Facilitating international transdisciplinary collaboration in a virtual academic exchange project

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Abstract

What challenges does virtual collaboration pose to fundamental conditions of collaborative work such as building relationships and trust and establishing balanced participation? We approached this question in a virtual seminar in transdisciplinary Public Art across six international universities, with funding from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) International Virtual Academic Collaboration (IVAC) program. Together with our partner institutions and accompanied by an intercultural facilitator, we established a collaborative methodology for teaching and learning. As means of participation and relationship building, we developed a two- step method for matching student teams and used collaborative tools such as playful exercises and open agenda meetings. We conducted a qualitative study to monitor the collaborative process throughout the course. We held semi structured one-on-one interviews with fifteen students and analyzed their written reports. The results illustrate how our methodology supported the students' collaborative creative practices. Additionally, we describe challenges and consider possible solutions.

Keywords: Online teaching; collaboration; public art; art education; relationship building; collaborative methodology; academic exchange.

1. Introduction

Since the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, online teaching has gained substantial importance in higher education. While technical tools and solutions have quickly developed and improved (García-Morales, 2021; Carrruana Martín et al., 2022), scholars have worked to retain the social importance of relationships, trust and care in online teaching environments. As Burke and Larmar (2021) review, students in online courses are more likely to experience isolation and loss of a sense of identity and personal engagement with other students and teachers than they are in face-to-face classes. In online education, opportunities for casual encounters, personal exchange and spontaneous feedback are reduced. Recent studies suggest that an environment for collaboration should be purposefully designed and facilitated (Herrera-Pavo, 2021; Uukkivi et. al. 2022). Herrera-Pavo (2021) reviewed studies on social and educational factors as a basis of virtual collaboration in higher education and proposed that teachers assume not only the role of educators but also of mediators.

We designed a virtual teaching collaboration, with a focus on social qualities. In the realm of interdisciplinary creative practice, our aim was to create an environment for participation and free experimentation. We followed the extracurricular aim of forming a community of practice in socially engaged public art. In the spring and summer of 2022, six international universities co-developed and realized the joint seminar called "Public Arts Garage", integrating perspectives from artistic research, performative art, architecture, anthropology and literature and language. The partnering universities included Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Concordia University Montreal, Rennes 2 University, Queen's University Belfast, University College Cork and University of Barcelona. The project served as a prototype within a newly founded international graduate school on creative approaches to public space (GS-CAPS). Students were matched across different countries and disciplines to develop artistic projects in virtual exchanges that took place in public spaces in the respective locations. Due to different academic schedules, the seminar was divided into two cohorts – one with five and one with three partner universities – that followed the same basic methodology. We followed an idea of deep collaboration, guided by our intercultural facilitator Susanne Wille, who accompanied the entire process including course design and moderation during the sessions. Her approach was informed by a relational understanding of cultural complexity (Baumann Montecinos and Grünfelder, 2022) and focused on the quality of attention and intention (Scharmer, 2016). With her support and with participation of all partner institutions, we established a collaborative methodology, consisting of a two-step process for matching student groups and collaborative tools like playful exercises and weekly open-agenda meetings. In this qualitative study, we investigated what drove the collaborative processes in the student groups, how our methodology supported these processes and what challenges emerged in virtual group work.

2. Methods

The data collection was undertaken as a means of evaluation and as part of the lead author's doctoral thesis. The qualitative study focused on results that describe social qualities and pedagogical methods as a basis for virtual student group work. The data consists of interview transcripts, fieldnotes and written reports produced by the students. Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were held (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018), lasting between 45 min and one hour. An interview guide was designed using open-ended questions about the participants' experience during the course. Follow-up questions were used to delve deeper into relevant aspects (Flick, 2007). The data were analyzed with an inductive approach, allowing findings to arise from the data through initial and focused coding (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2015).

Fifteen students participated in the study with informed consent. Participation comprised of an interview and analysis of reflective reports produced during the seminar. A request for participation was sent to all 51 students. Additionally, individual requests were sent to participants who had the most relevant experience in the subject (Flick, 2007). The final selection included students with particularly positive or negative experiences in their group, students who dropped out and students who had experienced both cohorts of the seminar.

The authors were at the same time initiators, coordinators and co-teachers in the seminar. Being involved in multiple roles provided profound insights, while it could be seen as a limitation of bias in the study. The researchers were sensitive to potential conflicts of interest.

3. Results

The interviews revealed how students connected to their groups and how they collaboratively developed projects. We could confirm that our methodology was able to support group formation in a way that students felt connected and could develop creative work through virtual exchange. Additionally, we identified challenges that emerged and considered how these could be met in future collaborative projects.

3.1. Matching method to build positive group relationships

Our matching method supported the formation of teams that were able to develop positive dynamics and more or less equal commitment to collaboration. Positive experiences were reported in groups where students found commonalities such as similar personalities, interests and cultural backgrounds.

Most of the students had not met before even if they were enrolled at the same institution. For supporting the formation of groups across the international partner universities, we developed a two-step matching process consisting of a kick-off workshop and a survey. The

kick-off workshop was held in a virtual[1] meeting space. Students worked on creative tasks in small groups in different constellations. They brainstormed about connecting features in public spaces, such as bodies of water or public monuments, between their home countries. The results were then presented to the whole cohort. The aim was to foster curiosity and interaction as an alternative to customary introductory rounds, which often promote self-presentation. In the second step, the participants filled out a survey as a basis for the teachers to build groups of two to four students for the seminar project work. The participants were asked to name preferences for potential team members. Furthermore, they were asked open questions about their expectations and skills they would like to share, followed by ranking questions about experience in creative collaborations and digital exchange. Finally, questions about expected time commitments and learning styles were included. In the selection, priority was given to the choice of potential group members, followed by the other questions in the order as listed above. All groups were mixed across institutions and disciplines. 60 percent were mixed across academic levels of MA and Ph.D. based on our survey, at least one student in each group was experienced in collaborative work and virtual exchange, so that other group members could benefit from this experience. Our intercultural facilitator helped design the matching method and moderated the kick-off workshop. As non-subject-specific teacher, she was in a neutral role and could thus fully focus on the aspect of building relationships.

Through initial coding, we recognized that most participants highlighted positive experiences regarding their relationships in the groups. With focused coding, we determined what made the experience positive. Eight participants of both cohorts emphasized a sense of openness for equal participation. For example, they felt that there was "room for change" to bring in ideas and that the group members would "listen" which made it "easier to share". Two of those students remarked team spirit, describing that they were "tied together as a team" and experienced "some sort of synergy that you can't really organize or assume from the beginning". Others mentioned "trust". Importantly, in many cases positive experiences of group constellations in both cohorts were reported as mostly being related to commonalities that the participants identified in their team-mates. One participant depicted that their group had similar "personalities", others told that they shared a similar *"worldview"* and "that we think about the same things at the moment."[2]. Four of the students from three different groups emphasized cultural background as a connecting factor. For example, a student from Germany suggested that their group worked well together "*maybe because of culturally being congruent, being kind of from the same place".* This group consisted of three partners who lived in Germany, Canada and Brazil, while sharing a Latin American heritage. They were able to use this commonality to co-develop a performance for different public spaces. They

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[1] An exemption were the students from Canada in the second cohort, who met in a hybrid setting in a room.

[2] Original quote in German: "dass wir uns gerade um die gleichen Dinge Gedanken machen." (Translation by the lead author)

chose the topic of sharing dreams, because the group could relate to the topic from their own cultural backgrounds. They were *"feeling very close culturally to the importance of the dream space"* and were "*very aware of what this means to indigenous communities, to indigenous cultures in Latin America."*

The interdisciplinary seminar across six international universities offered multiple ways for students to benefit from differences like different disciplinary backgrounds, academic levels and cultural environments. At the same time, differences were accompanied by challenges, like working across different time zones and learning cultures. While collaboration entailed embracing differences and learning from each other's diverse experiences, ideas and approaches, our data show that fruitful creative group work was essentially supported by elements of commonality. Herrera-Pavo (2021), has argued that virtual group work is more likely to succeed if the group shares common interests. Our results confirm this finding while our case additionally involved the factors of personality and cultural commonalities. The two-phase matching process was a helpful instrument. Even limited to virtual meetings, participants were able to find fellow students with whom they felt connected. The findings offer a way to refine this method, by more consciously addressing important commonalities.

3.2. Collaborative tools for developing creative group work
One of the most rewarding outcomes of the collaboration was reported when the group work led to new and surprising results. Next, we consider how the collaborative tools of "playful exercises" and "Maker's Lounge" meetings supported this outcome.

Throughout the seminar, playfulness was used to encourage curiosity, leaving known paths and creating new ideas together with others. In the first cohort of the seminar, Maruška Svašek, a partnering professor from Queen's University Belfast, developed a game that the student groups were asked to play. They explored public spaces based on an experiment of playful ethnography (Svašek, 2019). In the second cohort, students were encouraged to design their own playful exercises in reference to "unlearning exercises" used in a collaborative course (in-person) at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna (Baldauf, 2016, p. 169).

In the first round of coding the interviews, it appeared that some students emphatically highlighted positive experiences when they were improvising together in their groups. Different participants pronounced that they "clicked" together, that they had a "magical time" discovering "surprises", and one even described the experience as akin to being "on the biggest high". In focused coding, we became aware of reports of seven students from both cohorts, who experienced rewarding moments in their collaboration when they came upon surprising new ideas through collective improvisation. Some students pointed out that the playful exercises helped them to improvise together. In the second cohort, a student from Northern Ireland declared that using games "was really fun" and "added a different kind of

approach". A teammate from Canada remarked that it "brought up a lot of new avenues". In the first cohort, some groups developed their final seminar projects based on their playful exercises. The written reports of two students from Germany and Northern Ireland illustrate how this game helped them to collaboratively develop a project. The pair reached a dead end with their initial approach and used the game to recalibrate. Initially, they worked on the base of a previous project from the German partner, creating posters that addressed issues of climate change. The student from Northern Ireland felt unsure working with posters as artistic medium and wrote: „I believe, for both of us there was an instability in the concept." After they had exchanged some drafts, the German student "found it difficult to work on this graphic design task at a distance." Hence, the pair gave up the poster idea and developed a new collaborative project. The German student recalled that *"The playful task (…) gave us the important impulse."* The task was an explorative walk through the students' respective cities letting the dice decide the direction. They set rules for where to start and what to do during the walk. Their rule was to document plants growing in the cracks and corners of the cityscape. From this experience, the German student noted that it became "*clear that the real recipients of our public art should be the uninvited flora in the streets."* Instead of posters, the group created a performance, addressing plants with messages and poetry. The game encouraged the partners to develop a creative group process even through remote exchange.

The case of the two students from Germany and Northern Ireland also illustrates the role of another collaborative tool developed for the seminar, a weekly open agenda meeting called the "Maker's Lounge". When the student from Northern Ireland was in doubt about the group's first poster idea, she was not immediately able to exchange her concerns with her team-mate due to timing issues and shaky internet. Thus, the student attended the Maker's Lounge, where she was reassured by teachers and peers to reconfigure and to embrace the playful exercise for new ideas. This case was typical for the role of the Maker's Lounge in the seminar. The weekly two-hour time slot was a reliable opportunity to exchange ideas outside of the regular sessions. It served as an important instrument of feedback and enabled a facilitation role of teachers as suggested by Herrera-Pavo (2021). Additionally, some students from both cohorts declared that the meetings gave them orientation in the course. A student from Canada in the second cohort told that when she *"wasn't sure (…) what was most important for me (…) it was always grounding, when we got together and had conversations about it."* Burke & Larmar (2021), report that feelings of isolation and disorientation are more likely to emerge among students in online settings than in-person. The Maker's Lounge was a connective feedback instrument that helped strengthen bonds and provide orientation.

3.3. Challenges

While many groups recounted positive experiences, some challenges emerged, and some students dropped out before the seminar ended. Not all challenges and dropping out were related to group work. However, some findings were pertinent in the context of this study.

Interviews with students who dropped out showed that asymmetries in leaving and staying within one's own comfort zone created negative experiences of unequal participation. In this practice-based seminar, two students from Germany in the second cohort especially felt that they had to work outside their immediate fields of interest and their artistic media, while their teammates did not. One of them affirmed that *"this is really not my safe ground"* The student used to work with objects and "do things in the streets", while her group worked fully digitally. The student "liked that a lot". However, she added: *"it was difficult because I felt so far away from the things I was used to. So, for me, it was really hard to connect with them."* The other two members were also on a higher academic level. As the group worked in an area that was very familiar for those two, the younger student with less practical experience felt isolated and demotivated. Another student from a different group reported a similar problematic. She also worked object based, while her group designed a performative experiment. The researcher's fieldnotes recount that the student normally felt comfortable and "*would take the lead in such group situations".* In this group *"she did not feel qualified to do so because she was working outside of her strength in fields that her teammates were more qualified in and she was 'not a specialist' in."* The seminar demanded students and university staff to master multiple challenges including working remotely with public spaces across different countries. Not being able to work in one's own fields of interest and artistic media created additional challenges for the two participants quoted above. The asymmetrical situation that their teammates were working in their fields and media was experienced as a barrier to equal participation. Instead of benefiting from the others' expertise, the students felt intimidated and did not see a way of meaningfully or equally contributing.

4. Conclusion

In our seminar, similar personalities, interests and cultural backgrounds were essential preconditions for fruitful creative group work in an international virtual setting. Our tools helped students from different backgrounds to develop meaningful and rewarding collaborations and provided orientation. In some cases, negative experiences emerged when group members asymmetrically worked within and outside their fields of interest and artistic media. This challenge can be met by monitoring and mediating asymmetries in group processes. With a focus on social factors of collaboration and with attentive support of a facilitator, the seminar established relationships among students and faculty, some of which are still lasting and have led to follow-up projects. This indicates an important first step for a community of practice to form and to establish virtual exchange in public art.

Acknowledgments

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