

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0546

International collaborative exchange project: stories from first-year university students during the Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic

Katherine L. Friend¹, Lorna Wardle¹

¹*Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, United Kingdom*

Research Domain: International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract: As instances of nationalism in the US and UK continue to rise, much of the rhetoric behind immigration often hinge on the phenomenon of (un)intentional othering (Pehrson & Green, 2010). The coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic fuelled varied and explicit forms of racism and increased nationalistic us/them discourses (Ho, 2021). Simultaneously, lockdowns due to the pandemic resulted in substantial changes to learning and teaching practices in higher education with the rapid switch to off-campus teaching posing many challenges both in its inception and delivery (Bickle & Rucker, 2020). This paper details an international collaborative exchange project between first-year undergraduates attending two higher education institutions in England, UK and Massachusetts, USA. It offers insights into not only online pedagogy and innovative learning opportunities but also the role of international ambassadors in building international connections to combat isolationism that can lead to nationalism. Preliminary findings indicated that the online interaction provided students a space for cultural exchange and collaborative learning. By asking students to think about the questions they wanted to pose to their international peers beforehand, students were able to better articulate their thoughts in a culturally sensitive way and ensured a productive discussion to learn about others' experiences.

Paper: Instances of nationalism in the United State (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) continue to rise and much of the rhetoric behind immigration or foreignness often hinge on the phenomenon of (un)intentional othering (Pehrson & Green, 2010). Ideas of national populism in the US and UK are reflected in the 2016 election of Donald Trump and the Brexit Referendum. This urge to turn inward upset long celebrated ideas of the global world such as the free movement of people, while also disrupting individual identities and the sense of belonging.

Starting in late 2019, the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic fuelled varied and explicit forms of racism targeting specific groups and stripping people of their humanity and ability to belong (Ho, 2021). The pandemic was, and continues to be, not only a public health crisis, but has inflamed mistrust of specific groups, and divided communities (Ho, 2021). The COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020 fundamentally disrupted life globally. Like many countries, the United Kingdom entered lockdown to limit social contact and reduce the spread of the virus (Gonzalez et al., 2020). The lockdowns resulted in substantial changes to learning and teaching practices in higher education and students and academics had to quickly adapt to new pedagogies. And while online learning has been adopted by

higher education institutions as a creative approach to teaching and learning, the rapid switch to off-campus teaching posed many challenges both in its inception and delivery (Bickle & Rucker, 2020). Within days of the lockdown, remote working, e-learning, video conferencing all became not just educational tools, but a communication lifeline for many (Gonzalez et al., 2020). Although many countries' education systems differed in their approach, many undergraduate students in higher education felt isolated and struggled with learning alone (Horgos, et al., 2020).

This paper details an international collaborative exchange project between two higher education institutions in England, UK and Massachusetts, USA. It offers an insight into not only online pedagogy and innovative learning opportunities, but also raises essential questions around the role of international ambassadors to combat isolationism and promote the connectiveness of the global world. The objective of this international collaborative was to provide a group of twenty, first-year British and American students, studying education related degrees, the opportunity to come together to share stories. It is understood that storytelling allows participants 'to reflect and archive ... complex notions of who they are in the world' (Alrutz, 2013, p.48). Themes of globalisation and internationalisation are embedded across many Education courses—including these two universities with the hope that by embedding an international exchange (in some form) good pedagogical and inclusive practices informed by cultural awareness would result (Rizvi, 2005). Unfortunately, this collaborative exchange was scheduled for 2020 and, with the pause to international travel, the project was subsequently moved virtually. It was recognised this was a unique opportunity for both the students and academics to engage with an international community with a mutual educational interest. Specifically, to discuss the question: what was it like to be a first-year student during a global pandemic? The experience offered to student relied on academics to plan and facilitate e-learning and teaching sessions.

Preliminary findings indicated that the online interaction provided students a space for cultural exchange and collaborative learning. By asking students to think about the questions they wanted to pose to their international peers beforehand, students were able to better articulate their thoughts in a culturally sensitive way and ensured a productive discussion to learn about difference. Also, for many of the student participants, it was the first-time they had the opportunity to engage with peers from a country other than their own. An unintended outcome was this e-learning exchange eliminated the need for economic capital whereby students from low socioeconomic background are less likely to be able to participate in an international exchange. Overall, the feedback from students was extremely positive with students from both the US and UK eager to engage further with international online collaborations in the future. Moving forward, more planning will be needed in selecting an online platform that both countries are familiar with as well as balancing the time differences. Ultimately, despite living on two different continents, in two different countries, and enrolled at two separate higher education institutions, the impact of the global pandemic had similar effects. Students discussed the impact of the pandemic on their differing health care systems, instances of racism exacerbated by the pandemic, and the personal struggle that isolation causes. This international collaborative exchange project is still ongoing with the goal of a face-to-face exchange when it is safe to do so.

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