Benefits of Developing Friendships with International Partner Students

in a Global Understanding Course

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Abstract

This study used assessment data from a Global Understanding (GU) course to examine the

impact of intercultural interaction when students feel that they have developed close friendships.

The GU course follows empirically-based guidelines for reducing prejudice, and even though it

provides students with a unique opportunity to interact with different cultural groups, this contact

does not automatically benefit all students. However, when students develop close friendships

with their international partners during the GU course, as many of these students do, then they

reap the benefits described in the research literature as important for reducing prejudice—

increased knowledge about outgroups, decreased communication anxiety, and increased

perspective taking.

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The purpose of this study was to assess outcomes for students participating in a Global

Understanding (GU) course. This course was designed to provide college students with

international experiences while they remained on their home campuses (Chia, Poe, & Yang,

2011) and it presently involves the collaboration of faculty, administrators, and technology

personnel from more than 60 institutions in 30 countries—a group called Global Partners in

Education. Each GU class is scheduled to work with two or three partner countries in blocks of

six to nine linking days per country. During a block of linking days, students communicate with

international partners in real-time small discussion groups via videoconferencing (Figure 1) and

also in individual chat rooms. Topics for discussion are designed to progress from easy "safe"

HHN students with their ECU partners
(Germany)

ECU students with their HHN partners
(USA)

Figure 1. Students who participated in videoconference discussions from HHN and ECU.

topics (e.g., personal introductions, college life, family structure, holidays, and cultural

traditions) to more challenging "controversial" topics (e.g., meaning of life, religion, stereotypes

and prejudice). Students are assigned to work with one or two partner students from each of the

partner countries in a given semester. In addition to in-class interactions, students are required to engage in email (or other social media) exchanges with their assigned partners, and to complete a small collaborative project that is jointly presented on the final linking day.

Intercultural Interactions Are Not Automatically Beneficial

Opportunities to interact with partner students from multiple countries presumably increases knowledge and understanding of cultural differences. However, intercultural interactions are not always beneficial and sometimes attitudes may become more negative after interactions (Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002). For example, our GU students sometimes initially assume that intercultural communication will be easy but then they experience communication challenges which increases their uncertainty and anxiety. Or sometimes they begin with such a high level of communication anxiety that discussions remain on a superficial level and they only feel comfortable interacting with international peers when they are discussing cultural similarities or safe topics.

Learning to engage in meaningful intercultural interactions is a developmental process and students' level of intercultural maturity plays an important role (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). The development of intercultural maturity has both cognitive and emotional components. The cognitive components include developing a more complex understanding of cultural differences, an ability to change perspectives, and a desire to understand challenges to one's personal beliefs. The emotional components include being able to accept cultural differences without feeling threatened by them. Research suggests that people who are less interculturally mature react to anxiety and discomfort in interactions by disengaging and avoiding (King, Baxter Magolda, & Masse, 2011). In contrast, people who are more interculturally mature use anxiety and discomfort as a cue to explore, which leads to increased engagement and greater

appreciation for other perspectives. Thus, with increased intercultural experience, students'

progress from assuming that knowledge is either right or wrong to an increasing acceptance of

uncertainty and awareness of multiple perspectives. The highest level of intercultural maturity is

reflected by the ability to not only consider alternative cultural viewpoints, but to consciously

shift from one perspective to another.

Intergroup Contact Theory and Reducing Prejudice

Racial conflict in the USA has prompted decades of research by American social

psychologists on the causes and cures for prejudice (Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011).

Much of this research has been guided by Allport's (1954) intergroup contact theory. Allport

outlined four necessary conditions for contact between groups to result in decreased prejudice:

(1) the groups must have equal status during the contact, (2) the groups must share common

goals, (3) the contact must involve cooperation rather than competition, and (4) the contact must

be sanctioned by authorities or law. Although Allport's four conditions do enhance the positive

effects of contact between groups, they are not necessary conditions for reducing prejudice

(Pettigrew et al., 2011). Instead, the primary factors that mediate the effects of intergroup contact

on prejudice are reduced anxiety and increased empathy (Pettigrew et al., 2011).

How does contact between groups help to reduce prejudice? Intergroup contact increases

knowledge about other groups, decreases anxiety about interactions, and increases empathy and

perspective taking (Pettigrew et al., 2011). Increasing one's knowledge about other groups helps

to challenge ethnocentrism. People learn to understand reasons for different norms and customs,

so they are less likely to believe that their own norms and customs are the natural way that

everyone should behave. Negative assumptions about outgroups can be corrected when new

information arises which contradicts those assumptions. We feel uncomfortable when we hold

conflicting views (cognitive dissonance) and we are motivated to restore internal consistency by resolving the conflicting attitudes (Gawronski, 2012). Intergroup contact also helps to decrease communication anxiety by reducing uncertainty (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). In unfamiliar situations, it can be difficult to predict how the interaction will proceed and how best to respond. This, in turn, decreases motivation to interact and acts as a barrier to effective communication and cultural understanding. Intergroup contact helps people to understand other points of view (cognitive component) and to feel empathy (emotional component). Both facilitate increased motivation for interaction, tolerance, conflict resolution, and decreased ethnocentrism and prejudiced attitudes.

Cross-group friendships are particularly important, and they have greater impact on reducing prejudice when they are of longer duration and more intimate (sharing personal information) (Pettigrew et al., 2011). Friendship creates many of the conditions that make intergroup contact effective. For example, friendship usually involves equal status interactions and cooperation in working toward shared goals, three of Allport's (1954) conditions. And positive feelings toward a single friend improves attitudes toward the entire group (Pettigrew et al., 2011). Even indirect contact may reduce prejudice, such as having a friend who has a close outgroup friend (Pettigrew et al., 2011).

The purpose of this study was to use the GU assessment data to test whether changes in intercultural competence, communication anxiety, and perspective taking were greater for students who developed stronger friendships with their international partners during the GU course.

Methods

Participants

During the Spring 2016 and Fall 2016 semesters, 1244 students from 38 universities in 22 countries took the assessment survey for the GU course. Participants for this study were 576 students who completed both the pretest and posttest surveys. These students ranged in age from 16 to 23 (91% were 18-23) and 67% were women. This was the first time taking a GU course for 95% of the participants, 88% had never studied abroad, and 46% had never traveled outside their home country.

Materials

The GU assessment survey included measures of communication anxiety, perspective taking, and other items created for the purposes of assessing intercultural competence and course satisfaction. The item used to establish the groups for comparison was: "I feel that during this Global Understanding course I have developed a close friendship with at least one student from another country." Students responded by choosing either yes or no.

The intercultural communication apprehension scale (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997) is a self-report measure of the level of anxiety that people experience when communicating with people from different cultures. The scale consists of 14 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Half of the items were reverse scored so that a higher average score indicates greater levels of anxiety. This measure was used on both the pretest and posttest surveys.

The social perspective taking motivation scale (Gehlback et al., 2008) is a self-report measure of how often people attempt to understand the thoughts and feelings of others. The scale consists of 7 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = almost never to 5 = almost all

of the time. Higher average scores indicate greater perspective taking motivation. This measure was used on both the pretest and posttest surveys.

Additional items were created to assess intercultural competence, as well as students' satisfaction with interactions with their international partners and with the GU course. A few of the items were used on both the pretest and posttest surveys, but most were used only on the posttest survey. Participants indicated strength of agreement with the items using 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree (with the exception of a few items, as indicated in the tables). Relevant items are included in the Results section along with the corresponding analyses.

Procedure

The GU assessment was administered in English as an online survey. It was taken by students as close as possible to the first and last days of the GU course (before interactions with any international partners and after the conclusion of all interactions with international partners. Analyses included only students who completed both the pretest and posttest surveys.

<center>**Results**</center>

For all analyses, students were divided into two groups, those who responded yes (64%) versus no (36%) to the item concerning whether or not they developed a close friendship with at least one student from another country during the GU course. For measures that were included on only the posttest survey, data were analyzed with t-tests comparing the two friendship groups. For measures that were included on both the pretest and posttest surveys, data were analyzed with 2 (pretest vs posttest) x 2 (close friend group vs no friend group) mixed factorial ANOVAs. Means, standard deviations, and results of the statistical tests are presented in Table 1 for the t-tests and Table 2 for the ANOVAs.

Increased Knowledge

On the posttest, students indicated strength of agreement with the statement, "I have learned a great deal about other countries and their cultures during this Global Understanding course." The close friend group expressed stronger agreement with this statement than the no friend group. Also on the posttest, students were asked, "Compared to the beginning of the class, how interested are you now in reading about or listening to international news?" and "…, how interested are you now in traveling to different countries?" These items used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = much less to 5 = much more. After completing the GU course, the close friend group was more interested in international news and traveling to different countries than the no friend group.

On both the pretest and the posttest, students rated the statement, "I make extra effort to learn about other countries and cultures during my free time." This item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = never to 5 = all of the time. There was a significant increase in how often students engaged in learning about other countries from pretest to posttest for the close friend group, but no change for the no friend group.

Decreased Anxiety

Intercultural communication anxiety decreased after taking the GU course. Both friendship groups showed a significant decrease in communication anxiety. The two groups did not differ on the pretest, but the close friend group showed lower communication anxiety on the posttest than the no friend group.

Making international friends during the GU course also benefitted students who are anxious or uncomfortable interacting with local peers or speaking during class. This was assessed with two items on both the pretest and posttest surveys: "I feel anxious or

uncomfortable interacting with other students in my classes when I do not know them." and
"Often I feel anxious or uncomfortable speaking up during class time." There was a significant
decrease in anxiety after taking the GU course for both items for the close friend group, but no
change for the no friend group.

Increased Perspective Taking

Perspective taking increased after taking the GU course for all students, although this
finding was relatively weak. However, several items on the posttest supplemented this finding.
Students were asked, "How often did you and this partner [the one with whom they felt they had
developed the closest friendship] talk about topics where you had different opinions or
disagreed?" The choices were never (1), rarely (2), sometimes (3), or often (4). Students in the
close friend group were more likely than the no friend group to have discussed topics where they
disagreed. Students rated strength of agreement (7-point scale) with, "The Global Understanding
class helped me to understand different perspectives." They were also asked, "Compared to the
beginning of the semester, my overall view of this partner's country:" and the choices ranged
from 1 = became much more negative to 5 = became much more positive. Compared to the no
friend group, the close friend group felt more strongly that the GU class helped them to
understand different perspectives, and they reported more positive views of their partners'
countries.

Enjoyment of the GU Experience

All course satisfaction measures were higher for the close friend group than for the no
friend group, including quality of interaction with partners, amount of written communication
outside of class time, real-time discussions (both videoconferencing and chatrooms), email
contact, desire to continue interaction with partners, overall satisfaction with the course, interest

in taking more GU courses, and number of times they have recommended the GU course to

others.

Table 1
Results for Comparison of the Two Friendship Groups on Posttest Items

Survey Item	Close Friendship Group (*M & SD*)	No Friendship Group (*M & SD*)	*t*	*df*	*p*
Learned a great deal about other countries & cultures (scale 1-7)	6.02 (.91)	5.78 (1.05)	2.89	563	.004
Interest in international news (scale 1-5)	3.98 (.93)	3.71 (.87)	3.38	553	.001
Interest in travel to other countries (scale 1-5)	4.35 (.89)	4.17 (.97)	2.29	557	.022
Discussed topics where opinions disagreed (scale 1-4)	2.88 (.80)	2.65 (.78)	3.30	565	.001
Understand different perspectives (scale 1-7)	6.03 (.88)	5.70 (1.13)	3.92	564	.000
View of partner's country (scale 1-5)	4.30 (.73)	4.01 (.78)	4.44	567	.000
Quality of interaction with partners (scale 1-7)	5.85 (1.18)	5.30 (1.32)	5.11	568	.000
Amount of written communication (scale 1-7)	5.68 (1.26)	4.92 (1.45)	6.53	567	.000
Real time discussion via videoconferencing (scale 1-7)	6.09 (1.08)	5.81 (1.16)	2.87	566	.004
Real time discussion via chat room (scale 1-7)	5.84 (1.25)	5.43 (1.37)	3.59	564	.000

Email contact (scale 1-7)	5.51 (1.48)	4.55 (1.54)	7.34	567	.000
Desire to continue interaction with partner (scale 1-7)	5.95 (1.08)	4.53 (1.31)	13.94	566	.000
Overall satisfaction with course (scale 1-7)	6.20 (.86)	5.66 (1.25)	6.09	562	.000
Interest in taking more GU courses (scale 1-7)	6.19 (.91)	5.57 (1.40)	6.31	562	.000
How often recommended GU course (never, once, a few times)	2.72 (.52)	2.34 (.77)	6.85	562	.000

Table 2

Results for 2 (Pre-Post) x 2 (Friendship Groups) ANOVAs

Survey Item = Make extra effort to learn about countries and cultures (scale 1-5)

Close Friend Group		No Friend Group	
Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
3.14 (.91)	3.37 (.87)	2.85 (1.00)	2.90 (.92)

- Pre-post main effect significant, $F(1,560) = 12.10$, $p = .001$.

- Friendship group main effect significant, $F(1,560) = 29.16$, $p = .000$.

- Interaction significant, $F(1,560) = 5.46$, $p = .02$.

- Pre-post difference not significant for no friend group, but significant for close friend group.

- The two friendship groups were significantly different on both the pretest and posttest.

Intercultural Communication Anxiety Measure (scale 1-5)

Close Friend Group		No Friend Group	
Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
2.19 (.64)	2.00 (.61)	2.27 (.65)	2.14 (.60)

- Pre-post main effect significant, $F(1,541) = 44.17$, $p = .000$.

- Friendship group main effect significant, $F(1,541) = 5.03$, $p = .025$.

- Interaction not significant, $F(1,541) = 1.54$, $p = .214$.

- Pre-post difference significant for both friendship groups.

- The two friendship groups were not significantly different on pretest, but were

  significantly different on posttest.

Survey Item = Feel anxious interacting with local peers (scale 1-7)

Close Friend Group		No Friend Group	
Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
3.48 (1.56)	3.00 (1.60)	3.82 (1.82)	3.53 (.92)

- Pre-post main effect significant, $F(1,287) = 12.62$, $p = .000$.

- Friendship group main effect significant, $F(1,287) = 6.21$, $p = .013$.

- Interaction not significant, $F < 1$.

- Pre-post difference not significant for no friend group, but significant for close friend group.

- The two friendship groups were not significantly different on pretest, but were significantly

  different on posttest.

Survey Item = Feel anxious speaking up in class (scale 1-7)

Close Friend Group		No Friend Group	
Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
3.44 (1.67)	2.87 (1.64)	3.67 (1.78)	3.40 (1.77)

- Pre-post main effect significant, $F(1,287) = 16.17$, $p = .000$.

- Friendship group main effect significant, $F(1,287) = 4.29$, $p = .039$.

- Interaction not significant, $F(1,287) = 2.14$, $p = .144$.

- Pre-post difference not significant for no friend group, but significant for close friend group.

- The two friendship groups were not significantly different on pretest, but were significantly different on posttest.

Perspective Taking Measure (scale 1-5)

Close Friend Group		No Friend Group	
Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
3.81 (.67)	3.86 (.70)	3.70 (.70)	3.75 (.72)

- re-post main effect significant, $F(1,551) = 3.90$, $p = .049$.

- Friendship group main effect marginally significant, $F(1,551) = 3.79$, $p = .052$.

- Interaction not significant, $F < 1$.

Discussion

Although the GU course provided students with a unique opportunity to develop firsthand knowledge about cultural differences without leaving campus, previous research and anecdotal observations make it clear that these interactions are not always beneficial. The main findings of the present study, based on the GU assessment data, are that the GU experience is significantly more beneficial when students develop close friendships with international peers. Students who reported that yes, they did have a close friendship with at least one of their GU partners, also self-reported that they learned more, had stronger interest in continuing to learn more, were able

to consider different viewpoints, and felt less anxious during intercultural interactions than students who said that they did not form any close friendships during the GU course.

The GU course is structured to follow empirically-based guidelines for reducing prejudice (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew et al., 2011). It is designed to encourage the development of intercultural friendships. Students engage in multiple live small group discussions and they are assigned to continue and expand their discussions with specific individuals. Early discussions focus on topics that are relatively easy and safe as students first get to know each other. This should help students cope with the many uncertainties present in intercultural interactions, thus reducing anxiety. As students become more comfortable in their interactions, the door opens for exchanging knowledge and personal experiences. This helps students to begin considering different viewpoints, particularly when discussing topics on which they have differing opinions. Students have equal status throughout their interactions and they work together toward common goals. Cooperation and deeper perspective taking are encouraged via the assignment of a collaborative project. These features of the GU course helped students to reap the benefits described in the research literature as important for reducing prejudice—increasing knowledge about other cultures, increasing the ability to consider different viewpoints, and decreasing intercultural communication anxiety. One ongoing challenge for the GU program is finding ways to foster the development of intercultural maturity by helping students cope with the discomfort of cognitive dissonance so that it promotes growth rather than inhibition and avoidance.

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