

Cultura Popular y Medios Contemporáneos



COIL module:
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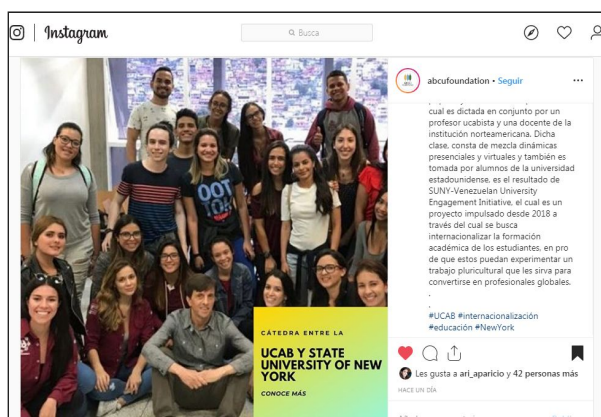
Representing Realities and Building Empathy through a Comparative Study of Popular Cultures

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Abstract:

During our 6-week Collaborative Online International Learning module (Oct.-Nov. 2019), 58 students jointly developed task-based projects on expressions of popular culture in Albany (USA) and Caracas (VZ). In teams of 7-8 participants, learners from both countries reflected on variations of the popular through descriptive and critical assignments, the drafting of a joint video script, and creation of a 10-minute video that focused on popular expressions in both cities (indie music, graffiti and other street art, inclusive performance spaces, community sites etc.). All were native or fluent and near-native speakers of Spanish. We experienced the topic of popular culture to be exceptionally well poised to help students engage with each other from the beginning, represent everyday realities and build empathy and transcultural understanding through written reflections, interviews, and joint final projects in the form of documentaries that included “slices” of life from the two different realities. While from a historical perspective, popular cultural production has often (rightfully) been criticized as partaking in imperialist endeavors and highlighted dichotomies (think of Walt Disney’s work during the Cold War that offered Latin America as a fantasy land and celebration of the pleasure principle freed from ethical considerations and responsibility), the small-scale, everyday popular cultural productions discovered in our module, highlight instead similarities in variations, helped students discover novel terrain within their own contexts and vice versa find common ground in the new context. In their exchange they actively created a shared “third” culture of collaboration. The critical examination of the popular within a virtual learning environment helped foster empathy towards transcultural awareness and equitable collaboration.

Research question:

Is it possible to foster a sense of empathy, transcultural awareness and equitable collaboration through the critical examination of the popular within a virtual learning environment?

Learners' community demography:

Students' ages ranged from 19-71 years, they came from eight different countries in the Americas (North and South), and their educational levels ranged from undergraduate to graduate (Master's and Ph.D.). While the Venezuelan learners were mainly of college-student age, the learners from Albany participated in a shared-resources class for advanced undergraduate students and graduate students alike. Given the fact that UAlbany is one of the most diverse institutions of higher education in the U.S., and its geographical situation in the State of New York, students in the program are either U.S. American students who learned Spanish as a new language, Latino/a/x students of Caribbean and Mexican descent, and Latin American students, from the Hispanic Caribbean (Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic), Peru, Ecuador, and Mexico. All were native or fluent speakers of Spanish.

Socio-political context of Venezuelan students:

For the last ten years, the socio-political situation in Venezuela has worsened to the point of developing into a deep humanitarian crisis. The students that participated in this virtual exchange are media and journalism college students, their ages ranging from 17 to 23 years. Venezuelan learners daily experience the pressure of violence, lack of human rights, absence of public services, the lack of a transparent information structure and a deteriorated educational system.

Methods:

During a 6-weeks period, two classes adopted the COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) methodology and engaged in a shared module titled "Popular Culture and Contemporary Media." From October to November 2019, 58 students, 26 from the University at Albany (SUNY) and 32 from the Andrés Bello Catholic University of Venezuela jointly developed task-based projects on expressions of popular culture in teams of 7-8 participants.

Following a high impact learning curriculum, learners from both countries reflected on variations of the popular through descriptive and critical reflections, the drafting of a joint video script, and the creation of a 10-minute video that focused on popular expressions in both cities (indie music, graffiti and other street art, inclusive performance spaces, community sites etc.). The two professors involved in the collaboration were Ilka Kressner teaching "Latin American Popular Culture" (UAlbany) and José Luis Jiménez teaching "Documentary" (UCAB).

The methodology of the collaborative virtual module was concentrated in intensive reading and group activities and a learning challenge. During the process, students critically read and

discussed three essays. Later, they carried out the activities on the readings in work teams that met virtually using communication tools of their choice, such as Facebook, Facetime, Voice Thread or WhatsApp chats. This curriculum promoted activities that required students to have an effective communication process in Spanish, the development of common agendas and the formation of groups with learners of diverse origins to work cooperatively. In addition, it encouraged them to propose new, unconventional solutions to institutional, community and social challenges. Learners skillfully used communication and information technology equipment and applications to interact with others in the global context. The given assignments motivated them to permanently update their knowledge on digital devices and in the security and protection measures needed to operate these systems.

The main learning objectives defined for this virtual exchange were: to practice the use of technologies of communication and information in order to interact with others in a global context; to become aware and interact within a context of multicultural specificities and diversities; and to work in a collaborative manner. The module was designed in four phases: the preparation phase (collaborations basics), the engagement phase, the reflection phase, and the results.

Preparation phase: collaboration basics

Prior to starting the COIL collaboration, students introduced themselves in the joint Facebook virtual classroom (a closed group) with introductory pictures and brief descriptions of their interests and expectations of the collaboration.

After students were divided into teams, during the first week of the module, they engaged in an “ice-breaker” activity related to the topic of the module, they had to select and present their personal popular hero with their teammates, This activity already opened up the broad scope of the popular and of heroes, as some students presented fictional comic heroes, others opted for singers songwriters, and others for folkloric figures known in their countries and regions. Students were not requested to summarize this discussion; they simply had to take and share a screenshot of their meeting and post it on the virtual classroom created on a joint closed Facebook group.

Engagement phase

During the next 3 weeks, learners performed joint writing tasks based on joint readings of essays that discussed critical terms, examples of cultural expression, the role of media in shaping popular cultures and stereotypes and related transfer questions. The assignments consisted in the collaborative writing of short 300 words essays per assignment per team.

Reflection phase

The third assignment consisted in a progress report where students described the individual pieces of work performed by each of them within their teams, related to the progress of the script of the final joint documentary project.

Final project

The final COIL project consisted in the creation of, and reflection on, a joint documentary of 10 minutes length per team dedicated to a theme selected by all team members, in which each teammate participated toward a joint popular culture experience (either personal practices or examinations of popular culture practices of others) in their specific living environments, Albany and Caracas. Among the topics selected were graffiti and other street art, grassroots music, inclusive performance spaces, and community sites.

The final documentaries were shared in the joint closed Facebook group.

Discussion:

Building a community of best practice through partnerships and knowledge sharing

New communication technologies facilitate and promote free exchange of knowledge and information, becoming ideal platforms for high impact experiential learning in a virtual exchange experience. The primary goal of the Popular Culture and Contemporary Media's module was to train global citizens and professionals able to function in a multicultural world through activities that encourage critical thinking, professional ethics, collaborative work and agency. Using a wide range of technologies of information and communication, students were the protagonists and creators of the content for their own learning. To build competencies on empathy and global citizenship the module focused on three general skills: learn to interact in the global context; learn to collaborate with others; and learn to recognize cultural similarities and differences.

In the preparation phase of the module (icebreaker), learners met their international teammates and skillfully used communication and information technology applications to interact with each other in this inter-American context. The group leadership skills to develop during this phase were: collaboration, shared purposes, respect for diversity, assignment of responsibilities and group learning.

During the engagement phase of the experience, students learned to collaborate with others by working in a high impact experiential learning environment. Through the readings and analysis they recognized the complexities of cultural representation, the role of the media in shaping the popular imaginary and perpetuating stereotypes. In this hands on model, learners appreciated and cultivated in a thoughtful, ethical, responsible and committed way, their relationship with other people in a multicultural environment to contribute to the collective well-being.

In the reflection phase, participants learned to recognize cultural similarities and differences, through the use of cognitive strategies and processes that promote autonomous learning: observation, research, comparison, understanding, analysis, synthesis, discussion and evaluation. In their teams, learners investigated, discussed, argued, and designed a documentary script for a comparative study of popular manifestations between the two cities.

Providing purpose and agency, students were challenged to develop a 10 minutes documentary comparing popular culture of two cities, Albany and Caracas (learners acted

with an ethical sense, to understand their socio-cultural environment). Participants selected the topic according to their interest and motivations (Identified and assumed as their own the problems of their socio-cultural context). In this exercise students understood and assumed their reality and allowed themselves to be challenged by it, they connected knowledge with their multicultural reality.

This project promoted activities that required students to engage in a process of effective communication, the development of common agendas and the formation of groups with people of diverse cultures to work cooperatively. In addition, it encouraged students to propose new solutions. The module fomented civic responsibility, self-reflection on values and principles that guided participants, the acquisition of skills to evaluate, self-assess and gain knowledge of leadership approaches and theories.

And finally, the challenge based learning model encouraged participants to get updated on digital technologies and in the security and protection measures of these systems. In addition, they properly managed, frequently used programs and applications and interacted in working groups using such technologies.

While we write this summary for the IVEC conference proceedings, we are currently engaged in our second COIL collaboration of the same topic and course length, now with a new cohort. This time, we are implementing evaluative measures to, in addition to qualitative data, also obtain a set of quantitative data (initial and final questionnaires for the two student groups, individual feedback during the COIL experience).

Conclusions and outlook:

We experienced the topic of popular culture to be exceptionally well poised to help represent everyday realities and build empathy and transcultural understanding through written reflections, interviews, and joint final projects in the form of documentaries that included “slices” of life from the two different realities.

While from a historical perspective, popular cultural production has often (rightfully) been criticized as partaking in imperialist endeavors and highlighted dichotomies (think of Walt Disney’s work during the Cold War that offered Latin America as a fantasy land and celebration of the pleasure principle freed from ethical considerations and responsibility), the small-scale, everyday popular cultural productions discovered in our module, highlight instead similarities in variations, helped students discover novel terrain within their own contexts and vice versa find common ground in the new context. In their high impact experiential learning exchange, they actively created a shared “third” culture of collaboration. The critical examination of the popular within a virtual learning environment helped foster empathy towards transcultural awareness and equitable collaboration.