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Title
“Learning through Experimentation, Commitment, and Sharing: A Higher Education Café International”

Authors
William E. Herman
Professor
Department of Psychology
State University of New York College at Potsdam
Potsdam, New York, U.S.A. 13676-2294

and

Dr. Frederik Ahlgrimm
University Lecturer
Department of Education
Universität Potsdam
Potsdam, Germany
Abstract

A SUNY psychology professor and a German counterpart who have worked together over the past five years to involve their students in an international exchange venue, will offer an Action Learning Lab for those interested in exploring the dynamics of what makes such exchanges work effectively and efficiently over time. The co-authors draw upon their personal international experiences and a theoretical base to form the foundation of the session. Participants will explore the process of developing, building, and sustaining international professional relationships and educational partnerships. The discussion will be organized in the World Café format, allowing and inviting participants to actively share their thoughts and experiences throughout the whole session.

Keywords: international higher education, global education, international collaboration
Learning through Experimentation, Commitment, and Sharing: A Higher Education Café International

The essence of intercultural education is the acquisition of empathy—the ability to see the world as others see it, and to allow for the possibility that others may see something we have failed to see, or may see it more accurately.

— J. William Fulbright

This conference paper attempts to achieve two lofty goals: 1) outline a theoretical base for healthy international professional relationships and 2) describe the World Café roundtable format employed in a conference setting. The co-authors while representing the State University of New York (SUNY) College at Potsdam in the U.S.A. and the Universität Potsdam in Germany and under the umbrella of a signed International Exchange Agreement discovered creative ways to collaborate that included their students. The co-authors decided that it was time to “take-stock” after five-years of collaboration and share such insights with a broader professional audience. Fortunately, the COIL Conference offered a venue to reflect and share such learning experiences with others.

A recent report prepared by the American Council on Education entitled: *International Education Partnerships: A Global Review of Standards and Practices* (ACE, 2015) offered several thematic principles of “good practice” for higher education leaders and stakeholders. Of particular interest to our topic is Theme 2: Faculty and Staff Engagement outlined below:

Well-qualified academic and administrative staff are fundamental to the success of international partnerships and programs. Given the challenges inherent in cross-border collaborations, a deep commitment to the goals of global engagement—along with a willingness to take a long view of the benefits—is important for all personnel. (p. 10)
This ACE Report further suggested that one strategy for faculty engagement includes the ability to capitalize on the enthusiasm of faculty “champions” defined as “a single faculty member or group of faculty members who are already heavily involved in international partnerships…” in order to serve as “key catalysts for expanding and strengthening strategic partnerships” (p. 12).

We stand united in championing the many benefits of international partnerships while realistically reminding readers of this paper that there are many frustrations and failures that lurk in the pathways of effective international educational collaboration. Our hope is that our stories of successes might help readers ask thoughtful and personal questions related to this exceptionally complex human and cultural endeavor.

Lumby and Foskett (2016) suggested that internationalization cannot simply be seen as “cash-cows” or a panacea to solve what is wrong in higher education today. Investments in international educational programs are not always a “win-win” situation in the world-wide higher educational marketplace. Clearly the hidden benefits and potential problems of international educational efforts need to be considered in the decision making process by stakeholders.

DeZurie et al. (2012) summarized several crucial topics to consider addressing in international educational exchanges: emphasize planning, know the context, build relationships continuously and be flexible, use technology to enhance communication, ensure that both parties benefit, create common ground, and think long-term. You will note in this paper that we have chosen to focus upon one facet that we think is most crucial and often neglected—building healthy long-term relationships with international partners.

Readers might be curious regarding exactly what we accomplished over the past five years and the long-term relationship between our institutions. There has been an International Exchange Agreement and Memorandum of Understanding between the State University of New
York College at Potsdam and the Universität Potsdam, for over 25 years and the current agreement expires in 2023. During this quarter of a century, collaboration has taken place that has allowed for student, faculty, and personnel visits in both directions. Since first meeting in the summer of 2013 on the Universität Potsdam campus, the co-authors of this paper have been involved in several joint activities, some of which directly involved students. The following list highlights some of some of these professional activities:

- Each faculty member (Bill and Frederik) has visited the other’s home campus and personal/private homes at least once.

- Bill and Frederik co-taught the month-long course: “From Theory to Practice” for 27 prospective German school teachers and Bill served as a research consultant for 12 education doctoral students at the Universität Potsdam on-site in Germany in June of 2016.

- Bill and Frederik made a joint on-site presentation at the 2016 SUNY COIL Conference held in New York City on the following topic: “COIL as a Double Helix: Insights from a Three Year German-American On-Line learning Collaboration.”

- The article entitled “The Marketplace of International Experiences” describing Bill and Frederik’s collaboration appeared in the Portal magazine published in the German language by the Universität Potsdam (see Hermanns (2016)).

- During the 2014-2015 academic year, German and American students planning to become classroom teachers used Poly-Com for a ‘real-time” video conference. These students were in Bill and Frederik’s classes and each German student was paired with 2-3 American students in order to make a student “team.” Each Team eventually produced a Prezi post related to the topics of grading and evaluation. (see Herman & Ahlgrimm, 2016)

- During the 2013-2014 academic year, German and American students planning to become classroom teachers and enrolled in Bill and Frederik’s classes were all registered on the American campus Moodle website with access to nearly 50 learning tools that included classroom stories, study guides, quizzes with answer keys, etc.

- On March 3, 2014, Bill appeared via Skype and Frederik appeared in person on-site at a conference in Germany to discuss their current international on-line learning efforts.
• On March 17, 2014, Bill appeared via Skype and Frederik appeared in person on-site at the DGHD Conference in Braunschweig, Germany, to offer an overview of their international partnership.

• The article entitled “Via Video over the Big Pond” describing Bill and Frederik’s collaboration appeared in the Portal magazine published in the German language by the Universität Potsdam (see Szameitat (2014)).

This should give readers an idea of the type of professional work that we have done together. It deserves to be pointed out that the co-authors also spent time together outside of the professional arena by visiting a Berlin museum and attending the 2016 Paul McCartney Concert. While in the U.S.A., they both attended a rehearsal session at the Crane School of Music at SUNY Potsdam and took pictures of the Adirondack Mountains while traveling to New York City. We remain convinced that a personal and professional friendship was built by working together as professional educators and also by spending quality time together outside of our professional roles and responsibilities.

We employed “taking stock” and reflective thinking as a theoretical framework in order to produce mindful, honest, and purposeful reflections regarding why our professional relationship has been sustained. Our first step was to independently review our private notes in order to refresh our memories and react to the following guiding questions. Our independently generated responses are included in bold below.

1) Why did your professional relationship thrive over the past 5 years?

Bill (B): Commitment, university support, personal sacrifice, intrinsic value of learning about teacher preparation in another country, chance of becoming a world-wide scholar, learning about cultural differences and similarities, goodness of fit with our backgrounds, patience/understanding, caring about the safety/well-being of others, making compromises including teaching/learning and travel adaptations, mutual respect and admiration

Frederik (F): In my view, this relationship thrived due to the openness and curiosity on both sides to try new paths and experiment with formats that involved both colleagues in new and unfamiliar roles. This openness required much understanding for the other’s
professional working environment, personal circumstances, as well as his institution’s rules and expectations. Nevertheless, the interest in the colleague’s ideas, knowledge, and mindset and the resulting chances to learn were forces that made the collaboration blossom.

2) Was there a life-event that convinced you this relationship was going to flourish and be sustained?
(B): Once I offered Frederik a series of multiple-choice items over the content we were covering with both the German and American students. I made a prediction regarding how his students might struggle with a couple of the questions, just like my students have been confused in the past. A few days later, Frederik wrote me that his students had struggled with the same items exactly in the manner that I had predicted.

(F): I cannot think of one individual life-event. My view is that the relationship grew out of a series of personal interactions that included: Bill’s visit to Potsdam in 2013, our close work together in the German on-site class we taught together, Frederik’s visit in Potsdam, NY, Bill’s stay in Potsdam, Germany, and many Skype sessions. In my memory, the common activities were always highlights: visits to the SUNY campuses in Potsdam, NY, and in Albany, NY, the New York State Museum in Albany, NY, presenting together at the NYC COIL conference in 2016, a co-taught class in Potsdam, Germany, the Paul McCartney concert, a Berlin museum visit, and a barbecue at my home in Berlin.

3) What do you admire the most about your international colleague?
(B): Frederik’s excellent English skills, his travel experience, knowledge of the German education system, his willingness to share his professional connections, his dedication to life-long learning

(F): Among many things, I do deeply appreciate and admire Bill’s profound knowledge in psychology and his ability to apply it in diverse and new contexts - both in teaching and in his written work.

4) Describe an accomplishment/activity with your colleague that was most rewarding and/or meaningful.
(B): Teaching a course together on Frederik’s German campus, 2016 COIL presentation, traveling together by car through the Adirondack Mountains, attending social events together, meeting his family

(F): Again, picking out one thing is difficult. What stood out for me were the classes that I adapted to meet our COIL on-line teaching concept, using Anita Woolfolk’s excellent textbook was a great revelation to me, teaching in the English language, and preparing the German students for the exchange with American scholars. This total experience was very rewarding, offered new insights, and shaped my path toward future international exchanges.
As we review the compilation of juxtaposed reflections, some generalizations become possible regarding the factors that might encourage collaboration such as the importance of building trust, respect, admiration, shared experiences, willingness to take risks, openness to new experiences, and toleration of some ambiguity. These reflective discoveries encouraged us along the lines that we might have something of value to share with other professionals involved in international collaborations. Fortunately, our topic was seen as important and the SUNY COIL Conference Committee accepted our proposal to create the “Action Lab” session to further explore these ideas.

**Action Lab Session Description**

**2018 COIL Conference**

The presenters organized and facilitated roundtable small group discussions (about 3-4 people) on the topics of developing, building, and sustaining international professional relationships and educational partnerships. The Action Lab was directed toward scholars with and without former COIL/international experiences and designed to enhance the participant’s international exchange knowledge base and identify and address successful conditions for COIL and other international collaborations. The interactive format of a World Café allowed all participants to actively share their thoughts/experiences and pose questions. Important points were recorded and made available after the session.

Some of the guiding questions for the group members included the following:

1. Which have been or can be the major gains from an international collaboration, both for you as a scholar and for your students?
2. Where do you see the major obstacles or hurdles?
3. Which technological tools do you consider useful or not so useful for international work?
4. What does a successful international collaboration require?
5. What are the costs? How do you find the time and energy for collaboration?
6. How do you get started and find a support system like COIL?
7. How do you involve students in international collaboration? Can COIL help?
8. How do you establish and maintain trust in collaboration?
9. What personality traits contribute to long-term collaboration?
10. Is COIL/international collaboration required, supported and/or rewarded in your institution? If so, which kind of support or reward to you perceive? How important is institutional support from your point of view?

The conceptual design for this “Higher Education Café International” originates with the World Café or Knowledge Café concept of group sharing that is semi-structured, but open ended so that participants can share their own experiences, frustrations, and visions. A brief summary of the highpoints of the discussion and unanswered questions were written down by the Recorder at each table. After exchanging thoughts, ideas, and questions for about 10 minutes, participants switched tables and interacted with different people on another pressing topic.

The World Café was composed of several round tables (often times standing tables, reminiscent of a café) equipped with a large piece paper and pens. Each table focused on a different topic. The participants were split into smaller groups of 4 to 6 persons. One person played the role of a Host at each table, thus welcoming the guests, moderating the conversation, and taking notes on the table notepads. After 10 minutes, each group moved on to another table while the Hosts remain at their table. Next the Hosts welcomed the new group and introduced them to the topic and summed-up the prior conversation based on notes. The group then continued to talk on the topic, adding new ideas and questions. After ten minutes, participants were encouraged to join another table. The Hosts do not change tables and thus become the
anchors at each table. Each Host later presented the major outcomes to the whole group.

Participants were constantly involved in learning, sharing, and asking questions. The key points were recorded providing a clear session outcome. Participants chose the topics and had powerful input into the ideas recorded as output.

The two group leaders briefly introduced themselves and later become two of the five Hosts. Three additional table Hosts were selected from the participants.

A General Overview of the Timeline for the Session (90 minutes total):

10 minutes: Two Leaders Introduce themselves and format
50 minutes: Conversation at the Café tables
10 minutes: Summarizing outcomes
20 minutes: Debriefing—sharing—questions

Active listening techniques were employed to clarify, extend, and connect the contributions of the participants. The two leaders provided a paper as a “take-away” at the end of the session. This ensured that the leaders remained in their facilitator roles and resisted the temptation to more directly share their own ideas in the Café International Forum.

Summary

Clearly our joint collaborative educational efforts were successful and we hope that our reflections might shed some light upon the process of building successful international partnerships. As Kuzhabekova, Hendel, and Chapman (2015) reviewed research conducted on international higher education, they found that only 11.3% of the 2,302 research publications studied were authored by researchers from at least two different countries. We hope to inspire others who might be able to increase this statistical finding in future decades.
If we had to distill all of our lessons learned down to a few over-arching factors for success in collaborative international education these would be empathy, openness to experience, genuineness, and honesty. For those trained in counseling and psychotherapy (especially for those familiar with the writing of Carl Rogers), such factors will sound very parallel to the client-centered or person-centered theory applied to the teaching/learning environment. Carl Rogers (1969) wrote that human beings have the need to forge healthy and growth-producing “connections” through interpersonal relationships. Our personal collaborative experience working together on educational projects over the past five years echoes the veracity of these insights from counseling and psychotherapy. May these thoughts serve as a catalyst for those who wish to form, maintain, and extend healthy, productive, and respectful international educational relationships.
References


