

A CASE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATIVE LEARNING BETWEEN AMERICAN AND CHINESE STUDENTS

Keywords: International Cooperative Learning, Tourism Education, Case Study

Suosheng Wang, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Indiana University, Indianapolis

Kun Lai, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China

Background

International Cooperative Learning (ICL) possesses a big potential in becoming a good solution to higher education's challenge of "internationalization." To explore how ICL should be designed, implemented and what challenges and barriers an ICL course may encounter, the researchers from SYSU, Guangzhou, China and IU, Indianapolis, USA researched ICL by incorporating it into the course of 'Global Tourism Geography' and bringing their students together into the same distance-learning 'classroom'. Such a study is needed for the reason that ICL lacks clear conception and practical operationalization, although it possesses great potentials to be an important solution to challenges caused by "internationalization" of higher education (Sungpikul, 2009; Zhang et al., 2010). Due to insufficient academic studies, up till now, little is known about what this learning approach actually means and how it can be successfully implemented.

Research Questions & Methods

This study firstly reviews literature about "learning", "cooperative learning" (hereafter CL) and "tourism (geography) higher education"; so as to conceptualize ICL, identify key research gaps and develop research questions. It then moves on to the case study, where the designing, implementing and assessing issues of the ICL project are presented. Particular emphasis is given to the assessment.

Based on literature review, it is clear that ICL as an important solution for the internationalization of tourism education has not been vigorously studied. This study contributes to that knowledge by addressing some important questions. In particular, three questions are proposed:

- How to design ICL so that it fits in with tourism geography education?
- How to implement ICL in tourism geography course?
- How to assess the effectiveness of ICL as applied to tourism geography

This study addresses these questions by conducting a case study of an ICL project between two universities, SYSU and IU. As a result, The design and implementation process of the ICL project was introduced; students' learning effectiveness through the ICL approach was

assessed; and the challenges and barriers encountered in the process were identified and discussed. In terms of challenges and barriers, for example, due to inconsistent class hours and academic schedules, students from both universities found it a big challenge to fulfill ICL projects on time. Due to different time, students experienced difficulties in communicating with and receiving responses from their international counterparts in a timely manner.

Findings & Limitations

The ICL project was assessed by requiring the students to evaluate 27 items related to the cause-, outcome- and overall- dimensions of ICL effectiveness. The cause-dimension assessment shows that both groups agreed with the statements, as the average mean scores for both are 3.27 and 3.72. ANOVA test indicates that assessment of 4 out of 10 items are statistically different between Chinese and American students. Two groups share different opinions on two elements of CL, i.e., social skills and group processing. The effect-dimension assessment shows that overall the ICL project caused good outcomes for both groups. Both groups believed that their inter-personal relationship and personal and social skills had benefited most from the project. The assessment of the negative effect dimension showed differences however. IU students were less negative about the ICL project, although both agreed that the grouping and the group assignments design need further improvement. Finally, the overall-dimension assessment shows positive results too. This means that both groups were satisfied with the project, found it interesting, and would like to take similar courses with ICL and recommend the course they taken to others. Note that, American students were comparatively more satisfied with the project. The standard assessment tells a consistent story about how the ICL project was perceived by the students. By analyzing the correlation among four composite variables, namely, the cause-dimension items, reversed positive effect-dimension items, negative effect-dimension items, and overall-dimensions items, it is found that the fourth variable is related to the rest.

As an initial effort to conceptualize the nature of ICL, findings from this case study provide a good foundation for further ICL studies in the future. However, while this study helps us understand more about the characteristics of ICL, we would like to make a caution about the reliability of the assessment results due to some basic reasons: first, the sample size of this study is small (one class only with 13 students); two, students were at different grade levels. Therefore, we recommend future studies to re-assess the effectiveness of ICL by incorporating the above discussed challenges and barriers. With this being said, we have no attempt to claim the findings of this study to be generalizable.