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GLOBAL NORTH-SOUTH TELECOLLABORATION: PROMOTING A CRITICAL MINDSET, OR “JUST MAKING DAY-DREAMS”?

Abstract:

Telecollaboration can enhance language skills and promote intercultural understanding, but university-level links between students in the Global North and the Global South are still rare, despite significant connectivity gains in the Global South, and despite the range of skills and experience that Global South students possess. This paper presents a pre-sessional EAP course between engineering students in Scotland and Gaza in which telecollaborative project-work forms the core. It suggests that such project-work can engender authentic forms of communication, providing opportunities for developing what Barnett (2007) terms a “space-for-being” among participants, and raise awareness of global inequality. The paper concludes that the widespread move to online EAP delivery since 2020 might be seen not only as a pedagogic challenge, but also as an opportunity to develop a “critical EAP” (Benesch, 2001). This would be of value to the students who are able to attend pre-sessional courses in the Global North *and* to the students in the Global South who are normally unable to attend such courses. It could contribute more broadly, too, to the creation of an HE system based on principles of fairness and inclusion. However, it also notes that further work is needed to ensure that Global South students feel willing to make their voices heard, one crucial element of authenticity that is still lacking.

Keywords: English for Academic Purposes ♦ pre-sessional ♦ authenticity ♦ voice ♦ becoming

Introduction

At a time of widening inequalities, there is a growing need for inter-university links across geographical, social, racial and political divides. Students from the Global South combine knowledge of their chosen fields with solid English language skills, and they share with their

Global North¹ peers a desire to further develop their subject-knowledge and language abilities, and to learn about other cultures. At the same time, telecollaboration – “the engagement of groups of learners in online intercultural interactions and collaboration projects with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programmes” (O’Dowd, 2018, p. 1) – offers obvious potential for developing language-skills, knowledge of content, criticality, and intercultural awareness. As East (2012) notes, increased contact between students from the Global North and the Global South could be of mutual benefit in many ways.

However, even though telecollaboration must now be considered mainstream (Colpaert, 2020), and despite notable advances in connectivity (O’Dowd and O’Rourke, 2019), Global North to South telecollaboration is still unusual (Helm, 2015; Starke-Meyerring & Wilson, 2008). This paper describes an attempt to redress this situation within the field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), a specific genre of English addressing the skills such as essay-writing, reading-efficiency and seminar-contributions that are required for successful study at university. It breaks new ground in its examination of issues deriving from a specifically *pre-sessional* telecollaboration initiative with the Global South.

Pre-sessional courses exist to enhance the English-language (particularly EAP) skills of students aiming at university study, but they often offer only limited mixing of national / linguistic groups and of opportunities for intercultural contact (Benesch, 2001; Chichon, 2019; Ding & Bruce, 2017). A further problem, particularly relevant to the Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) course described here, is the tendency to focus on technical outcomes (Daly et al, 2017), to the detriment of potential societal impacts. This has in fact led to the introduction in 2020 by the UK Engineering Council of a new accreditation criterion, namely an approach to engineering practice that “recognises the responsibilities, benefits and importance of supporting equality, diversity and inclusion” (AHEP, 2020, p. 30).

The English for Academic Studies Telecollaboration (henceforth EAST) project referenced in this paper calls on pre-sessional engineering students in Scotland to work together with Palestinian engineering students, in order to look for technological answers to societal problems in the Gaza Strip. Specifically, this paper draws on a 5-year link-up between SET students at the University of Glasgow (henceforth UofG) and peers at the Islamic University of Gaza

¹ “Global North/South” describes a political / economic division of the world, rather than geographic. Unlike the terms “developed/developing”, it provides a space for two-way learning, and avoids the power-connotations inherent in this previous nomenclature.

(henceforth IUG). In Gaza, engineers are obliged to tailor their responses to the economic constraints and societal dislocations that have resulted from decades of conflict and – since 2014 - blockade (Fassetta et al, 2017; Imperiale, 2017). These circumstances present a combination of challenges (Aouragh, 2001; Hammond, 2012; PCBS, 2021) that engineers studying and working in the Global North can scarcely comprehend, and an encounter of real potential for developing language skills, intercultural awareness and criticality among participants.

Building on the author's own experience of working in a Global South context, the paper explores the extent to which such courses can combine an authenticity of communication with opportunities for transformative encounters for the students in both contexts, and whether the voice of the Global South is audible.

Literature Review: Drivers for Change

My own critical trajectory

The author's first insights into the potential benefits that English language skills can bring, alongside an awareness of uncomfortable power implications inherent to the status of English as a vehicle of development (Phillipson, 1992), came from two years' work as a volunteer English teacher in Eritrea. On entering the Scottish higher education system as a pre-sessional lecturer in EAP to engineering students, these experiences provided an opportunity for a longer-term critical reflection (Barnett, 1997; Benade, 2015; Schön, 1983) from a position as insider, juxtaposing the privileges that are offered to the university-student who can access a UK institution, and those generally denied their Global South counterpart. At the same time, lacunae for any university student arriving in the UK were also clear, most immediately in terms of the opportunity to actually *use* the English language within their EAP course; for instance, year-on-year Mandarin speakers within the UofG pre-sessional course make up over 60% of the SET cohort, hence contact with students from other L1 groups can be limited.

Critical reflection regarding my own positionality and responsibilities as a teacher / course-leader followed. I found myself working within a system that that is increasingly dependent upon market forces and driven by a need for outcomes that are quantifiable (Morrissey, 2015), and that consequently struggles to find space for intangibles such as meaningful intercultural interaction (Crosbie, 2014), issues relating to social justice (Giroux, 2010; Jacob & Hastings, 2016) or the need to contest Islamophobia (Durrani, 2018).

Opportunities for transformative change through pre-sessional project work

Kumaravadivelu (2008) suggests that encounters between students from the Global North and South can lead to “transformative” change for the students (p. 107). Transformative change can occur when a learner realizes that a given perspective no longer holds, resulting in reflection and the search for a new perspective (Mezirow, 2011), i.e., a process analogous to my own critical trajectory, outlined above. Critical questioning of the self is central to the process of transformative learning, and the result is a deep-seated alteration not only in how we see ourselves and the impact of our actions and beliefs, but how we see the world around us. Dal Magro et al. (2020, p. 582) update the theory, in a way that is very apt for the project presented here:

[Transformative learning] might be seen as a pedagogy of discomfort, one that emphasizes the need for educators and students to move outside of their ‘comfort zones’, challenging dominant beliefs, social habits and normative practices to create possibilities for individual and social transformation.

Writing in 2015, however, Helm (p. 204) noted that links with the Global South were in fact relatively unusual, and more recent studies (see e.g., Plutino et al., 2019; Turula et al., 2019) continue to present an overwhelmingly Global North focus. While stating that “the promotion of understanding across national and cultural divides.... is more pressing than ever”, O’Dowd and O’Rourke’s overview of virtual exchange projects (2019, p. 4) includes only one mention involving Global South partners – Soliya – a project linking the European Union and countries along the southern Mediterranean coast. Projects that *do* involve Global South partners rarely touch on the *most* disadvantaged: Starke-Meyerring and Wilson’s 2008 overview of telecollaborations included Development Assistance Committee (DAC)-listed partners in Mexico, China, Brazil and Nicaragua; only the last is currently listed by the Development Assistance Committee (2022) as a Lower Middle Income Country.

A space for Critical Pedagogy in pre-sessional project work

A further driver for change was the chance to adopt a pedagogy that might actively set out to make learners aware of global injustices. Speaking specifically of higher education, Giroux describes a ‘critical pedagogy’, first outlined by Paulo Freire in the 1970s, as one that via a “culture of openness, debate and engagement” [...] “forges an expanded notion of politics and agency through a language of skepticism and possibility” (Giroux, 2010, p. 718).

There seemed to be space within the pre-sessional course to raise awareness of how systems of education interact with wider social and economic systems to maintain inequality worldwide. Project work might talk in particular to three key tenets of Freire’s critical pedagogy approach.

Firstly, context forms a crucial part of Freire's pedagogy (2007, p. 60), and the EAST project would necessitate a problem-solving dialogue based on the *Global South context*. Talking specifically of the SET field, Weinstein et al (2016) note what they see as a particularly concerning tendency to "reinforce and legitimise a neoliberal hegemony of global competition and capitalist expansionism" (p. 201); engineers are not often called on to address issues of social justice. The dialogue and reflection that results from contextualized project-work and the telecollaborative interchanges would, it was hoped, generate what Freire terms "hinged themes" (Freire, 2007, p. 120) among students who are able to study in a Global North country. Such themes might raise awareness of social justice beyond the circumscribed engineering issues that they investigate. The themes would emerge (crucially, in Freirean terms) from challenges *chosen by the Gazan students*.

A second way in which the EAST project might foster a critical pedagogy approach was in the way the student-student emphasis could re-frame the conventional teacher-student relationship. EAST represented an attempt to move away from what Freire (2007, p. 72) terms a "banking" model of education, one in which learners acquire pre-digested facts that need little or no adaptation to the demands and challenges of the real world. Knowledge-accrual via experiential, project-based learning enabled the students not only to discover engineering responses to the challenges outlined by the Gazans, but to then communicate them to their peers, and to their EAP teachers, and (in a final-week presentation) to engineering academics from both institutions. Within the constraints of a pre-sessional course whose goal was matriculation, EAST, by de-centering the teacher, went some way towards combatting the need to teach to the test (Giroux, 2010).

Finally, Freire champions the "conscientization" of marginalized groups, a raising of awareness of their own excluded positions within educational, economic and political systems, of the ways in which this exclusion tends to perpetuate inequality, and of the need for participants themselves to take action. Arguably there is less need for such conscientization in Gaza than in many areas of the Global South; Gazan students live the experience of blockade on a daily basis and are well-informed regarding the underlying socio-political causes of these injustices (Marie et al, 2018; Phipps, 2014) and of Freire's emphasis on the key importance of equality and peace. However, Khoo et al. (2016) and Helm (2020) suggest that many of the overseas students who *are* able to access English language support via overseas travel, do so with a less critical mindset. The main national groups studying pre-sessionally at UofG are Chinese (as already noted), Saudi (15-20%) and Brazilian (5%), proportions of course varying year to year. There are very few Europeans. Even though some of these students themselves come from countries that could be labelled "Global South", given the scarcity of scholarships, the very ability to

access the “positional good” (Hirsch, 1976) of a pre-sessional course means that most are nevertheless relatively privileged in socio-economic terms. Some certainly arrive in Scotland having had limited engagement with disadvantaged peers, and do not necessarily understand what living side-by-side with deprivation (even with conflict) means. Hence we felt that EAST might present opportunities for a conscientization not only among the Global South participants, but also among those students studying pre-sessionally in the Global North institution.

Acknowledgement of the need for change

There seems to be a growing appetite for a more critical mindset among engineering practitioners, The Royal Academy of Engineering’s 2014 report *Thinking like an Engineer: Implications for the Education System* emphasized a need to broaden “Engineering Habits of Mind”, whether via “signature pedagogies” or via a wider call to challenge the system. The preamble to the most recent Engineering Council Accreditation of Higher Education Programmes report (AHEP, 2020) states that students should be able to tackle “complex problems that have no obvious solution and may involve wide-ranging or conflicting technical issues and/or user needs that can be addressed through creativity and the resourceful application of engineering science” (p. 26). At the master’s level, chartered engineers are now expected to develop an understanding of Sustainability (criterion M7), and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (M11).

EAP practitioners, too, acknowledge a need for change. Talking specifically of EAP for Engineering, such change may embrace EAP for engineering pedagogy, specifically via Content and Language Integrated Learning (Arnó-Macia & Rueda-Ramos, 2011) in which engineering is taught through a foreign language (in this case, English), aiming simultaneously at the learning of content and the acquisition of this second language. However, it may also embrace a broader critical reflection on how engineers could better interact with the people and societies they will be working with or, as Freire (2007) puts it, a move to integrate “the word” with “the world” (p.87). Morgan (2009) discusses in depth the challenges, but also the rewards to the students, of such an attempt to foster criticality within the EAP course.

In short, if the Engineering Council is sincere in its wish to challenge the system, we as EAP practitioners could be aiming higher than merely integrating content and language on our pre-sessional courses. We hoped to encourage student-engineers to re-phrase a default question such as ‘How am I to provide clean drinking water to this area?’ to the far more challenging ‘Why is the aquifer so dangerously low?’, or even ‘Who is taking most of the water?’. Such an opportunity would be quite subversive within the context of a UK university pre-sessional

program, providing what Morgan (2009, p. 96) terms “critical EAP exemplars that bridge theory and practice through detailed case studies [...] grounded in specific institutional settings and demands.”

The 5-week EAP for Engineering pre-sessional course

Structure of the EAST project

EAST formed part of an intensive pre-sessional course taken by overseas students wanting to study at UofG. The wider course provides training in language and study skills needed for successful study in a British academic context and is organized month on month in several blocks that progressively demand more of the students. The final 5-week block of the pre-sessional provision introduces students to subject-specific discourse and conventions, one of them being a SET strand. As part of the curriculum, their in-class contact-time is devoted to work on their reading, speaking, listening, and writing skills, and the students are exposed to authentic lectures and undertake field trips related to their discipline. They also conduct mini-research into a subject-specific problem of their choosing, to produce a 1,500-word assessed assignment of a Situation-Problem-Response-Evaluation format. This is accompanied by an oral presentation during which the students summarize their findings, and field questions from peers and tutors.

On taking over direction of UofG’s SET pre-sessional course in 2015, my own critical reflection led to an adaptation of the final 5-week block, in order to link Global North and South via project work. An already-existing relationship with IUG presented the opportunity to combine engineering students at the two institutions, and for the five-year period from 2015 to 2019, a mini-research assignment linked students at UofG and IUG. I was cognizant that my employer would view challenges and impacts through an institutional (rather than a Freirean) lens. For this reason, EAST had to be almost exclusively extra-curricular and had to be integrated within a fully timetabled pre-sessional course comprising the inputs just outlined.

However, though extra-curricular, the EAST-based interactions with the IUG students were obligatory for the UofG-based SET students, as 50% of the end-of-course writing grade was dependent upon the subject-specific essay they had to write, and likewise 50% of the speaking grade was based on the end-of-course presentation, both linked to their project work. Without pass marks, the UofG-based pre-sessional students were unable to matriculate and enter their masters’ studies. As Table 1 shows, overall numbers increased considerably over the five years of EAST, from 57 in 2015, to 196 in 2019 (the last year unaffected by the global pandemic).

Table 1. EAST overall numbers 2015-2019

Project iteration	Student numbers
2015: UofG	37
IUG	20
2016: UofG	31
IUG	21
2017: UofG	81
IUG	23
2018: UofG	140
IUG	52
2019: UofG	171
IUG ²	25

Trying to balance the disparate needs and desires of the two groups

Matriculation onto UofG’s master’s course was not an option for the Gazan engineering students – their participation was voluntary, and in fact took place during their summer holiday. We made sure that the Gazan students were aware of this before they joined, and aware too that their roles would be as mentors. In order to mitigate as far as possible this built-in inequity, a week-long course in providing constructive feedback was delivered each summer to the Gazan engineering students by staff at both institutions, just before the pre-sessional course began. Once the pre-sessional course began, the IUG staff-members were on their summer holiday and had no further teaching input.

This Constructive Feedback training course (Rolinska & Guariento, 2017) - available via Creative Commons - performed a dual purpose. Firstly, it was designed to enable the IUG student-engineers to take on the mentoring role, guiding the UofG-based students effectively in their project-work. The IUG students would suggest societal problems in Gaza, then lead their UofG-based partners towards context-appropriate engineering solutions over the five weeks of the project. They needed to learn how to offer empathetic and structured feedback in order to do this effectively. Secondly, however, these skills would also be of value in the Gazan students’ post-EAST search for paid work - at 57%, unemployment in Gaza is a massive problem (PCBS, 2021), and much of the online work available to graduates requires good levels of English language literacy and the soft skills involved in online exchanges.

² Plus universities in Malawi/Chile, which are not included in this study.

An overall IELTS-equivalent of 6.5 was requested for the Gazan participants, with a minimum 6.0 in Speaking, though we were flexible in these requirements. East (2012) argues that by combining groups of students with similar interests but different strengths (in terms of language skills) in both locations, and by including both synchronous and asynchronous modes of interaction, even students with fairly restricted English language skills are able to contribute to and gain from online project-work. As each Gaza-based team usually consisted of more than one engineering student, they were able to work together to ensure effective communication with their UofG-based peers. We hoped this flexibility would go furthest in helping to overcome the sensation of isolation, resulting from years of enforced immobility, by maximizing the number of Gazan participants.

Once the pre-sessional course proper began, students worked in UofG-IUG groups that varied in numbers, from 2 to 4 students at UofG, to 2 to 3 at IUG (occasionally 1), depending on the year. UofG-based students worked collaboratively with one another and with their IUG partners on the research and in preparing their oral presentations, but (in order to matriculate and enroll on their chosen master's program) they had to write their subject-specific essays individually. The students were free to choose the platform(s) for their interactions—Facebook, Skype (moving to Whatsapp and Zoom in the later projects) and e-mail were the most commonly-used.

Most of the topics were related to the blockade and ongoing conflicts the Gazan students have to face, whether directly or indirectly. Examples of these were:

- Generating electricity for wastewater treatment
- Water drainage and sea pollution
- Combating pesticide toxicity
- Maximizing battery-life
- Optimizing a hospital waiting list
- Combating groundwater salinity
- Development of Arabic optical character recognition for mobile devices
- Delivering parcels to areas without addresses
- Traffic congestion (see also video-clip in Table 2)
- Storage of sewage (see also video-clip in Table 2)

Though the range of topics available, and the information gap across borders, proved very motivational for the students involved, starting in 2018, an extra, synchronous timetabled in-class link-up was added in Week 1, to better form the necessary bond between the UofG-IUG groups. Table 2 represents the final iteration, in 2019.

Table 2. EAST project, weekly overview of activities; shaded parts are extra-curricular

Week 1: Monday	Timetabled plenary to ‘sell’ concept of collaboration to UofG-based students. UofG-based students chose a Gazan engineering challenge to study, i.e., formation of UofG-IUG groupings.		
Thurs.	Timetabled in-class session for 1 st group-group live meetings, via Whatsapp, facebook etc. (each group free to choose communication mode).		
	UofG-based students...	IUG students...	UofG staff...
Week 2	researched the selected scenario via library and the Internet. 1 st output.		
		provided constructive content-oriented feedback on 1 st output from UofG-based students.	
	based on the feedback from Gaza, wrote the first draft stating the problem and one complete response.		
Week 3	continued researching further responses. 1 st draft produced for formative feedback from teachers.	produced short video clips illustrating the social impact of the topic under investigation.	provided formative feedback on language and structure.
Week 4	continued researching further responses. Final write-up.	continued content-oriented comments. Produced 2-min’ video introduction for Week 5 presentation.	
Week 5: Monday & Tuesday	submitted essays, and delivered short presentations (integrating video-intro from IUG students).	attended presentations via live Facebook feed, asked questions and commented.	provided summative feedback on presentations (including on Gazan video-intros). graded UofG essays.
Wed	Study trip		graded UofG essays.
Thurs	Presentation of video clips from IUG students (from Week 3) e.g. https://easttelecollaboration.wordpress.com/2015/10/01/another-video-from-gaza/#more-362 and		graded UofG essays.

	https://easttelecollaboration.wordpress.com/2016/10/13/a-video-from-gaza/	
End-of-course party - presentation of certificate of participation to IUG students.		

The institutional rationale for and focus of EAST in 2015 was a (relatively unambitious) enhancement of students’ language skills. Having piloted this, we as course organizers felt that a broadening of aims might be attempted. We had to continue to address the outcomes-based aim of the Global North institution (pass-grades for the UofG-based students). At the same time, we saw two directions of research which, we felt, were potentially of greater long-term significance to the participants, whether from Gaza or based in Scotland. Firstly, we were interested in the extent to which online interaction can be considered “authentic” communication. Secondly, we wanted to explore what Barnett (2007, p. 144) terms “becomings”, i.e., to look for evidence of any transformation among the stakeholders.

Authenticity of communication

A review of literature suggested three possible ways in which students might experience an “authentic” communication act, the final one offering the greatest element of criticality.

Text and task: an authenticity of doing

Authenticity in language learning, particularly on EAP courses, is often taken to mean an authenticity of text (Little et al, 1988; Parks, 2020), i.e., the presentation of input that students are likely to encounter in their coming studies. An authenticity of *task* is, however, equally important (Buendgens-Kosten, 2014), i.e., what the students are called upon to actually *do* with these texts, highlighting the need, from a second-language acquisition standpoint, to move beyond input to tasks that also call for student *output* (Guariento & Morley, 2001; Long & Crookes, 1992). From the outset, EAST represented an attempt to harness an authenticity, of both text and task, to distance-learning at university. We felt that the project might use telecollaboration to address “pluriliteracies” (Coyle, 2015), or that the student-interactions (with the texts used on the course / with each other) would integrate content and language, while also offering chances to enhance intercultural awareness (Guth & Helm, 2011; Helm et al., 2012), and to operate at a level which also challenges *cognitively* (Dalton-Puffer et al, 2014).

Context: An authenticity of knowing

The adoption of a project-based pluriliteracies approach based on telecollaboration with Gaza also provided an opportunity for a deeper knowing, from a critical pedagogies perspective: as Freire puts it (2007, p. 115), “all authentic education investigates thinking...by stimulating ‘perceptions of the previous perceptions’ and ‘knowledge of previous knowledge’” (p. 104). As the project titles sampled above show, the socially rooted engineering challenges of EAST added a context that often brought social justice to the fore (Ladegaard & Phipps, 2020), at times calling on the students to consider their perceptions and their engineering knowledge from novel standpoints.

Moving beyond text, task and context: an authenticity of “becoming”

In Barnett’s opinion (2007), “ways of active ‘knowing’ and as forms of action shot through with first-handed authenticity [...] offer just two pillars of an educational project” (p. 7). Barnett posits that true knowing actually involves bringing the student into new relationships with the world, i.e., an ontological (as well as epistemological and practical) commitment. He terms this (2007) a “form of student-becoming that is dis-encumbered from its educational setting” (p. 45). Many university courses, in Barnett’s view, aim to educate via risk-aversion (we are reminded again of Freire’s idea of a pernicious banking mode of education), but EAST acknowledged the authenticity of taking risks, and as such added to the doing of a pluriliteracies approach and the knowing advocated by Freire. Students in both sites overcame the difficulties of working with peers from other cultures and presented what they had learned to an audience of peers and of academics, and in an L2. Most UofG-based students passed—over the five years of EAST, 97% met the standard for matriculation—but during the project the participant comments show that some at times had to accommodate to a sense of being lost, i.e., to the knowledge that this sense will occur, then clear, but also perhaps to the understanding that this sense of being lost, and of recovery, is authentic to wider university life (and maybe [Derrida, 2001] to life itself). In order for such learning to happen, the course needed to create what Barnett (2007) terms a “space-for-being” (p. 144), the ontological substrate which is, he feels, crucial for transformative outcomes, and one of arguably greater long-term value than pre-sessional exit-grades.

Data and research questions

The EAST project was a mixed method extended case-study (Burawoy, 2009), one which was bounded in terms both of space (online), and of time (from 2015 to 2019, five 5-week courses), based on a participatory action approach (Grant et al., 2008). UofG ethics procedures were followed throughout, with informed consent obtained from the participating students, both in

Scotland and in Gaza. From 2018 onwards storage of data moved from Google Drive to the university's OneDrive, though in all other respects the project met General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) stipulations from the outset. The author was particularly aware of the Gazan participants' circumstances, which made choices regarding data-collection unusually delicate.

The principal data source consisted of responses on the final day of each of the five courses to a questionnaire (Q) consisting of a mixture of Likert and cross-sectional open-ended questions. This paper draws on the latter, i.e., a qualitative thematic analysis of answers to the following questions:

What was the greatest thing about participating in the project?

What was the most challenging thing about participating in the project?

What definitely needs to be improved/changed for the project to work better next time?

The majority of the students on the pre-sessional course are Mandarin speakers. How do you evaluate the EAST Project in terms of increasing linguistic diversity?

When working on the project, what language/es did you use? Were there particular situations in which you used one language over the other? Give examples.

How do you evaluate the project in terms of raising your cultural awareness? Can you give examples of how you developed it?

Did you make real time contact when you heard each other's voices and saw each other's faces? When during the project? How often? How was that important for your project work?

When communicating with your partner, did you ever discuss topics other than the topics directly related to the Project? If yes, what topics and how did that make you feel? If not, why not?

How do you evaluate the project in terms of increasing your knowledge of global issues such as climate change/crisis, poverty, etc? What global issues did you learn about?

You worked with some people in your group face-to-face, with others only online. Which made you feel more comfortable? Why?

Has the project changed you in any way as a person, for example in the ways in which you think or act? Develop your answer.

Responses were voluntary and the response-rate varied between 62-78% year-on-year at UofG and 71% and 88% among the IUG students. These were triangulated with comments noted during end-of-course annual monitoring reviews (AMRs) held with the teaching team, and with extracts from the end-of-course powerpoint presentations (PPT). Starting from 2017, ongoing categorization and re-categorization of these data inputs led to the emergence of two research questions regarding pre-sessional telecollaboration between Global North-South stakeholders,

viz the students at both institutions, the staff at the Scottish institution hosting the pre-sessional course, and myself as course leader:

Can telecollaboration be considered to constitute an authentic communicative act?
Is there evidence for transformative outcomes among stakeholders, and a ‘voice’ for the Global South students?

Field notes (FN) were taken throughout the five years of EAST, and a teachers’ focus group (TFG) consisting of six teachers was held after the final year, in 2019. This was an informal meeting, audio-recorded for subsequent analysis, with the author as facilitator (the field note data and focus group interview are used only to interpret the students' responses and were not used as primary data).

Results

Engagement across cultures

The analysis shows that in some cases, the interactions took on an immediately positive form, appearing almost as benign intercultural happenstance, or surprise at intercultural commonalities:

‘When I dealt with others with each one has its own culture, my view of the subject really changed...I actually get to know some cultures and really impressed by some’ (IUG, Q: 2016).³

‘Borden my horizons and found my own weakness’ (UofG, Q: 2016)

‘Traffic, pesticides, litter, car-pollution....life in Gaza seems to throw up pretty similar problems to life here in Scotland!’ (FN: 2015).

But alongside exemplars of “delight, wonder, care, fun, engagement” (Barnett, 2007, p. 72) there were comments, too, suggesting that this very engagement across cultures could also lead students to lose the comfort of anchors to their own certainties:

‘At the beginning, I didn’t know much about Gaza. So I was very careful to talk about some sensitive issues like wars with them’ (UofG, Q: 2017)

‘I find out that our group members from different countries think in different way, so it’s hard to understand each other. We have to explain everything in detail’ (UofG, Q: 2019)

‘At the beginning, I was worried about this experience and will fail to communicate with another people who have another culture, thinking, language and another way to life, but

³ Student-comments are reported verbatim.

as time passed, I started to know that it's a lot easier than I thought. We had two video chatting then we complete chatting and writing, and we had a lot of fun and exchange cultures together. Actually, in the first discussion about our topic, was a big misunderstanding and my partners were very angry and confused, then it went well' (IUG, Q: 2017)

Evidence of transformative outcomes

Dal Magro et al (2020) outline gradations of learning, from “Doing things better”, through “Doing better things”, to a third and final level that requires a change of worldview, i.e., an epistemic change (p. 582). Of the three comments by EAST participants just presented, the last brings us to the possibility of outcomes that might be described as “transformative”.

One of the main drivers of EAST was to foster knowledge of the issues facing students from the Global South among those able to study at a Global North institution (some of whom may themselves be from a Global South background but privileged enough to travel overseas and able to meet the costs of a UK university education). The three gradations of learning suggested by Dal Magro et al. can be cumulative and will of course have fuzzy borders. However, the analysis shows that there was in fact significant critical engagement for some UofG-based participants, generated inductively by this pre-sessional project-work, and that there is evidence for an epistemic dimension involving an evolution of consciousness:

'I just knew that there were wars in Gaza, but I didn't know to what extent they influence in daily life of the people there' (UofG, Q: 2016)

'can't believe the truth [of the situation in Gaza]' (UofG, Q: 2019)

'...the poverty and bombings....I couldn't begin to imagine the impact of this, let alone the students who knew nothing about Gaza' (TFG: Teacher 5)

These comments align with what Nussbaum has termed the central capability of “affiliation” (2013, p. 34); participants from a SET background (and evidently some of their teachers), who might otherwise never have the opportunity, were clearly able to learn about, and from, issues of social justice in the Global South.

In terms of quantity and of felt expression, our examination of the comments from Gaza show they were even more marked. Some were grateful for the “witnessing” of their hardships (Freire, 2007, p. 176) that telecollaborative links to students (e.g., from China, from Thailand, from Saudi Arabia) could provide. Some acknowledged the opportunity for personal insights and some even acknowledged insights into *their own* culture:

'In the project, I talked remotely with completely strange people, for the first time in my life, who are from very far country, talk different language, and have new culture to me. This opened my eye about new things, as not all people think the same way' (IUG, Q: 2018)

'The EAST project offered to my life a different experiment too; when [the EAST coordinating team] asked Gazan students to film a short video about our problems, I considered that was a big challenge for me to stroll around the streets holding my camera, especially that my teams problem was the road traffic and I faced some obstacles like interrogation by police. That experience made me a courageous and strong human. I was very happy to make that video because it transferred our suffering to the world, it was a clever idea' (IUG, Q: 2015)

'You will get astonished when you hear that I have learned many thing about the problems of my countries that I have never known it is existing' (IUG, Q: 2016).

Clearly, there were moments of misunderstanding, bewilderment and friction, the overcoming of which could lead at times to valuable insights among the students. They suggest that the project-based interaction was a worthwhile exercise. However, in one specific and interesting way, outcomes were less positive.

A limited voice for the Gazan students

Risager (2007) argues that effective intercultural communication is one that allows participants to appropriate the languages and cultures that are studied, without the need to disguise, or to lose, their own identities. In view of the economic blockade, of the permanent fear of bombardment, and of the political constraints on egress from the Strip, negative, even embittered, comments from the Gazan students were certainly anticipated by course organizers. One Gazan student in fact began her end-of-EAST powerpoint presentation with a clear positioning: "Gaza strip located in historical Palestine which occupied by what called Israel since Nakba in 1947". One of the most interesting aspects of the data gathered, however, was that this was almost the only exemplar of any anger, and it is fair to say that expression of frustration was extremely unusual in *public-facing* communication during the five years of the EAST project. The following comments in post-course feedback, visible only to the course organizers, show that the frustration, even anger, certainly did exist:

'When you talked about cause of problem, you could add occupation somehow because this unjust occupation is the main reason for every problem in Gaza' (IUG, Q: 2018).

'Our problem here in Gaza is purely political: there any solutions should be put forward be at the front of freedom and get ride from occupation and then come the role of scientific solution' (IUG, Q: 2018)

'As a student in Gaza, I have encountered many difficulties and challenges, especially in the last war, where my older brothers have lost' (IUG, Q: 2018)

'But the important question is where we will build this solar power station and how we will protect it? As any one knew, Gaza Strip is a region of war, in the last 12-year people of Gaza Strip live 3 destruction war, 2008, 2012 and 2014' (IUG, Q: 2018)

The IUG students clearly had a voice, but these comments cannot be categorized as attempts to “write back” (Imperiale, 2017), as the post-EAST student feedback lacked an audience. Given that the real-world impact of a course lasting just five weeks must at most be marginal, an important arbiter of its effectiveness has to be measured in terms of the audience that it provides the Global South participants, and in these terms EAST lacked impact. Many IUG students clearly wanted to communicate their frustration but did so rarely in a public-facing manner, which suggests that many did in fact feel obliged to disguise their identities (Risager, 2007). They wanted and needed to “express their anger” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 33), but very few did so in public. Unfortunately, as researcher I had no access to students’ private correspondence via (for example) Whatsapp, though the following end-of-course comment suggests that, in private, the IUG-UofG interaction may have been less circumspect:

'I don't know why we have to do it since these work may not be feasible to the situation in those countries. I feel bad for this. Are we just making day-dreams?' (UofG, Q: 2019).

Discussion

Global North-South telecollaboration as token

Modiano (1999) argues that merely enabling more participants access to knowledge and skills views deprivation as being in the main a question of resource-access, and the solutions available to be achievable without questioning our roles as educators within the Global North, or the broader institutional frameworks within which we operate. Pennycook (2007) concurs, highlighting too the potentially negative impact of the English language itself on the cultural integrity of the learner. That initiatives such as EAST may be tokenistic, and that the issue of exclusion is much broader and multi-faceted, is reflected in the previous “day-dreams” comment from a student, and also in the following comments from teachers delivering the EAST project:

'We suspect some [IUG feedback] may be over-positive, due to Siege (any input is better than no input, or maybe because they hope for travel-opportunities beyond)' (UofG, AMR: 2015)

'The main issue for me is lack of balance, in that the Gazans are just basically used, in a way, and they're not getting much out of it' (TFG, Teacher 3)

In these comments, the teachers were broaching their concerns regarding the voice available to the Gazan students and staff and of the uneven distribution of power among the students, the staff, and the institutions participating in EAST. It is probably fair to say that the majority of the teaching-team had chosen to join the SET cohort with some sympathy towards the Palestinian cause, and some understanding of / hope of subverting the wider power structures and the increasingly neo-liberal ethos within higher education in the UK (Morrissey, 2015), and all involved were aware of the institutional constraints within which pre-sessional courses have to function. Their comments demonstrate ongoing reflection on wider epistemological issues, and an understanding within the teaching-team of the difficulties in looking for spaces in which the voices of marginalized groups might be centered and disruption to existing power structures attempted (Canagarajah & Selim, 2013). Inclusion is clearly a very challenging issue, more than a question of simple numbers or geography, but one in which the exclusionary effects of discourses need to be examined.

Global North-South telecollaboration as subverter

However, to return to the UofG-based student's "day-dream" comment, it is probably true to say that this student, for one, was emerging from EAST asking questions that they might otherwise never have posed, i.e., that in some instances a project such as EAST can have more than a tokenistic value. There was also evidence of critical engagement, despite the institutional constraints, among the teachers involved on EAST, who put forward further ideas for developing project-work with the Global South. The following exchange was also taken from the teachers' focus group, held in March 2020.

'It's far better to have Gaza involved than not. The alternative would be isolation.' (TFG, Teacher 2)

Global North-South telecollaboration: The impact on the author

Personal impacts, on myself as project leader, were also of consequence. I emerged from the five years of the EAST project with an enhanced understanding of the values and prejudices I hold and my positionality in relation to the university courses within which I work – the power I have to exclude others, the power the system has to exclude these others and to exclude me, and what I can realistically do to challenge both. Two examples follow, by way of illustration.

Firstly, in 2018 students from IUG were able to access Erasmus Plus funding for study at UofG, and they were of course curious to learn something of Scotland beyond the confines of academic life. One student was interested in combining British history with the beauty of the open spaces and wilderness that the landscape offers, and I suggested Glencoe as a place that could contextualize the (sometimes fraught) relationship between Scotland and England. When I explained what had happened there⁴, she was visibly shocked; to someone who has had to face the possibility of injury and bereavement many times already in her young life, an event that had occurred more than 300 years ago could have no possible folkloristic or scenic value (FN, 2018).

As a further illustration, I viewed the arrival of the students from IUG in 2018 as an opportunity for the visitors to explain face-to-face to the UofG-based pre-sessional students their experience of growing up and studying in a conflict-zone, and I organized a meeting with the IUG students soon after their arrival specifically to propose this. However, in the meeting I noted the following:

'Some students are willing, but I'm sensing overall a polite reluctance' (FN, 2018).

I abandoned the idea. It seemed to me that the students from Gaza, most of whom were engaged on their first-ever trip beyond the Strip, both wanted and deserved an opportunity to be just that: normal students. They did not want to stand out from the others on the pre-sessional course. My field notes outline other moments contributing to a growing understanding of how the conduct of research might affect those involved, of the privilege that my position as a white, Western male confers (Andreotti et al., 2015, p. 24), and a realization of how these privileges can more broadly impact my own approach to overseas project-work (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 3). My work in Eritrea had already highlighted a temptation as project manager to impose the overall direction of travel, one which partners working across vast power-differentials have little influence over, and this realization (how can a partner from the Global South ever say “no”?) remained a concern throughout the iterations of EAST. Barnett may take task with the “educational totalitarianism” of learning outcomes yet, even in EAP projects unavoidably straitened (like EAST) by a need to work within pre-existing university systems, the educational process can open up a space-for-being not only for the students, but for the educator too; their “becoming” has also revealed itself as a personal “becoming”, my own acceptance of the

⁴ In February 1692, around 30 members of the Scottish clan MacDonald were murdered by their rivals, the Campbells (who were also Scottish, but aligned with the occupying English power).

ubiquity and even the value of uncertainty. Barnett (2007) talks about the student, bewildered for a time by the task they faced, who then "...caught the wind and sailed on" (p. 77); over the five years' duration of EAST, I consider this to be very relatable on a personal level and as a reflective practitioner.

Global North-South telecollaboration and institutional change

Beyond the impact on the students, on the teachers, and on myself as course organizer, evidence for any change at institutional level, whether for good or ill, is difficult to divine. The University of Glasgow allowed EAST to take place. In view of the delicacy surrounding initiatives linking the UK and Palestine, this might not have been the case at another institution. However, Andreotti et al (2015, p. 27) suggest that, given the strength of neoliberal governance, projects such as EAST might at best be seen as a "hacking" of institutions that are basically beyond reform, or at worst as exemplars of a Foucauldian collusion. Brown (2022, p. 322), on the other hand, talks of the need to acknowledge that what she terms "throwntogetherness" will almost always involve acceptance of complications and compromise, and Phipps (2007, p. 49) would seem to agree; talking specifically of power issues inherent in English language initiatives, she states that

...by demanding the end to all domination and by refusing to associate with the institutions of society and of political power, we try and cover over the mess of life, rather than working together to find ways of living together that will include, even embrace, the impossibilities.

She feels that it may be justifiable to begin a project (as Gillian Rose puts it) in "the broken middle", and with an understanding that this will involve "untidiness and compromise" (ibid).

Project-based education across borders has its own specific and unavoidable challenges. Tuhiwai Smith (2012) notes that benefits between partners must be reciprocal, but are unlikely ever to be identical, and Koehn and Obamba (2014) outline the need for patience in constructing collaborative partnerships with overseas partners to build trust and to explore mutual needs. It may just be that five years is the time needed for a project such as EAST to 'bed in' to a slow-moving institution.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show the value of Global North-South telecollaborative projects, with specific reference to pre-sessional EAP courses. The need for a critical pedagogy within EAP has only grown since Benesch wrote in 2001, and an increasingly interconnected world

will better fulfil its potential if universities in the Global North actively look to speak to and learn from and with the Global South.

Almost certainly, the principal impact of a project such as EAST is to be found among the UofG-based cohort; for many, the opportunity to travel to the UK and to study on a pre-sessional EAP course represented the first-ever juxtaposition of content and Global South context in their lives, bringing an awareness that the privilege which we (as Scots, Saudis, Chinese, Americans, Brazilians) take for granted are not present for all. This paper suggests that telecollaborative work with the Global South within a pre-sessional EAP program can offer such students an opportunity for questioning of a *political* nature that they may otherwise never experience or, as Shaull puts it (in Freire, 2007, p. 34), a chance “to deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world”. It is a pity (to put it mildly) that greater benefits do not accrue to the Global South students, but this does not in itself invalidate the project nor the concept of North-South pre-sessional project-work.

Regarding the first research question, student-responses over the 5 years of EAST suggest that the online project work between the Global North and South can deliver meaningful communication, with tangible gains not only in terms of language, but also of intercultural awareness and learning about injustice. Though the problems the Gazans face are truly deep-rooted and complex, there are certainly comments that suggest that the engagement engendered by EAST was considered authentic, and even at times permitted a ‘space-for-being’ among participants, and at *both* sites. It seems that online project-based work between Global North and South can provide novel and stimulating interaction that participants consider to be as reassuring, open and relevant as face-to-face encounters.

Regarding the second research question on transformative impacts, though the emancipatory effects of online interaction should not be overstated (particularly in the Gaza Strip), sample comments again suggested that Global North-South project work led to opportunities for a critical questioning among a significant number of students, and again at *both* sites. However, the second research question also looked at the extent to which Global South students had the space and freedom to truly project their voice, and here the results were less satisfactory. To find out whether pre-sessional project work that centers themes of social justice (as described here) is a ‘day-dream’, the post-project questions to the Gazan participants would need to be more probing: *why* had some felt obliged to hide their true feelings from public-gaze? Not only was this muting unfair to the Gazan participants, but their reticence also withheld from those based at the UofG further opportunities both of “knowing” and (potentially) of “becoming”.

Future project work will need to address this limitation; the Global South students need to be able to participate fully (hopefully even *joyously*) in teamwork across borders, while also telling their new-found partners that these borders exist and are having terrible impacts. This is of course particularly true for Gazans but must also be key in many other areas of the Global South, and in any future North-South telecollaborative projects.

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