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Cross-cultural collaboration through virtual teaming in higher education

Abstract

Scholars from three universities in three different parts of the world – North America, Africa, and Eurasia – across different cultures, disciplines, and contexts, collaborated with the objective of advancing transversal skills and intercultural competences through immersing their students in international virtual teamwork. Students and lecturers represented the Appalachian State University (United States of America), University of the Free State (South Africa), and Novgorod State University (Russia). In this article, we share our lessons learned from the challenges we faced in the hopes of deepening understanding in higher education concerning what can be accomplished through remote learning across continents and cultures. This work allowed us to be ahead of the collapse of traditional teaching on campuses caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as we had prior experience of online pedagogies reaching across international borders, cultures, time zones, and languages. Even during hard lockdown, when travelling abroad was impossible, our students experienced internationalised curricula, interacted with international scholars and staff, and were able to continue with the programme as planned. We began this work more than five years prior to the pandemic; therefore, these efforts led to successfully switching to online learning in other courses. We began with engaging staff members as well as students in ongoing, project-based collaboration across cultures from these institutions. This required the use of synchronous and asynchronous digital platforms, which would enable staff members and students to work collaboratively for six to eight weeks to create realistic projects. Staff members began to compile the collaborative co-creating courses that would be taught together, thus combining and adapting various pedagogical approaches. We then shared the responsibility for co-facilitating each course, despite different philosophies of teaching and learning. The result was a balanced blend of pedagogies, allowing students to collaborate successfully with students from the other universities. Students overcame a number of challenges: (a) cultural differences; (b) infrastructure for technology platforms; (c) time zones; (d) languages; (e) age and generational differences; (f) unfamiliarity with various pedagogies; (g) interaction with other cultures and settings; and (h) stereotypes fuelled by popular media. We share our journey and the strategies that addressed these challenges, including the use of technology and results from this continued collaboration.

Keywords: Collaboration among higher education students; cross-cultural teaching in Higher Education; international studies; internationalisation; transformative learning

1. Introduction

The three authors, who are scholars from the Appalachian State University (AppState) (United States of America), University of the Free State (UFS) (South Africa), and Novgorod State University (NovSU) (Russia) worked across different cultures, disciplines and contexts to collaborate with the purpose of advancing transversal skills and intercultural competences by immersing their students in international virtual teamwork. The three institutions are state-funded universities within their countries, and as such seek to serve diverse populations. All three universities seek to enhance cross-cultural experiences. Both the UFS and NovSU have established partnerships with AppState, resulting in faculty and student exchanges and study-abroad programmes. The collaboration between NovSU and AppState began in 2014 during an international conference held at NovSU attended by a delegation from AppState for the purpose of establishing a long-term partnership for future staff and student exchanges. While various staff and student exchanges, along with study-abroad programmes, resulted from this initial partnership agreement, two lecturers,¹ (first and second author) one from each university, shared a vision of building a more sustainable bridge across the political and cultural divides of their countries.

This vision was not unique to the two lecturers, as universities across the globe were awakening to the potential and challenges of internationalised learning and transcultural studies for their students (MacKenzie & Meyers, 2012; Yasuhara, 2013; Shin, Lee & Kim, 2013; Eliyahu-Levi, 2020). Furthermore, there is an increasing awareness that intercultural exchange through mobility programmes remains exclusive (Woicolesco, Cassol-Silva & Morosini, 2022). Daunted by the expense and time required for international travel for themselves and their students, these two lecturers came up with the idea of utilising their universities' online learning management platforms and other online communication tools for online international learning opportunities. It seemed a logical step to expand the growing partnership of their universities and connect not only students, but also lecturers.

This initial idea of collaboration among the two lecturers grew organically to encompass interested colleagues at both universities, as more courses were developed requiring expertise in such fields as technology, sustainability, and leadership. In 2019, a third university in South Africa joined the collaboration after the first author had visited the UFS as a Fulbright specialist, which added lecturers and students from yet another continent. This new partnership thus expanded the cultural diversity represented by staff and students. The network now extended across three continents and brought into the mix three different university policies and systems of governance, thus increasing the challenges and complexity. Yet it enriched the experiences of all the students as well as the lecturers. Blessinger and Cozza (2016) emphasise that reaching the goals of a partnership or project ultimately depends on "good personal relationships between individuals". In this case, the three lecturers instinctively found rapport amongst one another, which was then strengthened through weekly engagements by means of online meetings, during which we planned for the work but also at times shared our stories from our daily lives.

Collaboration among lecturers at university level is crucial for the effective development of coursework that will transcend cultures and geopolitical spaces (MacKenzie & Meyers, 2012; Sun & Kang, 2022; Wimpenny et al., 2022). Collaborators must be open to sharing their teaching philosophies and strategies as well as learning new ones. One lecturer cannot

1 We use the term 'lecturer' as a general reference to academic and professional staff involved in teaching at universities.

simply 'recycle' syllabi and teach materials taught in an earlier course on his/her own (Haug & Jacobs, 2023). This defeats the purpose and loses the richness of cross-cultural collaboration. The collaboration cannot continue successfully if all parties are not open to engaging in new approaches to teaching and learning (MacKenzie & Meyers, 2012). That is not to say that there cannot be a division of skills or tasks among the group. For instance, one or more leaders within the collaborative group will keep the group on track by maintaining deadlines, setting up online meetings, handling logistics, etc. Such leadership, however, should not overpower the creative nature of the group and must be trusted to empower each team member to allow for the collaborative project to develop (Halim, 2021). The authors had to learn and engage with these critical principles of collaboration themselves before leading their students in such practice. Yet, through commitment from all three, in line with the recommendation by Blessinger and Cozza (2016), challenges were overcome.

According to Halim (2021), effective international collaboration is at a much deeper level than many university lecturers may have experienced in the past. Interaction among parties take place on three distinct levels: cooperation, coordination, and collaboration. Collaboration at the level of cooperation lacks a defined mission, with little or no planning among partners. Individuals retain control over their projects, only sharing individual progress, with little or no input or feedback from outside partners. This level of collaboration is generally no-risk, short-term, with lower intensity and lack of shared resources. Collaboration may come about with study-abroad programmes where a university group visits another country, but the programme itself is under the complete control of the visiting lecturer, with little or no input from the host country other than to assist with logistics (Halim, 2021). There is generally not this level of collaboration described in our project; yet this is the level experienced by most lecturers who consider themselves international scholars due to study-abroad programmes.

Coordination, the next level up, is longer term, with more formal relationships in which partners understand the shared mission of the programme, as there has been some planning. Resources are generally shared. There are open channels of communication, but authority over aspects of the project is still retained by the individuals involved. This may create a power struggle in the long run. There is higher risk than at the coordination level, but it is still considered low-level risk, as any partner may withdraw and retain authority over his or her part of the project (Halim, 2021).

The highest level of interaction among partners is collaboration. This was the level sought by the partners engaged in the project reported in this article. According to Halim (2021), collaboration tends to be longer term, with commitment on all sides for a common mission developed mutually over time. This level of interaction results in a totally new structure or programme through input and exchange of ideas among all partners. Resources are shared, and there is open communication that is sustained over a longer period. At the heart of such a project one finds a level of trust and a common value base, in spite of geo-political divides (Blessinger & Coza, 2016; Jacobs *et al.*, 2021). In our project, collaborative efforts have been sustained through such open communication since 2014. No one partner or university lays claim to the project, as the input and resources are mutually shared, and the project is co-owned (cf. Kirk *et al.*, 2018).

The level of collaboration among the partnering universities of this project resulted in a programme of four courses developed over several years, rolled out at different tempos. Three of the four courses have been co-taught to students representing each university, with

the fourth only bilaterally, as one university was unable to participate. While the registration of students, payment to lecturers, if applicable, and course credits are handled separately at each university according to their policies, the goals and objectives of the programme and within each course are shared by all partners. This is a typical feature of collaborative online international learning programmes and lessens the complexities (Haug & Jacobs, 2023)

The project described in this paper follows a journey filled with challenges and celebrations, as it becomes a story of effective collaboration among lecturers from three very different cultures and systems of university governance. All courses were offered through virtual classrooms making use of online learning and communication platforms. This allowed students to engage in synchronous and asynchronous collaborating interaction with peers from around the globe. The results of the collaboration among the lecturers, including course development, pedagogical approaches and outcomes, will be shared below.

In this paper we chronologically share our collective experiences on virtual international collaborative teaching and learning that evolved organically to a project of four complementary courses. Ethical clearance was obtained for research on this project (Ref UFS-HSD2019/2056/1402). We situate the paper in the current discourse on online international learning and reflect on how our experiences could inform future projects.

2. The experiences of the lecturers

In developing these courses to be used transnationally, lecturers did not have the option of traditional face-to-face classrooms with regular meeting times. The nature of these courses forced lecturers to develop new skills in teaching based on theories of online learning and andragogy. While it could not be predicted that such skills would prove so valuable later during a global pandemic, at the time, online learning through distance education programmes was the only way to accomplish the vision and goals established. The collaboration allowed a rich diversity of pedagogical philosophies and strategies that created learning opportunities for students who ordinarily would not experience them. For example, the lecturer from AppState regularly immersed students in project-based learning and action research, while the teaching approach of the lecturer from NovSU focused more on direct instruction and lecture. These lecturers learned from each other to bring in diverse andragogical approaches. It is important that lecturers find the proper approach for the context in which courses are offered (Mashaul & Nyawoll, 2021), which in this case was in a virtual international space.

2.1 Early development of courses between two countries

At the start of this project, the platform used was OpenQwaq, a three-dimensional (3D), immersive platform that involved avatars and virtual environments similar to Second Life, to bring lecturers and students together. Originally developed by the United States Navy (Maxwell et al., 2011), the platform was adapted for use in higher education to bring together students from remote areas across one or two states. The partners in this collaboration utilised the platform to bring their students together from two different countries (USA and Russia).

This first course focused on cross-cultural communication, which was deemed a foundational course for all subsequent courses. This first course, and all subsequent courses, were grounded in project-based learning (Barber & King, 2016). This approach, while deviating from the more traditional Russian lecturing approach grounded in theory and content, allowed the lecturers to provide realistic, relevant projects requiring collaboration among student

team members, with all teams comprising students from each of the two countries. The more traditional approach to teaching morphed into some sessions of direct instruction (i.e. mini-lectures) and required readings on theories and content associated with the project.

Students were required to work together in virtual teams (comprising a combination of students from the USA and Russia) on a series of activities that scaffolded the final project-based assessment task. Each team selected a country other than Russia or the USA for their project. Specific activities engaged students in learning experiences, including culture mapping (Meyer, 2014) of their own as well as another country, doing research about that third country, developing a business proposal and finally presenting the business proposal to their peers and lecturers as an imaginary audience from the third country.

Placing students in virtual teams online in OpenQwaq began the process of transformative learning (Taylor, 2008) as they struggled with language barriers (translators were assigned to each team for those who were non-English speaking), time zone differences of up to seven hours, and cultural expectations for a course in higher education. In transformative learning, students must first be placed outside their usual comfort zone, which challenges familiar paradigms. To transform their thinking, they must first abandon such paradigms to seek more innovative and appropriate solutions to the problem (Taylor, 2008; Patterson & Munoz, 2015). In placing students into virtual teams with those from another culture upon whom the success of a project depended (Haug & Jacobs, 2023), the students were forced to examine their existing paradigms, including biases, prior knowledge of other cultures, and expectations for conducting decision-making among groups.

OpenQwaq, hosted by AppState, was used for synchronous meetings among the students. Students came together with staff for 'real-time' presentations, discussions, and activities. Due to time zones and work schedules of students, these meetings took place on Saturdays in the morning for USA students, which was afternoon for the Russian students. We observed that participation was high, as students maintained a high level of commitment to the course, their teammates, and the project, despite the encroachment on personal time over weekends.

Asynchronous work was accomplished through the online learning management system, Moodle, hosted by NovSU. The course syllabus, instructions for activities, required readings, and forums were posted on this site. It allowed a common level of communication among students and lecturers throughout the course. The lecturers collaborated on the development of all course materials, on the structure of the Moodle site, and review of student work, drawing from specific expertise in each of the collaborating lecturers.

In this course, students met over the course of nine weeks during one semester. Since the two countries' academic calendars differ, the weeks in which they overlapped were designated for collaboration among student teams. This is referred to as the collaboration period of the course. Time outside this period allowed individual lecturers the freedom to prepare or debrief their students concerning the collaboration period. Additional readings or meetings were assigned during this time. The focus on the shared mission and goals of the course meant that the time spent in collaboration accomplished the desired results and any additional instruction outside the overlapping weeks strengthened student collaborative skills.

During this first iteration of the course, student teams presented their projects in OpenQwaq (Monte et al., 2011). Due to the virtual environment, it was possible to invite other academics and university administrators to attend. The presentations could also be recorded and shared

later. Each team successfully presented a project that met the course requirements by providing the following components: culture maps of Russia, the USA, and the third-party country; samples of simulated communications to the third country based on that country's culture; and a business plan. Examples of ideas presented by the teams included a business to produce yoga equipment to a partner in India and plans for a music festival to a partner in Spain. The simulations required of each team to work together to design the business as well as the pitch to a third party.

As a result of participation in this course, students shared the mind shift they made during the course in reflections as they discovered the unintended biases and stereotypes previously held about the other culture. They began to focus more on similarities rather than on differences. This built a bridge between two cultures that have been engaged in political struggles for decades. Over the course of the weeks spent in collaboration, students were encouraged to communicate on social media and any other platform, including email and WhatsApp, with the result that many continued this level of communication beyond the course. Several reported becoming Facebook friends, sharing mutual interests and hobbies.

The results of this pilot project and initial course encouraged the continuation and expansion of the collaboration. Participating lecturers evaluated the course based on the level of the projects presented, the reflections of students at the end of the course, and the level of engagement of students throughout the course. All projects met the requirements and exceeded the expectations of the lecturers. Reflections of students indicated the value the course brought to their individual growth in understanding diverse cultures. No students left the course or lacked regular engagement on Moodle or attendance – even at the Saturday meetings.

These student reflections, social media postings, and course assessments represent the data sources used to evaluate the course and the international collaboration. We were able to determine that all students achieved the stated goals of the course through the assessment of the project and course postings in Moodle. We had a focus-group discussion with the cohort of students at the end of the course and requested that they submit a personal reflection paper regarding their perceptions of the course and its impact on their views of different cultures. Each student shared an increase in positive perceptions of different cultures.

Inspired by the success of the project, the first two authors committed to expanding the project and to ensure sustainability.

2.2 Continued course development through collaboration

The initial course development continued from 2014 to 2018, when new courses were introduced as more colleagues became intrigued with the international collaboration. The model for the courses followed the pilot project in terms of lessons learned and structures that worked. All subsequent courses followed the same simple developmental structure: collaboration among lecturers from all participating universities; courses attended by students from all collaborating universities; project-based learning reflecting the course goals; and the establishment of virtual teams among the students. This structure reflected the constant monitoring and input from the lecturers as they applied the lessons learned from the initial pilot project.

2.3 Reflecting on lessons learned during the early collaboration efforts

The Cross-Cultural Communication course provided a starting point for continued collaboration. The use of the Moodle site offered a means of providing consistent information and resources across all universities so that students could share posts and materials with all lecturers and students engaged in the course. Expectations and requirements for the course, designed by the team, were uniformly presented. The use of this course management system allowed uniformity across the board, bringing the entire group of students together. This Moodle site continues to be hosted by the Russian university. This is an example of resource sharing that is vital to collaborative efforts (Halim, 2021).

The OpenQwaq platform, while enjoyed by most of the students, was problematic. It presented complicated room settings and graphics designed to engage learners, but challenges in the virtual international class abound. The more graphics are used, the greater the bandwidth necessary to sustain it. In remote or rural areas, regardless of country, the infrastructure simply was not available. Stanford (2020, par 2) warns that

frequent use of high-bandwidth technologies can limit [students'] ability to fully participate in course activities. This can jeopardize their success in the course, create a sense of shame and anxiety.

Staff at the US university worked on the support, but the technological issues often proved to be beyond the staff's skill and knowledge levels. Students were often 'kicked out' by the system when the bandwidth became overloaded. Sound was sometimes lost. Students often did not have the means to supply the necessary equipment such as external microphones or headsets. Subsequently it was impossible for all the groups to post all their materials on the platform due to the many issues. This resulted in frustration and lost materials, which then had to be recovered and posted through the Moodle site or sent as attachments via email. After the second year, as technology developed and more platforms became available, it became obvious that an alternative platform might be more appropriate.

As the collaboration continued, the universities switched to using Zoom, which was hosted by the US university. Zoom allowed a more stable online environment. Students connected through cameras rather than avatars, offering a much more realistic approach. The added advantage was the more personal approach. Chat boxes became a good feature to share as it was sometimes easier to read the written statement rather than listen to language heavy with an unfamiliar accent. Screen sharing, breakout rooms, and recording of sessions offered various instructional advantages. As Zoom was a much more widely used and therefore familiar platform, it did not require the same level of training. There were no downloads or bandwidth issues as previously experienced, thus making it easier to use. This is important in online learning, as the course should not be about the technological platform in which instruction is delivered, but about the experiences and content knowledge gained. The US lecturers also had the advantage of access to their university subscription of Zoom, which provided unlimited access around the world. Since Zoom had been adopted for online distance education programmes at the US university prior to the shut-down of universities due to the pandemic, these lecturers had participated in long-term professional development in online andragogy. This experience and training not only served the international project, but greatly eased the transition to closed campuses and mandatory online classes. Indeed, Mashaul and Nyawoll (2021) emphasise the importance of sufficiently preparing both the lecturers and the students for any form of online learning.

Most importantly, the earlier pilot programme reinforced the need for collaboration among more of the university lecturers, and some were invited. The authors remained a core team, involving also other who became the virtual teams they intended to teach to their students. This required a shift in approach and philosophy of teaching as lecturers shifted from individual course design to a collaborative co-teaching model based on co-design. Not all instructors (beyond the three authors) were, however, able to make this shift successfully, and some left the project or were replaced. In this regard, Blessinger and Cozza (2016, par 12) explains that

Within this multi-cultural context, some discomfort may arise as participants struggle to understand different perspectives and customs. So, given the different cultural beliefs that may exist in international partnerships, it is important that all participants come together in a spirit of solidarity that is centred on shared values and a shared vision.

The design and implementation of a transnational online course are indeed neither simple nor easy, especially when involving public universities on three different continents with vastly different systems of policies, resources, and governance. Navigating these differences to allow lecturers to collaborate and students to participate was one of the first hurdles. Haug and Jacobs (2023) point out that in such collaborative virtual learning space there is no transfer of credits, and each institution retains its autonomous administrative processes (e.g. processing of marks), and likewise we were each responsible for our own registration of students and the concomitant administration. Also, working with the respective international offices² within each university in this project proved to be a major advantage in negotiations within institution to overcome barriers. Using the positive results of the pilot project also assisted, as the obvious advantages to each university in developing rigorous online international experiences for students figured largely in the strategic planning for each partnering university.

2.4 Moving to tri-country collaboration

The third partnering university (UFS) joined this collaboration in 2019 as a result of a formal partnership between AppState and the UFS, as well as the first author's visit to South Africa as a Fulbright Specialist, advising on distance education programmes. Inspired by what was shared, and mindful of the national Policy Framework on Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa that was forthcoming at that time,³ the third author saw the invite to join in the project as a means to build capacity for online international learning by engaging professional staff from relevant offices (e.g. working on curriculum design and in international offices) as 'students' in the cross-cultural communication course. Haug and Jacobs (2023) explain the importance of experiencing online collaborative learning first-hand as part of staff capacity development.

2.5 Additional courses in the programme

Once the programme had become established at each university according to their policies, three additional courses were added. The courses focused on the following: technological platforms and systems for international learning, sustainability and best practices internationally, and leadership in virtual teams. These courses were developed and taught by virtual teams of lecturers from all three universities. Each of these courses followed the

2 These offices are referred to differently at the three institutions, but generally serve to enable and support internationalisation of the institutions

3 The *Policy Framework for Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa* was published in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic on 6 November 2020, and inter alia requiring of South African universities to internationalise their curricula (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019).

agreed-upon structure of collaboration among lecturers, establishment of virtual teams of students, and project-based learning, with shared content. In the sustainability course, for example, students collected actual samples from their home environments to study the worldwide impact of pollutants. This gave the students a unique opportunity to work together on real life problems informed by instruction, and their contextual knowledge.

2.6 Instructional strategies

The instructional strategies used in the classes were determined by the collaborating lecturers, mostly from different disciplines, but all courses relied on one final project related to the course topics that also required virtual international teaming by the students. It was not enough simply to convey the knowledge of the course, but to move to transdisciplinary knowledge to solving real-life problems. In this programme, it was much more important for students to learn the process and to experience the teaming. This created an online environment that challenged students to exchange ideas, using such strategies as literature circles in which shared readings were discussed (Varga et al., 2020). Opportunities for real-time authentic learning through the projects developed by each team followed by deep reflections on individual learning led to greater cultural competency (Sun & Kang, 2022). Regardless of the strategies utilized, it was far more important that the focus be on the open exchange of ideas with an emphasis on the similarities among the students rather than the cultural differences (Goodall et al., 2020).

3. Student experiences

This programme was widely applauded by the students who engaged in the courses. Students were asked to write final reflection papers in which they shared the impact of the courses on their learning. Reflection provides students with the opportunity to reflect on their learning, but also to learn through reflection (Haug & Jacobs, 2023) The following excerpts are representative samples of the majority of student reflections for the courses. In the words of one postgraduate student who engaged in the programme:⁴

During the courses we discussed several concepts, including culture, ethnocentrism, communication, and collaboration, each of which have enriched my capacity as an educational leader and global citizen. The opportunity to work on an international team was an added bonus to the courses, because it afforded me the opportunity to have rich, multi-perspective conversations around the concepts discussed in class.

Another student noted:

Collaboration on a project, proposing a new idea to a country different from both cultures, has been a fascinating experience of analysing communication structures, global leadership styles, and overall cross-cultural dynamics consideration. Leadership skills were also developed that will help me later in life if working on international projects. While many challenges were faced throughout the process of developing an international project, I learned a lot outside my own culture with regard to Russian and German culture.

An international student reflected on her unique cultural position:

As a Dutch international student in the United States, I did work together with students from the United States, of course, but I was the only international student among them, which is a very different experience from working in the team during the LES6100 class. Our team consisted of two members from Russia, three members from South Africa, and me. It was a very enriching experience to work with people from these cultures,

4 The reflections of students from the USA and South Africa were used, as geopolitical complexity and different ethical policies impacted on our study.

because I had never met people from these countries before. Working professionally in an international environment was thus a very good and valuable experience for me. I am very sure it will be useful in the future as well, for any career path I may take.

One of the South African students commented as follows:

I really enjoyed the course. I am glad I said yes when you invited me despite thinking that I would not have time. I have no regrets, I learned so much.

This sentiment was echoed by other students who found the courses helpful in understanding cultures for which they had long-held stereotypes fuelled by media and politics. As one South African student stated,

I had no idea we had so much in common with one another!

The impact on students in engaging in this kind of learning experience indicates the value of cross-cultural collaboration from both the viewpoints of the lecturers as well as those of the students. Indeed, De Hei et al. (2020) found that groupwork with diverse students in this space enhances the intercultural competences; however, the groupwork must be planned and executed to advance such competences intentionally. The lecturers continue to collaborate on course development and other projects as these arise. The programme offers the opportunity for a strong network of colleagues across these universities to extend to even more collaborations.

4. Discussion

Reflecting jointly on the value of working together to develop and offer virtual collaborative international learning programmes allowed several issues to emerge. Firstly, the project began through face-to-face contact between the first and second authors at a conference, and secondly, through a scholarly visit of the first author to the third author's institution. In both cases, there was intentionality on the part of the universities that international work would develop, and formal agreements to collaborate in general signed, but it remained up to the individuals involved to operationalise it. Kirk et al. (2018) discuss the value of combining a bottom-up and top-down approach to internationalisation of higher education towards empowerment and ownership. These initial interactions then led to many staff and students meeting and working together online beyond the intent of the universities. Developing these connections at the university level is key to establishing initial contacts, leading to long-term collaboration. Commitment by those instructors engaged in such collaboration and development of courses is instrumental to sustaining the courses (Blessinger & Cozza, 2016).

Secondly, the project drew from different institutional and individual resources and strengths, and an equal relationship despite positionalities was established. Each collaborator brought unique strengths, both individually and institutionally, which contributed greatly to the development of the project. Yet, no one voice or opinion dominates the work. This is the essence of intentional collaboration, especially in respect of diverse cultures. Each collaborator must not only maintain respect for what the other partners bring to the project, but appreciate and value one another (Jacobs et al., 2021).

Thirdly, through the virtual collaboration, opportunities arose for staff and students to participate in an internationalised curriculum, irrespective of financial inequalities, or the disruption brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, it is generally accepted that virtual

exchange education courses are cost effective. When such courses are developed in teams, this approach is even more cost effective, with a sharing of resources, workflow, timeline management, instructional design, and budget oversight (Crowley, Chen & Cerver, 2018).

Fourthly, in the project, we worked with different disciplinary and ideological perspectives as well as different course levels (undergraduate, postgraduate and staff development), which led to rich transdisciplinary learning. The value thereof was clear, even if it brought its own complexities. In this, we attempted to break down the traditional silos that tend to confine disciplines in higher education within departments and colleges. Students were then actually able to experience the ebb and flow of intersecting theories and practices such as exist in the real world, and could appreciate the value of a poli-ocular team to solve problems. Haug and Jacobs (2023) argue that moving into the transdisciplinary realm leads to impactful collaboration and a more holistic approach to problem solving.

Finally, each lecturer brought students into the course for a wider range of purposes than are normally considered. For example, in South Africa, the course was used among staff for professional development as they learned how to engage in internationalised teaching and learning. In Russia, it was primarily an opportunity for the development of English-speaking skills and cultural awareness that would benefit them in business and medicine. In the USA, the courses offered credits for a postgraduate programme in educational leadership. The flexibility that came with this approach has revealed incredible opportunities beyond our expectations. It further demonstrates the value of this type of collaboration among other universities.

Certain limitations must, however, be noted. Data from students were limited to those who gave permission for their reflections to be used, and excluded the reflections of the Russian students, as a result of geopolitical complexities, as well as different ethical policies at the time of writing the manuscript. This in itself is an example of respecting differences, whilst maintaining positive academic relationships.

5. Future directions

It is becoming harder and harder in today's political climate to arrange student or staff exchange programmes among universities in countries that may be experiencing conflict or sanctions. Yet, due to the pandemic and move toward globalisation, it is more important than ever that as citizens of the world, we understand one another and experience a deep sense of diverse cultures to combat increasing levels of xenophobia and nationalism threatening our nations.

Working with policies and administrations in higher education can be the most challenging aspect of transnational collaboration for the academics, and professional staff of a university. This is especially true when administrators change positions, leaving behind promises of resource allocation and support for the programme. Maintaining strong advocacy in administration is critical to continuance of this kind of programme.

This programme challenges the traditional methods of enrolling and supporting students at most universities – even for online distance education programmes. Because it brings together students and lecturers from three universities with different policies and governance, it had to be established that each student be registered and enrolled at their home university. This resulted in counting the academics' load at the home university as well as student tuition, credit for coursework, etc. Certification for the course had to originate with the home university, which created another set of permissions and policy changes to in some cases,

allow students to apply these courses to their existing programmes of study. All these details were worked out among the administrations of the collaborating universities as part of their partnership agreements.

This programme is capable of being expanded beyond this one four-course programme to become part of collaborative degree programmes. There is a demand for this kind of learning experience, as evidenced by student inquiries. There is a definite need for universities to reconsider how they immerse students into cultural experiences to gain true skill in international collaborations in a world that is becoming more and more interdependent. Is it still enough for universities to rely on student exchanges and study abroad? The pandemic effectively shut down such programmes with its travel bans; yet online programmes such as the one described in this paper could survive the weight of a pandemic.

It is quite a sensitive time in our collaboration due to the war in the Ukraine, and our different governments' positions on that. Still, we continue to keep in touch on a personal level, and consider ways to advance collaborative research, until such time that it will be possible for us to continue with the courses.

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