Identity, racial cognizance, and intercultural competence: Students' collective identities in the virtual literary classroom

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Abstract

This practice report describes a Virtual Exchange (VE), Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) experience (US and Spain) titled *Identity Matters: Culture, Ethnicity, and Race in Literature*. It describes the formation of students' individual and communal identities in the virtual literary classroom. The Spanish students were perusing a BA in English Studies, and the American students were studying various Arts and Sciences BA degrees. Both courses were based in American English literature, so this VE course was conducted in English because the Spanish students were required to do their coursework in English. Students read American short stories/poems about the identities of American/American immigrant characters from different racial backgrounds: African American, Indigenous, Asian, and Latinx. The texts portrayed characters dealing with identity crises: racial, ethnic, and types of discrimination in contemporary American society. Students were prompted to discuss their individual identities and, when placed in a group, their communal identities with identity charts, in relation to the characters' identities and discriminatory experiences. However, although some students discussed race (social/biocultural construct) in their individual charts, racial cognizance was missing in the group charts and they discussed differences in terms of ethnicity (national/cultural: ancestry, language, beliefs). Additionally, because of these results, we believe that intercultural communication in VE should create/provide a space for race cognizance, among international identities, to better understand the different contexts of stereotypes, prejudices, racism, and/or discrimination experiences that make up all identities

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participating in VE. We therefore suggest Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality Theory and Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory are possible building-block solutions to this dilemma.

1. Introduction

Intercultural competence entails effectively communicating/navigating diverse cultural contexts with individuals from various cultural backgrounds (Leung et al., 2014). Hence, encouraging students to enhance their intercultural, communication, and digital capabilities for a competitive edge in the global job market is important (Garson, 2017). Developing cultural awareness is crucial to intercultural competence, involving an understanding of viewpoints/principles held by different cultural groups (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999, as cited in Tran-Hoang, 2010). Students are faced with their own cultural identities through cultural differences (Frumuselu & Bellot, 2022).

In effect, this practice report describes a Virtual Exchange (VE) experience via literature and cultural studies. Using the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) framework, partnering institutions (US and Spain) developed a project to foster intercultural-international competence. The project centered on identity construction, exploring issues of race, ethnicity, and culture in literary studies. This report describes that VE experience and observes how participants disclosed/depicted their racial/other identities, both individually and collectively, while reflecting on the literary characters and lectures. The main discoveries, drawn from students' final projects, show that although some students discussed race (social/biocultural construct) in their individual identity charts, racial cognizance was missing in the group charts, and students were reluctant to discuss race as part of their collective identities, focusing rather on ethnicity (national/cultural: ancestry, language, beliefs).

This practice report does not claim to demonstrate "the right practice" for identifying intercultural differences; however, it suggests that intercultural competence needs to develop a space for the definitions and cultural contexts of race/identity in various international-educational VE settings. Thus, we propose, as possible solutions, discussing the concept of Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality Theory in the VE classroom, which acknowledges that everyone has unique "parts" and experiences, which must be considered in order to understand how people live and what

circumstances in a specific society make us privileged/marginalized. Therefore, Intersectionality will enable international students to consider one another's "whole parts": sexuality, gender, disability, nationality etc. and racial identity. Another solution entails making students aware of Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which explains that social environments and relationships influence human development. Hence, international students, from different backgrounds/social environments, view/experience the world differently since their environments will affect every aspect of their lives. As educators, we also need to be aware of these differences, encourage students to be aware, and comfortably help students connect with one another.

2.   Context

The international VE discussed in this report was framed as a COIL experience between two medium-sized universities from: US (northern New York State) and Spain (Catalan region). COIL represents a pioneering virtual education method that entails collaborative online teaching and learning (SUNY COIL Center, n.d.).

Due to the pandemic, all instruction was online (synchronous and asynchronous sessions). Slack was used as the main digital platform. Channels were created, for students, with detailed course descriptions for discussions and instructions for collaboration with their COIL peers. There were group channels for guidelines, submission of assignments, and for social interaction (food, music, films, places, etc.). Additional guidelines were provided on students' institutional software (Moodle/Blackboard/Teams). Also, students used Teams and Zoom for videoconferencing.

The US students were part of a general education Humanities module, *Talking About Diversity, Equity, Inclusion/Literature & Identity*, while the Spanish students were enrolled in *Literature & Society*, a course for first-year English students. This course was taught in English. Catalan/Spanish students have a B2-C1 level of spoken/written English. Both teaching assistants, IT-Tech-Support student (Mediterranean University/Montenegro) and Spanish-English interpreter (SUNY), had previously worked with the US professor. Spanish students, however, were able to work in English, proficiently.

The students read American short stories/poems about characters' identities dealing with racial, ethnic, and gender identity conflicts. These characters were Americans/American immigrants from different racial backgrounds: African American, Native/Indigenous, Asian, and Hispanic/Latinx. Summaries are as follows:

- *Fish Cheeks* (Amy Tan, 1987): a coming-of-age story discussing the significance of culture/race/ethnicity, where a Chinese American teenage girl, wished for a "blond hair boy . . . and a slim American nose." She was embarrassed of her Chinese food/traditions at a Chinese American Christmas dinner. *Fish Cheeks* is autobiographical, about accepting your culture/race/heritage, and embracing cultural difference/diversity.
- *No Speak English* (from *The House of Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros, 1984) tells the story of Mamacita, a newly arrived Mexican immigrant and her struggles of adapting to Chicago life due to her inability to speak English and her nostalgia. *No Speak English* deals with language/identity/race/loneliness/homesickness.
- *Blue Winds Dancing* (Thomas S. Whitecloud, 1938) is the story of a Native American university student. He is prompted to travel to his Native American roots, since he struggles with his racial/cultural identity and encounters racial stereotypes from, as he states, the "white world," where Native Americans are labeled as lazy/unintelligent/uncivilized. *Blue Winds Dancing* is about gaining confidence and strength in your racial/cultural identity amidst damaging labels and rising above negative experiences.
- *Won't You Celebrate With Me* (from *The Book of Light*, Lucille Clifton, 1992) is a poem addressing themes of identity/lack of identity, race (African American), and gender. The 1960's poem was written amidst the struggles of the civil rights movement. Clifton urges readers to celebrate with her because of the "kind of life" she has "shaped." She discusses the plight of African American women and the struggles of success in white America; they have no role models. Clifton is the underdog, the black-to-white/female-to-male minority, who has struggled to gain success and proclaims her success in a racial/gender-hostile America.

Instructors discussed the material with students, who also discussed it among themselves. Students were prompted to (1) create individual identity charts related to any connections of race/gender/other identities from the readings, (2) discuss and share the individual charts with their peer-groups, and (3) create collective final-project group charts, from those individual charts, and include similarities/differences about their race/gender/other identities. An Identity Chart is a graphic tool that helps students consider the many factors that shape individuals and communities (Facing History and Ourselves, n.d.).

3.   Objectives

The course was centered in developing students' skills in diversity, literary analysis, and critical thinking, focusing on fostering intercultural competence and:

- Going beyond students' own ideas, prompting communication/understanding of another's environment/life, and creating identity charts for better understanding one another;
- Effectively communicating across cultural differences (Spain/United States), articulating global self-awareness;
- Sharpening their VE interpersonal communication/teamwork skills.

4.   Project design

This six-week VE project, *Identity Matters: Culture, Ethnicity, and Race in Literature* (Spring 2021), started with attending a COIL partnering fair, and we realized our literature courses were similar.

During the six weeks, students were closely monitored. Learning activities enabled students' active participation, execution, reflection of assignments, and learning outcomes.

We began with an icebreaker activity where students introduced themselves by creating an introductory video. They were prompted to give feedback and interact with their international peers on each video.

Student-groups met in videoconferences and elaborated on individual identity charts in Zoom meetings. They were provided with some of the following indicators (only some are listed):

> **Instructions for interviewing your peers in your group:**
>
> Ask your peers these questions, so that you could understand each other:
> You can use the questions from the identity/introduce yourself video as well.
> Who is my peer? – So, ask them – Who are you? Follow with the other questions:
> What factors make you who you are? Music/celebrities/family/ethnicity/race etc.?
> How is your identity formed?

In subsequent meetings, once students' individual identities were discussed and connected to the readings, they worked together on a group-identity chart.

> **SUMMARY OF FINAL PROJECT:**
>
> Your group will be making a GROUP-IDENTITY CHART for the whole group, from your individual charts. Please get creative on how you are going to do your GROUP-IDENTITY CHART.

5.   Evaluation and discussion of outcomes

5.1.   Evaluation methodology, assessments, and participation rates

This report's definitions, on VE, American literature, and identity, acknowledges Durovic (2008), citing Burr (1995), who states that identity is connected to "socio-constructivism and differs from the formerly prevalent essentialist thought" (p. 4); and as VE researchers, we also realize that racial identifiers and constructs deal with the ideologies and stereotypes attached to specific groups. Socio-constructivism posits that human nature/identity is constantly being constructed by our social environments/experiences and power dynamics; however, essentialist believe that human nature/identity is fixed/unchanging and grounded in inherent categories.

Thus, although there might be a trend to exclude acknowledging racial identity in favor of color blindness, race cognizance is still important for demarcating the hierarchy associated with color differences and its different racial experiences. Color blindness is the act of not seeing or acknowledging color differences between people, and thereby rejecting racial practices and/or attitudes associated with it, which encourages a refusal to recognize specific indicators and discrimination associated with race/racial experiences. Walden University's Educational program-page states in their article, *Why Cultural Diversity and Awareness in the Classroom in Important* (2021), that teachers/educators will have more success in the classroom when they embrace cultural diversity. Also, understanding the influential power that skin color has had on US society is important. Durovic (2008) also argues that ethnic identity is a "sense of belonging and loyalty to one or several groups, defined by citizenship, religion, race, language or another ethnic marker" (p. 2).

This project research stemmed from the US professor's course: *Talking About Diversity, Equity, Inclusion Seminar: What's in a Name? – Literature, Culture, Identity, and Race.* Both professors agreed to create an extension of that course/research, but on the VE/international/cross-cultural level. The US professor was already approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), so the best practices for human subject research ethics were used: incorporating surveys with consent forms and honoring principles of respect of persons and their anonymity.

Participation rates were good overall. There were 100 students, 94 responded to the pre-survey, and 78 filled out the post-survey questions. The course had challenges: COVID-19 issues, time zone differences, and technology problems because of the dead zone areas in northern New York. By the end of the project, some students lagged behind, didn't participate, or decided to do the group chart with a peer from their home country. In order to understand our students' thoughts on the different intercultural concepts of race and identity, we asked questions on gender, race, and ethnicity, and other questions based on identity and intercultural competence. We wanted to discover what our students knew/learnt about their own identities, race cognizance, and discrimination through American culture/literature. The goal was to prompt students to understand every aspect of another's identity and environment, in other words, the concepts of Intersectionality and Ecological Theory. Intersectionality deems that identity can be constructed in several categories that allows for the exclusive sum of a set of experiences, for example, gender, race, ethnicity, and other pointers (O'Reilly, 2020). Reason and Evans (2007) call for society/people to become "racially cognizant," which is the opposite of color blindness, and the awareness/acknowledgment of the role that race contributes to our identities and our daily lives. The Ecological Theory discusses that social environments/ relationships influence human development. Students' different backgrounds/social environments will affect every aspect of their lives; thus, they will view the world differently. We wanted to assess if students would generate further discussion, with peers, about race/ethnicity/ identity in their own contexts/environments/lived experiences after reading the literary texts.

5.2. Identity Of Students: Gender, Racial, And Ethnic Make-up

Students were asked to describe their identities in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity. These concepts impact individuals' identity and as O'Reilly (2020) states, "impact individuals psychologically" (p. 1). Figure 1, the gender pie-chart results, demonstrates that the largest percentage of students were female at 71.6%, male at 25.3%; the other categories, non-binary and prefer not to say, were significantly small. Because of the insignificant non-binary category, we could have made comments on the traditional heterosexual differences, but we chose not to, since these studies are exhaustive, and they are on the fence.

Figure 1. Pre-survey gender of students

Gender
95 responses
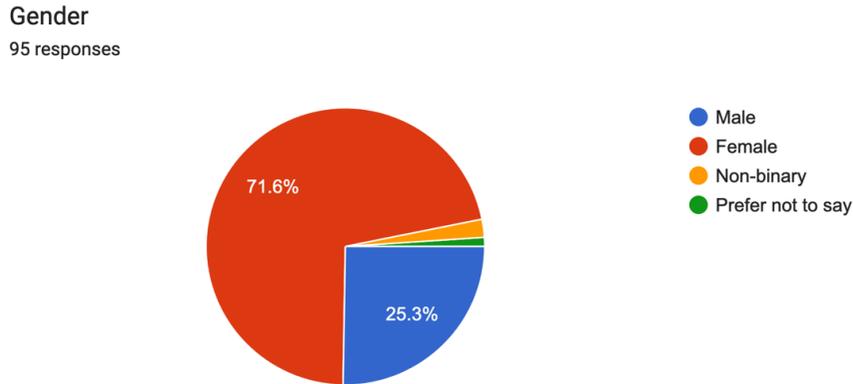
Figure 2 shows the post survey results for students' racial identity, with only 78 students responding. The results demonstrate that the largest group of the racial make-up of students' identities were 60.3%, identifying as white/Caucasian, the second largest group at 23.1% identifying as Hispanic/Lantinx. Also, 11.5% chose Black/African/African American, 5.1% chose North African/Middle Eastern, and the other categories were very small.

Figure 2. Post-survey racial make-up of students

How would you best describe yourself? Click ALL that apply.
78 responses

Category	Value
American Indian/Native Americ...	0 (0%)
Asian/Pacific Islander	1 (1.3%)
Black/African/African American	9 (11.5%)
White/Caucasian	47 (60.3%)
Hispanic/Latino	18 (23.1%)
North African/Middle Eastern	4 (5.1%)
Biracial/Multiracial/Interracial/M...	1 (1.3%)
Other	7 (9%)
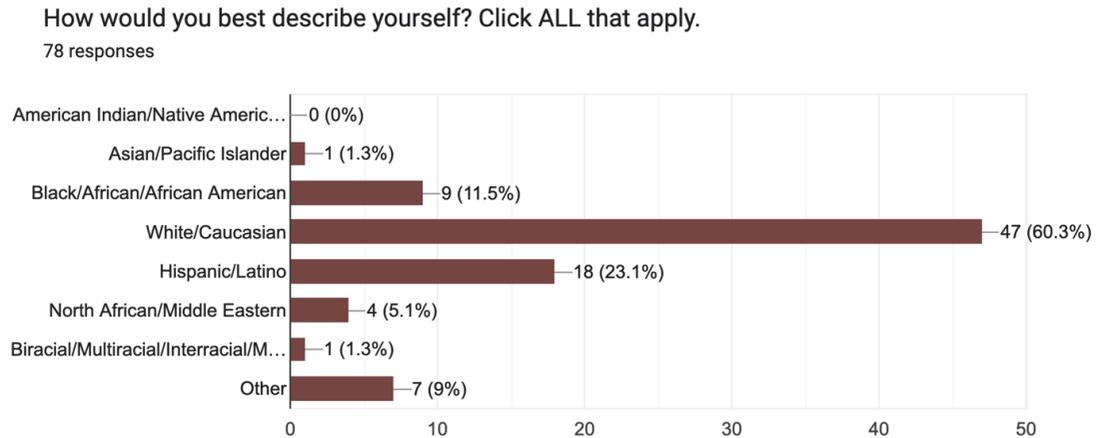
Additionally, students answered questions on their nationalities and/or ethnicities, which we will use interchangeably with birthplace and/or where they lived/are living, which ranged from Spain, US, Dominican Republic, Russia, Romania, Germany, Morocco, and Vietnam.

Additionally, Figure 3 demonstrates that most of the students had not done a VE before, except for a small amount.

Figure 3. Experience in VE

Have you done a virtual exchange before?
94 responses

- No
- I don't know (I'm not sure)
- Yes

88.3%
9.6%
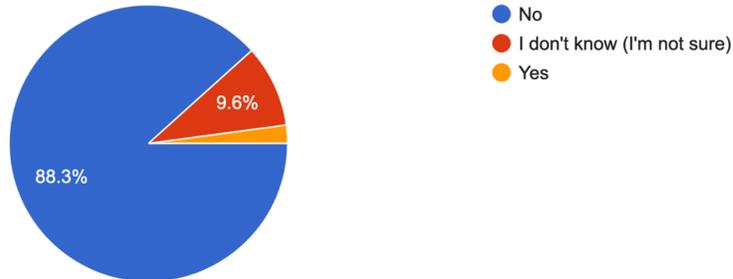
5.3. Students' attitude toward VE and their knowledge of intercultural competence

Students were directed to answer questions related to attitudes/experiences with VE. The answers to these questions also helped us to determine students' willingness to interact with people from different backgrounds in VE experiences. Therefore, in Figure 4 and Figure 5 students conveyed, on a graph, ranging from "being happy" to "being nervous" about VE.

Figure 4. Pre-survey VE attitudes

How do you feel about this virtual exchange? (Choose one or more)

94 responses

Attitude	Value
Happy	34 (36.2%)
Excited	65 (69.1%)
Scared	20 (21.3%)
Interested	69 (73.4%)
Uninterested	0 (0%)
Curious	69 (73.4%)
Annoyed	3 (3.2%)
Unhappy	0 (0%)
Nervous	2 (2.1%)
Some what anxious	2 (2.1%)
Intrigued, due to the fact that…	1 (1.1%)
It seems like a lot of work	1 (1.1%)
I also feel a bit nervous	1 (1.1%)
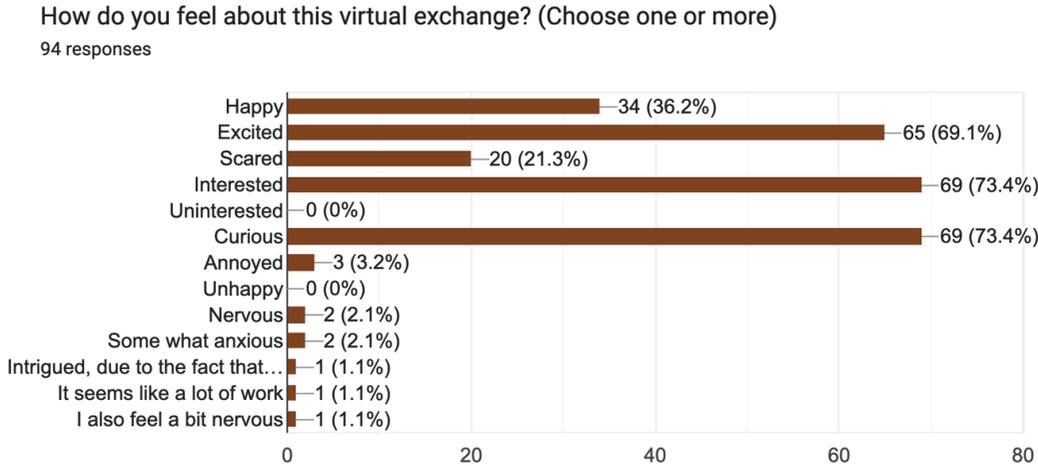
Figure 5. Post-survey VE attitudes

All in all, how do you feel about this virtual exchange? (Choose one or more)

78 responses

Attitude	Value
Happy	37 (47.4%)
Satisfied	50 (64.1%)
Annoyed	7 (9%)
Unhappy	3 (3.8%)
Not sure	11 (14.1%)
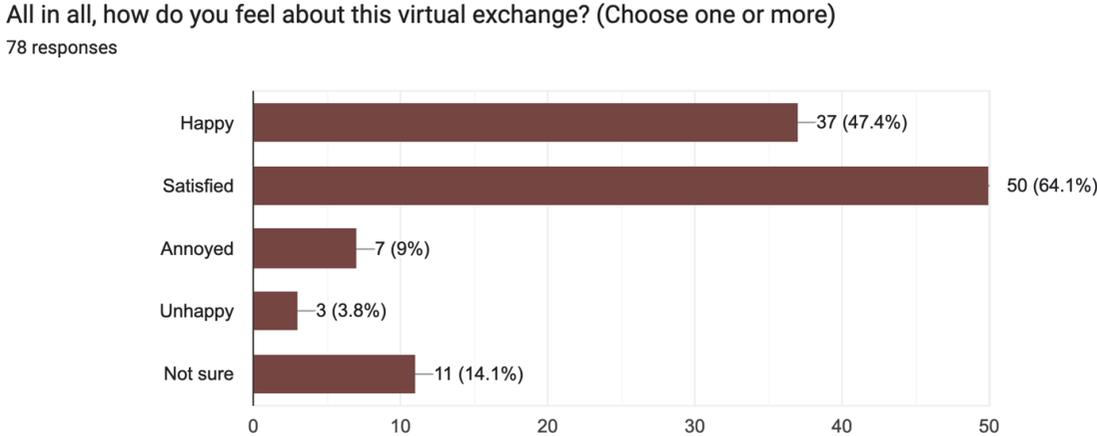
In the pre-survey (Figure 4), students (94 responding) were allowed to choose one or more answers to this question, the answer that was chosen the most by students were both curious (73.4%) and interested (73.4%), with the answer excited (69.1%) close behind. The answer chosen next was happy (34%) and a very small percentage of answers were annoyed (3.2%), nervous (2.1%), and anxious (2.1%). The post-survey (78 responding) indicates similar assessments. Satisfied (64.1%) was the highest followed by happy (47.4%). Also, on a smaller scale, students chose not sure (14.1%), annoyed (9%), and unhappy (3.8%), which were slightly higher than in the presurvey. Although these last three percentages were lower than the other answers, we regretted that we did not have a section in the survey for students to answer why they felt that way.

Lastly, in measuring students' level of/or fluency in intercultural competency, they were asked the question: *How do you think intercultural competency can be developed/fostered?* – and we received 74 responses. While some answered that they simply did not know, most of the answers targeted intercultural competence to communication, talking to people of other cultures, and interacting with peers. Out of all the answers, only 2 comments incorporated the word *identity/identities.* Also, 27 comments used the word *culture* and none of the students mentioned the words *race* or *ethnicity.* We asked a similar question in the post-survey: *What did you learn/gain through this VE?* Students' level of understanding cultural competency increased because answers consisted of students describing their progress in terms of learning about and understanding *identity* (mentioned ten times), *race* (six times), *ethnicity* (five times), *indigenous* (one time), and *culture* (26 times).

5.4. Identity charts

The final project for the course consisted of students creating group-identity charts. Initially, each student created a personal identity chart (Figure 6), and they had to eventually combine their charts and create a group chart.

Figure 6. An example of an Identity Chart (Facing History and Ourselves, n.d.)
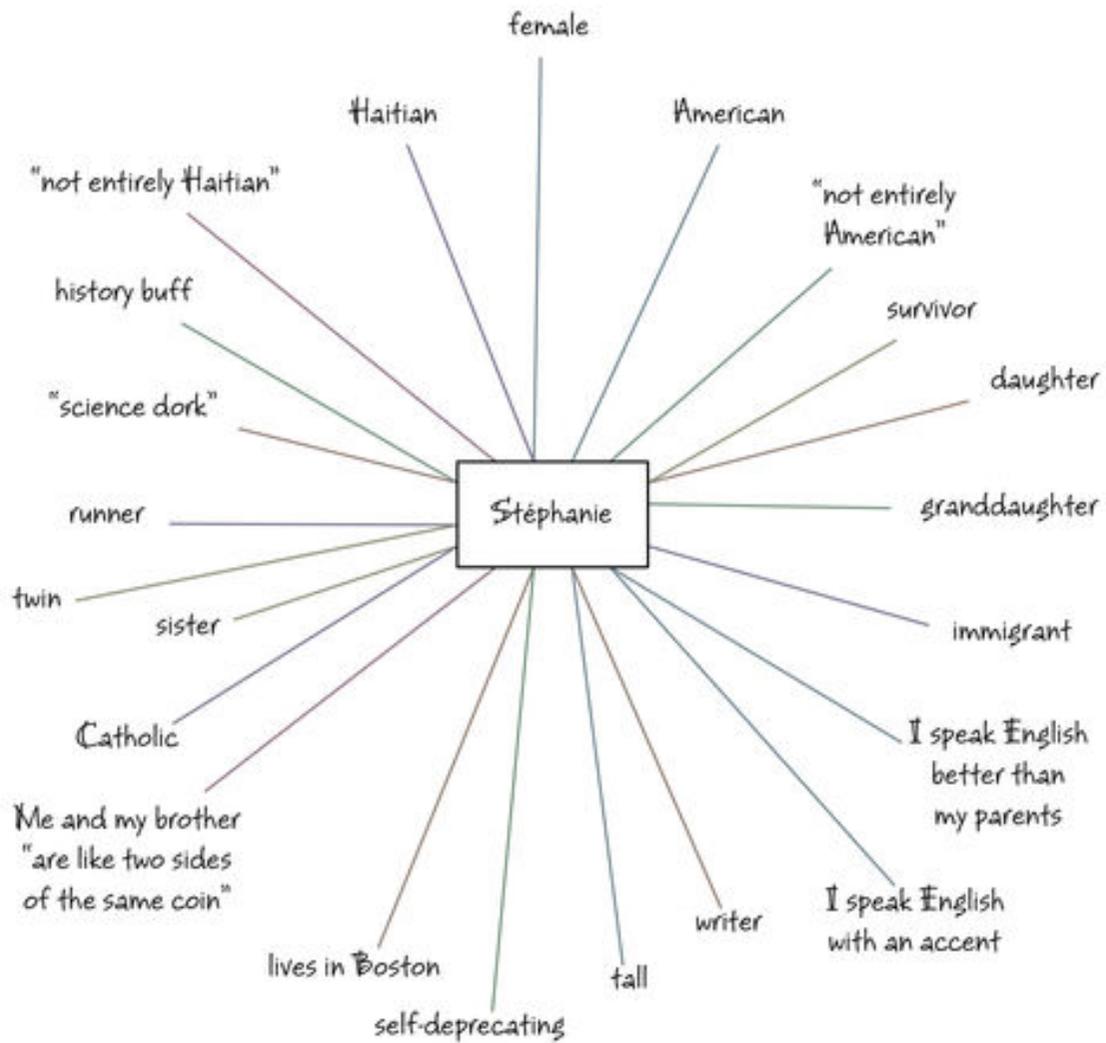
Students' final projects, demonstrate that some of our students did address identity in terms of race, ethnicity, and other markers on their personal charts; however, on the group chart, it was either totally left out, they chose to demonstrate identity only in the form of nationality and culture, or

they mixed-up nationality with race or religion markers. Students were aware of similarities/ differences between themselves in an international/cross-cultural setting. They do know how they want to self-identify, which is what an Identity Chart does, it helps students "consider the many factors that shape who we are as individuals and as communities" (Facing History and Ourselves, n.d.).

Figure 7. Identity Chart Group 1

In Figure 7, the identity chart created by Group 1 discusses diversity in general similarities/differences, but race and ethnicity were not markers of identity and instead students only referred to nationalities.

Figure 8. Identity Chart Group 10
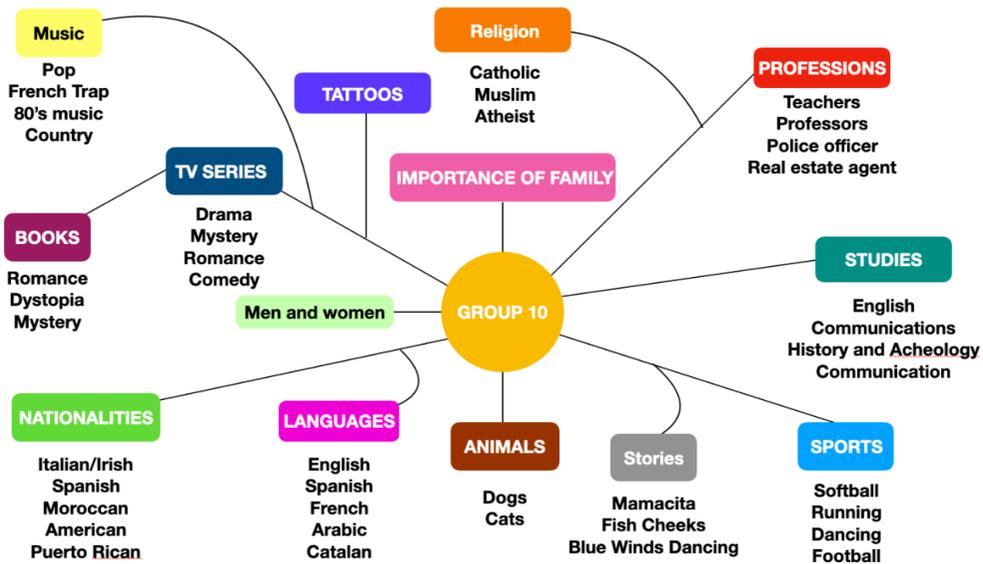
Additionally, students in Group 10 chose similar diversity markers to Group 1. Furthermore, race and ethnicity were not listed, but students listed differences based on nationalities.

Figure 9. Identity Chart Group 2
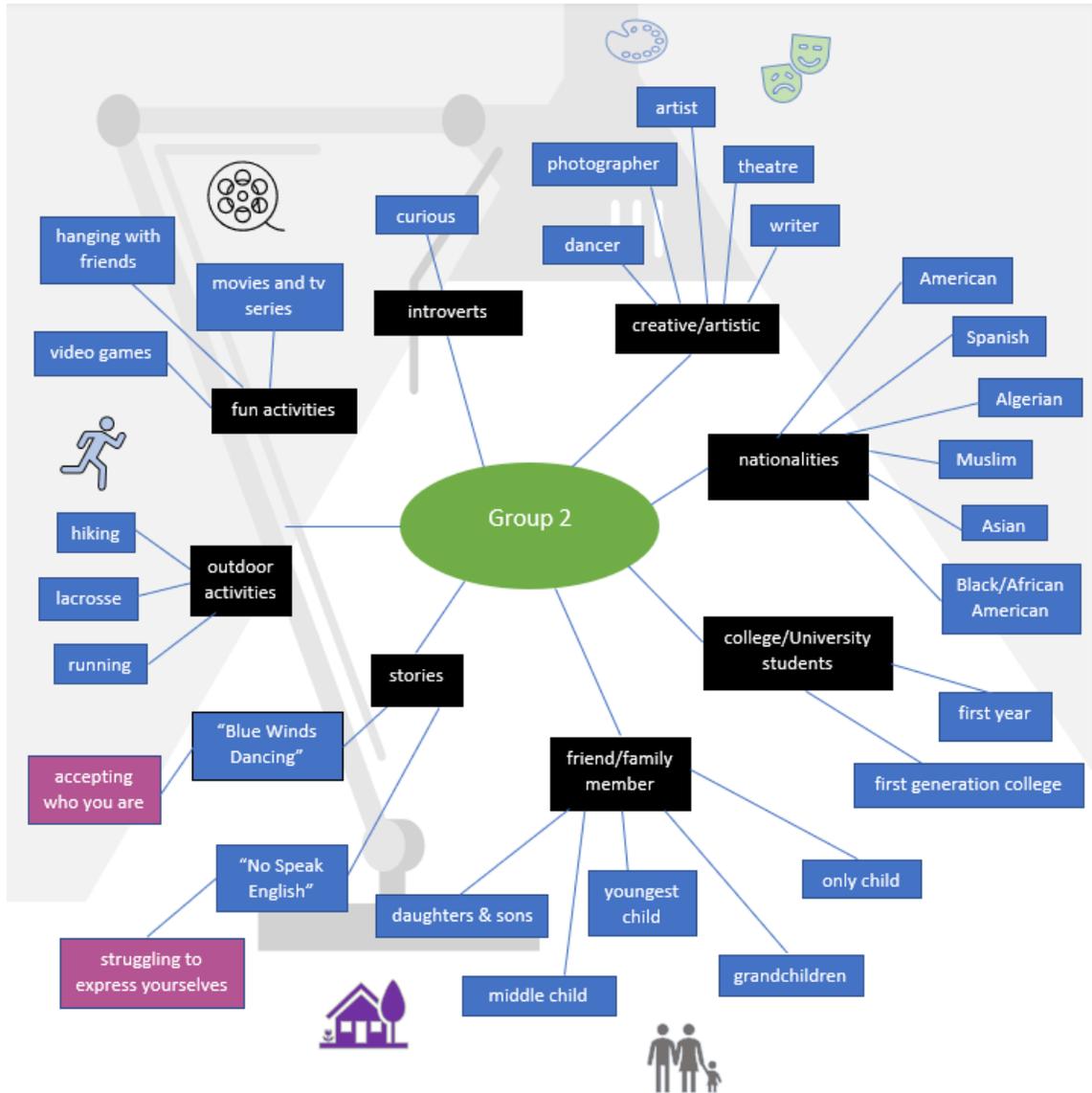
In Group 2, students also listed some of the same identity markers as Group 1 & 10 and did not list race and ethnicity but nationalities; however, it shows a mix of listing nationalities, religion, and race markers. Students listed American, Spanish, Algerian, Muslim, Asian, and Black/African American as nationalities. In their article, Sandefur et al. (2004) review the inconsistences of collecting racial data in relation to American health disparities. These variations stem from the "mismatch between self-selected race (which is used in most data sets) and the observer-selected race." The latter being given by an observing party filling out the form, for example, a death certificate (Swallen and Guend, 2001, as cited in Sandefur et al., 2004). Also, Sandefur et al. (2004) argue that additional variations could arise since a specific culture might "think and talk about race and ethnicity differently." Furthermore, the identity marker *Asian* is used as a multifunctional word for nationality, ethnicity and race, whereas Zuriet and Lyausheva (2019) discuss *Muslim* identity in terms of a religious marker. In addition, the *Black/African American* marker could fall in the various categories: *Black*, being associated with racial and ethnic identification and *African American*, although sometimes associated with ethnicity/culture, is mostly a racial marker in American race descriptors. We could stipulate that these ideas could have been some of the possible markers why students filled out collective forms differently from individual forms.

Figure 10. Identity Chart Group 6
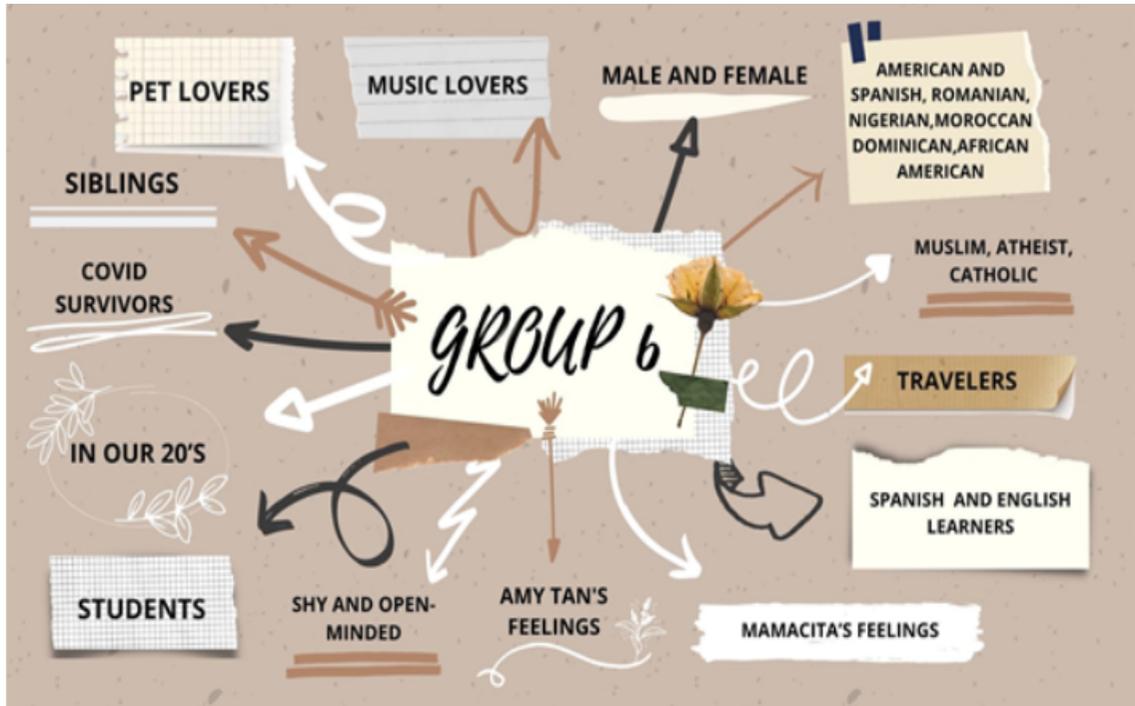
In Group 6, the identity chart also had similar markers and listed nationality: American, Spanish, Romanian, Nigerian, Dominican, and African American in the same cluster; however, again, African American is possibly, a racial, ethnic/cultural, or national label.

Figure 11. Identity Chart Group 7
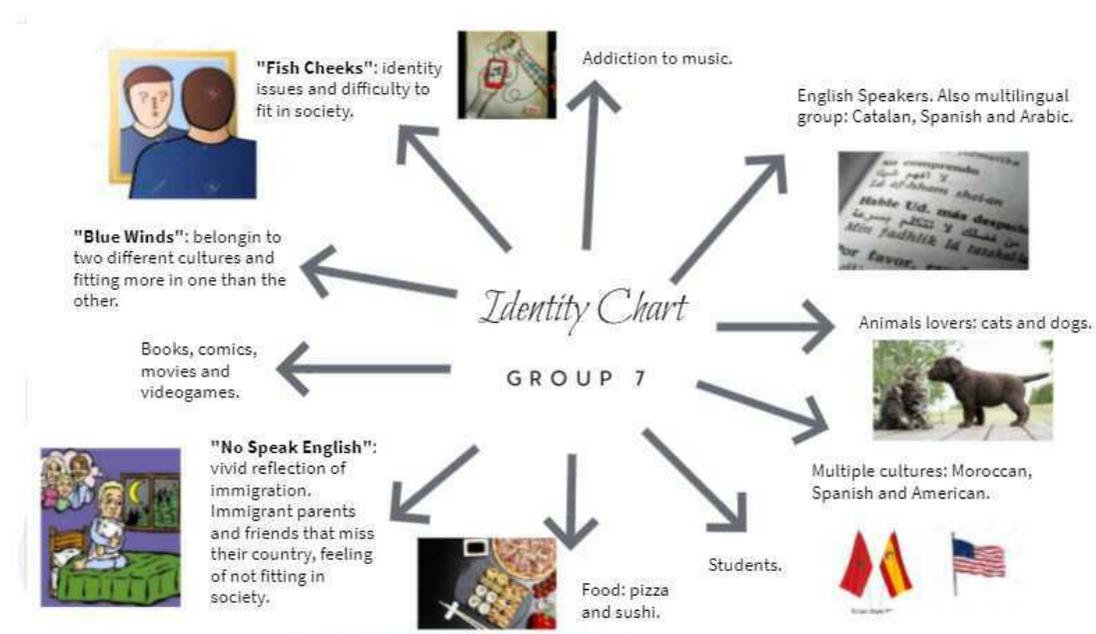
Lastly, Group 7, listed Moroccan, Spanish, and American not as nationalities but as cultures, which is sometimes the case, but the group did not connect these categories to a specific idea of racial or ethnic identification.

6.   Conclusions and implication

This COIL project prompted students to think about intercultural competence in terms of identity. Thus, we discovered that:

- Students' answers in the post survey and their knowledge and vocabulary of identity markers increased compared to the pre-survey;
- Intercultural competence needs to provide a space for the different definitions and the cultural contexts for discussing race and identity in various educational international settings;

• Intercultural communication should provide a space for race cognizance to better understand different international lived experiences as it connects to different contexts of stereotypes, prejudice, racism, and discrimination;

Therefore, building-block discussions on Intersectionality, which stress an individual's "whole parts," and the Ecological Systems Theory, which highlights growth in terms of relationships and environments, are possible solutions. Additionally, citing Puroila and Karila (2001) on Bronfenbrenner's ideas, Härkönen (2007) states that "the goal of education is to support optimal development" (p. 5). Thus, understanding children, and subsequently our students, we must understand their interaction with their immediate and greater environment.

Moreover, the trajectory of literature on culture, race, and identity issues via intercultural communication benefits students in the classroom and acts as a supplemental *experience* to their actual interactions with peers on multicultural education. Chang (2019) discusses how David Mura, an Asian American author, considers using multicultural literature, similar to this COIL project, to teach ideas about identity and culture. At least this study created an awareness of the stark differences in the way we might view identities in different cultural, national/international, settings or the interaction of international/intercultural relations. Therefore, VE instructors need to understand, and be mindful of, what we may miss, what we could possibly aim for, and the challenges of intergroup collaboration we face when grouping international students together from different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds and when discussing/teaching subjects on identity. Also, teaching topics on identity in the VE classroom can establish an inclusive/enriching classroom culture, encourage students to share their own cultural backgrounds/experiences, foster empathy/active listening, and create cultural understanding, which promotes a collaborative learning environment.

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