

## **The Value of a Virtual Term Abroad**

Lorette Pellettiere Calix and Patrice Prusko Torcivia

SUNY Empire State College

### *Authors' Note*

Lorette Pellettiere Calix, International Programs, SUNY Empire State College; Patrice Prusko Torcivia, International Programs, SUNY Empire State College. (Patrice Prusko Torcivia is now at Department of Academic Technologies, Cornell University.)

This research was supported by a grant from SUNY and had the support of partner university Quality Leadership University in Panama. Kimberly E. Johnson provided statistical analysis support. Authors contributed equally to this study.

We must thank the instructors and staff who participated in this project:

Albert Armstead, Adjunct Professor, Evening/Saturday College, The College of Westchester

Roberto Ball, director of IT Operations, Quality Leadership University, Panama

Erin Catone, SUNY Empire State College International Programs

Sean Capossela, Director of IT Operations, The College of Westchester

John Deluca, PhD, Instructor SUNY Empire State College International Programs, Jaqueline Flynn, The College of Westchester

Peter Janacek, Principal and Senior Counsel, BrandcomPR, s.r.o, University of Bratislava, Slovakia

Oto Jones, PhD, Area Coordinator, SUNY Empire State College Center for Distance Learning

Kagan Ozdemir, Phd., Anadolu University, Turkey

Katarina Pisutova, Instructional Designer, Empire State College and Elearning Coordinator at Comenius University in Bratislava

Nazik Roufaiel, Ph.D., CPA, CIA, CMA, CFM, CFE, CITP, CGMA, Area Coordinator: Accounting, Professor Accounting & Finance, SUNY Empire State College Center for Distance Learning

Rhianna Rogers, Ph.D., RPA, Mentor/Assistant Professor of Cultural Studies, Empire State College (SUNY)- Niagara Frontier Center

Lisa Snyder, Phd., formerly of ESC Graduate Studies

Janet Thompson, Adjunct Professor, The College of Westchester

German Zacate-Hoyos, Phd., SUNY/Cortland

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Lorette Pellettiere Calix, International Programs, SUNY Empire State College, Saratoga, NY 12866. E-mail: [Lorette.Calix@esc.edu](mailto:Lorette.Calix@esc.edu)

## **Introduction**

Participation in a term abroad provides a cultural experience that develops critical skills students need to be globally competent and marketable in the workforce. For business students, an international experience helps to understand international business practices and could be preparation for an international business career. This experience also provides the broadly applicable advantages of expanding international and cross-cultural perspectives and increased interpersonal and communications skills (Orahood, Kruze & Pearson, 2004). Houser, C., Brannstrom, C., Quiring, S. M., and Lemmons, K. K. (2011) found that even short term international field experiences had a positive impact on student learning, explained primarily by increased engagement with the course content and new social networks.

Unfortunately, only a small percentage of students participate in study abroad programs and many groups are underrepresented. There is little diversity in race, gender and ethnicity nor access for non-traditional, lower socioeconomic groups, those with disabilities and first generation college students (Fischer, 2012). From our initial experiences in Panama, we believed even virtual interaction between students in different countries contributes to some of the objectives of a study abroad experience. The eventual goal of this study was to develop a framework that would enable all SUNY students to participate in a virtual term abroad.

Empire State College's programs in Latin America were built on a blended learning model, with mandatory week long residencies. In the Dominican Republic (DR) and Honduras, we didn't have enough students to merit sending instructors to conduct those residencies. As a solution, we looked to using virtual tools to have our DR and Honduran students connect to the residencies we offered with the more substantial group of students in Panama. Feedback from end of term student surveys

indicated the experience had been positive but improvements were needed to make the experience more meaningful. .

At about this time news came of the SUNY Innovative Instructional Technologies Grant (IITG). Our interest corresponded to the SUNY goals of “creating globally competent students... providing international exposure throughout all courses and degrees... and using social and emerging technologies to network students and faculty throughout the world” (State University of New York, 2009, pp. 18-19). We successfully submitted a proposal for a Tier 2 grant and received \$20,000 to explore the use of technology and analyze the benefit of a virtual term abroad. This article will focus on the collaborations and the value of a virtual term abroad.

### **Theoretical Framework**

After analyzing numerous theoretical frameworks, we decided that the work of Etienne Wenger, et.al in *Promoting and assessing value creation in communities and networks: a conceptual framework* (2011) was the most appropriate framework to assess the value created by a virtual international experience. The value creation framework identifies five value cycles, which are not sequential and may overlap:

*Immediate value* – Activities and interactions

*Potential value* – Knowledge capital

*Applied value* – Changes in practice

*Realized value* - Performance improvement

*Reframing value* – Redefining success

## Value Creation



(Wenger, Trayner, & de Laat as cited in Bozarth, 2012, para. 3)

In this article we will address our findings related to the following research questions:

- 1) What is the level of value creation demonstrated by students of different cultures when collaborating in a virtual term abroad using virtual meeting tools, mobile devices and mobile apps?
- 2) What are students perceptions related to the value creation of using virtual meeting tools to collaborate with students in other countries?
- 3) What are faculty perceptions of the value creation within a virtual term abroad?

## **Methodology**

The participating students varied in age from 19 – 50, with 90% equally distributed across the 20s, 30s and 40s. Overall, 60% of the total participating students were female, although the Latin American students were primarily male. The students in Panama and the Dominican Republic were a cohort participating in a blended learning program with both online and face-to-face components. The students in the United States were, in some cases, in traditional classroom based courses, and in one case, in a fully online course. Of a total of 95 enrolled students in the eight courses we analyzed (four collaborations), 31 participated in the surveys. (32.6%)

ESC's program in Panama was appropriate for this pilot project because the students move through the program as a cohort allowing us to evaluate difficulties and develop solutions over a 14 month period. During the grant period we worked with a cohort of students who had already experienced two terms of academic work in the program and completed another three academic terms during the grant period. This allowed them to give us valuable feedback on the differences they perceived before and after the course collaborations.

### **Course Collaborations**

The guidelines for the collaborations were broad enough to let each faculty team create assignments that fit within the context of their courses. The guidelines for the purposes of this study suggested a 2-3 week collaboration with a minimum of two virtual sessions, a cross team assignment and an asynchronous blog discussion. For the purposes of this pilot faculty were not asked to create assignments connected to specific global competence goals. We planned on using blogs rather than having a group discussion within Angel. This allowed open access for the students without the

constraints of having to be enrolled in the course. We allowed faculty to choose whichever teleconferencing equipment they preferred since our goal was to analyze the value of the collaboration and not the specific tool used. Tools suggested included Skype, Blackboard Collaborate, Zoom and BlueJeans. We allowed faculty to coordinate when the collaborations would take place but they had to be announced in the syllabus prior to the start of the class giving students adequate time to prepare.

Activities were designed to assess the value of the collaboration and assess how closely a virtual term abroad could simulate an on the ground experience. Faculty facilitated the virtual sessions and all activities were designed to encourage meaningful discussion between the students and a team project that met both the academic expectations of the course as well as meaningful cross cultural interaction. Assignments included paired interviews, the development of a website, posting research and discussing on a blog, discussion of case studies. Following is a description of three of the collaborations:

#### ESC-College of Westchester (Collaborations 1 and 2-Table1)

Each collaboration started with an asynchronous icebreaker. This gave students a chance to introduce themselves to one another and share something about their culture. The icebreaker session was followed by a virtual session that was moderated by the faculty. During the first collaboration students were asked to research the other country prior to the start of the session and prepare a question to ask. The plan for the session was to alternate students from each country and have them pose a question to another student. On the day of the session there was a blackout throughout the city of Panama. Approximately 5 minutes before the session was to begin the power went back on and almost the entire class logged in for the session. The blackout did prevent the students

in Panama from researching a topic but the session did result in a lot of lively discussion between students from the two countries. We paired students up to do a paired interview. The students were allowed to choose the tool they would use for the interview. They then had to submit a summary of the actual interview and a personal reflection on what they learned. The process of pairing up students and them connecting for the interview went well and there were no major issues. In the second collaboration the Panama students had difficulties connecting with their CW counterpart and only one team completed the assignment. It is not clear why there were issues in the second collaboration that did not arise in the first.

During the virtual sessions the CW students were all together in a classroom while the Panama logged in from their homes, jobs and in some cases cars. As part of the second collaboration we arranged for the first virtual session to take place during the residency so that the Panama students would be together. On the night of the first virtual meeting all the universities were closed in Panama due to a lack of rain resulting in an energy shortage. Faculty packed up all the equipment and set up a classroom at the hotel. We were able to hold a successful session.

The second collaboration used case studies as the primary assignment for the virtual sessions. The faculty felt the first collaboration was so successful they wanted to increase the number of virtual sessions. When looking at schedules we were only able to find three times for virtual sessions. Students were asked to read an assigned case study as preparation for the session discussion. The discussions were guided by faculty and specific questions related to the case study. In the second collaboration two courses from CW participated with two faculty facilitators.

## ESC Slovakia (Collaboration 5-Table 1)

As part of a SUNY COIL grant Patrice Prusko Torcivia worked with an ESC instructional designer who was living in Slovakia in the design and development of a co-taught, co-designed Internet Marketing course. The course was developed in Moodle, which was being used by the university in Slovakia. This allowed all students to work in the same LMS throughout the entire 15 week, full course collaboration. At the start of the course there were 25 students from Slovakia and 9 from ESC Panama. When creating the teams we tried to balance them by including a student who had some expertise in web site design, English language skills and years of education completed. While the course was a requirement for the students from Panama the students from Slovakia were taking this course at no cost and it was not needed as part of any degree program. The lack of a vested interest in course completion impacted both the participation throughout the course as well as completion of the course.

Due to the time difference and having students in both classes who worked virtual sessions were held on Sunday afternoons at 3 PM EST. The participation by the students from Slovakia in the virtual sessions was low. It is not clear if this was due to a lack of vested interest in the course or because of they were held on a Sunday. The sessions were mandatory for all students and part of their final grade. The team assignment was the development of a website for Habitat for Humanity in Slovakia.

Examples of guest speakers included Trudy Jacobson, who spoke about transliteracy skills; and Adam Ceresko, CEO of Appek (mobile applications) who spoke about what it takes to start an Internet company highlighting the importance of being innovative, vision, taking risks and ownership and accountability of one's actions. Students in Slovakia presented the final website to Habitat for Humanity. Due to the

time difference we weren't able to do this as a team presentation. As part of this collaboration students used Facebook as a way to discuss assignments and work on team projects and share articles of interest.

**Table 1. Course Collaboration Descriptions**

#	University	Virtual Session	Team Project	Asynchronous Discussion
1	ESC-CW	Zoom – guided discussion	Paired interview	Blog
2	ESC-CW	Zoom – case study analysis	Paired interview	Blog
3	ESC-CW	Blackboard Collaborate – case study analysis	None (Individual assignments shared with group)	Blog
4	ESC-ESC	None	Internet Market plan/website	Moodle forum
5*	ESC-University of Bratslava	Zoom – guest speakers	None	None
6*	SUNY/Cortland	Skype – guest speaker		

\*Data not included in analysis

## Results

### Student Experience and Perceptions

The average participation rate in the blogs was 72%, with a range from 52% to 89%. Students participated from one to seven times in each blog discussion, with an overall average of 3.7 posts per student. The most active blog discussions were the initial icebreakers. Interestingly, except for the icebreaker discussion, the groups that had less synchronous virtual contact were more active in the online blog space. Instructors indicated there was more active participation during the collaborative exercise. Sixty-five percent of the students also indicated they believed there was more participation during the collaborative exercise. The relatively higher number of posts

during the collaboration compared to other course discussion forums supports value created in the “Immediate value” cycle.

The quality of the posts, or “educationally valuable talk” (EVT), as analyzed using the Bliss and Lawrence (2009) framework (educationally valuable posts/total number of posts) varied from a low of .11 to a high of 3.5 EVT posts per participating student. Educationally valuable talk is defined as “ a particular interaction pattern in online discussion threads characterized as dialogic exchanges whereby participants collaboratively display construction, and at times, critical engagement with the ideas or key concepts that make up the topic of an online discussions, and build knowledge through reasoning, articulations, creativity and reflections” (Uzuner, 2007, par 15). The icebreaker discussions, whose value was in forming a sense of community and identification with the students in the other country, were not counted as EVT. Student post collaboration survey results indicated that 70% of the students thought the quality of the discussions during the collaboration was higher than during other discussion forums in the course. This also affirms value created during the “Immediate Value” cycle.

Initial data analysis indicates increased value in multiple virtual term abroad experiences. Numerous students from both ESC and CW in Collaboration 1 also participated in Collaboration 2. The second time the students met in the blog they expressed recognition for the other students and indicated they were happy to be working with them again:

*I believe that there are some familiar faces from our previous collaboration, it's great to be working with you guys again! 😊 (Panama student A).*

*Last term, we had a collaboration with you guys and it was really interesting. I learned a lot and was glad to have met two of you guys through our interview assignment. So, I am glad to work with you guys again. (Panama student B)*

*I'm glad to be back. it is very exciting to know that we are going to have another time to learn from each other. I felt last time we didn't have enough time for our discussions. (US student A)*

*Hi, my colleagues in Panama. I am looking forward to once again collaborate with you. (US student B)*

The online participation was much lower the second time students participated in a collaboration (89% participation and 4.7 posts per student the first time, vs. 53% participation and 1.1 posts per student the second time). These were the students who also had more contact in virtual sessions, where they were seeing and speaking to one another. Data analysis indicates that more personal contact in the virtual sessions was more exciting and satisfying to the students than the strictly asynchronous communication. The second time, when students were already familiar with one another, there were fewer posts related to getting to know one another. .

This observation is echoed by the data from online forums in the courses that did not have as much (or any) virtual contact. The students that primarily communicated through the blogs had higher participation rates and a greater number of posts per student, and similarly, had a higher number of quality posts. Lacking the opportunity for virtual contact, students made greater use of the asynchronous online discussion forum.

Results indicate the Panamanian and Dominican students had higher participation rates and a higher number of posts per student. This may have been

because of a greater comfort level with the tools, but also may be a cultural reflection, as the Latin American culture values establishing personal relationships and high levels of communication as a precursor to “working” together. An exception to familiarity with the tools is the course *First Peoples of America*, taught by Dr. Rhianna Rogers, which already incorporated blogs as a routine part of the course learning activities. Even in this situation, however, the Latin American students, who were less familiar with blogging than the US students, posted more often with an average of 7 posts per student compared to 5.75 posts per US student and a proportionate difference in EVT.

### **Student Perceptions of Value Created**

Analysis of student survey responses indicates most of the value created was in the first cycle: Immediate value (activities and interactions). Survey responses indicated students found the project to be fun or inspiring, they made connections between the collaboration and their course content, they found the activity to be relevant, and they made connections with new people. Nonetheless one of the second ranked values was from Cycle 5, Reframing value: *“I see the value in sharing and learning with people from other cultures.”* The third ranked value created was from Cycle 2, Potential Value (knowledge capital): *“I have gained confidence in my ability to engage with people from another country or culture”* (See Table 2).

**TABLE 2. Student perception of GREATEST value created**

VALUE CREATED	% STUDENTS WHO AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE	% STUDENTS WHO NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	% STUDENTS WHO DISAGREE OR STRONGLY DISAGREE	AGREE MINUS DISAGREE	CYCLE
The project was fun or inspiring	77.4	22.8	0	77.40	1
I made learning connections between the collaborative project and other course content.	77.4	19.4	3.2	74.20	1
I see the value in sharing learning with people from other countries and cultures.	77.4	19.4	3.2	74.20	5
I have gained confidence in my ability to engage with people from another country or culture.	73.3	26.7	0	73.30	2
The activity and interaction were relevant to me.	74.2	22.6	3.2	71.00	1
I interacted or made connections with new people.	76.7	16.7	6.6	70.10	1

**Student post-collaboration survey results, 2013.**

The least impact on value creation was in Cycle 3: Applied value (changes in practice). Four of the bottom five ranked questions were in Cycle 3 with students indicating they didn't feel they got to know the students in the other country well enough to build trust and confidence. This may be due to the short length of the collaborations since it takes a significant amount of time and interaction to build trust. Cycle 4 (Realized Value- performance improvement) also showed only moderate levels of value creation, with the criteria of having access to new information also in the bottom five. (See Table 3)

**TABLE 3. Student perception of LEAST value created**

VALUE CREATED	% STUDENTS WHO AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE	% STUDENTS WHO NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	% STUDENTS WHO DISAGREE OR STRONGLY DISAGREE	AGREE MINUS DISAGREE	CYCLE
I trust students in the other country enough to ask them for help.	41.4	48.3	10.3	31.10	3
I know students in the other country well enough to know what they can contribute to my learning.	48.4	41.9	9.7	38.70	3
I feel less isolated.	48.4	51.6	0	48.40	3
I have access to documents or sources of information I would not otherwise have had.	63.3	23.3	13.4	49.90	4
I have gained access to new people	61.3	29	9.7	51.60	3

## **Student post-collaboration survey results (2013)**

Initial results support the impact even a short term collaboration can have on value creation. Students found strong value creation in the fifth cycle: *“I see the value in sharing and learning with people from other cultures.”* This is the essence of the value of a study abroad experience: increased understanding and appreciation of another point of view.

## **Faculty Feedback**

Preliminary results from the faculty surveys echoed the student responses. While, at the time of this writing, we have still not completed a final analysis of faculty survey responses, preliminary results from the faculty who participated in the first collaborations confirm value created through the virtual term abroad experience. 100% of the faculty agreed or strongly agreed with the student’s greatest value creation results (Table 2). In addition:

- 75% of the faculty felt the students had greater participation
- 75% of the faculty felt the students demonstrated more learning
- 67% of the faculty perceived greater student engagement
- 67% were more satisfied with the course that contained a collaboration compared to other courses they teach.

No faculty disagreed with the above statements. One faculty member commented: *“I found the level and substance of student engagement made this an invaluable project.”*(Faculty post-collaboration survey)

Faculty did report that the course collaboration represented a significant increase in workload, and sometimes did not achieve the results they had hoped for. One instructor, disappointed with the results, speculated that the collaborations might lend

themselves better to theoretical or cultural courses rather than courses of a more technical orientation. Nonetheless, that same instructor felt the overall experience was positive and added “*it is great to have another teacher from the other side (who) brings some (other) perspectives and opinions*” (Faculty post-collaboration focus group).

Despite the additional work load and problems with technology and communication, when asked if they would do it again, 100% of the faculty said “YES”.

### **Discussion**

Initial data analysis indicates limitations of our research and areas that warrant further research.

- A study designed with collaborations that have learning objectives tied to the activities. It is recommended that the activities and objectives be tied to the Association of American Colleges and Universities rubrics (Rhodes, 2010)
- Survey instruments would be more reliable if piloted. While we did test the instruments and made some modifications, after applying we discovered some flaws. For example, we did not limit the course choices which would have helped us distinguish differences between the students in different countries. As a result, some students named both the course in which they were enrolled as well as the partner course. As a consequence, all of our data is global, separated only into student and faculty results.
- Tools providing the opportunity for students to both see and hear one another at all times promoted greater engagement and verbal discussion. If the students had the option to turn off their cameras or use a chat box, they tended to hide in the chat, rarely using their microphones.
- The icebreaker discussion builds enthusiasm among the students

- Close communication between the participating instructors is crucial; define the roles and responsibilities of each
- Test the equipment in advance; have a Plan B
- Give students sufficient advance notice of scheduled virtual sessions
- The collaboration should be required and factor into grade
- Virtual sessions should include student participation and activities encouraging engagement
- Provide more faculty training and student orientation
- Provide faculty with more support because of the additional workload created
- It is important to use tools that are mobile device friendly. While most of the students and faculty used their computers to access the collaboration activities and participate in virtual sessions, there were always some students who used mobile devices. When there were technological difficulties, mobile devices saved the day!

### **Future Research**

There is sufficient evidence of value created with a virtual term abroad to merit further research. In addition to expanding the sample size to corroborate our preliminary results, other research questions to explore are:

- Are there differences in perceptions of value created between the students in different countries? If so, what might explain those differences?
- Did the perceptions of students who participated in more virtual sessions differ from the perceptions of the students who did not experience as many virtual sessions?
- Would asynchronous voice thread tools provide affect student perceptions?

- Would longer collaborations create more value?
- Is the impact of the virtual term abroad long lasting?
- Is student learning and engagement impacted beyond the period of collaboration?
- Did differences in instructor interaction and intervention impact student perceptions of value created?
- Are some “types” of courses better suited for virtual term abroad collaborations than others?

Ultimately, we believe Empire State College can offer a unique opportunity to all SUNY students as well as students at other universities. We have international programs established in several countries which can provide a platform for numerous course collaborations, and even full term virtual study experiences. As a next step, we would like to see international program courses with strong online components incorporated into the College course catalog, and freely offered for enrollment of students SUNY and college-wide. This could be the only opportunity for an international experience that many of our students may be able to acquire.

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