtual learning, within and outside the GPE GU project, which is likely to have worn off the effect of novelty and thus reduced the students' motivation to actively participate in the project assignments, (ii) the lack of systematic supervision on the part of course instructors, or (iii) technical issues. However, the actual explanation is yet to be offered as it remained outside the scope of the GPE GU research conducted so far.

As far as the GPE GU participants' relations with their partners are concerned, the results indicate that the project work creates good opportunities for developing close interpersonal ties. As many as 63% of the respondents in 2017 and 66% of the respondents in 2018 stated that the project had helped them to befriend at least one of their international partners.

What is more, among the overall gains from participating in the project, which were to be enumerated by students as write-in responses to an open-ended question in the 2018 iteration of the research, 10% of them placed friendship. In other words, they declared that the project promoted the making of new friends in foreign countries.

The development of Cultural Intelligence. As far as cultural intelligence is concerned, in both iterations of the research by Eppler (2018) and Eppler and Wynn (2019) no numerical scores were provided but as it is reported by the research authors, each time significant increases in students' pre- and post-course CQ scores were observed. What is more, those increases were observed within each of the components of cultural intelligence, i.e. knowledge (metacognitive and cognitive), motivation and behaviour.

CQ scores also correlated with improved results in the areas that have already been presented, e.g. increased ability to understand other people's perspectives, lowered anxiety levels in interaction with strangers, or more interest in up-to-date cultural knowledge, international travel and foreign study, to name a few.

The CQ scores for individual students were also related to their social profile, which was interpreted as dependent on whether they had international friends prior to the project, and whether they made any new international friends in the course of the project. Four different student profiles in this respect were identified: (i) students with prior friends and no new friends; and (ii) students with prior friends and new friends; (iii) students with no prior friends and no new friends; and (iv) students with no prior friends and new friends; Interestingly enough, those students who had no international friends prior to the project but made new friends in the duration of the project were those who had achieved the highest increase in their CQ scores. As Figure 1 illustrates, their CQ scores increased from 4.83 to 5.25, whereas in the case of the other groups, the increase ranged from 5.3 to 5.46 (for group i), from 5.16 to 5.46 (for group ii) and from 4.75 to 5.09 (for group iv).

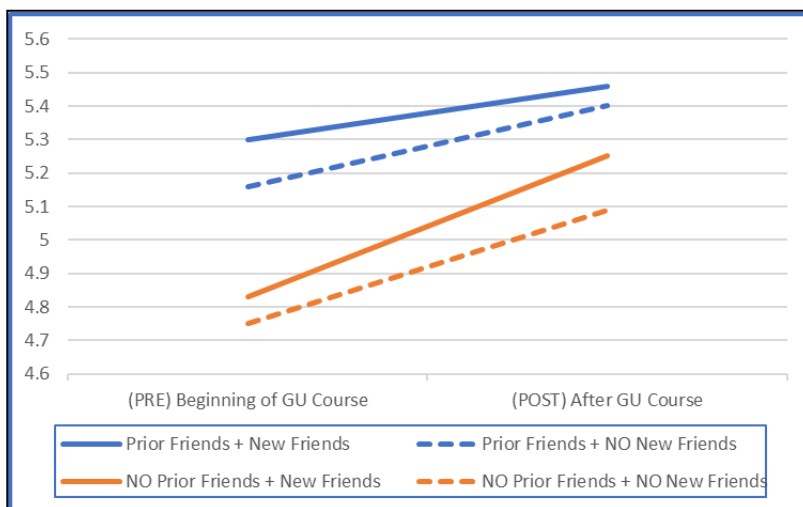


Figure 1. CQ: Prior international friends x making international friends

Source: Eppler & Wynn, 2019

Increased awareness and interest in further intercultural/international experiences. The students reported the facilitative role of the GPE GU project in increasing their intercultural and international awareness. 77% of the respondents surveyed in 2018 declared that the GU course had helped them to understand other people's perspectives (no data were collected in this respect in 2017). 76% of those surveyed in 2017 and 74% of those surveyed in 2018 claimed that through the project they had increased their knowledge about other countries and cultures. 70% of the students surveyed in 2017 and 66% of the students surveyed in 2018 reported that participation in the PGE GU project had increased their interest in following international news. 80% of those surveyed in 2017 and 78% of those surveyed in 2018 reported increased interest in international travel, while 70% of those surveyed in 2018 expressed increased interest in studying abroad (no data were collected in this respect in 2017). A graphic summary of the results is presented in Figure 2.

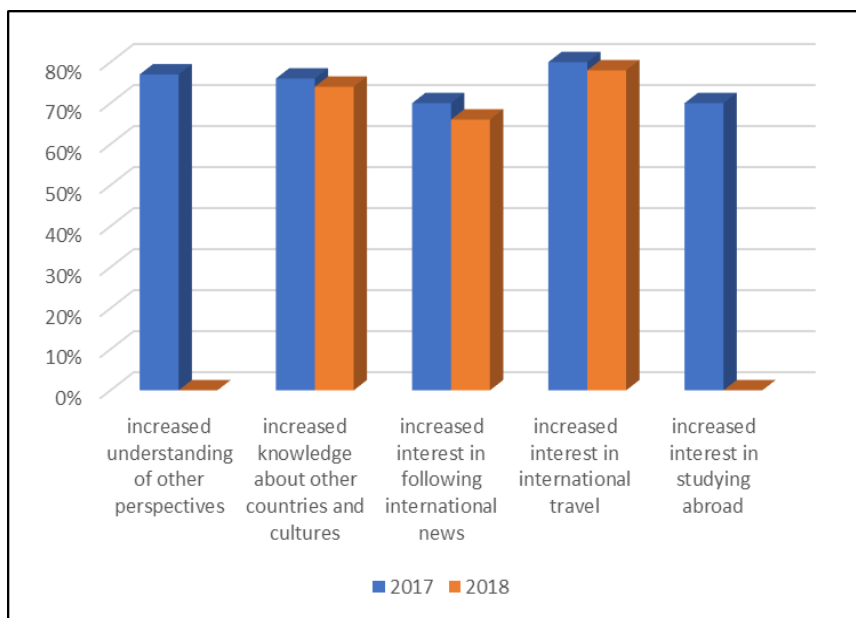


Figure 2. Impact of the GPE GU project on intercultural/international awareness

Source: Own work based on Eppler, 2018 and Eppler & Wynn, 2019

Clear increases were also identified in the students' interest in seeking international/intercultural experiences. For instance, the proportion of those who reported increased effort to learn about other countries and cultures in their free time rose from 31% before the GPE GU course to 37% at the end of the course (as revealed by the 2017 data), and from 33% before the GPE GU course to 42% at the end of the course (as revealed by the 2018 data).

The pre-course average rating of the students' anxiety relating to the prospect of living abroad, which the students indicated on a stress scale ranging from 0 to 10 in the 2017 research and a scale ranging from 1 to 7 in the 2018 research, had significantly decreased from 5.05 at the beginning of the course to 4.78 by the end of the course and from 3.72 at the beginning of the course to 3.52 by the end of the course, respectively.

Last but not least, the proportion of those students who considered the idea of studying abroad, or those who were planning to do so, had risen from 38% at the beginning of the course to 43% by the end of the course in the 2017 research, and from 25% at the beginning of the course to 34% by the end of the course in the 2018 research.

Course satisfaction seems to have reached substantially high levels for nearly 80% of the respondents in each iteration of the research, which manifests itself in the fact that on a scale ranging from 1 to 7 points, they marked their satisfaction level either as 6 (40% in 2017 and 41% in 2018) or 7 (39% in 2017 and 36% in 2018).

Moreover, a vast majority (89% in 2017 and 87% in 2018) of the students maintained that they had already recommended the GPE GU project to their colleagues, while a similarly high proportion (87% in 2017 and 86% in 2018) expressed interest in participating in other intercultural learning courses of the GPE GU type.

As a GPE GU student from Lebanon stated in the 2018 research, he/she would recommend the course to others (...) *because it was the most interesting course in my time at uni*, which seems to confirm the role that the GPE GU course plays in diversifying students' learning experience at university.

CONCLUSION

Local level. What transpires when one looks back at the results obtained in the local research is that the GPE GU project is likely to have created multiple opportunities for intercultural learning, which apparently involved the development of cognitive and metacognitive knowledge. The participants reported that they had not only increased their knowledge of other countries and cultures, their project partners and even their own colleagues (cognitive knowledge) but also the very process of their own intercultural learning (metacognitive knowledge).

The learning gains the students reported also comprised changes to the students': (i) awareness of intercultural differences at individual and more general cultural levels, (ii) attitudes towards strangers and different forms of behaviour, (iii) mindset, i.e. readiness to approach others and intercultural difference with openness, as well as (iv) language skills.

In the local context examined, the project work was reportedly fun, which might have a motivational effect on the students seeking opportunities for further intercultural learning. However, it must be observed that the gains listed by the project participants cannot be taken for granted. Clearly, the project constitutes a learning opportunity but to what extent students take it, depends on how they act upon their project experience. That may be easily seen when one looks at what feelings the students experienced in the project, how they acted upon intercultural incidents and how they interpreted their project partners' behaviour.

The majority of the feelings experienced were negative, at times particular students took action to mediate intercultural conflict, on other occasions they simply ignored it, they also interpreted their project partners' behaviour using their own criteria. All of the above are potentially conducive to intercultural learning. The survey data seem to confirm that at least in the students' view such learning did occur. However, how much of that learning happened in the case of individual students depended largely on the degree to which they took informed and reflection-based decisions, and that – due to the nature of the research conducted – remains opaque. What follows is that the GPE GU project potentially creates a myriad of opportunities for intercultural development but in order to ensure such learning indeed happens at individual level, students must be permanently involved in teacher- or self-induced reflection. Only then will they be able to maximise their learning gains.

Global level. The results collected globally, i.e. from a much larger population of the project participants, also demonstrated a number of positive outcomes.

Firstly, it turned out that the students reported increases in intercultural communication competence and confidence. Interestingly, it was not only increased confidence in interaction with strangers, but also confidence in speaking at large, even in communication with local colleagues. Thus, the project work seems to have stimulated the lowering of the students' speaking anxiety, which is often cited as a barrier to the development of students' productive skills in a foreign language (cf. Cheng, Horwitz & Schallert 1999).

Secondly, the students found the work modes involved in the GPE GU project highly interesting, e.g. the tandem work performed by pairs of students out of class and telecollaboration at large. It is worth adding that the students appreciated telecollaborative work despite the challenges it induced.

Thirdly, the students viewed the project as an opportunity to develop close interpersonal relationships with their project partners. Additionally, it was discovered that the project produced increases in the students' scores on the cultural intelligence scale.

What draws attention here is the fact that although it is impossible to state whether an increase in the students' CQ scores facilitated the in-project friend-making

or whether the opposite was true, it nevertheless seems to demonstrate a correlation between CQ and the ability to build relationships with representatives of other cultures. And even though the direction of that influence cannot be established on the basis of the data obtained, the very correlation indicates yet another area for successful intercultural learning within the GPE GU project.

Fourthly, the students declared the project had increased their intercultural awareness and motivated them to seek more intercultural experiences, continue their self-development in the area and undertake new learning opportunities, including foreign language study.

Last but not least, the students reported very high levels of satisfaction with the project and underlined the uniqueness of the GPE Gu course in their study programmes.

All in all, the GPE GU project seems to be an example of successful intercultural learning, at both local and global level. However, it would be interesting to conduct further research into the actual workings of the project and the mechanisms behind the apparent success. For example, it is necessary to find out to what extent and in what manner students' reflection on experience is stimulated in other local contexts, i.e. at other universities. Moreover, it is desirable to verify the project participants' claims about the components of intercultural competence which they claim to have developed in the GPE GU project. In order to respond to this need, future research needs to seek evidence of actual progress in students' intercultural development, instead of examining students' mere declarations.

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