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Transforming Health Through Communities: An Experience From a Collaborative Online International Learning Program

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Abstract

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Background:

For many years, universities have placed a strong emphasis on providing students with an internationalization experience through study-abroad programs; however, the recent pandemic led many universities to look for alternatives to continue offering students an international experience.

Method:

This article describes the implementation and evaluation of a collaborative online international learning (COIL) experience between nursing students in Australia and the United Kingdom.

Results:

Students explored community spirit in the recovery from COVID-19. Students positively rated the experience and shared insights and outcomes gained from the program.

Conclusion:

The COIL experience exposed nursing students from Australia and the United Kingdom to learn about public health issues and develop cultural awareness and a sense of global community. Future programs should evaluate the long-term effects on students' nursing practice and their careers. [*J Nurs Educ.* 2023;62(7):387–392.]

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The concept of internationalization is a feature of many universities and has been described as a “vital aspect of higher education in the 21st Century” (Klopper, 2020, p. 1). Through internationalizing the curriculum, universities seek to assist students develop a culturally competent global perspective, attributes, qualities, and competencies to live and work in a global community (Villar-Onrubia & Rajpal, 2016). This is achieved by encompassing a diverse range of activities to provide students with a global experience (Altbach et al., 2010).

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that there is a strong need for universities to explore ways in which international experiences can be delivered virtually to present meaningful educational opportunities and deepen global engagement without the need for overseas travel. The term Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), introduced in the United States in 2006, has gained popularity in recent years as a medium for delivering virtual learning experiences across geographical boundaries (Rubin, 2017). COIL is viewed as an innovative approach to teaching and learning, providing online opportunities for deeper cross-cultural learning and enabling students to interact and collaborate across boundaries (Naicker et al., 2021). Connecting students from geographically distant locations, COIL provides experiences whereby students can work on meaningful projects together, develop cross-cultural communication, and explore issues through the different perspectives of global peers (Rubin & Guth, 2015). During the COVID-19 pandemic, COIL appeared as a popular pedagogy that provided opportunities to explore a globally relevant issue, enriching the intercultural learning experience as cross-cultural differences emerged through interactions (de Castro et al., 2019).

Community is at the heart of health care. At the height of the pandemic, when it seemed that the world had paused, it also exposed communities. In some cases, the pandemic brought communities together as individuals began looking out for each other and started supporting local businesses. In other situations, however, the pandemic highlighted the many inequalities that exist within society (Suleman et al., 2021).

It has been well recognized in the literature that communities play a vital role in improving health and well-being (Buck et al., 2021). Individuals living within the communities are aware of the influencing factors on health from social and environmental perspectives, and can help shape and develop services in response to health needs. To transform health through communities, it is essential that a community asset approach is taken. The aim of this approach is to strengthen and promote health within communities, whereby individual members develop a sense of ownership and feel empowered to establish supportive networks that can help address health needs and reduce health inequalities (Rippon & Hopkins, 2015). Therefore, it is essential that undergraduate nursing

students understand the communities they serve and recognize the significant role the community has in relation to health care delivery and health outcomes.

The COIL program was developed in collaboration between an Australian university and a United Kingdom university to bring together nursing and public health academics and students in the form of a virtual conference. This conference, which explored community spirit in the recovery from COVID-19 in the Australian and U.K. context, was entitled, "Transforming Health Through Communities." The aim was to raise awareness of public health issues among undergraduate nursing students and to equip them with the required knowledge, skills, and attitudes to contribute toward transforming health using a community asset approach.

Program Description

Using a collaborative learning pedagogy encompassing active learning and constructive process (Zhang & Cui, 2018), both universities identified the need for this virtual conference to expose nursing students to public health issues that were not covered in-depth in the curriculum. The program objectives, which were developed mutually by academics at both universities, included: 1.

To create awareness of the public health issues and expose students to the community asset approach.

2.

To provide an opportunity for academics and students to collaborate and network across countries.

3.

To develop intercultural knowledge and skills.

Considering the three key elements of designing a successful COIL program, pedagogy, technology, and cross-cultural learning were given the utmost attention (Asojo et al., 2019). The pedagogy was informed by the theory of constructivism and collaborative learning, which implies the learner constructs the knowledge through interactions (Gussy et al., 2006). With regard to the technology, Zoom was used to deliver the conference. Cross-cultural learning was incorporated by mixing students and assigning them to groups to work on a collaborative project. Using the three elements, COIL provided students with an opportunity to connect and take ownership of their learning in a meaningful way that resulted in cross-cultural awareness, communication, and collaboration.

Implementation

A 6-week conference was designed and delivered using a Zoom platform. Conferences were delivered in convenient time zones for the students—morning for U.K. students and evening for Australian students. In the first week, academics from each of the two universities presented a keynote address focusing on the context of their own country's public health issues and introducing students to the community asset approach. Five case studies were developed for students to use for their project work: (1) mental health and well-being; (2) social isolation; (3) travelling communities; (4) homelessness; and (5) domestic violence. During weeks 2 through 5, students worked collaboratively for approximately 2 hours each week in predetermined groups with an equal mix of students from both universities. Students were required to prepare a 15-minute presentation or innovative project based on their allocated case study and use a provided template of key ideas to be presented to academics and students during the last conference. Students needed to collaborate and communicate with each other throughout the 5-week planning and development stages. Communication and method of presentation were selected by each group via a platform that met the needs of each individual group.

Participants and Recruitment Strategy

Participants included undergraduate nursing and midwifery students who were enrolled in a Bachelor of Nursing or Bachelor of Nursing and Midwifery double degree at one university in Victoria, Australia, and undergraduate nursing students enrolled in a Bachelor of Nursing program at one university in Sheffield, U.K.

An expression of interest flyer was posted on the School of Nursing and Midwifery learning and management site inviting first-, second-, third-, and fourth-year students enrolled in undergraduate nursing courses to participate in the COIL program. Academics from the U.K. university also promoted the learning opportunity via an expression of interest flyer and social media channels. All of the students in the COIL program were invited to participate in the evaluation postprogram.

Ethics

The program evaluation was not considered evaluative research by the universities' ethics committees. Therefore, ethical approval was exempted.

Data Collection

An anonymous online evaluation survey was designed to collect students' feedback and experiences with the program. The survey was divided into closed- and open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions captured demographic details asked students to rate their experiences with the conference. The open-ended questions were: 1.

What were the best aspects of the conference?

2.

What were the most important outcomes gained from attending the conference?

3.

How might this conference affect your nursing practice?

4.

What aspect of the program could be improved?

An additional section also was included for students to provide other comments.

The electronic link to the evaluation form was shared with the students at the end of the last day of the conference. Participation in the evaluation was voluntary; however, as this was the first conference of its kind between the two universities, students were encouraged to complete the form. Students were informed that the submitted anonymous evaluation would be considered as implied consent and that their responses could not be identified by any of the facilitators.

Data Analysis

The responses from the participants who completed the evaluation form were analyzed using the content analysis framework proposed by Chambers and Chiang (2012). This process involved labelling, organizing, and interpreting data into a set of codes, concepts, themes, or categories. All of the completed evaluation forms were organized into an Excel spreadsheet. For closed-ended responses, numbers and frequencies were calculated and arranged in a tabular format for visibility.

For open-ended questions, two academics (G.M., J.J.) involved in the program independently organized the texts and assigned codes to the text. Next, similar codes were grouped together, and outliers were arranged separately. An inductive process was used by both academics in generating the codes and subsequent themes within each of the open-ended questions. For example, students' responses to the question, "What were the best aspects of the conference?" resulted in two themes that were developed inductively. After the themes were constructed, the academics from both universities discussed the findings with each other and then in a wider group with the program facilitators to confirm the themes. In addition, students were invited to confirm the themes generated from the findings. Two students from each university confirmed the themes were representative of their experiences. In line with the feedback from the team, adjustments were made to the themes.

Results

Of the 40 students who participated in the conference, 30 (75%) students completed the program evaluation. Twenty-seven (90%) students were enrolled in a Bachelor of Nursing program, and three (10%) students were enrolled in a double-degree program. Nine (30%) students were in the first year of the program; 10 (33%) students were in the second year of the program; 10 (33%) students were in the third year of the program; and 1 (4%) student was in the fourth year of the program (**Table 1**).

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Demographic	<i>n</i>
University	
Australia	17
United Kingdom	13
Degree	
Bachelor of Nursing	27
Bachelor of Nursing/Bachelor of Midwifery	3

Year in program	
First	9
Second	10
Third	10
Fourth	1

Using a 10-point Likert scale ranging from 0 = *lowest* to 10 = *highest*, students rated their overall satisfaction with the conference as 8. Students also rated their experience working with students on a collaborative project from both universities as 8. Twenty-nine (96%) students believed the conference was stimulating and engaging, and enhanced their learning of public health issues in both Australia and the U.K. The majority of students ($n = 27$, 90%) also reported the conference helped them develop intercultural knowledge and skills.

Best Aspects of the Conference

The qualitative part of the evaluation explored students' views regarding the best aspects of the conference. Two themes that emerged from the participants' responses were opportunities to collaborate and network, and insights into health care.

Opportunities to collaborate and network. Students indicated the conference provided opportunities to meet and network with students across countries; one student described this as “being able to collaborate internationally.” Another student noted an appreciation for “the insight provided by all corners of learning and independent inquiry; all groups have worked with respect and understanding of cultural differences.”

Learning about cultural differences and gaining insight into public health aspects were highlighted by some students. This was described by students as “creating overseas friendships, learning about social issues and the different experiences in each country” and “working collaboratively with other students from across the universities and comparing the public health aspects from both the U.K. and Australia.”

Insights into health care. The participants also described the insights they gained about health care in both countries as the best aspect of the conference. Most of the students acknowledged the similarities and differences in public health in both countries. Despite both countries having some similarities as part of a commonwealth, students also learned there were imminent differences. One participant said, “This conference opened my eyes to different aspects and delivery of care between the U.K. and Australia.” Another student noted, “It gave me insight into many important aspects of health care and addressing health problems that are not really taught in our academic subjects.”

Several students noted the knowledge about health care issues and how to address those issues would be useful in their future employment across countries. One participant said, “I would like to eventually go to the U.K., so this is a great insight into the health care system there.” Another participant noted, “I plan to work in Australia, and this has provided me with knowledge and information about life there.”

Outcomes Gained From the Conference

Students were asked to outline the key outcomes they gained by attending the conference. Three themes that emerged from the content analysis included learning across countries, knowledge and understanding of health issues, and collaborative projects.

Learning across countries. Students appreciated learning about international communities and their public health-care policies. Through keynote and students' presentations, participants found that despite the similarities in healthcare, there are differences in the approach both countries take to address community and public health issues, as one student mentioned: “I learnt about UK and Australian attitudes to public health problems. There are differences that we can all learn from and use in our practices.”

Knowledge and understanding of health issues. Students' responses explicitly mentioned the knowledge they gained and the understanding they developed about public health issues by participating in the conference. This was aligned with one of the core objectives of the conference. One student said, “I now have a wider knowledge of several public health issues and how this affects communities. Some alarming statistics that we came across about health issues that impact people's health were interesting to note.” Another student noted that one of

the videos “made me do my own research to see what my own town has to offer to kids who need a helping hand in life.”

Students also appreciated gaining knowledge about the services and resources available within each country to address public health issues. One student described this as having an “understanding of health disparities in minority groups in the U.K. and Australia, [and] being educated about the services and resources available for those experiencing these issues in the community.”

Working together on collaborative projects. Most of the students highly valued working with students across countries on the collaborative project. Students indicated they had a shared vision to learn and apply the knowledge in practice. One student said, “It is important to acknowledge we have the same shared vision to make a difference. I loved collaborating with my counterparts at La Trobe University; this has been the most insightful conference I have attended.” Similar comments made by other participants included, “The ability to work effectively and efficiently with the group members has been a blast,” and “Honestly, peer support during the pointy end of this pandemic was much needed.”

Some of the students were appreciative of the groups they were assigned to and the connections they made with peers in a short timeframe. One participant said, “I got really lucky with my group, and I thoroughly enjoyed the project work with my team members. I can't believe it's over to be honest. We caught up nearly every week and always recapped via WhatsApp.”

When planning the students' projects, the academics were concerned that the time differences between the two countries would create difficulties for the students to communicate to assign tasks. However, the students were actively engaged in the preparation of the project and did not use the time differences as an excuse not to collaborate. One student said, “Working across time differences is possible and the possibility of collaborating with health care across the world.” Another student noted, “To be a global citizen, time differences should not be a barrier.”

Effects on Nursing Practice

Participants were asked to consider the effects the conference might have on their nursing practice. By participating in this conference, students reported they expected to develop their skills, acquire an aspiration to serve as a volunteer, and gain appreciation for the role of nurses in the community setting.

Developing skills. Through students' projects and presentations, the participants outlined several skills they found useful for their current and future nursing practice. In particular, confidence and teamwork were identified. One participant said, “This program increased my confidence and

team working skills, especially when working with students from Australia who I didn't know." Another participant reported gaining "confidence in presenting in front of a group of peers and teachers."

Collaboration skills and working in teams also were mentioned by several students. One student described learning how "to collaborate with others in an effective way in the weeks leading up to the final conference." Another participant noted, "This conference improved my collaboration skills with different peers and shared decision-making skills, which are important aspects of nursing practice."

Serving as a volunteer. The conference inspired some students to become community volunteers and serve their community. Despite heavy study workloads, students desired to make a difference in the community. One participant said, "I loved learning about the Wigan Deal. It has actually got me inspired to volunteer at my Local Mildura Community House. After COVID, I plan on volunteering and teaching kids about their health." Another participant said, "Volunteering and being able to pass on my knowledge and health promotion for years to come."

Appreciating the role of nurses. The conference reinforced the value of nursing skills such as assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation in identifying the issues faced by communities. One student said, "This will definitely help me to sharpen my nursing assessment skills and help me to look at different roles across the globe." Students indicated they also gained a deeper understanding of the important role that nurses play in identifying and addressing public health issues in the context of community. One student said:

"This conference has given me a deeper understanding and appreciation of the various issues affecting members of our community. Learning just how prevalent these issues are will help me to engage with patients in a more sensitive way and understanding ways that I can provide practical advice as a nurse serving members of our community."

Aspects of the Program to Improve

Students also were asked to identify areas that could be improved in future COIL programs. Three themes emerged: student engagement, facilitators' support, and guidance on students' projects and presentations.

Student engagement. A few students expressed their concerns about the lack of some students' commitment to the conference and student project. Some students were not engaged and did not contribute to the project; this left other students in the group to do all the work. One student said, "It was slightly disappointing that three members of our group dropped out and did not

contribute, leaving other members to pick up their load." Another student said, "It's hard to know when people are going to show up and when they won't."

Lack of effective communication by a few group members was regarded by students as highly unprofessional. One participant said, "Lack of communication on some members' parts who did not attend the Zoom meetings throughout the past weeks and did not communicate that they would be absent; this demonstrates what kind of professionals they may become." A solution suggested by students was to assign a group leader.

One student said, "Ensuring a group leader is nominated within a group who can ensure accountability of each student to contribute and making sure that the workload shared between students is relatively equal." Several participants also recommended that facilitators needed to take responsibility to ensure all of the groups were functional and to support groups that were short of members. One participant described this as "a continuous check-in with the higher-ups and making sure everyone is interacting in the group."

Facilitator support. At the beginning of the conference, each group was assigned a facilitator. Students were appreciative of the support facilitators provided to each group. One participant said, "Having a facilitator for a group project was the best part; we had regular meetings and were well supported." However, for some students, the experience with the facilitators was not as positive. One student said, "We felt that our team lacked leadership from our facilitator." Another student noted, "We had many drop out and didn't meet our facilitator until 1 hour before the presentation. Guidance much earlier and weekly interactions would have been appreciated."

Guidance on students' projects and presentations. Most of the students appreciated the opportunity to work with students from another country on a project. There were some areas students noted that needed improvement, such as guidance on presentation preparation and more time to prepare the presentation.

Students also provided a recommendation to have an interactive first session and a venue to meet with students in the first session. Students noted that this would have made it easier to get to know each other; suggestions included a more interactive first session and a breakout room for students to meet each other and have a brief discussion.

Discussion

The COIL experience aimed to create an awareness of public health issues and a community asset approach among nursing students across two countries. Participants' evaluations indicated transformative learning occurred during the program. The emergent themes suggested personal and professional gains from the program were acknowledged and appreciated by the

students. Previous studies have reported that undergraduate nursing students welcomed the opportunity to learn in an intercultural environment (Ambrose et al., 2017) and gained increased collaboration skills (Chan et al., 2017), intercultural awareness and communication (Vahed & Levine, 2019), open-mindedness (Jung et al., 2022), and insights into global health care issues (Vicente et al., 2021). This knowledge and skills are essential to prepare the future workforce to work in multicultural health environments across nations and countries (de Castro et al., 2019). By participating in this conference, students appreciated the role of nurses in the community context and aspired to serve the community through volunteering. This was a unique and important insight gained from students' excerpts.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, undergraduate nursing students in both universities were restricted to community clinical placements in their own countries. Prior to the pandemic, students were exposed to community placements in international countries to widen their horizons of community and public health settings. Therefore, connecting with students from other countries and learning about public health issues using the COIL approach provided some valuable understanding for students from both countries. This model of learning was used by Ambrose et al. (2017) when medical students from one university in Australia and another university in Indonesia explored global health issues by participating in an online collaborative program. In addition, Strickland et al. (2013) regarded this framework as an alternative clinical placement by providing nursing students from different countries with an opportunity to work closely and learn from each other to construct new knowledge and understand health issues.

Despite reporting the positive influence of the program on students' personal and professional careers, students expressed some challenges they faced during the 6-week conference. In particular, some participants reported a lack of commitment from a few students and described being frustrated when working with those students. Previous studies found technology (Naicker et al., 2021), language (Chan et al., 2017; Vicente et al., 2021), and time zone differences (Naicker et al., 2021) as barriers. However, lack of engagement by some students might be due to several reasons. First, students were selected based on their expression of interest, and participation was voluntary. Second, there were no assessments or credits attached to the conference participation. Finally, both Australia and the U.K. were faced with a significant number of COVID-19 cases during the conference period, which might have challenged students with other competing demands, such as work and family commitments.

For future offerings, the program team from both countries needs to explore creative strategies to ensure students are engaged and work closely with their peers in the assigned groups. For example, a credit can be attached for program participation, with students collecting points from weekly interactions with their group peers. Additionally, as the program was co-designed by academics from both countries, there may be an opportunity to also involve students in the

design stage of the program. This also would open an avenue for students to be involved in the research and publication aspects of the program. The program team believes research exploring students' and academics' postprogram experiences would offer valuable insights into the program design, implementation, and evaluation for future offerings.

Another challenge worth noting was that students were assigned a facilitator to support their collaborative projects. Some students highlighted the limited support and guidance received from their assigned facilitator, which eventually affected students' ability to prepare and present the topic in line with the program expectations. A similar challenge was reported by Strickland et al. (2013), who noted that students expected reassurance from the lecturers on their project work. Hence, it is important for academic staff to understand their role as facilitators and have a balanced approach between empowering students and giving them the freedom to construct their own knowledge. Program faculty believed future programs should ensure that all facilitators are briefed prior to the program, expectations are set, and regular check-in calls are made by the program leads. A consistent approach to student support and facilitation throughout the program is important. Naicker et al. (2021) suggested providing a pre-COIL orientation for both students and staff, offering in-program support, and conducting post-COIL debriefing and reflection may help in mitigating barriers faced by students and staff.

Overall, this offering was the first co-designed collaborative online learning program between both universities. The success of the program was evident in the personal and professional outcomes reported by participating students, and provides valuable insights for curriculum developers and academics in embedding a COIL experience in the nursing and midwifery curriculum. The evolution in technology and online learning has made it possible to develop COIL programs for nursing and midwifery students that are sustainable and cost effective, and assist in achieving internationalization objectives across global nursing and midwifery education to ensure graduates are prepared to become global citizens.

Limitations

Considering the number of students enrolled in the Bachelor of Nursing program in both countries, student participation was low at the COIL conference. Some variables, such as time zone differences, clinical placement, work and family commitments, and conference length, may have influenced students' participation and engagement with the program. In addition, study findings reflect students' self-reported data; future COIL programs should include valid instruments to measure students' intercultural knowledge and skills, as well as qualitative interviews to offer deeper insights into students' experiences.

Conclusion

This article describes the implementation and evaluation of a COIL conference for nursing students in Australia and the U.K. during the COVID-19 pandemic in response to the need to provide alternative opportunities for international learning and to develop cultural awareness and a sense of global community. The COIL opportunity was underpinned by learning pedagogies and offered an understanding of concepts that were not fully explored in the curriculum. Although the COIL conference was evaluated positively by the participants, areas for improvement were identified in terms of student engagement, facilitator support, and guidance around the project. The recommendations for programs will be considered in future COIL opportunities between the two universities.

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