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An online international learning project around global health promotion

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Introduction

As stressed by Ernest, Heiser & Murphy (2011, 37) “the arrival of new Web 2.0 environments greatly enhances opportunities for fostering increased peer interaction, collaboration and learner autonomy.” Randall (2012, 7) describes telecollaboration as “pedagogical processes and outcomes of engaging learners in different geographical locations in virtual contact together, mediated through the application of online communication tools such as e-mail, synchronous chat and threaded discussion as well as the tools of Web 2.0 such as wikis, blogs, social networking and 3D virtual worlds.” The overall aims of the online international learning project (OIL) involving nursing students and staff at Coventry University and Laurea University of Applied Sciences were to support the students’ learning on their modules, including assignment work, develop cultural awareness and competence, improve communication, learn about and from each other as well as to have fun and make friends. Furthermore, an objective for Finnish students was to improve their English language skills through discussions with native speakers. Intended learning outcomes also included demonstrating an ability to use ICT effectively to support collaboration with international colleagues, using English to communicate effectively between native and non-native speakers, and working as a team to explore a selected health promotion issue.

Initially the Coventry and Laurea UAS students chose global health and wellbeing topics to discuss during meetings via Web 2.0 tools. Also, the Finnish students read an article around their chosen global health promotion topic, wrote a summary of it and posted this on a common Moodle site to inspire online discussions. Students were able to compare the Finnish and UK approaches to the selected issue. This enhanced their cultural competence skills, as they could draw conclusions about how culture influences health and health promotion, reflect on experiences and learn from discussions with international colleagues. According to Dooly (2008, 22) “in the cooperative model of learning, the teacher still controls most of what is going on in the class, even if the students are working in groups. Collaborative learning, on the other hand, is aimed at getting the students to take almost full responsibility for working together, building knowledge together, changing and evolving together and of course, improving together.”

Lawrence (2013, 312) suggests that “ICT-mediated intercultural language learning collaborations offer language learners rich opportunities to build language acquisition, intercultural knowledge and to develop meaningful relationships with people of other languages and cultures.” Students’ feedback shows that the online projects have indeed been enjoyable, engaging and advantageous, considerably increasing students’ motivation to study as well as their knowledge of the topics. Additionally, the students have had the opportunity to follow up this OIL project with a field trip. Three Coventry University students visited Laurea after their online discussions to meet their Finnish peers and see the country.



How did it work in practice?

During the project the students at Laurea UAS and Coventry University were studying very similar modules. Nursing students from Laurea were matched with Coventry University students to make small learning teams. Coventry students were given names and email addresses for allocated Laurea UAS students and contacted their Laurea colleagues by email to agree a time to chat on Skype. Teams included between one and six students from each university. Students held two to four Skype meetings and had discussions on Facebook. The first meeting was to introduce and get used to chatting to each other in English, also to agree discussion topics. Students prepared for the next meeting by planning questions to ask each other. In the second meeting they asked each other their questions and noted them down so that they could prepare answers for the next meeting. The third and fourth meetings were to share these answers. Students could then decide how to keep in touch with their new friends.

In the UK, employers, including the NHS, recognise a need for cultural competence when caring for people from diverse backgrounds. International projects help the students to develop skills, build their portfolio, perhaps related to the EU directives and become more employable. The students kept a reflective account of their discussions throughout the project and shared it with tutors and their colleagues. The Finnish students reported that their English skills had really improved during the project, because their professional vocabulary had increased and they had become more confident in communicating in English. Dooly (2008, 26) states “whether it is through collaborative or cooperative learning, getting students to work together in the classroom and with other students in another part of the world, requires teachers helping their students learn to interact positively with people who are different from themselves and who may not think the same as they do. Through online collaboration, students may come to see the importance of taking responsibility for their own learning and feel empowered to do so while learning to respect the opinions and work of their online partners.”

Things to remember in future projects

In OIL projects it is very important to be respectful to each other’s values and differences, including competence using the English language. The Finns have a longer wait-time following questions

than most European nationalities, therefore the UK students probably need to allow awkward silences to enable the Finnish students to consider and plan replies. It is also important to stay within the boundaries of one's own nursing code of practice, for example by not breaching confidentiality. Participants should check that their Skype connection works in advance of their first meeting. If more than one person shares a computer, students will need to take it in turns to sit near the microphone or use a desk microphone instead. Tian & Wang (2010, 194) studied the benefits of videoconferencing-supported language learning. According to them if it is "used effectively, it can be an important supplement to classroom teaching in that it takes part of the learning outside the classroom and into the real world."

Conclusion

Universities are globalising. Traditional in-class activities are important in building up the students' skills and knowledge of the field. However, for the effective development of cultural competence and communication skills students need more learning tasks in the real world in collaboration with foreign students. Web 2.0 tools enable students in different parts of the world to communicate and thus increase each other's cultural competence. To successfully facilitate OIL projects, teachers need to prepare and build relationships between universities, take time to identify suitable learning opportunities and develop their own skills in facilitation and cultural competence. Erasmus exchange visits provided the opportunity to do this, playing a key part in enabling the OIL project with nursing students and staff at the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences of Coventry University and the Degree Programme in Nursing at Laurea University of Applied Sciences. Project outcomes include improving the students' cultural competence and communication skills, as well as offering both students and staff a global perspective on topics in their modules. This global perspective plays an important role in the current multicultural nursing environments both in the UK and Finland, and needs to be taken into account when educating future health care professionals.

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