



Sacred Heart  
UNIVERSITY

Sacred Heart University  
**DigitalCommons@SHU**

---

Global Affairs Publications

Office of Global Affairs

---

Fall 2016

# Designing a Pre-Departure Study Abroad Intervention Using Collaborative Online International Learning

Carrie Wojenski  
*Sacred Heart University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/global\\_pub](https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/global_pub)

---

## Recommended Citation

Wojenski, C. (2016, Fall). Designing a pre-departure study abroad intervention using collaborative online international learning. *IIE Networker*, 36-37.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Global Affairs at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Global Affairs Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact [ferribyp@sacredheart.edu](mailto:ferribyp@sacredheart.edu), [lysobeyb@sacredheart.edu](mailto:lysobeyb@sacredheart.edu).

## Designing a Pre-Departure Study Abroad Intervention using Collaborative Online International Learning

By Carrie Wojenski

**EDUCATION ABROAD** professionals face a fundamental challenge when sending students to learn outside the country. The duality of a study abroad experience is that it can be a source of tension and conflict as well as an enriching experience and opportunity for personal growth<sup>1</sup>. Historically, education abroad professionals believed that study abroad participants automatically gained global competencies and became more culturally aware simply by being abroad, yet we now know that is not the case<sup>2</sup>. Exposure to another culture is a necessary, although not always sufficient, condition for intercultural learning<sup>3</sup>. Study abroad participants need to receive guided education and training if they are to successfully navigate new cultures, as well as recognize and understand their own cultural beliefs and values as related to their experiences abroad<sup>4</sup>. To address this, need some study abroad programs offer intercultural interventions before, during, or after the study abroad experience.

Access to a diverse set of technological tools affords the opportunity to offer such interventions virtually. There is great potential for leveraging technology in ways that enrich in-person intercultural training or augment face-to-face exchange, and create opportunities for guided facilitation. For example, creating connections between domestic and international students increases the likelihood of critical thinking and reflection on the nature of *the other* because course discussion can be enriched and deepened by the diversity of opinions, experiences, and cultures of the participants<sup>5</sup>. Continuing this line of thought, combining an online intervention with guided support and opportunities to connect with *the other* in a collaborative manner can facilitate intercultural development<sup>6</sup>. Today, online learning interventions are used to bring together far away populations, to explore new ways of disseminating orientation information, and to teach intercultural learning and intercultural learning theories<sup>7</sup>. Studies of such online interventions often examine changes in students' pre/post intercultural development, but do not fully examine the factors that contribute to the intervention outcomes, such as social interactions, technology, and perceived

learning<sup>8</sup>. Thus, as more study abroad programs incorporate various forms of technology into the overall intervention format, it is important to examine variables such as peer interaction within collaborative online interventions and the relationship between collaborative learning and intercultural development.

While collaborative online international learning (COIL) is a newer area of education abroad research, other disciplines have documented the benefits and challenges of online, computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL). The primary focus of CSCL research is the understanding and analysis of how computer tools aid learning and facilitation of knowledge sharing and collaborative meaning making. Research in the fields of collaborative learning and CSCL demonstrate that learning in an online environment comes with many design and social challenges, among them encouraging the use of tools, helping students to understand the value of collaboration, and social isolation<sup>9</sup>. An added challenge is creating and maintaining social presence in a non-traditional academic environment. Yet, despite the challenges, when collaborative learning is successful it can foster meaning making and shared knowledge creation<sup>10</sup>. Much like the finding that study abroad students do not automatically gain intercultural competence while abroad, it is not enough to place individuals in a learning environment and expect that learning will occur<sup>11</sup>. Students' prior knowledge and experience, the design of the curriculum, the role of the instructor, choice of tool use, a secure sense of community, and group cohesion must be purposefully addressed and carefully integrated to foster a successful CSCL environment<sup>12</sup>. In addition, CSCL must be designed around authentic and engaging activities, and students must be prepared to work in collaborative groups prior to engaging in the online environment<sup>13</sup>.

### Intervention and Understanding

To address a gap in the knowledge base of COIL pre-departure study abroad interventions, I designed a study to examine participants' experiences in a COIL intervention and to understand which variables influenced the

COIL environment. Specific research questions explored how social interactions influence pre-departure study abroad students' experiences within the intervention and examined the affordances and constraints of collaborative learning in an online, international intervention. I created a non-credit-bearing COIL seminar for university-level, semester study abroad students with two iterations of pre-departure U.S. study abroad students and international students coming to study in the U.S. participating in an online, collaborative seminar. Topics of the seminar included study abroad preparedness and intercultural communication theories. The first seminar lasted six weeks and was conducted using the Sakai learning management system. A revised strategy for the second seminar took into consideration feedback from the first group of participants and was reimaged as a five-week seminar hosted on Facebook. The seminar design reflected Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) Community of Inquiry (COI) model, which suggests that learning occurs when interdependent elements of social, cognitive, and teaching variables are aligned within an educational experience. Data collected included a needs assessment, focus groups, and transcripts of seminar discussions. The two forms of data analysis used in this study were the COI framework and a phenomenological review of participants' text.

The study highlighted variables that influence learning outcomes and experiences within a COIL intervention. Lessons concerning what worked well and what did not are important for understanding a complex problem of practice. This research demonstrated several technical and social challenges of building a COIL Community of Inquiry and how a redesign of an intervention can influence outcomes. Lessons learned are as follows:

- Students' experiences and engagement within an intervention are intimately connected to the social interactions experienced. Both groups reported that interacting with other participants was the most educational, developmental, and enjoyable aspect of the seminar.
- Students who participated actively in the seminar demonstrated more of the intended

## While collaborative online international learning is a newer area of education abroad research, other disciplines have documented the benefits and challenges of online, computer-supported collaborative learning.

learning outcomes, felt more socially connected, and had a more positive seminar experience. Active participation was also connected to the quality of reflections.

- Factors that inhibit social connectedness included overall participation rates, individual insecurity, and technological challenges.
- Different technologies, which offer different affordances and constraints for supporting a COIL community, greatly influence learning and social experiences. Choice of platform and integration of tools influenced seminar students' motivation and perceived socialness, as well as perceptions of the value-added affordances of technology.

### Together Everyone Achieves More

In addition, this study highlights challenges that led to implications for designing an effective COIL Community of Inquiry and how the design of an intervention can influence outcomes. Initial technological constraints, such as connectivity, lack of embedded collaboration tools, and disjointed flow discouraged participation and thwarted the success of the intervention. Technologies used in COIL environments must support the social connections necessary to create a collaborative community; otherwise, students will not achieve the desired learning outcomes. Furthermore, some students were not prepared with the technical skills necessary to navigate the technologies used in the first seminar, which detracted from interacting with others and participating in activities. This suggests the importance of utilizing technologies that are familiar to participants and afford the desired activities, as well as supporting social, cognitive, and instructional development.

While both groups felt engaging with other study abroad students and learning about other cultures provided some incentive to

participate, as the weeks progressed participation steadily declined. Intrinsic motivation is not enough to sustain motivation and encourage quality academic learning or reflection. After an initial virtual meet-and-greet, few students took the initiative to begin their own discussion threads due to fears of interrupting the academic, facilitated nature of the seminar. Special care should be taken to balance the instructional and learning outcomes with an environment that affords sociability, because students may not otherwise feel at liberty to socialize and develop bonds in an academic environment, even if the platform is informal in nature. Most students in the first seminar did not feel socially connected with their peers, and students in the second enactment felt only superficially connected. More time and opportunities for synchronous web conference or video chat interaction is recommended, as groups of students in both iterations indicated that virtual face time was the most enjoyable and educational aspect of the seminar, as well as when they felt most connected.

Understanding the variables within a COIL environment can help education abroad professionals design more effective online interventions for pre-departure study abroad students. Lessons learned after two iterations of the intervention underline best practices that can be applied when supporting and administering COIL interventions and virtual exchange opportunities across multiple education levels. There is more to study in a COIL seminar than its outcomes. It is equally important to understand what happens cognitively and socially within a seminar since these elements contribute to its overall success. Purposeful design and greater understanding of the factors that influence students' learning and experiences are imperative to the successful creation and deployment of COIL interventions. ■

*Carrie Wojenski is executive director, Office of Global Affairs at Sacred Heart University.*

### NOTES

1. Fennes & Hapgood, 1997
2. La Brack, 1994
3. Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009
4. Paige, 1993
5. Cunningham, 2009; West, 2010
6. Lou & Bosley, 2008
7. La Brack, 1994; Lou & Bosley, 2008
8. Lou & Bosley, 2008
9. Muilenburg & Berg, 2005; Vonderwell, 2003; Volet & Wosnitza, 2004; Fung, 2004
10. Resta & Laferrière, 2007; Stahl, 2006
11. Wegerif & Mansour, 2010

12. van Aalst, 2009; Resta & Laferrière, 2007; Hmelo, Guzdial, & Turns, 1998
13. Hmelo-Silver, 2006; Wegerif & Mansour, 2010

### REFERENCES

- Bennett, J. M. (2008). On becoming a global soul: A path to engagement during study abroad. In V. Savicki (Ed.), *Developing intercultural competence and transformation: Theory, research, and application in international education* (pp. 13-31). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.
- Cunningham, J. (2009). Cultural exchange 人文コミュニケーション学科論集 6, 181-206.
- Fennes, H., & Hapgood, K. (1997). *Intercultural learning in the classroom: Crossing borders*. London, UK: Cassell.
- Fung, Y. Y. H. (2004). Collaborative online learning: Interaction patterns and limiting factors. *Open Learning*, 19(2), 135-149.
- Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2-3), 87-105.
- Hmelo-Silver, C. E. (2006). Introduction: Cognitive tools for collaborative communities. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 35(2), 97-102.
- Hmelo, C. E., Guzdial, M., & Turns, J. (1998). Computer-support for collaborative learning: Learning to support student engagement. *Journal of Interactive Learning Research*, 9(2), 107-129.
- La Brack, B. (1994). Covert competencies: The recognition and assessment of "hidden" skills gained from study abroad. In R. Lambert (Ed.), *Educational exchange and global competence* (pp. 199-204). New York, NY: Council on International Education.
- Lou, K., & Bosley, G. (2008). Dynamics of cultural contexts: Meta-level intervention in the study abroad experience. In V. Savicki (Ed.), *Developing intercultural competence and transformation: Theory, research and application in international education* (pp. 276-296). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.
- Muilenburg, L. Y., & Berge, Z. L. (2005). Student barriers to online learning: A factor analytic study. *Distance Education*, 26(1), 29-48.
- Paige, R. M. (1993). On the nature of intercultural experiences and intercultural education. In R. M. Paige (Ed.), *Education for the intercultural experience* (pp. 1-20). Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, Inc.
- Resta, P., & Laferrière, T. (2007). Technology in support of collaborative learning. *Educational Psychology Review*, 19(1), 65-83.
- Stahl, G. (2006). *Group cognition: Computer support for building collaborative knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- van Aalst, J. (2009). Distinguishing knowledge-sharing, knowledge-construction, and knowledge-creation discourses. *International Journal of Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning*, 4(3), 259-287.
- Vande Berg, M., Connor-Linton, J., & Paige, R. M. (2009). The Georgetown Consortium project: Interventions for student learning abroad. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 18, 1-75.
- Volet, S., & Wosnitza, M. (2004). Social affordances and students' engagement in cross-national online learning: An exploratory study. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 3(1), 5-29. doi: <http://10.1177/1475240904041460>.
- Vonderwell, S. (2003). An examination of asynchronous communication experiences and perspectives of students in an online course: A case study. *Internet and Higher Education*, 6, 77-90. doi:[http://10.1016/S1096-7516\(02\)00164-1](http://10.1016/S1096-7516(02)00164-1).
- Wegerif, R., & Mansour, N. (2010). A dialogic approach to technology-enhanced education for the global knowledge society. In M. S. Khine & I. M. Saleh (Eds.), *The new science of learning: Cognition, computers, and collaboration in education* (325-339). New York: Springer.
- West, C. (2010). Borderless via technology. *International Educator*, 19(2), 24-33.