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ONLINE COLLABORATIVE TEACHING: THE POWER OF PROFESSIONAL CONNECTIONS

The research intends to describe and conceptualize a long-term online collaborative teaching between Ukrainian and American teacher-training institutions. Initiated as a pilot web-blended class to “facilitate engagement and globalize horizons” (Powell et al., 2014, p. 44), the class appeared to become a platform for nurturing international professional connections, leading to scalability and longevity of partnership formats. The research questions aim to identify attitudes toward international collaboration and the opportunities the collaboration provides for English teacher preparation. The findings demonstrate that once a university-to-university friendship yet invigorated with bilateral interest in global engagement, it evolved into sustainable educational multiple-member partnerships, powerful enough to significantly promote internationalization in teacher training, diversify instruction, and engage Ukrainian colleagues and students from other universities (Kuzmina et al., 2024; Matvienko & Kuzmina, 2020; Matvienko et al., 2022). Equally, co-teaching and international collaboration positively affect scientific research and professional development at both ends and nurture educational community networking in Ukraine and abroad.

Key words: internationalization, global perspective, long-term online collaborative international teaching, teacher education, nurturing professional networking, teacher program transformation.

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та американськими закладами підготовки вчителів. Започаткований як пілотний вебзмішаний клас для “сприяння взаємодії та глобалізації горизонтів” (Powell et al., 2014, p. 44) став платформою для розвитку міжнародних професійних зв’язків, що призвело до масштабування та довготривалості форматів партнерства. Питання дослідження спрямовані на визначення ставлення до міжнародної співпраці та можливостей, які вона надає для підготовки учителів англійської мови. Результати дослідження демонструють, що колись розпочаті як дружні відносини між двома університетами, які, однак, підживлювалися зацікавленістю до міжнародної співпраці обох сторін, вони перетворилися на стійкі освітні багатосторонні партнерства, достатньо потужні, щоб суттєво сприяти інтернаціоналізації підготовки учителів, урізноманітнити викладання та залучати українських колег і студентів з інших університетів. Співвикладання та міжнародна співпраця також позитивно впливають на наукові дослідження і професійний розвиток обох сторін та сприяють створенню мереж освітньої спільноти в Україні та за її межами.

Ключові слова: інтернаціоналізація, глобальна перспектива, довгострокове спільне міжнародне викладання в режимі онлайн, педагогічна освіта, розвиток професійних мереж, трансформація педагогічних програм

1. Introduction

Collaboration between educators in higher education has always been essential, entailing joint research, practical experience exchange, and the development of professional community networks. It is common knowledge that collaboration in education facilitates inclusion and “trust relationships,” contributing to current and future teachers’ professional empowerment and student success in in-service teaching (Boada, 2022; IPGCE, n.d.; Kolleck et al., 2021, p. 89; Oh et al., 2017; Rytivaara et al., 2023; SOE, 2023; Taylor, 2022). According to Kolleck et al. (2021), “teacher collaboration is an intentional interaction between teachers who are connected... by common professional goals and tasks”

ОНЛАЙНОВЕ КОЛАБОРАТИВНЕ ВИКЛАДАННЯ: ПОТУЖНІСТЬ ПРОФЕСІЙНИХ ЗВ’ЯЗКІВ

Дослідження має на меті описати та концептуалізувати довгострокове спільне онлайн-викладання між українськими

(p. 92). It has always been easier to partner and interact, sticking their heads together when working in the same locations and institutions; like-mindedness and collegiality arising from common professional aspirations and spatial proximity matter for the initiatives to be generated in abundance and innovations to be shared swiftly, leading at least to effective educational tandems and at most to productive professional teams and communities united by the togetherness of professional objectives and orientations (Boada, 2022; Kolleck et al., 2021; Kuzmina et al., 2024). However, with the processes of globalization and internationalization of education (de Wit, 2019; Gromov et al., 2022; Kuzmina et al., 2023; Matvienko et al., 2022), wherein educational technologies play a pivotal role in connecting globally, collaboration transcends the boundaries of home countries and habitual formats of interaction, facilitating international engagement, adding telltale global perspectives, and enabling scholars to make together a powerful impact on the “global education battlefield” (Gromov et al., 2022; Kuzmina et al., 2024; Matvienko & Kuzmina, 2020; Matvienko et al., 2022; McIntosh & Nenonene, 2022; Powell et al., 2014; Powell et al., 2015; Tripses et al., 2018). International collaboration underpinned by dedication and deliberate effort positively affects students and professors, resulting in “meaningful exchanges” for both parties to benefit (Naicker et al., 2021, p. 499). Furthermore, digitalization improves the quality of education, makes collaboration multidimensional and sustainable despite distances, and, in the Ukrainian case, helps withstand global and local crises (Goeldi & Thees, 2024; Kaminsky, 2024; Kursh et al., 2024; Kuzmina et al., 2024; Lavrysh, 2024; Lucenko et al., 2023; Matvienko et al., 2021). Importantly, technology-assisted international interaction is capable of “building a sense of global citizenship” (Naicker et al., 2022, p. 502).

2. Methodology

Since the research is empirical, it intends to consolidate a decade-long international virtual co-teaching initiated as a person-to-person connection between professors from Vinnytsia Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi State Pedagogical University (VSPU), Ukraine, and Southeast Missouri State University (SEMO), the USA; however, expanding yearly due to the bilaterally increased interest in the outcomes and impact, the partnership has reached a profound scalability. Reflecting on the experience, the study considers the benefits of establishing long-term professional connections, integrative networking, and academic activities related to co-teaching, such as joint class development, research, and project work in foreign language teacher training. The research applies mixed methods, prioritizing descriptive and qualitative methods for data collection. Preservice teachers majoring in English language education and minoring in German, as research participants, were

annually surveyed for feedback, while instructors expressed their opinions verbally.

3. Antecedents of Collaborative Teaching and Networking

The Fulbright Fund’s impact on fostering mutual understanding between countries can hardly be underestimated. Created in 1946, the Fund has affected many personal and professional lives, providing access to American higher education, ensuring hands-on research, establishing long-term professional contacts, and developing international partnerships (Lally & Islem, 2023; Powell et al., 2015; Tripses et al., 2018). VSPU benefited from collaboration with Fulbright Ukraine in 2009-2010: the articulation agreement was signed between VSPU and SEMO in 2011, officially solidifying academic research, co-teaching, work on online infrastructure, and professional development. Consequently, the first tangible step in the partnership became the development of a web-blended class backgrounded in the Fulbright research “*Teacher Candidate Preparation in the U.S. Universities*,” completed on SEMO’s campus (Powell et al., 2014; Powell et al., 2015; Randolph, 2012), which gradually transformed into a pilot Web-Blended Education project of online international collaborative teaching (Powell et al., 2014; Powell et al., 2015). Initially, the project engaged a VSPU language instructor, three professors from SEMO, and a Fulbright awardee from the University of Bradley, Illinois, who served her Fulbright grant at VSPU in 2012. The collaborators worked on SKYPE for synchronous lectures to give Ukrainian students insights into American teacher preparation (Figure 1).

The self-developed class infrastructure on Google Apps with Java runtime accommodated weekly asynchronous communication and forum discussions (Powell et al., 2014; Kuzmina et al., 2024). In the long run, that international experience outcomes persuaded eleven other instructors from Southeast University College of Education and English Department to join the project, which changed the class orientation from teacher training in the USA to “Web-Blended Education for English Skills,” complying with the majoring field of the students enrolled in the class (Figure 2).

Persistence and commitment to strengthening “internationalization pursuits” for better education services (Kuzmina et al., 2023, p. 84; Matvienko & Kuzmina, 2020) profoundly motivated the project’s initiators to engage new counterparts. Notably, professional counterparts’ networking augmented from affiliating to a non-governmental international educational organization, “Global Community: Uniting for Equity” (GCUE), as its subsidiary in Ukraine, “Community of Educators: Uniting for Justice and Equity in Education” (GCUE, n.d.). The GCUE members from the USA, Japan, Columbia, and Canada accomplished the mission of GCUE to advocate for equity through education and significant-

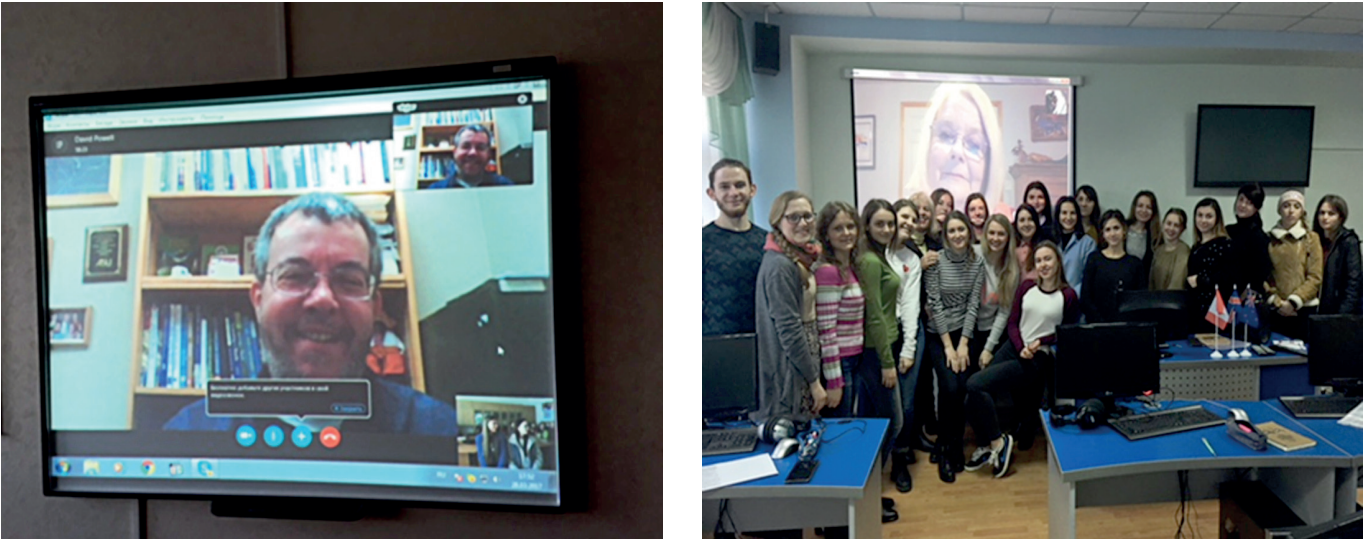


Figure 1. The online lectures with Dr. D. Powell and Dr. M. Noe from SEMO

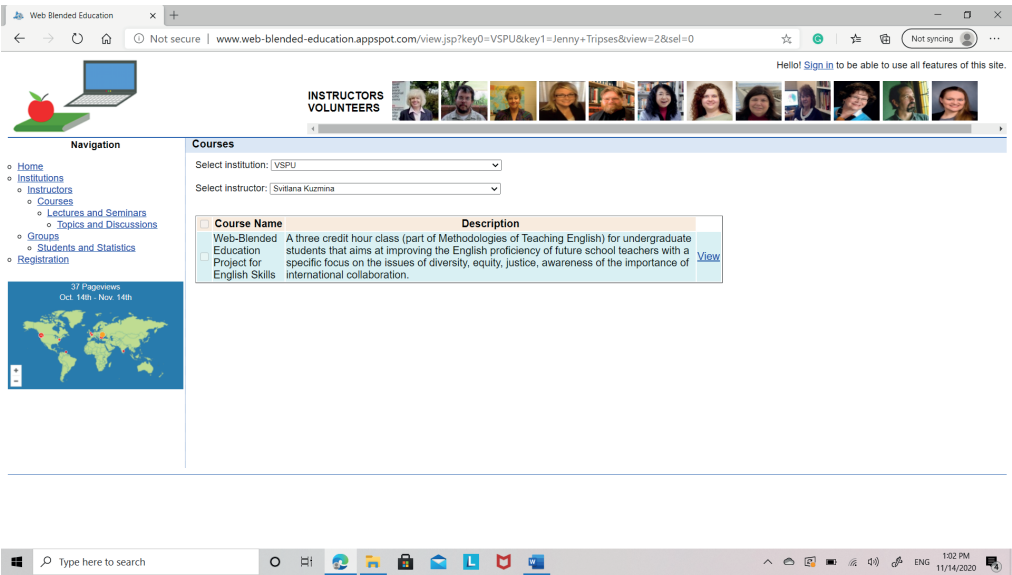


Figure 2. The Web-Blended Education Infrastructure Design on Google Apps

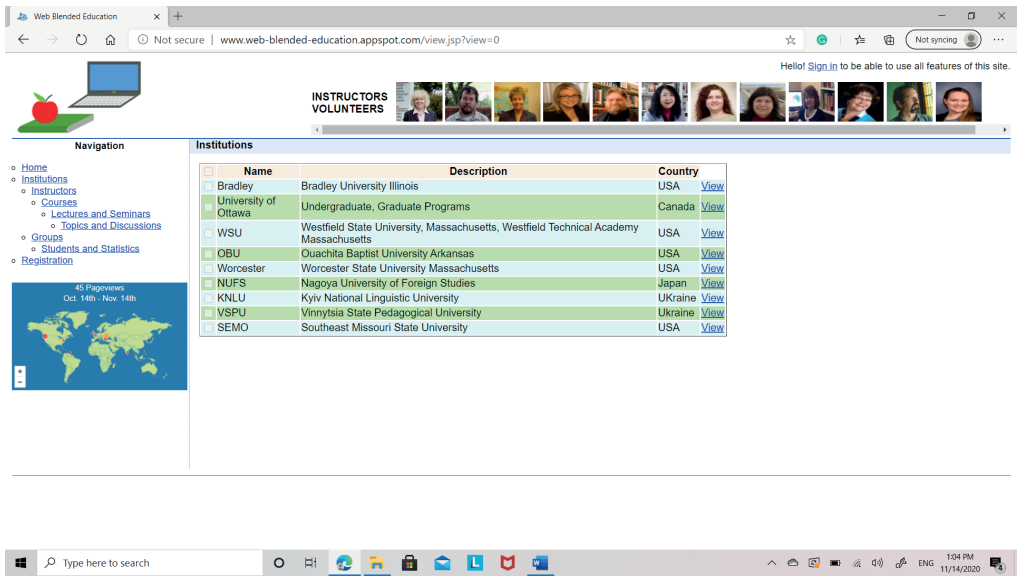


Figure 3. The increased number of universities and countries involved

ly enriched and streamlined teacher training programs content, with twenty-six co-teachers from nine universities located in four foreign countries: the US, Canada, Japan, Colombia (Figure 3).

4. Enriching educational practices and providing opportunities

Focusing on the symbiosis of pedagogy and language studies since “the purposes of pedagogical and language education... are interconnected” (Matvienko & Kuzmina, 2020, p.161), international co-teaching specifically addressed teaching English through the prism of cultural and social issues based on pedagogical science in parallel underpinning teacher education with a significant global perspective. Considering other advantages, the authors admit that co-teaching secured meaningful opportunities for broadening and updating the program content, exploring different online platforms, adopting new instruction formats for better digital literacy, developing joint COIL projects, and engaging other Ukrainian universities in scientific research and projects. (Figure 4).

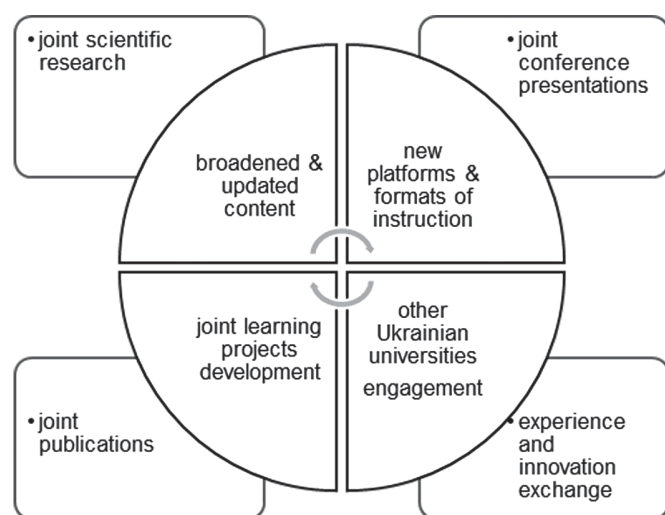


Figure 4. Opportunities for students and instructors-collaborators

Based on VSPU's experience and conceptualizing the benefits regarding new class developments, exploring new platforms and formats of instruction, “Foreign Experience in Teacher Preparation,” “Interdisciplinary Approach to English Language Education,” and “Traditions of Academic Collaboration: International Experience” became online classes developed jointly and designed on Google Apps, Google Classroom, and Moodle. Due to their innovative formats, content, and international engagement, they were included in teacher education programs in different years of study, including undergraduates and graduates (Kuzmina et al., 2023; Kuzmina et al., 2024), so that students' exposure to international pedagogical and language education experiences would grow permanently and consistently. To comply with the immediate needs in English teacher preparation and to

benefit from foreign colleagues' professional wealth of knowledge, the emphasis was made on:

- International Experience in Educational Technology Applications for English Language Education.
- Interdisciplinary Approach to English Language Education.
- Building Subject Literacy on the Principles of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
- Advantages of International Communication and Collaboration for English Teacher Education. Intercultural Competence.

Additionally, Ukrainian teacher educators and students have been broadening the realm of professional preparation by and large, addressing routinely Inclusive Language Education for English Literacy; Teacher Leadership and Teacher Ethics; Artificial Intelligence and Academic Honesty; Educational Technologies in the Time of Crisis; Literature to Enhance Linguistic and Critical Thinking Skills; Content-Based Activities to Enhance Critical Thinking Skills; Student-Generated Activities to Master Vocabulary; Gamification and AI for Learning English; Reading Competence as a Critical Element for Social Justice; Cultural Proficiency, Equity, and Inclusion; Cultivating Kindness in the Classroom; Culturally Responsive Assessment; Social-Emotional Learning; Stress and Trauma Responsiveness in Teacher Education.

Regarding joint scientific research, based on the substantial practical experience and topicality of subjects studied and regular observations of student communication with foreign experts were viewed as relevant to globalized and internationalized education, local and international findings were impactful (Powell et al., 2014; Powell et al., 2015; Powell et al., 2016; Tripses et al., 2018; Matvienko et al., 2021; Kuzmina et al., 2023; Kuzmina et al., 2024).

5. Impacting behavioral patterns and attitudes

Student and teacher interest in international collaboration varied, and attitudes were not always homogeneously positive. First, the time difference had to be adjusted. Second, co-teaching required additional effort and preparation. Nevertheless, attitudes underwent salient changes with time, leading to a pronounced tendency toward more positivity due to a conscious recognition of novelty, international perspective, learning from native speakers, and the ever-growing potential of collaborative efforts for better English language education. Understandably, students and instructors needed time to overcome fears and ill-preparedness for learning online and for improving technology literacy (Blayone et al., 2017; Powell et al., 2014; Matvienko et al., 2021), which resulted in only 32% of students who approved learning online, with 27% recognizing international collaboration as a strength at the early stages of the collaboration in 2013-2014 (Powell et al., 2015). However, by 2023, the attitudes had changed: 100% of students acknowledged

the importance of digital literacy, and 95% – admitted international exposure as mandatory in English teacher education (Kuzmina et al., 2024). Notably, as professional contacts have already been established, co-teaching foregrounded other types of online partnerships, such as joint co-learning on kindness and trauma-informed learning, computer-assisted language learning, and anxiety related to assessment (Goeldi & Thees, 2024; Kuzmina et al., 2023; Kuzmina et al., 2024).

Similarly, 70,4% of students agree that collaborative interaction has apparent benefits for personal development, and 93.8% claimed there are great opportunities for professional growth (Kuzmina et al., 2023; Kuzmina et al., 2024). Most students appreciate international co-teaching and are grateful to foreign instructors for teaching them.

The three research questions summarized students' attitudes and feelings:

1. *What is your attitude to online international collaboration?* Out of the suggested options, “positive,” “satisfactory,” and “unsatisfactory,” the option “positive” was chosen by the majority. Some students could not help but express emotions and comment on interactions as “wonderful and invaluable experiences,” and concluded that “to exchange experiences, learn from each other” is crucial and “it is good that my university collaborates and enriches Ukrainian education” because “collaboration improves our knowledge of English and pedagogy.”

2. *Was the class co-taught with guest lecturers interesting, and why?* Among the answers prevailed approval of its “intensiveness,” “direct communication with American professors,” and “novelty.” Several students wrote that they “were impressed with so much different and rich information,” specifying “learning equity and special education,” “online methodologies of teaching English,” “teacher leadership,” “academic honesty,” a discussion of technology use.” Many wrote that they were glad to be “part of these classes because they were significantly charged with inspiration and motivation to become better teachers of English” and “it was an incredible and unique opportunity” that “completely changed... points of view about online education and international collaboration.” Some feedback revealed some criticism toward VSPU: “I liked the atmosphere and how students can be free in their thoughts and actions; this is precisely what our university needs,” “I wish our professors were as positive and respectful as American professors.”

3. *“Do you have any suggestions for improvement?”* showcased that students would like to develop joint international classes and projects further “with foreign professors and students from other countries.”

Similarly, foreign professors assessed the work of Ukrainian students in complementary terms, characterizing them as “amazing with great questions to engage in the learning, diligent, professionally curious, passionate about teaching and thoughtfully considering the philoso-

phy and practice of teaching, which is an excellent work [of VSPU] that prepares them for successful careers.”

Conclusions

Given that online collaborative international teaching is one of the educational achievements substantiated by technological progress and is an outcome of improved technology literacy and undergoing internationalization, the authors underscore the importance of professional collaborative networking development and maintenance for transforming teacher education programs, making them more relevant to the modern world's standards. Technology literacy is vital for establishing partnerships worldwide. However, the ability to pinpoint common goals and create integrative and inclusive intentional interaction is essential. Facilitated engagement in international scientific collaboration and research enriches academic and cultural experiences and, at the same time, provides students with the necessary professional skills. Routine communication with native speakers on professional subjects improves pedagogy and English language education. Lastly, educators engage in and unite on common problems while respecting the differences and authenticity of their educational practices to powerfully affect the future of schooling elsewhere.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

No artificial intelligence tools or materials were used in the manuscript.

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