Engaging in an online odyssey: Globally Networked Learning among undergraduates in Germany and the US

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Abstract

The purpose of this practice report is to describe a Global Networked Learning (GNL) that unfolded among a cohort of 54 University students (n=54) in Germany and the United States. There were 28 students from Germany and 26 students from the United States who participated in the international virtual exchange. A GNL is a collaborative, international online approach to help students and instructors from universities around the world to participate in a learning exchange and the creation of knowledge through project-based learning. The GNL project centered around crafting an engaging multimedia presentation about regions called a Global Competency Virtual Odyssey (GCVO). The focus of the GCVO was on regions in Germany and the United States. The GNL project was implemented over a an eight-week period. The students collaborated via four synchronous Zoom sessions with further collaboration happening over WhatsApp. The report describes the features of the GNL project and the collaborative process of creating and presenting the GCVOs. The article could be relevant to readers as it offers an explanation how to implement a GNL project. The report concludes with a discussion of the students' perceptions of creating and presenting their GCVOs as part of the GNL project.

Keywords: digital technology, global awareness, Globally Networked Learning (GNL), intercultural communication, regions, virtual exchange

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1.   Introduction

Preparing undergraduate students as global citizens means addressing stereotypes, challenging ignorance about world geography, and developing global competencies. The literature defines global competencies as the knowledge and skills to act on global issues in local ways (Boix Mansilla & Jackson, 2012). For example, the Asia Society has identified global competencies including: (1) investigating the world; (2) recognizing perspectives; (3) communicating ideas; and (4) taking action (Boix Mansilla & Jackson, 2012). Global citizenship is the deeper awareness of global issues that can lead to participatory engagement – in local ways – of people around the world for a more just and sustainable planet (Putman & Byker, 2020). International programs, such as virtual exchange (VE), have many promising benefits in developing global citizenship through investigating the world, recognizing perspectives, supporting social emotional learning, and fostering intercultural awareness including through immersive type of language learning experiences (Byker, 2019; Commander et al., 2022; Kurek & Müller-Hartmann, 2019). Similarly, Sebastian and Souza (2022) found VE to be a promising way to facilitate language learning and help undergraduate students stay connected to the globe. Indeed, VE provided an opportunity for undergraduate students to still participate in some form of international experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this practice report, we describe a type of VE called Globally Networked Learning (GNL) among undergraduates in Germany and the United States. Similar to Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), "GNL is a collaborative online approach to international virtual exchange that enables students and instructors from different locations around the world to participate in learning and the creation of knowledge together" (Byker et al., 2023, p. 49). GNL helps to increase the equity of international experiences through a virtual intercultural exchange focused on project based learning among the participants (Byker et al., 2023; House et al., 2022). One of the purposes of our GNL was to introduce and engage the undergraduate students with a deeper understanding of geography and the regions in Germany and the United States.

Regions are an important component of geographic awareness and understanding. Researchers define regions as areas of the world that have common natural features or cultural features (Brophy et al., 2016; Hobbs, 2021). Additionally, the literature found that undergraduate students can have a number of misconceptions about regions including often confusing regions for landforms like hills or bodies of water (Brophy et al., 2016; Kayali, 2009; Lee, 2018). Additionally, researchers have also found that undergraduate students – especially in the United States – tend to have strong stereotypes about certain regions of the world, such as the Middle East, but the students actually know very little about the region and cannot even locate the region on a world map (Bakalian & Bozorgmehr, 2009; Lee, 2018). Many students in the United States have difficulty identifying where countries in Europe

are located or where the Alps are located. Since our GNL project was virtually situated in Germany and the United States, we focused much of the content for our GNL project on the regions in Germany and the United States.

Students collaborated on the creation of an interactive multimedia presentation called a Global Competency Virtual Odyssey (GCVO). The GCVO focus was on regions in Germany and the United States. There were two participating institutions for this GNL project. The students from Germany (n=28) were from a public university located in the southwest region of Germany. The students from the United States (n=26) were from a public research university in the Southeast region of the United States. The students from Germany were primarily in their junior or senior year of studies and most were preparing to become English secondary teachers in Germany. The German students were enrolled in a class about the uses of digital media for English language teaching. The students from the United States were all in their junior year and were preparing to become elementary school teachers in the United States. The United States' students were all enrolled in a social studies methods course. All the students in this GNL project were proficient in English and English was the medium of instruction for the GNL project. The authors of this project report were all instructors helping to facilitate the GNL project.

2. Context

Increasing global awareness is one of the larger goals for social studies education in the United States. The GNL project helped to meet this goal by guiding students in an international VE focused on culture, geography, global competencies, and intercultural awareness. By culture, we mean the ways in which human beings make meaning and express that meaning through symbolic forms of communication and customs (Geertz, 1973). By global competencies, we follow Boix Mansilla and Jackson's (2012) definition that global competencies are the knowledge and skills needed to take action on issues that are both intertwined globally and locally. We define intercultural awareness as being able to successfully communicate with people from other cultures through an awareness of one's own culture and by developing awareness of the other person's culture (Baker, 2012; Byker, 2021; Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2008). We had four objectives for our GNL project, which were: (1) communicate the global relevance of the Global Networked Learning project; (2) engage with cultural similarities and differences; (3) critically reflect on how one is culturally and geographically situated; and (4) explain the global interconnectedness of people and places.

3.   Project design

Our GNL project design included two main stages. There was the planning stage and the implementation stage. For the planning stage, the author team had bi-weekly planning meetings on Zoom about three months prior to the implementation stage of the GNL project. The partnership grew out of a long-standing relationship between the two universities. During the planning stage, we discussed the organization of the GNL and planned out the semester schedule. The implementation of our GNL project was eight weeks long. The GNL project included four Zoom webinars with all the student participants. The first webinar was focused on helping the students get to know each other through an icebreaker like the Two Truths and a Lie game. After the first webinar, the students also posted their pictures and some basic information about themselves on a Moodle Discussion Board. The second webinar introduced the students to the Global Competencies Virtual Odyssey (GCVO) project. Students were also assigned to their GCVO groups as part of this webinar. The purpose of the GCVO was to create interactive multimedia presentations that were comprised of the following slides:

• A geography slide that describes and shows a map image of the region or location of the people group in the region;
• A culture slide that explains at least 2 cultural norms or customs/holidays of the region or people group in the region;
• A language slide that includes common expressions of greetings and goodbyes in the place's or people group's language – the slide should include one way of saying hello and one way of saying goodbye in the home language;
• A history slide with at least two facts (depicted with pictures/images) related to the history of the region or people group in the region;
• A children's literature book slides, which should highlight a children's literature book or a fable/folktale from that region or people group;
• Each person in the group also creates an individual reflection slide that includes a paragraph reflection about how this GCVO developed deeper awareness of global citizenship and connected to the importance of knowing about this region or people group as global citizens.

The students in the United States created their GCVO about a region in Germany such as the Black Forest (in the southwest of Germany), or one of the German federal states such as Bavaria (in the southeast of Germany). The students were organized into small groups of two or three people. Each group selected a different region of Germany. The students in Germany had the choice to create their GCVO on either an indigenous people group in a region of the United States (e.g., the Cherokee Nation,

the Navajo Nation, etc.) or a region in the United States (e.g., Mid-Atlantic, New England, Pacific Northwest, Southeast, etc.). Then, each group from the United States was paired with a group from Germany. The student groups were paired with each other in breakout rooms during the webinars. During this time, the German groups helped their United States counterparts with their research on the German region under study. Vice-versa, the United States groups helped their German colleagues with their research related to their topic under study. Student groups were required to also meet two additional times without the instructors present using a technology of their choice like FaceTime or WhatsApp, etc. Many groups met more than twice for these workshop type meetings.

The final two webinars of the GNL project were dedicated to GCVO Project presentations and reflections. Student groups presented their GCVO Projects to one another on Zoom. The final webinar also included a reflection activity where students posted to a Google Jamboard (an interactive whiteboard) anonymous responses to the following discussion prompts:

• What did you learn about the global relevance of participating in a GNL project like this?
• What is the relevance for yourself as a university student?
• And what is the relevance of this GNL project to your future career?

4. Evaluation

After receiving the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, we collected data as part of this GNL project. All the IRB and the University of Groningen Press (UGP) ethics guidelines were followed in relation to the data collection, data analysis, and the reporting of the study's data. While we are still analyzing the study's data, we discuss some initial findings from the collected data, which included artifact analysis and a pre and post survey. In the evaluation section below, we share an initial report of the artifact analysis data from the students' reflections about the global relevance of the GNL project from their responses on the Jamboard activity.

Today's technology allows course instructors to facilitate international VE programs like GNL projects, which helps undergraduate students to connect with the world in more ways. This opportunity also creates many challenges. One challenge was giving time for our students to engage in intercultural communication. The initial icebreaker activity of having students introduce themselves by playing the Two Truths and a Lie game helped facilitate the initial exchange and we would recommend including an icebreaker type of activity at the beginning of every webinar session. GNL projects can be time-consuming to manage and supervise. We found it necessary to be in regular communication

with each other to make the GNL experience as seamless as possible for our students. In order to equip our students with all the necessary skills, attitudes, and knowledge they need to become global citizens, we as the authors and course instructors had to critically reflect on our own understanding of culture. Without knowing about our own culture, we cannot become aware of others' culture and it is precisely that global awareness that forms the basis of a global community (Byker & Mejia, 2022; Byker & Sadula, 2022). As discussed earlier, this GNL project included a reflective Jamboard activity during Webinar 4. The students were asked to reflect upon what they learned during the project. We are currently conducting a qualitative and quantitative analysis of their answers (33 were given). We have grouped some initial results into four main categories: global awareness; cultural knowledge; competencies; and career-related answers.

5. Discussion of outcomes

We have some initial qualitative observations of the Jamboard data. The OECD (2018) recognizes the importance of intercultural communication in relation to the development of global competencies. Students in this GNL project echoed that important linkage. For example, one student wrote: "Communication with others abroad makes me feel more like a global citizen." Intercultural communication is emphasized in the curricula for secondary schools in Germany. Accordingly, teacher training programs at German universities put effort into teaching how to reach that goal. While we anticipated that there would have been more connections to the importance of intercultural communication, there was actually a much higher percentage of connections to culture as it related to global awareness. As Table 1 illustrates, the students in this GNL project perceived global awareness as predominantly defined by the idea of culture. As one student put it: "I want my children to feel welcome and be aware of their classmates' cultures and beliefs." In addition to culture, students also mentioned different people, different regions and beliefs as part of their developing global awareness. In our qualitative analysis, we saw a pattern of how students perceived the important connection between communication of global awareness and the development of global competency. This fits the OECD (2018) definition of global competence which includes being effective communicators. Indeed, communication is one of the most important features of developing global awareness and competence (Byker & Putman, 2019). This further underlines the value of implementing GNL and international VE to increase global awareness through communication.

Table 1. Student reflections of the GNL project

Global awareness - connections	37 occurrences	45%
World knowledge/stereotypes	9	24%
Different peoples	5	14%
Different cultures	12	32%
Different regions	6	16%
Different beliefs and customs	2	5%
History	1	3%
Language	1	3%
Communication	1	3%
Competencies - connections	**18 occurrences**	**22%**
Personal skills/knowledge	12	67%
Learning for life	1	6%
Learning for career	2	11%
Technology	1	6%
Peer-learning	2	11%
Cultural knowledge – connections	**14 occurrences**	**17%**
Own culture	5	36%
Other culture	9	64%
Career-related – connections	**13 occurrences**	**16%**
Own teaching skills	5	38%
Student/Classroom related	8	62%
Total	**82**	**100%**

Not surprisingly, in a course that featured an assignment about developing global awareness, there were 37 out of 82 (45%) occurrences of ideas and reflections connected to developing global awareness. As Table 1 illustrates, the students in this GNL project quantitatively recognized the importance of developing global awareness. Global awareness related responses represent close to half (45%) of all reflections on the Jamboard. The development of competencies was an oft-repeated connection in the students' reflections of the GNL project. The students mentioned the acquisition of new skills and the fostering of competencies in 22% of all comments, with 12 of 18 occurrences (67%) in this category highlighting the gain of personal skills and knowledge. This encompasses cultural knowledge as well as language-related competencies and even starting new friendships. One student reflected

on the experience in this way, "It was awesome being able to learn with people from different places. I actually have kept in contact with 2 people I met in the original breakout rooms!"

Using digital technology to facilitate the experience was another competency connection. One student wrote about the online interaction, "I learned how nice it is to meet other people, especially English-speaking ones, even if it is just online and how important that is if I want to teach in a foreign language." This comment shows numerous things: first of all, this student perceives that there are benefits of contact with other people and appreciates the opportunity to speak English. Furthermore, the student identifies personal as well as career-related gains in regard to teaching a foreign language. The comment also reveals a few more insights into a post-COVID culture. The student does not seem to perceive online contact to be on the same qualitative level as personal contact: "[…] even if it is just online." This comment may reflect a perception of online technologies in a post-COVID society. After several semesters of online teaching, the student may be placing greater value on face-to-face contact and face-to-face interaction in a foreign language compared to online exchange. We found it interesting that some students may have perceived online contact with speakers from distant countries as "just online." However, it should be kept in mind that authentic contact and intercultural communicative exchange has played a special role in foreign language learning for decades now (Lin & Lan, 2015). Synchronous online technologies allow more equitable and accessible opportunities to facilitate international exchange through project-based types of learning.

All of the students in this GNL project are preparing to become classroom teachers. We were not surprised to see the connections the students made to the GNL project and to their future careers. More than 16% of all comments at least partly address their future jobs. However, the students were more concerned with their future students and classroom situations than with their own teaching skills in these comments (62% vs. 38%). Students were especially focused on how to implement cultural and global awareness into their future teaching. One student commented, "The virtual odysseys would be great in my future career as a teacher, it is something to engage students and teach them about a culture or a country." They furthermore seemed to perceive advantages and great importance in teaching about global and cultural diversity. For example, one student put it this way: "Knowing about a variety of cultures or regions will help me understand my students and will allow me to connect to my students better and explore the different cultures that might be in my classroom." In their reflections, students stressed the importance of the relationship that forms between teachers and students. The students in this GNL project identified culture as one way to make connections with students and foster a strong teacher and student rapport.

6.   Conclusion and implications

Since culture is one of the core characteristics of global awareness, it is paramount for teacher educators to make their students aware of the importance of cultural awareness and intercultural communication. This is true in Germany and in the United States. We believe that VE experiences, like GNL, can help to facilitate the development of cultural awareness, global competencies, and intercultural communication. Equally important is to open students' eyes and minds to the wider world (Byker & Marquadt, 2016). International VE can help to engage learners in a process of reflecting on the values of their community and culture with all the particularities and peculiarities while, at the same time, broadening their knowledge and global awareness. Engaging different views with an open and positive attitude helps students to understand ways to engage the challenges of cross-cultural situations. In a global community, cultural knowledge and intercultural communication is more important than ever. The students in our GNL project were eager and willing to learn about other cultures (64% of the comments are about other cultures). Their eagerness was reflected in one student's comment about becoming "more open-minded towards new cultures". Furthermore, they perceived a benefit to both their personal and professional life. For instance, a student wrote, "I learned that recognizing cultural diversity and appreciating different cultures is very important, not only for my professional but also personal life."

In conclusion, one of the outcomes of this GNL project was that our students recognized the relevance of participating in an international VE in relation to their development of global awareness and knowledge about cultures and regions. They agreed that fostering global competencies, language skills, and technological skills are a benefit to their personal lives and their future professional practice. From this GNL project, we learned a number of valuable lessons for future GNL implementations. First, we learned that icebreaker activities are a key feature in prompting intercultural communication among the students. For future GNL projects, we would like to include more icebreakers. Second, we also learned that some structure to collaborative assignments, like the GCVO assignment, is important as it helps students to work together on task formations (Müller-Hartmann & Kurek, 2016). Third, we learned that students in the GNL project need time to ask questions about the collaborative assignments and to get started on their work in the webinar setting. We also have some questions that we would like to explore more in the future. One question is: What collaborative assignments help to facilitate the development of intercultural communication? Another question is: In what ways do GNL projects support language learning at a linguistic level (e.g., practice with the target language) and on a cultural level (e.g., understanding the meaning of what is being said and done in regards to different cultures)?

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