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Transcultural Collaboration: Epistemic Fluency and Identity Colaboración Transcultural: Fluidez Epistémica e Identidad



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Anne Carr, D 0000-0001-5622-7085 acarr@uazuay.edu.ec Facultad de Ciencias Jurídicas, Universidad del Azuay, Cuenca, Ecuador.

Gabriela Bonilla-Chumbi, (1) 0000-0003-3525-8637 🖂 gabrielabonilla@uazuay.edu.ec Facultad de Ciencias Jurídicas, Universidad del Azuay, Cuenca, Ecuador.

Matías Abad, 💿 0000-0002-0248-2555 🖂 matabad@uazuay.edu.ec Facultad de Ciencias Jurídicas, Universidad del Azuay, Cuenca, Ecuador.

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Abstract

This article explores the development of epistemic skills through transcultural collaborations among students and professors from eight universities across continents. The study emphasizes the importance of dialogue in enhancing critical thinking and epistemic fluency in global contexts. By engaging students in discussions on global migration and epistemic justice, the research highlights the role of dialogic participation in fostering inclusivity and understanding diverse epistemologies. The projects "Epistemic (In)justice" and "Epistemologies of Inclusion across Continents and Cultures" revealed the potential of digital technology to facilitate meaningful intercultural exchanges while also underscoring the need for epistemic fluency to navigate complex global issues. The findings suggest that educational institutions must prioritize the cultivation of both hard and soft skills to prepare students for active, informed participation in a globalized world.

Resumen

Este artículo explora el desarrollo de habilidades epistémicas a través de colaboraciones transculturales entre estudiantes y profesores de ocho universidades de todos

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los continentes. El estudio enfatiza la importancia del diálogo para mejorar el pensamiento crítico y la fluidez epistémica en contextos globales. Al involucrar a los estudiantes en debates sobre la migración global y la justicia epistémica, la investigación destaca el papel de la participación dialógica en el fomento de la inclusión y la comprensión de epistemologías diversas. Los proyectos, "(In)justicia epistémica" y "Epistemologías de la inclusión en continentes y culturas", revelaron el potencial de la tecnología digital para facilitar intercambios interculturales significativos, al tiempo que subrayaron la necesidad de fluidez epistémica para navegar en cuestiones globales complejas. Los hallazgos sugieren que las instituciones educativas deben priorizar el cultivo de habilidades tanto duras como blandas para preparar a los estudiantes para una participación activa e informada en un mundo globalizado.

Palabras clave

Fluidez Epistémica; Colaboración Transcultural; Comunicación Intercultural; Migración Global.

Keywords

Epistemic Fluency; Transcultural Collaboration; Intercultural Communication, Global Migration.

"Sapientia est dīcere quod necesse est, et auscultāre quod alii dicunt"

"Wisdom is to say what is necessary, and to listen to what others say" is attributed to Thomas Aquinas and appeared in his work Sentential libri Ethicorum (approximately 1271). This phrase encapsulates belief in the importance of effective communication, which includes both speaking wisely and listening attentively, and the importance of reasoned and respectful communication as a foundation for wisdom and moral living.

In the 12th-century Court Chancellery in Lucignano, Italy, the walls and ceilings are

covered with 15th-century frescoes that depict Roman and Biblical heroes. On each of the two arches rising to the ceiling, an angel blows a trumpet of Latin words to remind the justices of their role. From one trumpet flow, the flow the words in Latin "Speak little, listen to much, and keep your aims in mind". From the second trumpet, reminding them (and us) of dialogue, "Listen to the other side". Dialogue or dia (through) logos (word), in early Greek Society, referred to conversation and generation of meaning and understanding through a space for participating in the dialogue process such as 'talking circles' in indigenous cultures.

Introduction

In the 21st century:

By being able to listen and talk with students from other parts of the world, I was able to understand how many times the situations that we live in daily are transferred to other contexts and have similar shareholders. We do not see them in the same way; that is, we think that what happens in our country is the worst or that in other places they handle these issues better, but the reality is not like that (UDA Epistemic (In) Justice Project student quote 2023).

The 'hard skills' of digital technology have simplified the dialogic/communication process and expanded potential interactive communication opportunities where live interaction on academic teaching and learning tools such as Zoom create the possibility of manifesting the authenticity of participation. However, transcultural participation across continents and cultures requires epistemic fluency and resourcefulness involving a set of capabilities, or 'soft skills' for students to develop a critical appreciation of situations with peers, recognizing actions that are systematically desirable and culturally feasible. It is in and through dialogue, wether in person or digital, that meanings and understandings can be continually interpreted, reinterpreted, clarified and revised where newness in meaning and understanding emerges and possibilities are generated for thought, feeling, emotion, and action.

Since 2021, in International Studies, we have been investigating strategies to support the development of epistemic skills and fluency through an innovative transcultural collaboration among professors and students in eight universities across continents and cultures. We are documenting the extent to which students can prepare to think critically about and plan their engagement – communication and collaboration - with other distinctive epistemologies across time and space, re-personalizing and re-politicizing the space for epistemological diversity ad pluri-versality with their own identities, heritages and practices (Gaya, 2021).

The relationship between speaking and listening is one of reciprocity and mutual dependence where listening plays an essential role in initiating many dialogues by creating a space in which people can embrace each other as complete individuals. Escobar (2020) asks us if it is possible to have different ways of thinking, or rather a different way of sentipensar (feeling-thinking), about what is possible, to suggest a way of knowing that does not separate thinking from feeling, reason from emotion, knowledge from caring. In fact, in the Book of Embraces (1991), Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano, through parable, paradox, anecdote, and autobiography, helps us embrace each other through experiences of empathy as a highly flexible and context-dependent phenomenon in relation to the narratives of victims and perpetrators of war and exile noting that.

From the moment we enter school or church, education chops us into pieces; it teaches us to divorce soul from body and mind from heart. The fishermen of the Colombian coast must be learned doctors of ethics and morality, for they invented the sentipensante, feeling-thinking, to define language that speaks the truth (1991, p.27).

The following quote from a student illustrates this almost 'not knowing' way that we think about the construction of knowledge, including having a critical and tentative attitude about what you think you know (i.e., theory, facts, truths, beliefs, and assumptions), and the attitude, tone, manner, and timing in which it is offered.

> The atmosphere of the group discussions allowed me to open my heart and

speak my mind. The most touching part was the commonality, rather than the difference, in the views of students from different countries. I found that despite the very different social realities we were exposed to, when it came to issues of principles and the morality of global issues such as equality, conflict, and identity, there was a consistent tendency to oppose all forms of discrimination and to encourage ordinary people to speak out for disadvantaged groups (UDA Epistemic (In)justice Project student quote 2023).

Sometimes, we are less in a dialogic process and sometimes we are more so. What counts is the entirety of the relationship and conversation. The words in the Court Chancellery speak to the importance of listening, hearing, and speaking.

2 Related Literature

The macro mission of higher education is in a constant struggle to redefine itself and maintain autonomy amidst shifting ideologies and policies nationally and globally. Historically, one mission has been focused on local engagement through listening and speaking but with little service-oriented work for the global context.

For example, during 2021 and 2022, Ecuador was hosting an estimated 500,000 Venezuelans migrating from the economic and health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic when the government-initiated provision of legal protection, social stability and training opportunities, for example, car mechanics, seam-stressing and hospitality skills, delivered by universities. This presented us the research opportunity to highlight and disrupt how both historical and contemporary power structures of geopolitics impact marginalized populations, such as migrants and refugees, through interviews to hear their narratives.

However, global issues such as migration know no boundaries and require global service-oriented work across continents in the Global North and Global South, and cultures from Latin America to Asia, bringing advantages for students and faculty -educational innovation and progress, learning and growth, inspiration, support, and collaboration for a shared purpose among like-minded individuals. Thus, the projects "Epistemic (In)justice: Whose Voices Count? Listening to Migrants and Students (Carr et al., 2023b) and 'Epistemologies across Continents and Cultures' (Carr et al., 2024a) were developed through an information ethics perspective of the 'dilemma of culturality' (Wimmer, 2007) with our international colleagues. No longer comparative or dialogical projects, our research was now polylogical where different traditions and inter-epistemic dialogues about global migration might take place digitally. Involving eight different universities in Argentina, the Dominican Republic, United Kingdom, Czech Republic, Ukraine and Turkey guaranteed the growth of cultural contacts (Safronovay & Michshenko, 2023) where representatives of each culture, being carriers of a certain national culture and sense of identity, shared the qualities of consciousness shaped by their cultural development.

3 Method

In this section we combine information about the participants, main objectives, results, and analysis from two projects that were published in the Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education in 2023 and 2024.

Participants and Process

The participants in these two studies were faculty members and students from the fields of Education, History, International Relations, Latin American Studies, Law, Linguistics, and Tourism. They were initially affiliated with four and then eight universities located in Latin America, the Caribbean, Western Europe, Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and Turkey. Student teams from each university took turns to host and prepare power-point content based on their interviews with migrants. They also led breakout sessions. The 75-minute sessions, conducted on the Zoom platform, were held at 11.00 a.m. Ecuadorian local time.

Our research project brought together participants from diverse geographical, political, economic, and social backgrounds, and it was built upon faculty relationships established in previous projects and shared interests in epistemic (in)justice and global migration, and student identity. Each virtual session began with a brief welcome from the hosting faculty. This was followed by a 15-minute, student-led presentation, which was primarily based on data from interviews, surveys, and other research methods. The presentation then transitioned to a 35-minute breakout session that incorporated students from all seven participating universities. During this time, the faculty members took the opportunity to further discuss both the procedure and the content presented. At the end of each session, students from the host university provided a summary of the discussions held. These breakout sessions were recorded.

Additionally, students from UDA in Ecuador maintained a record of every breakout session they took part in, using a shared Google document. English was used as the main language of communication during the eight sessions. This was a foreign language for most students.

Main Objectivess

a) Epistemic (In)justice: Whose voices count? Listening to Migrants and Students (Carr et al., 2023)

This project involved students enrolled at four universities located in Ecuador, Dominican Republic, United Kingdom, and the Czech Republic. The main goal of the project was to raise student awareness about the conditions that cause epistemic injustice for migrants and refugees. Epistemic injustice is a concept that sheds light on the ethical dimensions of our epistemic practices. It recognizes that individuals can be wronged specifically in their capacity as knowers, a capacity essential to human value (Fricker, 2007).

The project material included a set of interviews with migrants and refugees as well as desk research about the status of their national migratory contexts. Students exchanged their testimonies. Through understanding that labels such as illegal, undocumented and unauthorized are not neutral descriptors but carry implicit association and value judgments that frame and influence debate, students were invited to engage in a form of communication and consciousness to create spaces for unheard, marginalized voices of migration trends (Lipari, 2010.)

 b) Epistemologies of Inclusion across Continents and Cultures (Carr et al., 2024a)

In our times of hyper-diversity, students' lives marked by their identity practices and social relations can tell us how future inclusive global citizenship will be crafted and negotiated. A series of virtual meetings that consisted of presentations to become acquainted with the micronarratives of students from eight universities – Ecuador, Argentina, Dominican Republic, United Kingdom, Czech Republic and the Ukraine (two universities) and Turkey – who, for various reasons had been forced or disposed to migrate or internally displaced for their studies, fostered the creation of a transnational diasporic space for breakout discussions about the common yet different challenges

that each of them have had to overcome. Micronarratives and discussions were analyzed concerning the impact of mobility on identity. Possible patterns, connections and trends within the thematic construct of higher education's role to contribute to the enhancement of sustainable inclusion by means of internationalization were identified. Survey data enabled us to evaluate changes in the students' intercultural competencies and their thoughts on future virtual projects.



a) Epistemic (In)justice

Participating in the testimonial experience shared by an illegal migrant helped an Ecuadorian student identify her ethical responsibilities, hidden capabilities, and prejudices. When she heard that a mother was ashamed that she and her daughter, who had made the long journey from Venezuela to Ecuador, had slept in the town square and asked for food in the street, the student described how she sympathized with the mother because of the political and economic difficulties they had left behind and felt that refugees should be given due process. The student continued,

> ...if a case such as that of the Ukraine in which millions of refugees were forced to leave due to the war were to occur in Latin America, it could be more difficult as many of the countries in this region have several problems, such as poor education systems and high levels of social inequalities, that could present complications and delays in refugee and migrant immigration processing (Ecuadorian student, 2023).

While implicitly questioning how just societies are governed, how social membership is defined, and who benefits from being included, the student gains awareness of the web of different types of relationships that shape her reality.

A second Ecuadorian student alluded to what he described as the modern colonial world system that rules all reliable or unreliable, widely held associations of an attribute(s) and a social group(s). Fricker (2007) argues, as the student appears to be describing in the following quotation, stereotypes are an essential, but prejudicial, heuristic in the making of credibility judgments during testimonial exchanges when individuals are undermined in their capacity as givers of knowledge:

In theory, this production and distribution of knowledge should be equitable for all who seek education or engage in teaching. However, there are variables that affect the experience of learners, teachers, educational staff, researchers, theorists and other members of the academic community. Hermeneutic injustice (group exclusion and silencing) is the problem of passive racism in universities and workspaces when certain stories do not belong to or match those of the dominant group, the minority group is encouraged to code-switch to fit in (Ecuadorian student, 2023).

Code-switching, a term well-known in applied linguistics originally proposed by Gumperz (1977), is the practice of shifting from one linguistic code (a language or dialect) to another, depending on the social context or conversational setting. It is a phenomenon particularly used by members of minority ethnic groups to shape and maintain a sense of identity and belonging within a larger community.

b) Epistemologies of Inclusion

Student quote from a Ukrainian university:

> After sitting in a cold pipe basement under the civil dormitory without any food, surviving a Russian genocidal permanent bloody bombardment of my beloved home city and brave country, Ukraine, I realized you should not be attached to material possessions. Instead, you should take care of your own physical and mental health first because this is the only thing that cannot be taken away from you by anyone (March 30, 2024).

Other students, through their reported dialogue and actions, the micro-narrators convey degrees of initiative, how they make sense of the dislocation, and how they are included in their new contexts to accomplish personally (personalized) and socially acceptable (de-personalized) self-presentations. For example, Miguel, a Venezuelan student depersonalized narrative:

> 'It's better to take a risk than stay where you are unsafe...knowing there are good people in other countries that will comfort you even if you still love your country".

Or Juan's personalized reported dialogue and action that:

"From my very own apartment I could hear screams as they were raided and someone taken out. Maybe they would come to our door and do the same."

And the depersonalized message:

"You have to understand what situation refugees are coming from. You can stay where you are but what are you going to do ..."

Or Kat, forced to go abroad, knowing English but not the host country's language, accomplished the socially acceptable self-presentation to help other migrants with translations. And May, understanding the language barrier to her proposed migration, personally planned how to access student blogs in her host country for information about studying and living alone. Or Bel, who while dealing with some level of exclusion in her host country, maintained her Bolivian identity by cooking food from her home country and keeping her native Spanish pronunciation.

Connections across continents and cultures

Digital technology has simplified the communication process and expanded potential interactive communication opportunities. However, participation is structurally different from interaction. Interaction remains an important condition of participation, but it cannot be equated to participation. Interaction has no political meanings because it does not entail power dynamics, as does participation. In the breakout sessions, with an atmosphere of 'openness to and interest in the world as a whole and commitment to the process values of dialogic and nonviolent communication, coupled with the acceptance of the universal status of all human beings and a sense of trans-society responsibility for what happens in the world' (Dower, 2008), students engaged in what Kim (2021) describes as 'Curriculum-as-relations- driven by relationships and situated praxis...(that is) social-temporal-situational focusing on the network of people involved in communicating and reflecting together in a particular situation' (p. 139). Long ago, Dewey (1946) reminded us that communication is

the way by which any community comes to have things in common, such as knowledge, making a common intelligence possible. It should ensure participation in this common intelligence, the epistemological dimension reclaimed by Habermas (2006) in the notion of public sphere (Carr, et al., 2024a).

Trends across continents and cultures

From varying ontological perspectives, the critical internationalization policies of the participating universities enabled students to discuss individual migrant issues that had historiographic connections. Allying through global critical cooperation of contextualized local and global social issues of migration supported students across continents and cultures in a 'constant, fluid, situated process of scattered belonging'. For example, individual migrant issues: migration impact on identity; negative stereotyping, exclusion on University campuses, why migrants hope to return or not to their original country; comparing experiences of migrants abroad and internally displaced migrants; historiographic connections: Forced versus voluntary migration over decades; global history (Carr, et al., 2024b).

5 Analyses and discussion of both projects

From interviews, student virtual Power-Point presentations and breakout sessions, qualitative and quantitative surveys, and shared Google doc content analysis, as facilitators we have come to experientially understand from and with students that epistemic fluency involves a set of capabilities that allow people (faculty and students) recognize and participate in different ways of knowing initially about migration and subsequently about identity. Since 2021, we have been examining the multiple threads that connect local expression and negotiation of the identity of students to wider social contexts and ontologies. The joint virtual sessions have provided a unique platform for the exchange of ideas, methodologies, and knowledge between teachers and students, transcending the limitations of traditional academic discourse and serving as a dynamic space for intellectual exchange. The sessions contribute to a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted challenges and opportunities faced by students (and teachers) in different cultural contexts, navigating the complex dynamics of identity formation within global and local spheres.

In our times of Liquid Modernity (Bauman, 2000), 'liquid identities,' according to Brandao (2022), reflect risks and contingencies of social and cultural processes and influence the formation of abstract or vague identities. Despite facing liquid modernity and liquid identity, there are aspirations for sustainability. Live and virtual interaction creates the possibility of manifesting the authenticity of individuals, having an elicitation effect on the participants, and preventing the danger and temptation of losing identities.

Our strong and ongoing value of partnerships that embed mutual benefit, mutual contribution of expertise, and mutual dedication of time and energy have contributed to the design of our research process in 2024/25 to implement a comparative and thematic analysis of a transcultural transdisciplinary collaborative module with asynchronous and synchronous components to support epistemic fluency skills of Higher Education undergraduate students across continents and cultures about several themes (Carr et al., 2024b)

From a matrix of four broad themes culture and language, education and society, migration and global issues - teachers and their undergraduate student teams of ten participants in each university (which may be constituted from various disciplines) will identify a research topic that has as its focus both changing local and glocal identity. The teacher leading each team will have two tasks: to initially apply an interdisciplinary as well as a communication skills questionnaire and a Hofstedt country profile. Additionally, teachers will prepare an asynchronous component of the module with their contextual topic using a variety of media. Before the eight virtual synchronous sessions hosted by each university, all students will access the related asynchronous component. Process data, during their presentations and breakouts, will be recorded by students using a Shared Google, and later content analyzed for individual and team contextual epistemic resourcefulness. The skills questionnaires will be repeated and compared across all teams. All data, both quantitative and qualitative, will be comparatively evaluated and overall content from all contexts will be thematically analyzed (Carr et al., 2024b).

Transdisciplinary collaboration and identities

We are interested in situated-identity phenomena. This includes how students (and faculty) accomplish, construct, or establish a sense of self, and how identities develop in real-time. How do new self-representations become introduced, and how are 'old' self-representations left behind? How do new narrative stories become prominent narratives where we are not tied to our birthplace, past, or societal convention? The digital age has enabled virtual connections that transcend physical boundaries, allowing us to communicate with individuals across continents and cultures while, according to Bauman, being completely disconnected from one's immediate surroundings. With lives marked by globalization, heightened individualization, and preferred new social media information landscapes, 'young students' as well as 'old teachers' are continually forming or contributing to their identities and perspectives within a transcultural context (Harris, 2013, p.145).

It is in the public sphere that our shared characteristics become visible across con-

tinents and cultures, whether students or faculty. According to Hannah Arendt (1958), our human identity emerges primarily through public action and speech. Our process of collaboration and equitable partnerships is both transcultural and transdisciplinary. Our educational aims, necessary to ensure ethical global engagement, remain at the forefront of our project. Foundational to our reflexive, inclusive, and de-colonial approach to knowledge-and for its importance to democratic life, deliberation, and participation in international Higher Education-is whose voices are enabled, who gets to tell their stories, and who is heard and listened to (Walker, 2020). This is crucial whether we are situated in previously colonizing or colonized territories. What occurs through our joint endeavors is the incorporation of the tensions between the individual and the collective, the local and the global, and the homogeneous and the diverse. This leads to a true paradigm shift in terms of becoming responsible, autonomous societal actors during the project, upon the completion of participation, and after the project itself is over.

6 Postlude

We reflect on our process that through connectivity, our Higher Education students (and faculty) in the Global South, North, West, and East are exposed to the current politics and economics of how nation-states maintain societal order by policing geographical boundaries and operationalizing categories and hierarchies of humanity (citizens, refugees, and migrants) in the tension to ensure system continuity and potential progress. From different onto-epistemological localities, the focus of our transcultural 'assemblage' has been, and continues to be, on de-centering and reframing our knowledge traditions as we address Sustainable Development Goal #17 for Partnerships. Our assemblage works the way it does despite and because of our differences.

The development of our project took and continues to take on an organic character. While, of course, we planned and developed our program thoughtfully and consciously, we did not adhere to a strictly prescribed roadmap. Indeed, we did not foresee the growth of the project to encompass eight universities in seven countries, which has occurred in a rhizomatic fashion. At this pivot between the establishment of a regular series of collaborative seminars the project's past - and its expansion and associated publications - the project's future - it behooves us to pause and think about whether our work fits into an existing theoretical model or whether it represents something new and different.

Intentional inclusion, reciprocity, students as partners, and relational accountability – are profoundly important to our aims and motivations. Yet because our project is focused on the meeting points of northern, eastern, southern, and western epistemologies, our project looks rather different to many of the existing models for international collaboration. There are echoes of COIL, for instance, in our student-led breakout rooms, but these do not lead to formal outputs, as in our view, the conversation depends on its free-flowing and organic nature. Similarly, although the layering of student narratives might resemble story circles in some ways, this is not by design - we have found that if we are too prescriptive or directive, the sessions are likely to be less generative overall. There are similar conclusions to be drawn from our own collaboration as educators. From the outset we have worked in an egalitarian and informal way, by necessity really as our institutional settings and frameworks are so different (Carr, et al., 2024b).

We will continue to listen, speak, question, and plan, based on the outcomes of our research, hoping to contribute to a kind of virtual transcultural education that invites students, as becoming global citizens, to interrupt the reproduction of colonial futures and deepen their sense of social justice responsibility in the present.

CRediT authorship contribution statement:

Anne Carr: Conceptualization, Investigation and Writing original review. Matias Abad: Investigation and Writing review and editing. Gabriela Bonilla-Chumbi: Investigation and Writing review and editing.

Declaration of competing interest:

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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