

Virtual exchange with DePaul University, USA: A global learning experience that broadened horizons and exceeded expectations

Unichristus and DePaul University (Chicago, USA) realized their first virtual collaboration project from April to June 2019 with 20 students from each institution. The focus was on academic writing in English, but Brazilian and American students also discussed about interculturality and student life in Fortaleza and Chicago. Even without meeting personally, they had an amazing experience.

The Genesis of the Project

The collaboration began when GianMario Besana, Associate Provost for Global Engagement at DePaul University, and Jan Krimphove, Head of International Affairs at Unichristus, met at a conference in Rio de Janeiro in april 2018. GianMario gave a presentation about DePaul's "Global Learning Experience" (GLE) projects¹, which are online collaborative exchange programs. Together, Jan and GianMario drafted a plan to start a GLE about "Scientific Writing in English" for students at both universities.

At Unichristus, Jan invited Maely Barreto, a professor of scientific methodology, and

Cymara Kuehner, who teaches physical therapy and has extensive experience teaching English, to help run the course. At DePaul, GianMario asked Hannah Harris, a professor in the Writing, Rhetoric, and Discourse department, to teach the DePaul course since she has a specialization in writing studies and a background in teaching English.

The first virtual meetings between Hannah, Maely and Jan took place at the end of 2018. They were followed by an intensive virtual collaboration from January through March 2019 to design the course which run from April to June 2019. During the preparation process and nearly all of the GLE project, collaboration between the instructors at both ends was purely virtual. It was an amazing experience that we were able to collaborate in an effective way with a colleague who was 4,500 miles away, which mirrored students experience as well. During the final week of the course, Hannah was able to come to Fortaleza to meet the Unichristus students and professors in person.

Prof. Hannah Harris, DePaul University, Chicago;
 Profa. Dra. Maely Barreto Borges, Profa. Dra.
 Maria Cymara Pessoa Kuehner,
 Prof. Jan Krimphove, Unichristus

Architecture of the Course

The GLE project was part of two distinct courses at the two universities which ran twice a week for about 10 weeks from early April to mid June 2019. The number of students was limited to 20 at each institution. Six out of 18 classes in each university were designed as online collaborative classes where students from both universities interacted synchronously via Zoom, a video conference system. The remaining 12 sessions were "local" face-to-face classes.

At De Paul, the GLE was embedded in a course titled "Writing Across Borders 377" in the Department of Writing, Rhetoric and Discourse and open to undergraduate students from all areas. Many of the DePaul participants majored in liberal arts and social sciences.

At Unichristus the GLE was part of the optional course "Using English for Academic Purposes"



► Instructors of the GLE project - Profes. Cymara Kuehner (Unichristus), Hannah Harris (DePaul), Maely Barreto and Jan Krimphove (Unichristus)

► Participants of the GLE project at Unichristus

► Unichristus student talking to DePaul students on Zoom



which focused mainly on scientific English. Students were chosen through a strict selection process. Proficiency in English was required since all lessons were taught in English and the students needed to be able to communicate with their American pairs. The course was open to students from all areas with interest in scientific research and cross cultural exchange. 11 out of 20 students were Medical Students, five were in Law School, two studied Biomedical Sciences, one Dentistry and one Business Administration.

Unichristus Sessions

At Unichristus, the course started with three classes called "Introduction to Academic English", where students learned vocabulary and expressions that would be useful for the academic writing process. They had to write short texts during class and complete interactive exercises in pairs and small groups to train their speaking skills.

The main part of the 12 local sessions at Unichristus, however, consisted in understanding the function of the different parts of a research paper - introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion - and learning how to write each part. To prepare, students read the book *English for Writing Research Papers* by Adrian Wallwork². The text helped students understand how each section contributed to the content, structure, and word choice of the overall paper. At the end of each class, students wrote the respective section of their own paper. These texts were edited during the writing workshops together with DePaul students.

DePaul Sessions

Navigating the differences between cultures was a main theme for DePaul students. They were briefed about potential differences in language proficiency and how to address them during the collaborative classes. Before the collaborative sessions began, DePaul students talked about the intersectionality between race, gender, socioeconomic status, and education. The first half of the local sessions at DePaul focused more on language teaching theory and the politics of speaking different languages. Students were encouraged to think critically to analyze how the English language is used as a tool for learning but can also reinscribe nativist bias and other stereotypes of what "good" English is or isn't. For each class, students were assigned different articles and chapters from a variety of peer-reviewed journals. Every class was always highly participatory.

During the second half of the local sessions, the content was about how to give feedback to Unichristus students about their writing. The majority of DePaul students had never given writing feedback to international students, so it was important to discuss best practices in writing feedback. Students read a short text by Nancy Sommers, *Responding to Student Writing* that was insightful on what the writing feedback process should be like. Students put their knowledge into practice when they gave feedback to Unichristus students in the collaborative sessions.

Collaborative Sessions

Following the GLE model, there were three phases to the

online collaboration: a preliminary, a central, and a reflection phase. During the preliminary phase students and teachers created introduction videos, so everybody would learn more about their peers in the partner institution. This initial phase also included the first collaborative online session, where students discussed, in small groups on Zoom, questions about cultural (mis)perceptions based on an inspiring TED talk about "cross cultural communication". One of the main insights of the session was that when dealing with different cultures the best attitude is to take the best from each of them. Finally, all students had to write and share a short text about their everyday life and they discussed the differences and similarities between Chicago and Fortaleza.

The central phase comprised four synchronous online collaboration sessions. During two of these classes students addressed the topics "Research in a 'post truth era'" and "Ethics and Research", based on articles and case studies they had to read before class. During class, they discussed on Zoom, in mixed groups of four students (two from DePaul and two from Unichristus), about challenges of doing research in an era of "alternative facts". They recorded their discussions on a Google doc. The second element of the central phase were two writing workshops. During these sessions students worked in virtual pairs. DePaul students provided feedback to the research papers written by Unichristus students. With the help of their American peers the Brazilian students edited their texts, negotiated content and language and thereby



improved their argumentation and writing skills.

During the reflection phase in the final week of the course students responded a short ending questionnaire. The questions for the questionnaire focussed on the intercultural experience that the students had undergone throughout the course: what they learned about collaborating with students from a different culture, what they learned about themselves during the process, and how they will use the communication skills from this course in their futures.

Technologies used for the collaborative sessions included Zoom for video conferences between the two classrooms and discussions in small groups, GoogleDocs for (co)writing and editing tasks, and DePaul's online learning platform D2L where the course materials and instructions were available to all participants and where students would post and share their writings.


Conclusion and Outlook

The first GLE project between Unichristus and DePaul was a fantastic experience for all participants, exceeding everyone's expectations. It included the following highlights for students: they improved online collaboration, practiced academic English, exchanged ideas about current scientific debates, and developed intercultural communication skills.

The ice between the students melted away during the first virtual meeting. Language or cultural barriers and technical issues were overcome easily. Students proved to be very

patient and polite with each other. They were very open to learning from students from the partner university and interacted very intensely in their virtual groups during the collaborative sessions.

At Unichristus, we believe that virtual collaboration can help us share the benefits of internationalization with a larger number of our students. Virtual exchanges make an international experience more accessible and enable our students to interact with other cultures without the need to travel to another country. We felt throughout the whole process that having DePaul as partner was a great start to our first online, international exchange project. At DePaul, students benefited from the exchange project to learn about Brazilian culture, academic life in Brazil, and they practiced giving feedback on students' writing.

Given the success of the first GLE we are planning a second edition in 2020. To further improve the learning experience some technological issues need to be resolved. Students' feedback will help to further develop some parts of the structure and the content of the course. For example, students wished to have more time to talk to each other and do more cross cultural (fun) exercises. Unichristus students would have loved to read more texts from DePaul students and DePaul students would have liked to learn some Portuguese. Students from both universities also suggested to dive deeper into the American/Brazilian culture, for instance by watching movies from the other country. 

Student feedback about the GLE project:

"I was nervous when it came to meeting new people, but everyone was very comprehensive and made me feel at home, while I improved the language and learned about research papers in English." [Unichristus student]

"The course exceeded our expectations. We felt that it went much smoother and we collaborated through technology much better than expected. We also found more common ground with each other than anticipated." [DePaul student]

"The course enriched my lexis, helped me with sharpening my reading and writing skills as well as have gifted me with new friends and very good contacts here and abroad. I'm glad I took the chance and embraced the opportunity!" [Unichristus student]

"What helped me the most was definitely the collaboration with the Unichristus students! It was a pleasure to interact with them and learn so much about Brazilian culture! These discussions were extremely engaging and eye-opening." [DePaul student]

References:

1. DePaul University is one of the world's leading institutions for virtual exchange in higher education and already implemented more than 100 GLE projects with universities all around the world. Examples can be found here: <https://offices.depaul.edu/global-engagement/partnerships/programs-for-partner-institutions/Pages/GLE-Projects.aspx>
2. Adrian Wallwork, English for Writing Research Papers, Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, New York, 2011.