

Advancing internationalization agenda amidst the war in Ukraine: kindness and trauma-informed teaching project in teacher education

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Abstract

The paper aims to describe and analyze graduate students' collaborative online learning project between Vinnytsia Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi State Pedagogical University, Vinnytsia [VSPU] Ukraine, and Worcester State University [WSU], Massachusetts, USA, as one of the outcomes of the internationalization agenda in Ukraine. Since the war in Ukraine and the increased acts of violence in the U.S. require immediate action, the “Kindness and Trauma-Informed Teaching” project is essential. Based on a one-semester interaction for the case study, research, and project work, it is a novel practice at both educational institutions. Graduate students engaged in asynchronous and synchronous activities utilizing Zoom, Google Classroom, and Google Documents. The project was carried out under the auspices of Education USA, the American Council in Ukraine, and SUNY COIL Foundation in the USA. The findings highlight the significance of such partnerships and persuade that this project promotes further collaborative research in teacher education.

Keywords: *Collaborative online international learning; international project; internationalization agenda; kindness and trauma-informed teaching; Ukrainian and American universities; graduate students.*

1. Introduction

The traditional understanding of the internationalization of education is associated with concepts such as globalization, cross-cultural awareness, mutual understanding, research integration, and student /faculty mobility (de Wit, 2019, p. 12; Ge, 2022, p. 229; Gromov, 2022, p. 58; Kuzmina & Glazunova, 2018, p. 294; Lisnychenko et al., 2022, p. 430; Malcolm, 2021, p. 4; Matvienko et al., 2022, p. 344). By definition, these terms entail a significant increase in scope, novelty, change, and challenge. Nevertheless, internationalization is primarily viewed as positive, where evident benefits outweigh shortcomings, although some apprehensions might also arise (Kuzmina & Glazunova, 2018, p. 295). Projecting internationalization on Ukrainian education makes this process a “necessary condition” for higher educational establishments' competitiveness and financial security (Gromov et al., 2022, p. 57; Matvienko et al., 2021, p. 142). Due to global developments, Ukrainian higher education has committed to robust international collaboration in line with the country's political aspirations aimed at European integration (Gromov, 2022, p. 56; Tripses et al., 2018, p. 214). Therefore, Ukraine's internationalization agenda has confidently and steadily become an integral part of higher education policies. Importantly, collaboration has got more versatile, including joining international non-governmental educational organizations as their affiliates, signing partnership agreements with universities, ensuring dual-degree education, guest-lecturing, developing curricula and courses with co-teaching opportunities, and writing research papers (Powell et al., 2014, p. 34; Gromov et al., 2022, p. 59; Lisnychenko et al., 2022, p. 430; Tripses et al., 2018, p.216). Similarly, international collaboration is viewed positively for student motivation to learn foreign languages, intercultural and values awareness (Lisnychenko et al., 2022; p. 440; Matvienko et al., 2022, p. 344)

However, the war in Ukraine endangered the sustainability of Ukrainian education. The air raids, shelling, internally and internationally displaced students and scholars, destroyed infrastructure, and power outages became severe obstacles to educational services. The regular academic communication and interaction paradigms were ruined and seemed irreparable. Nevertheless, progress in technology integration in Ukrainian higher education as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Matvienko et al., 2021, p. 141) and advances in the internationalization agenda achieved before the war helped resume schooling and internationalization agenda pursuits.

2. Methodology

The research describes the collaborative online learning of kindness and trauma-informed teaching by American and Ukrainian graduate students. The authors intended to design the project first, to provide students with an understanding of the significance of teaching kindness, trauma, and stress responsiveness in educational practices because of the war in

Ukraine and increasing violence in the USA. Second, to promote international collaboration in teacher education.

The project was integrated into the Traditions of Academic Collaboration: International Experience class offered at VSPU graduate school in the fall semester (October – December 2022) and the Trauma-Informed Learning class taught to WSU graduate students. This empirical research examines graduate students' behavioral patterns and attitudes to designated activities, consisting of F2F lectures, thematic scientific reading interventions, weekly assigned tasks on the materials, and discussions in international groups in real time. The commitment to online collaboration resulted in a welcoming environment for the three interaction modes: case study, research, and project work in asynchronous and synchronous formats. The Google Classroom platform, Google Documents, and Zoom were employed to unite forty-three students (17 American and 26 Ukrainian). Google Forms were used to survey students' experiences. The authors applied descriptive, qualitative, and quantitative methods to explore opinions about online international collaborative learning and the relevance of kindness and trauma-informed teaching. The literature under review is scientific papers about views on and internationalization experiences (de Wit, 2019; Ge, 2022; Gromov et al., 2022; Kuzmina & Glazunova, 2018; Powell et al., 2014; Tripses et al., 2018).

3. Collaborative Online International Learning

3.1. Internationalization Leadership Academy and SUNY COIL initiatives

The Internationalization Leadership Academy [ILA] All-Ukrainian program was launched in January 2022 by Education USA and the American Council in Ukraine in partnership with the State University of New York Collaborative Online International Learning Foundation [SUNY COIL] to foster leadership in internationalization. The SUNY COIL Foundation has been “empowering” leadership in collaborative learning since 2000 (SUNY COIL, n.d.). The selection criteria prioritized candidates' professional and personal skills and competencies for international collaboration: a desire to step out of the box, have prior experience in international cooperation, and the ability to connect with a U.S. partner-in-education and develop a joint project for integrating it in the class of the home university. The Education USA and SUNY COIL initiative resulted in fourteen international educational tandems from Ukrainian and American universities, engaging more than 250 students in collaborative learning in the fall semester of 2022-2023 (Education USA, n.d.). A three-week training for American and Ukrainian professors-collaborators gave good insight into planning/designing and involving students-collaborators in discussions and projects (Figure 1).

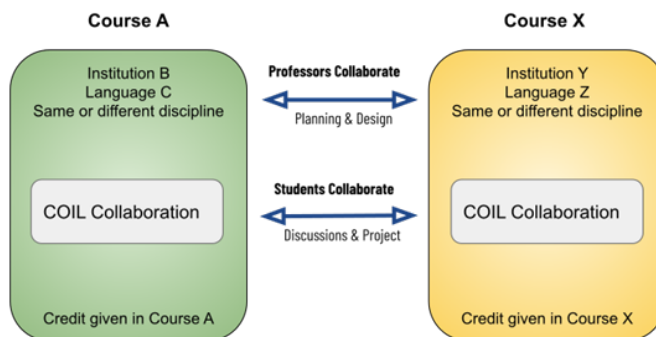


Figure 1. The layout of student/professor engagement in the COIL. (Source: website <https://coil.suny.edu/>).

3.2. The Kindness and Trauma-Informed Teaching Project

The Kindness and Trauma-Informed Teaching Project was preconditioned by the war in Ukraine and increased violence in America (Statista, n.d.). Besides, the authors collaborated on kindness as NGO Global Community Uniting for Equity members. The project design required students to develop teacher competencies in the case study on kindness, research and analyze presidential speeches, and develop project work on the effect of stress and emotional trauma on a child’s brain development. Guided by the central questions about how to make acts of kindness universal and the primary focus for teaching relationships, students considered the case study through group skills, pro-social attitudes, and influencing societal values positively. In conclusion, a plan was created to create a culture of kindness in the classroom. Resulting in ranking the importance of teaching kindness as *important* by 20,5% of students and *very important* by 82,1%, as the survey shows (Figure 2).

How would you rank the importance of the topic 'Teaching Kindness' in school curriculum.

39 відповідей

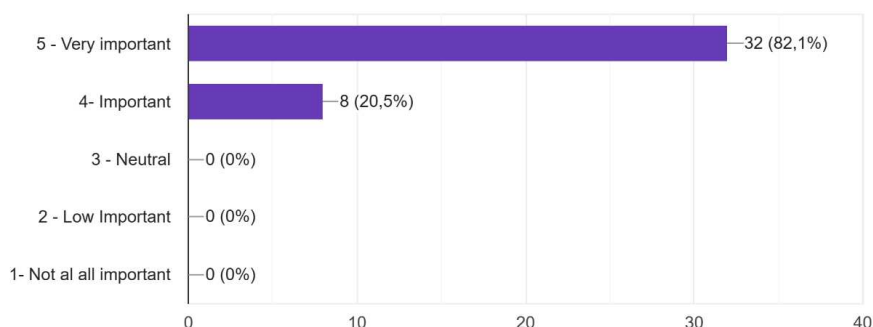


Figure 2. Display of ranking the importance of teaching kindness.

The “Presidential Speeches and Their Effect” research was performed in international teams in joint Google Docs. Such leaders’ speeches as President Obama, Bush, Zelensky, Trump, and Reagan were considered powerful for positive or adverse impact. Interestingly, both American and Ukrainian students noted that the emotional tone, choice of vocabulary, and stylistic figures are essential. The five created teams identified 33 to 53 words of kindness, 42 to 46 of their opposites, and 10-15 phrases of positive or negative character in the speeches under scrutiny. The identified common themes in the studied addresses are “elements of kindness,” “confronting barriers,” and “threats to unity.” Relating the speeches to the events that generated public appeals proved the political context to be impactful. The “Stress and Trauma Effect on Child’s Brain Development” project work addressed adverse childhood experiences resulting in apathy to learning and behavioral disruptions. Students identified the types of trauma and mechanisms of impact on a child’s brain development by analyzing scientific papers, YOUTUBE materials and reflecting on lectures delivered to project participants. Based on the acquired knowledge, 87,2% of students think trauma-informed learning is *very important*, and 12,8 % agree it is *important* (Figure 3), admitting practical recommendations on handling trauma in the classroom are timely provided and a valuable tool under current circumstances.

How would you rank the importance of the topic 'Trauma Informed Teaching/Care' in school curriculum.
39 відповідей

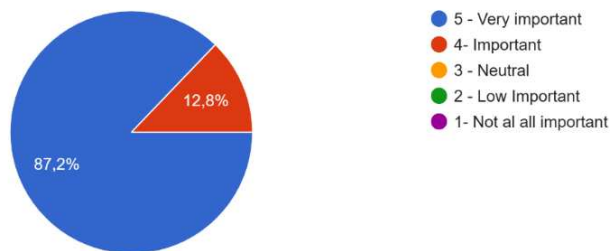


Figure 3. Display of opinions of trauma-informed teaching importance.

While students were reflecting on integrating kindness and trauma-informed teaching into professional activity, 82,1% of students confirmed the attitude as *I will undoubtedly*, 10,3%-*if they have like-minded colleagues; if my students are interested* – 5,1%, and only 2,6% - *I don't know* (Figure 4).

Do you think you will integrate these practices in your work as an educator?

39 відповідей

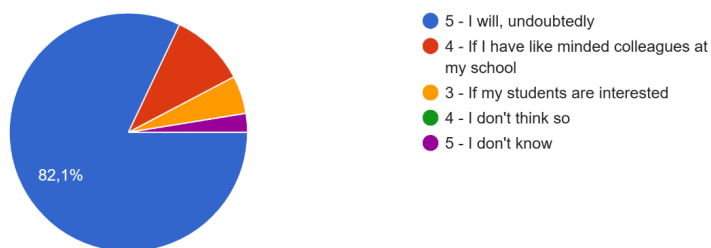


Figure 4. Commitment to integrating into work.

Interestingly, the synchronous discussions in ZOOM breakout rooms and the presentations of the teamwork outcomes at a general session concluded case study, research, and project work with the most desirable interaction format: live communication and vibrant cultural exchange. Decidedly, those F2F meetings became crucial for ruining stereotypes, developing mutual respect, and professional and personal exchange.

4. Professional and Personal Gains for Practical Applications

Since the authors were genuinely interested in student attitudes to and benefits of the project, they completed the work with the questionnaire. The Google Forms surveyed the graduate students' experience in kindness and trauma-informed teaching. The responders' emphasized the project's relevance and value for practical application and successful career pursuit. The highlighted benefits can be distinguished as professional (87%), personal (55%), or both – (45%). Concerning the professional gains from the project, students highlighted: *helpful in creating a toolbox to have as teachers; giving new perspectives for professional development; learning how to be a professional and kind person; getting an insight into what it is to teach in wartime; learning approaches to teaching kindness in the classroom; pursuing a successful career in education; solving similar problems in education; learning about trauma-informed teaching in an applicable way, learning to feel as an educator when students are stressed and how students may respond to the stress of war; a new experience I am eager to implement in my work; kindness can be developed in every person; we need more of such teaching for schools; exploring aspects Ukrainian education is lacking and adopting them.*

Considering personal gains, the students singled out: *learning new myself; the most important learning is to be kind and communicate with people of different cultures; taking such classes refreshes your passion for teaching; it was inspirational and emotional; a humbling*

experience to meet colleagues whose country is at war; learning the power of human spirit and connection; eye-opening experience for me; helping see things from other perspectives; learning kindness is vital to the well-being.

In addition, student feedback contained opinions of the benefits of English proficiency (15%), cross-cultural awareness (86%), live interaction (88%), character traits relating to national identity (17%), and evident intention to keep in touch (29%). The emotional component is high (96%) and expressed as *a once-in-life experience; I learned for this project more than during all years of study; complete fun of interactive collaboration; fantastic, inspirational, amazing experience; incredible exchange of ideas, cultures, and experience; like no other experience.* Concerning the drawbacks, American and Ukrainian graduate students are unanimous here: *there is not enough time for f2f sessions*, forwarding suggestions to organize more international collaborative projects.

5. Conclusions

The authors conclude that despite the war, Ukrainian higher education is determined to foster the internationalization agenda in teacher education, considering it a professional and personal enrichment resource and a powerful way to stay connected to educators worldwide for solving common problems. Reflecting on the VSPU and WSU graduates' feedback, we assume that international collaboration on kindness and trauma-informed teaching is essential for Ukrainian and American teacher education to help the traumatized and the stressed. It is evident that kindness and trauma-informed learning is fundamental due to the current situation and should be included in the teacher training curriculum in Ukraine to cope with the aftermath of war. More emphasis on kindness and trauma-informed responsiveness should be made in American schools to stop the violence eventually. In parallel, the research findings testify that estimates of the significance of intercultural exchange and collaborative research in teacher education are high. This paper's researchers fully agree with a student's opinion that "it is essential to build a community of kindness in the classroom, school, and, consequently, in society in general, and changing society means to change thinking." When young minds generate such ideas, there appears to be a conviction that creating a world of kindness is existential and achievable, signifying education's focal role in this endeavor.

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