

Collaboration in a Multicultural Learning Environment:

Asynchronous vs. Synchronous Platforms

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Abstract

While video linking through the Global Understanding Programme is an effective way to reduce prejudice and increase interest in other cultures, the number of students who can participate synchronously is limited both by physical classroom space and time differences. During the 9th GPE Conference, five instructors committed to implement an asynchronous model of Global Understanding (GU) using the SOLE SOCIAL platform. Students created video clips about themselves and the GU topics (e.g., College Life, Family and Cultural Traditions, etc.) and completed a collaborative project. At the end of the interaction, the majority of video clips were posted and collaborative projects were completed. However, there was little discussion about the GU topics. The amount of interaction in each group varied according to the students' personalities and commitment to the class. Although many students were comfortable using other social media platforms, they were discouraged from participating more actively in the SOLE discussion due to problems with logging in and the fact that the platform lacks notification services. Nevertheless, the project resulted in several development opportunities for the future of asynchronous work in the traditional GU programme. Firstly, sharing videos to illustrate GU topics opened a new avenue of opportunity to broaden the current discussion topics from conversations to interactive explorations. Secondly, allowing students access to asynchronous timing encouraged the development of student self-learning skills and investment in their own education. Finally, the asynchronous project illustrated the benefits of platforms to increase out-of-class interaction in the coming year.

Keywords: asynchronous online collaboration, multicultural learning environment, intercultural interaction, global citizenship, higher education

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Global social and economic changes at the turn of the 21st century including those ones in migration policy, opened up new opportunities for expanding cultural dialogue among different countries in a number of spheres. During the past several decades, international cooperation in education has witnessed establishment of governmental and non-governmental international organizations promoting student cultural and academic exchange programmes. Such collaboration in education has made it possible for universities and colleges worldwide to share best practices and contribute to the efficacy and quality of education around the globe.

Transformative educational learning theories (Mezirow, 1978) promote deeper understanding involving information exchange and independent learning. Consequently, this leads to contemporary methodological approaches that are characterized by sustained and focused attention to the problem of training interculturally competent graduates capable of effective teamwork in a multicultural collaboration setting (Kitchenham, 2008). Intercultural communication alongside multilingualism has been considered one of the key requirements for quality higher education as an integral part of all higher education systems (UNESCO, 1998). Upcoming graduates are expected to be able to successfully work with people from other cultures and be proficient in a foreign language (i.e., primarily English) in personal and professional intercultural interaction.

Such emphasis on intercultural interaction in education might be accounted for by its didactic potential in training globally competent employees. Interaction across borders might have a positive influence on one's personality holistically, as well as resulting in cognitive changes when purposefully organized in a learning setting (Boyer, Maher, & Kirkham, 2006).

Personality transformation might first and foremost include development of one's global worldview and enhancement of one's intercultural tolerance. This happens due to the elimination of stereotypes and prejudices resulting from immediate intercultural contacts (Spreckels & Kotthoff, 2007). It also might involve the development of one's personal level of mobility (i.e., professional, geographic, intercultural) via acquiring experience of academic mobility. In this respect, mobility is viewed as one's willingness to be employed in the global labour market; to become a member of a new culturally-diverse staff; and to change one's place of residence to obtain new professional and self-realization opportunities. Cognitive changes are associated with the overcoming of one's cultural egocentrism as a result of adopting the system of meanings and values of the other culture. These changes make it possible to more objectively approach anticipating and solving global problems.

Information and communication technology immensely influenced the availability and affordability of immediate intercultural interaction in education due to the introduction of a new generation of computer-based educational systems such as virtual learning environments. A virtual learning environment, being a designed information and social space (Dillenbourg, 2000), includes multiple tools for content management, provides opportunities for both synchronous and asynchronous communication, as well as offers different models of interaction in terms of the number of communicants (i.e., one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many). It might also include options characteristic of social media such as posting, sharing, and commenting.

It should be noted that virtual learning environments are not synonymous with virtual campuses arranged via conventional Learning Management Systems (LMS). The term "virtual learning environments" designates a broader notion since it does not restrict the curricula to any particular level of education, e.g. university course or diploma programme. What makes virtual

learning environments distinguish themselves among other constructivist environments is that students become not only active participants but also contributors to the social and information space (Dillenbourg, 2000). Overall, a virtual learning environment integrates such functions crucial for organizing successful intercultural interaction as information, learning, communication, collaboration, and management. The “googlization” of e-learning (Vaidhyathan, 2011) provides students with an array of tools to effectively take responsibility for their learning in online collaboration with others and, therefore, to substantially benefit from such collaboration.

Therefore, educational opportunities in the virtual learning environment are largely defined by the facilitation of social interactions among learners and between learners and tutors via collaboration. The importance of such interactions was first introduced in social constructivism (Trentin, 2010) and was further developed in a number of contemporary learning theories such as the connectivist, or network learning theory, proposed by Siemens (2004) and Downes (2006). Connectivism stresses the idea that knowledge exists within systems and is acquired by individuals who interact collaboratively to attain specific learning goals.

Collaboration allows students to develop cognitive and social skills in cooperation with others (Smith, 2005). Being involved in multiple social interactions, each participant has positive interrelations with other members and is aware of the responsibility for the result of joint activities. To address the issue of what collaborative learning is, Smith & MacGregor (1992) investigated a number of approaches and concluded that:

‘Collaborative learning’ is an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students, or students and teachers together. Usually, students are working in groups of two or more, mutually searching for understanding,

solutions, or meanings, or creating a product. Collaborative learning activities vary widely, but most center on students' exploration or application of the course material, not simply the teacher's presentation or explication of it. (p. 11)

When applied in virtual learning environments, collaboration contributes to building virtual communities that enhance education. Theoretical research and comparative experiments have proved that collaborative learning has an advantage over studying in individual situations in terms of the learning outcomes obtained by students (cf. Slavin, 1983; Bruffee, 1999; Kreijns & Kirschner, 2004). For example, Johnson, Johnson, and Stanne (2000) analyzed 158 reports on the effectiveness of cooperative learning methods used in schools and concluded that these methods have a significant positive impact on student achievement compared with individualistic learning.

Besides, there are extensive empirical studies that focus on the collaboration process itself, conditions crucial for making collaborative learning effective for students as well as the analysis of types of interactions favourable for collaborative learning (cf. Collazos et al., 2007; Jermann & Schneider, 1997).

Therefore, the process of virtual intercultural collaborative learning both synchronous and asynchronous is not new in intercultural research and has been efficiently employed in intercultural training for many years. The current paper proceeds to investigate the affordances of asynchronous collaborative learning for university students and describes the best practices in relation to the Asynchronous Global Understanding course.

Overview of the project

The Global Understanding (GU) course is a synchronous virtual educational setting where students in universities around the world discuss topics that include college life, cultural

traditions, family, the meaning of life, religion, and stereotypes and prejudices. Each class session includes live discussion in both small video groups and one-to-one keyboard chat. Evidence shows that while synchronous communication fosters social contact and activity within participants, it also creates a sense of urgency in terms of the task or debate at hand (Oztok et al, 2013). In the GU course, video linking translates into an effective way to reduce prejudice and increase interest in other cultures (Epler, 2017). However, the number of students who can participate synchronously is limited both by physical classroom space, and time differences. The video linking GU courses are limited to around 16 students per class and rely on each institution's resources to provide the information and communication technologies (ICTs) required for videoconferencing and synchronous chat. On the other hand, synchronous interaction between universities with large time differences is very challenging (i.e. Japan cannot work synchronously with European or African countries during the class times for GU courses).

With the purpose of expanding the GU course to more students and allowing exchange between countries which struggle to video link due to time differences, the authors of this paper proposed the implementation of an asynchronous GU course where students communicate using social media platforms outside of class. Asynchronous communication does not only allow for students in different time zones to interact, but it may present other benefits for EFL students in an intercultural environment that are not possible in synchronous communication. Asynchronous communication gives students extra time to internalize information or reflect on certain ideas of the other culture, while in synchronous communication they have to react immediately, with time for reflection restricted to after the interaction occurs. Although asynchronous text communication is considered to be lean media which adds little or no nonverbal cues to a verbal message, research has shown that mediated communication makes communicating easier (Adler,

Rosenfeld, & Proctor II, 2013).

This type of remote and asynchronous personal communication is possible through social media, and higher education instructors all over the world have taken advantage of the students' knowledge and skills using social media. Research shows that students prefer to use Facebook for some instructional activities like sharing multimedia or textual educational resources and interacting with other classmates in discussions and debates (Joinson, 2008 as cited in Espinosa, 2015; Pennington, 2009 as cited in Espinosa, 2015). Although widely used, Facebook is not available everywhere. Since 2009, for example, China banned Facebook (Pham & Riley, 2017). That makes for almost one fifth of the world population with no access to this social network. In order to implement the asynchronous GU course, it was necessary to select a social media platform other than Facebook. For this reason, a new educational platform that provides a Facebook-like platform, SOLE SOCIAL, was used for the asynchronous GU pilot (Brighton, 2017; Brighton & Rudenko, 2016).

Implementation

Five universities in Asia, Europe, and North America including: Ural State Pedagogical University (USPU, Russia), HAN University of Applied Sciences (HAN, Netherlands), Krosno State College (KSC, Poland), Universidad de Monterrey (UDEM, Mexico), and The University of Shimane (USJ, Japan), agreed on a timetable to work with two or more partners during the fall (i.e., roughly September through December) of 2016. Interaction with each partner lasted 3-4 weeks which is the traditional linking time between partners in the synchronous Global Understanding class. One of the instructors created small groups in the SOLE SOCIAL platform for no more than 8 students from both countries. At the beginning of the interaction, students were given a weekly schedule of discussion topics (Figure 1) that included the five standard GU

discussion topics: College Life, Family and Cultural Traditions, Religion and the Meaning of Life, and Stereotypes and Prejudices. The students were asked to produce a personal introduction as a video clip and video clips about each of these topics that would serve as a starting point for the group discussion. Early in the week, they were asked to post the weekly video clip(s) on the group's wall. Next, they were asked to react to the videos by commenting and asking questions to further explore each topic. As in the synchronous GU Course, students were assigned one or two partners to work on a one-to-one collaborative project. They were asked to contact their partners immediately after the link started to select a topic and engage with their partner to share information, opinions, values, attitudes and emotions. The project was to be posted at the end of the interaction on the group's wall and presented locally. Instructors monitored the SOLE SOCIAL groups and were in constant communication with their colleagues during the 3-4 week interaction.

Week 1

Early in the week - Post personal introductions video clips and video on Introduction to Country / College Life in SOLE SOCIAL group wall

By mid-week - Interaction in SOLE SOCIAL group wall (reaction to the video clips/ questions/ answers)

Week 2

Early in the week - Post video on Family and cultural traditions / Religion and the meaning of life in SOLE SOCIAL group wall

By mid-week - Interaction in SOLE SOCIAL group wall (reaction to the video clips/ questions/ answers)

Week 3

Early in the week - Post video on Stereotypes and prejudice in SOLE SOCIAL group wall

By mid-week - Interaction in SOLE SOCIAL group wall (reaction to the video clips/ questions/ answers)

Week 4

Early in the week- Post Collaborative Project ppt and evidence of partner-to-partner interaction in SOLE SOCIAL group wall /Present projects locally

Figure 1. Weekly schedule example

At the end of the semester the students were asked to complete a survey aimed at

assessing the asynchronous intercultural collaborative experience and the effectiveness of the SOLE SOCIAL platform as an educational social network. Altogether, there were 118 responses collected from HAN, UDEM, USJ, and USPU. Table 1 shows a summary of the student participation in the asynchronous GU course and in the survey by country, as well as their opinion about the overall asynchronous intercultural collaborative experience.

Table 1					
<i>Overview of student participation in and student opinion of the asynchronous GU course</i>					
University/ Country	Number of Student Participants	Completed Survey	Completed Collaborative Project	Positive views about course	Would Recommend Course
UDEM/ Mexico	40	73%	72%	66%	79%
HAN/ Netherlands	42	81%	21%	32%	79%
KSC/ Poland	15	0%	Data not available	Data not available	Data not available
USPU/ Russia	10	100%	70%	30%	100%
USJ/ Japan	48	94%	67%	32%	42%

The View from Mexico

Altogether, forty UDEM undergraduate students participated in the pilot study. There was a different group of 8-12 students with each partner institution. All students were enrolled in a common and mandatory 6-credit course aimed at comparing global trends in Mexico and other

countries. At the beginning of the semester, students were informed about using SOLE SOCIAL, they were asked to form groups of four students and choose one of the four countries (Japan, Poland, Netherlands, or Russia) to research and interact with. Each student prepared a self-introductory video clip and each group of four students prepared video clips on three topics to be posted online using SOLE SOCIAL at a rate of one per week during the four-week interaction with their international partners.

The main purpose of the video clips was to offer enough information about each topic to begin discussion with their partners. The students were given a set of discussion questions and were asked to answer them in a creative manner by video that would last no more than five minutes. Each group of four students discussed the questions among themselves in advance and decided how they wanted to explain their answers in video. The video clips were graded as a group assignment. By the time the interaction with each partner started, the video clips were ready to be posted according to the weekly schedule. Students were encouraged to actively participate in the SOLE SOCIAL groups. Posting and reacting to video clips and answering questions were individually graded.

During the interaction in the SOLE SOCIAL groups, there were a number of issues with logging in to the platform, posting and viewing the video clips, and having to wait a long time for an answer or a question from international partners. In sum, students expected more interaction and they couldn't tell whether the delayed response from the partners was due to a lack of interest, a low level of ITC skills, or cultural differences. In the students' words:

“The experience at the beginning was very difficult and challenging because between the two countries there are 7 hours of difference and by the time we went to sleep in Mexico they were waking up. We had never experienced difficulties like not being able to post

videos, view content or enter the platform. There was almost no interaction through the SOLE SOCIAL platform and we could not see their introduction video. It was a good idea to contact us via Facebook and email as an alternative social media.”

“They have a different level of organization in terms of their projects and jobs. So agreeing to discuss the issues was sometimes complicated. Sometimes we felt that we were perceived as "stalkers" because we tried to get in touch with each other, and we did not know if this was considered "good" or "bad" manners or was only part of a project.”

“We occasionally perceived them as disinterested in their work. But when they explained why they had not been able to get in touch, they showed a high level of commitment. We were satisfied because we fulfilled our part of the interaction to carry out this project, however, the interaction sometimes could not be made at all.”

At the end of the semester, 73% of the UDEM participant students completed the survey. Of which, 72% successfully completed the one-to-one collaborative projects with their partners. To complete this task, the Mexican students used social media such as email, Whatsapp and Facebook, as some of their partners could never log in to the educational platform and this was the only means to get the work done. They also found these social media easier than SOLE SOCIAL to cope with some of the challenges of the assignment, challenges related with time difference and communicating with other EFL students. The students who completed the task reported having enjoyed knowing a person from a different country and his/her culture and lifestyle.

All in all, 79% of the Mexican respondents would recommend the course to future students as they learnt that “people all over the world in fact can interact with you,” “cultures are really different one from another,” “it’s interesting the way students in each country use

technology,” and “that we have to agree to work as a team to find the best possible result.”

The View from The Netherlands

Forty-two HAN students participated in the pilot study. They were all third year primary teacher training college students who had also signed up to study abroad the following semester. The course was an obligatory part of their preparatory programme. Contributing to the SOLE SOCIAL platform and writing a reflective essay on their experiences was conditional for receiving credits for the preparatory programme. Students had the opportunity to express their preference for one of the four partners. Then they were divided into smaller groups and during the semester each group interacted with one of the other four partners, according to the timetable. Because of the differing number of students among partners, it was not always possible to provide students with their preference.

At the beginning of the interaction, the students posted a video clip on the SOLE SOCIAL platform in which they introduced themselves and the university. The instructor encouraged them to make videos in the university building and at home, believing that ‘real life’ images would more easily elicit interaction between partners. The following weeks the students were supposed to post three video clips on three different GU topics.

During the course of their interaction, the students at HAN noticed a large difference between the various partner institutions. Whereas the students at UDEM in Mexico had already prepared their video clips before and posted them immediately, the Japanese students at USJ suffered from technical problems with the platform and could not post their video clips right from the start. The Dutch students reacted correspondingly. The Dutch-Mexican group tried to keep up with the timetable for posts however, the Dutch-Japanese group appeared not to stick to the timetable at all.

An evaluation session with the various Dutch groups, each having communicated with a partner from a different country, appeared to be very valuable. Students could exchange their experiences. Comparing and reflecting on different experiences with different countries made it possible to touch upon possible cultural differences and to let the student become aware of their own role in the interaction, or the lack of interaction.

After having evaluated the programme together with the students, the instructor concluded that there had been very little interaction on the SOLE SOCIAL platform. In exceptional cases, there had been communication outside the platform, through Skype or Whatsapp. This was mainly the case with the Mexican students. The vast majority of the group however, didn't have any interaction outside the platform. Most students 'blamed' SOLE SOCIAL for not posting or interacting. They described it as very user-unfriendly.

At the end of the course, 81% of the participating students completed the survey. 21% reported to have completed the collaborative project and they were all students who had collaborated with students at UDEM in Mexico. The Dutch-Japanese group was not able to complete the collaborative project due to technical problems. Although only 32% of the respondents to the survey reported positive views about the overall course (score 4 or 5 out of 5), 79% of the students would recommend the course to other students despite the technical problems encountered with USJ and despite their frustrations with using the SOLE SOCIAL platform. It may be concluded that they liked the overall concept and had successful interactions using other types of social media.

The View from Poland

The piloting of the programme in Poland involved an evening group of fifteen mature students in the 26+ project, a programme for students over the age of 26 where most of the

classes are taught through the e-learning platform. Students meet their teachers two or three times a week for an evening class as well as for a class on Saturdays. Given the diverse experience and knowledge of computing skills of the student group the biggest student concern was individual access to and use of social media. One student had never used any form of social media prior to the pilot project and as such, was at a disadvantage. Other students' experience ranged from competent, regular users of social media to infrequent but familiar users.

Unlike other social media platforms, the students' collective concern was connected to notifications of posts and constant interaction. The SOLE SOCIAL platform did not include an ability to receive email or text notifications of interaction on the posts and required more effort to regularly check the website for comments. Consequently, the students did find it difficult to manage the need for constant checking and interspersed commentary from their collaborators due to the lack of notification. The overall comment was that without notification it was easy to miss or forget about SOLE SOCIAL due to their work patterns and other commitments. Social media, in the student view, works best when it informs the user of updates and posts to keep the individual involved in discussions.

The use of videos and uploading of pictures brought a new dimension for the communication and collaboration. As the instructor of the GU group, it was possible to notice that the conversation topics were more lively and visually motivated. The students enjoyed the opportunity to make short videos of their college life and family as well as show pictures about Poland and the local region. It was the visual nature of the interaction that allowed the Polish students to think in detail about what was necessary to show and talk about. Rather than simply reacting and following a conversation online, the need to prepare and upload prior to facilitate the link encouraged consideration of many aspects of Polish culture and the students' lifestyle.

The outcome of this activity is, from the teacher's perspective, positive as it increased self-awareness and student engagement.

The commentary by the students in the post-course evaluation highlighted their need for more face-to-face conversations. In Krosno State College, the GU course is considered to be a part of the Practical English and Intercultural Communication requirements of the college degree. Consequently, the students' mentioned that they were anticipating more one-on-one conversations and group discussions. Although several students did use Skype to have conversations, the nature of the asynchronous project created difficulty in finding a convenient time for meetings due to work and family as well as time zone differences. Additionally, whereas the Polish students believed a synchronous element was necessary and essential, not all of their collaborative partners had similar motives and opportunities.

Although the 26+ student group did enjoy the project and engaged as much as possible, the general feeling was that the project was unsuccessful overall. This was due to certain issues with the students' use of technology and expectations of social media as well as the lack of online asynchronous communication. Despite the positive comments relating to video uploads, the students believed that in comparison to the synchronous GU, which two of the group chose as an elective course, the overall effect was not appealing and without some form of synchronous communication the course should not be offered again in the current form.

The View from Russia

Ten USPU undergraduate students participated in the pilot. They were all third year EFL teacher training college students who had not previously participated in multicultural collaboration experiences through a learning environment. Nor had any of these students had prior experience with study abroad. The Virtual Global Understanding course was incorporated

in the regular curriculum as part of the English Communication course. Therefore, the Virtual Global Understanding course itself was not credit-bearing although it added points to the overall evaluation of the English Communication course.

The pilot took place in the fall semester (September-December) only. At the beginning of the semester, students were informed about the activity. They were asked to subsequently collaborate with a partner/partners from Netherlands and Mexico. Each student was instructed to prepare a self-introductory video clip of themselves as well as three video clips based on GU topics to be posted once per week during the four-week interaction with their partners.

During the interaction, there were issues with logging into the platform, posting and viewing the video clips, it not being a user-unfriendly interface, and irregular rate of interaction with partners from other countries. Despite the challenges related to the SOLE SOCIAL, overall, the pilot proved to have positive outcomes which include a better awareness of a different culture and acquisition of learning strategies crucial for successful collaboration. For example, one student reported:

“It's not so difficult to communicate with people from another country. It can be very interesting to chat with people, who have different cultures, different interests. You can learn a lot by speaking with them.”

Another participant wrote:

“I learnt that I need to answer messages quickly and mind time difference. I also learned to manage my time, watch the deadline. You should remind the partner about the project.”

At the end of the course, 100% of the participating students completed the survey. 70% reported to have completed the collaborative project. The success was achieved through constant

coordination of participants' actions. The participants from USPU reported that it was them who took the lead during collaboration with their partners. They believe to have initiated and maintained the interaction throughout the course. Although only 30% of the respondents to the survey reported positive views about the course, 100% of the students would recommend it to other students.

The View from Japan

Forty-eight USJ undergraduate students participated, with students from either HAN or UDEM, for about one month in the fall semester (October to December). Most students posted the required videos and interaction with partners was required. However, some students were frustrated by log-in difficulties and used alternative media such as Facebook and email. Due to the October start to the semester in Japan, students had no chance to prepare videos in advance of collaboration, and so they were shooting video and responding to partners in the same month. Students were required to interview their partners and make group presentations in class about Mexico or the Netherlands after the collaborative project was completed.

At the end of the project, 94% of the participating students completed the survey. 67% of the Japanese respondents successfully completed the one-to-one collaborative projects with their partners, but only 42% would recommend this course to future students. The students mentioned "understanding other cultures," "the way to introduce Japanese culture," and "practicing English" among the three most important things they learnt from the course. ICT skills also improved.

The students struggled greatly with the SOLE SOCIAL platform. They were asked to create accounts during class using their official university email addresses, which is their student number. The platform automatically treated applications from such similar addresses as an attack

and blocked all of their applications. Repeated emails from the instructor to the administrator cleared the problem for most students, but several were unable to log in to the site at all despite trying with multiple email addresses. This was very frustrating for students, and some of them seemed to give up due to the difficulty of accessing the platform. At the end of the semester, one student commented that ‘interaction with Dutch students was so difficult that I didn’t try very hard.’

The students also responded to a general survey administered for all USJ courses. Forty-four of these students answered about the course in question, and 24 of them chose to comment on the asynchronous GU project. Fifteen students included complaints about using the platform, but eleven of those students were positive about working with overseas partners and wanted to try again using a different platform. Several students suggested that we try Facebook or email next time. The remaining nine comments were positive about the asynchronous GU course and these Japanese students had found it both enjoyable and meaningful.

Summary of the Results

According to the survey, 40% of all respondents were positive about the course, while 31% were ambivalent, and 29% had negative views. Yet, 67% of all students would recommend it to future students. Positive opinions included learning about other cultures, practicing English, connecting with students from other countries, enjoying watching partners’ videos, and making friends. In addition to the typical “growing pains” of implementing any new form of a learning environment, there were negative opinions related to confusion about the instructions on the part of the students, lack of time to complete the tasks, overlap with exams (in specific instances), and problems with the SOLE SOCIAL platform.

The many-to-many virtual learning environment (Dillenbourg, 2000) set for the students

in the SOLE SOCIAL platform included characteristic of social media such as posting, sharing and commenting objects. While 60% reported being frequent users of social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), only 30% of the respondents reported a frequent use of the SOLE SOCIAL platform (10% at least a few times a week, 20% once or twice a week). Although the use of SOLE SOCIAL was required in order for the instructors to monitor the group discussion and interaction, when students encountered problems logging in, they were encouraged by their instructors to solve the problem using other means of communication. And so they did, as 79% reported having used other social media for communication, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Messenger. Still, only 15.3% of these reported having discussed the GU topics. In these cases, it seems that students were not using social media as a productive means of discussing the course topics and although it is a valuable way to build friendships and enhance cultural understanding, this type of communication should be reserved for outside of the time for completing course requirements. Nevertheless, when the students managed to use the SOLE SOCIAL platform as intended, the discussion of the GU topics in the groups was very productive. Figure 2 illustrates the kind of interaction expected in the educational platform.

At the end of the interaction, 55% of all the respondents successfully completed the one-to-one collaborative projects with a partner from the other country. For this collaboration, they used social networks such as Facebook and WhatsApp where they would get notifications and they could answer faster and sometimes synchronously. They also used Google drive to create and share PowerPoint presentations or word documents and worked on them synchronously or asynchronously as time allowed. Only a few negotiated a time for a Skype video call. They enjoyed the one-to-one interaction as they learned about their partner views, about the partner's country, and also about their own country. Therefore, for the purposes of working together on

the collaborative project, the use of social media was quite productive.

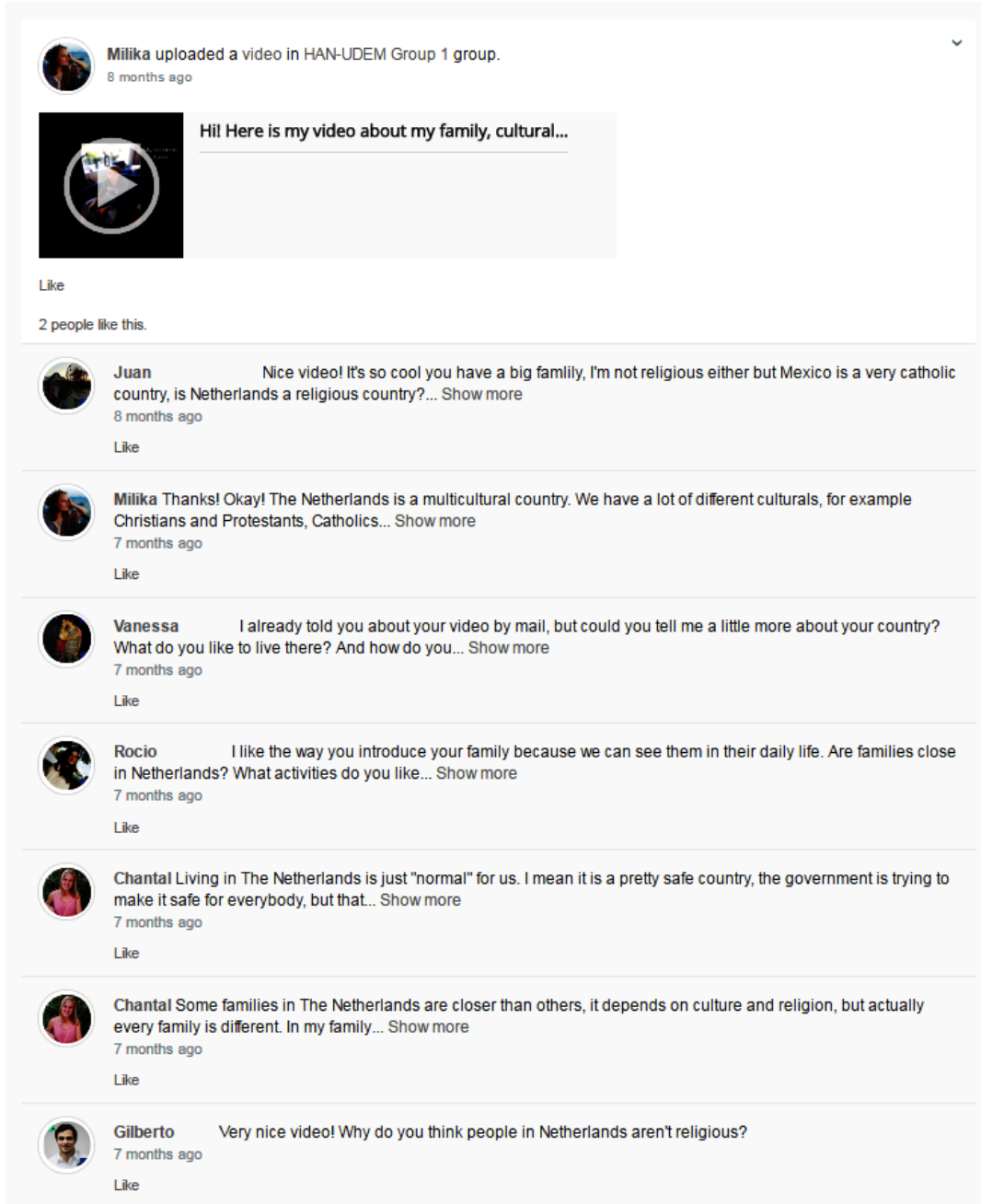


Figure 2. Interaction between Dutch and Mexican students after a video about family and cultural traditions was posted by a Dutch student in the SOLE SOCIAL platform (Villarreal-Solano, M.O., 2016).

Moreover, respondents who completed the one-to-one collaborative project showed more

positive attitudes towards the course than those who did not complete the assignment which is not surprising overall. Figure 3 shows that 55% of the 65 respondents who completed the one-to-one assignment had positive views about the course and 20% showed ambivalence. On the other hand, only 21% of the 53 students who did not complete the project had positive views about the course and 45% showed ambivalence. Negative views decreased when respondents completed the assignment from 34% to 25%. Overall, this indicates that completion of the collaborative project increased positive attitudes more than 30% justifying the value of having students complete this assignment. Negative views decreased when respondents completed the assignment. Furthermore, this suggests that the one-to-one model of interaction using asynchronous communication had a more positive effect than the many-to-many model implied in the virtual learning environment set for the students in in the educational platform.

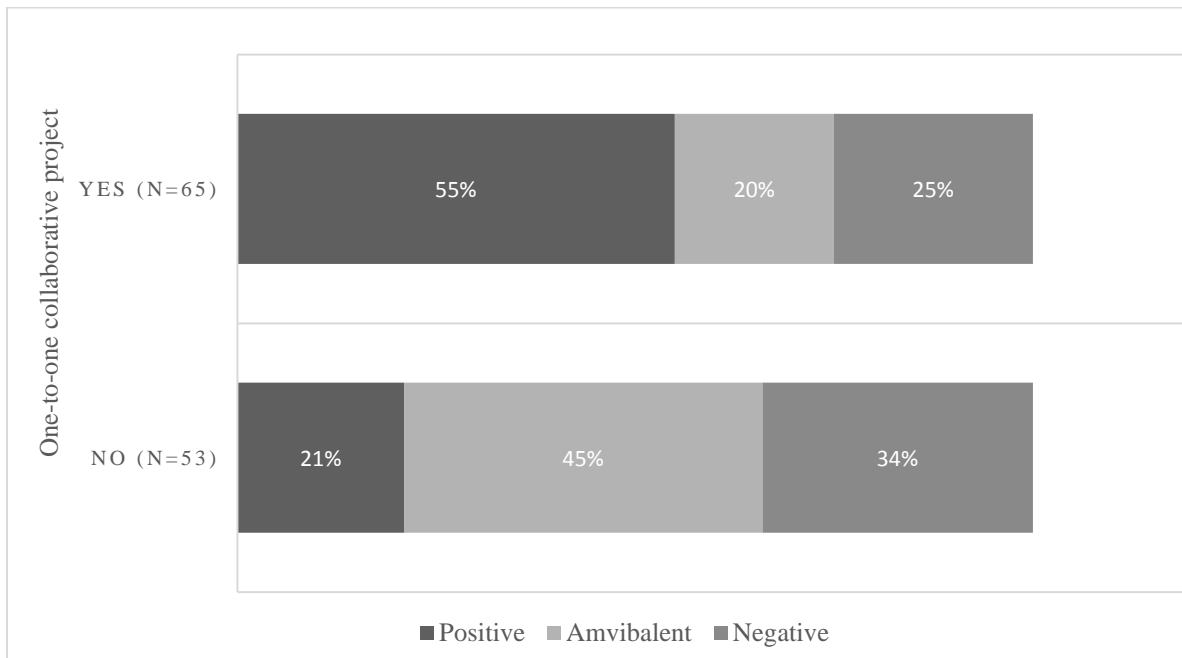


Figure 3. One-to-one collaborative project and attitudes toward the GU asynchronous course

Future directions

This pilot project was originally motivated by the idea that the GU course should be made more accessible to students, especially those who live in countries that are not able to link together during the synchronous GU course (e.g., East Asian countries such as Japan with countries in Europe and Africa) due to the time differences. The use of social media, which is commonly used by students outside of class, was the logical choice for setting up a platform for asynchronous communication. This platform would allow the necessary flexibility to facilitate communication between partner universities in this situation.

The Asynchronous Global Understanding project has generated many comments by students participating in the pilot and outcomes not only for the future of the project but also for the GU course in general. Overall, 67% of students would recommend this course because of what they learned about other cultures and how they connected with their peers in other countries. Based on this response, the asynchronous experience appears to have been a success and lends support to continue offering this course. However, based on student responses that indicated only 30% of students used SOLE SOCIAL on a frequent basis and 79% preferred to communicate with their partners using other forms of social media implies that use of SOLE SOCIAL has its drawbacks for offering the asynchronous GU course.

Despite the technological issues which are a part of any virtual learning experience or online course, the outcome has shown that there are many elements which enhanced the student experience and increased collaboration between participants (e.g., a majority of students completing the collaborative project). As such, the authors believe that the following points are ways in which the Global Partners in Education can explore in the future:

1. Sharing personal video clips created by students to illustrate GU topics and to broaden the current discussion topics from conversations to interactive explorations.

2. Allowing students access to asynchronous GU courses which can encourage the development of student self-learning skills and investment in their own education.
3. Increasing out-of-class interaction through development of the GU core to include asynchronous platforms for GU as enhancement of the synchronous programme.

With the above comments in mind, the authors and project directors are committed to continuing the project in 2017 for students and testing other available platforms to find a technology that encourages interaction and collaboration in an educational setting. In addition, we will evaluate the various ways in which instructors would successfully motivate students to participate in the asynchronous GU course and which strategies were not as successful. Furthermore, despite the small-scale nature of the current project, there are many other partners who have expressed interest in joining and continuing the piloting of the concepts explored in the work so far and we hope to include them in the future as well. The authors hope that the work currently undertaken will expand and develop in the coming years to work alongside and to enhance the current offering of GU.

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