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INTERNATIONAL DISTANCE COURSES: CAN THEY PROVIDE PERSONALIZED EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES?

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Abstract. This paper describes experience of the distance sociology courses that functioned for students from Belarusian State University and State University of New York. The joint distance course included studying texts and extensive discussions via the students' chats organized within the classes that reflected the student-led learning methods proposed by Dewey and developed for distance learning by modern scholars. Students' evaluation of the class was based on their personal interviews and written feedback on the courses. Due to the careful design of the teaching methods a level of students' satisfaction was high. The students especially liked a possibility to communicate with professors any time, an option to discuss with other students any questions and express their individual viewpoints, a chance to learn material asynchronously without physical participation in regular classes abroad. Students highly assessed such features of the distance class as a combination of formal and informal tools of communication, freedom to learn the sources that are not prescribed, accounting the individual educational interests, etc. This way the students could develop their personal abilities and personality. The long term effects of the international distance course included a better understanding of each other, a broader world outlook, a deeper knowledge on foreign countries and different nationalities. Such courses provided enlargement of the students' cultural potential on the basis of digitalized educational technology.

Key words: International Distance Courses, Dialogical Approach in Leaning, Joint Courses, Intercultural Communication, Personal Development

1. Introduction[2]

The role of distance education is commonly recognized. This form of education became especially important during the Covid-19 pandemic, when people in many countries had to stay at home and study/work online for several months. Distance forms of education also provided a necessary access to higher education for young people from the countries that lost an access to the universities due to the political and military conflicts. However, even before the period of the COVID-19 pandemic and the years of deterioration of international

situation in the world, there was a sustainable tendency to develop joint distance courses

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[2] This culturally oriented paper is based on a description and analysis of the successful features of an international distance course as a joint teaching project and does not contain any quantitative methods and measurements of the students' performances. The data of this course cannot be applicable to other cases due to its originality: the results only demonstrate the cultural opportunities for the students' development during the online teaching.

for the university students from different countries. Such courses were numerous between the EU and the US universities. Due to the existed educational cooperation they also became available for the advanced universities in Russia and Belarus.

Internationalization of the higher education is a well-known fact that attracts the scholars' attention (Brandenburg et al. 2019). This is a tendency that meets the global demand in the high quality specialists in the economy, cultural sphere, and political relations. Modern technology contributed to this tendency providing distance forms of education and making them popular in most countries (Ward 2016).

International distance courses have become a reality since the end of the 20th century due to the spread of the Internet (Youssef 2014). They gave a possibility for many students to collaborate online (Palloff and Platt 2005). From the beginning they were available for the students in the western countries as an addition form of collaboration to the real educational exchanges between the universities from different countries. Surely, many students from the European and Asian universities wanted to go for study abroad to the universities in the US or Canada. However, due to the broad development of the educational cooperation between many countries, supported by the professional educational organizations in the late 1990th and after, a new option appeared: distance exchange courses. This kind of educational cooperation was cheap (students did not pay for travel and staying in foreign countries), - distance classes did not assume any extra cost (Baldassar and McKenzie 2016). It is also important to mention the availability of such courses for the universities from quite different countries – western and eastern, advanced and developing. A significant help was provided for international collaboration from the State University New York Office of International Programms that implemented dual-degree programs with higher education institutions in Turkey, Russia, China, Mexico and other countries: the staff of this Office followed the concept of common interests beyond the borders (Ryder 2010).

To start the distance cooperation it was enough to sign a formal agreement about such kind of cooperation between the universities, so that many universities from the eastern countries could join this practice and participate in the international distance learning courses. Belarusian State University – number 1 in the Republic of Belarus, according to the international ratings – signed several agreements on the cooperation with the universities from the foreign countries in the 1990s, so that the faculties and the staff interested in the international cooperation could participated in the international conferences, seminars, trainings, conduct the joint research and the like. From the beginning of the 2000s, due to the spread of the internet educational tools and methods, the distance courses were organized, some of them with the foreign participation. Department of Sociology established the working contacts with the Department of Sociology and Anthropology from the SUNY (Cortland). Both sides were interested in such cooperation as the members of the American Universities for Democracy (AUDEM) – a non-state organization strongly promoted East-West universities civil cooperation and delivered western learning methods of education as well as democratic rules within the universities' communities. This organization was open as a part of the American Democracy Project in which more than 300 universities collaborated to deepen the impact public higher education (American 2024).

There were two professors teaching distance class together. The author of this paper represented Belarusian State University and professor Craig Little, a Chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology from SUNY (Cortland), was the key figure in the arrangement of distance cooperation. Twice another American professor who worked at Moscow State University also participated in the distance courses with Russian students (Little et al. 2005). Professors decided to take a course "Social Control": it was a selective course for both universities, and those students who were interested in this topic and international cooperation could be enrolled in it. From the

very beginning it was agreed that professors will teach the course together and discuss all the methodological and practical issues during the personal meetings that happened three or four times or online.

SUNY (Cortland) provided all the necessary technological conditions for the international course. First, SUNY shared the technological platform (Blackboard) making it available for Belarusian university so that all the students could use it within the learning process. Second, SUNY provided Belarusian students with three textbooks for this course and allowed free access to other resources necessary for participation in this course. Third, Belarusian professor participated in a special training delivered by the SUNY IT specialists on how to use the technological platform for running a distance course. As the expertise level of the SUNY international distance cooperation was high there were many scholars from several countries who took this two-days training to gain competences for further teaching distance courses together with the SUNY staff.

This unique experience of teaching this course has been gained during 2001- 2017, when the students of two above-mentioned institutions of higher education participated in this international distance class. Twice some students from Australia also participated in it making the international nature of the course even broader. In the end of each class students assessed the course following the different criteria (level of personal interest, atmosphere of the course, teachers' level of knowledge, satisfaction of the results, etc.). The average assessment grade of the class was high (more than 4 on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 was low and 5 was the highest).

This experience in the international teaching process stopped when an American professor retired, and nobody from SUNY agreed to substitute him for several reasons. Soon the COVID-19 pandemic made hopes to restore this course unrealistic. However, as this experience was successful, it makes sense to discuss the special features of this distance course and its unique design as a case of successful international educational cooperation. That is why the research question for this paper is to assess and interpret the factors that made this course attractive for all the students and ensured its success, as well as interpret the cultural impact of this course on the students.

2. The Research Design of the International Distance Course

2.1 Brief Description of a Design and Model

First of all, it might be useful to remind about the different opinions on the usefulness of distance education format as they have been popular before the COVID-19 pandemic. There are some international surveys that discovered no significant difference in the student performance between those who study online and in traditional classes as they could be organized only before the COVID-19 pandemic and the waves of sanctions related to the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict (Ananga and Biney 2017). According to these surveys both motivation and student evaluations of teaching quality of distance courses did not depend on the mode of education. According to the earlier studies, good traditional teachers and good distant instructors are among the best in both cases (Kelly et al. 2007). Distance methods and IT tools are not widespread and it might be neither necessary and nor useful in some cases: it depends on the discipline, the instructors, their willingness to use ICT and develop of new materials (Atkinson and Medina 2016). Finally, with the broad use of new technological forms of education, "we are on the verge of an educational revolution" (Murphy 2019). Two of the most powerful developments which are driving education forward are virtual learning environments and e-Libraries (Hughes 2019).

The forms of international distance classes that fit the goal of internationalization have to take into account such criteria as the countries from which students enroll, their level of training, educational

psychology, and different pedagogical methods. The literature discusses several issues related to the specifics of international distance education such as the language of instruction, the availability of teacher support, and technical platforms (Baldassar and McKenzie 2016. Ward 2016). For international distance e-learning including students from linguistically diverse countries, the language of instruction can be more extremely important. Therefore it is recommended to enroll only students with good level of English so that they can adjust themselves to these classes more easily (Youssef 2014).

There are few studies in Russia and dedicated to this topic because of the complexity of organizing such courses. Few cases of international distance classes including ex-soviet countries have been mentioned in papers devoted to regionalism or international education in general (Higher Education 2019). In Belarus there were no publications of such character because of a very small number of cases where the US and Belarus collaborated in the running of international distance classes.

The discussed case of a distance class was a new form of international education organized on the basis of distance teaching methods and technology. Carefully selected teaching methods and technological tools help construct an atmosphere for online learning, including cross-cultural communication, the exchange of experiences with international peers and support from instructors. This design and methods differ from many other forms of international teaching (Youssef 2014). At the same time it used the experience already gained in this field.

The specific aspect of this international distance course was the topic - social control within the sociology curriculum. This topic is closely tied with the political field and the different state regulations on criminals so that it was a concern whether the students would agree to openly discuss the topic. It is not usual for the field, where most international distance courses are focused on languages (Helm and Guth 2016). However, all the students expressed their views in the open manner on the topic. Sociological education is a part of the global process of internationalization. New technology can be used in teaching sociology to increase student engagement and improve their motivation as well as a level of international knowledge.

However, it is not easy to create and sustain an effective distance-learning course in sociology when the students enrolled represent different countries, with their own culture, teaching traditions and expectations for grading. Offering international courses is useful for those students who cannot afford a semester abroad or even a shorter exchange visit, but who need international experience and have a good knowledge of English.

Being a part of an international distance classroom creates a feeling of international engagement and provides opportunities to learn about the outside intercultural world and to discuss the similarities and differences of students' lives with a minimum of financial stress. A distance-learning sociology class with an international component is inclusive for students: first, it provides an opportunity for all the students to take a desirable course online outside the constraints of an established university program; second, it gives them a chance for virtual travel abroad and virtual communication with their international peers.

The model of the discussed distance class was primarily focused on the internationalization of higher education. The goal was to create an example of how to realize this goal. In such process the course design always matters, therefore, it has to be based it on the best experience from the field. Within this framework the successful SUNY experience in asynchronous distance education suggested that this form of learning was the most suitable for students living in different countries (Aviv 2001). Following the suggestions of the specialists from the SUNY Learning Network, it was

decided to use Blackboard because this Learning Management System was provided by SUNY. The university always provided technical support for running the course because this technology belonged to SUNY. This regular and sustainable support was necessary to make the running of the class successful.

The design of the course assumed that the students have to (1) offer global comparisons and perspectives on the problems of social control, (2) pose questions to one another from an outsider's perspective, (3) respond to questions that frequently challenge what is "taken for granted", and (4) take a reflective attitude toward their own society, culture, and politics. Overall, all the students, regardless of the country of origin, fulfilled these tasks.

2.2 Major Features of the Course Design

It is important to stress that an innovative design for an international online course greatly contributed to its success (it was organized several times during about 15 years). The key factors (or the special design features) that stimulated the high level of student involvement in online dialogue and the high level of satisfaction have been outlined as follows:

(a) Asynchronous method of teaching: all students could communicate online and contribute to the course 24/7. It was extremely convenient due to the time zone differences and class schedules of students in different countries. This method is well-known in the field, and its benefits are well described in the literature (Hiltz and Goldman 2005).

(b) Existence of *Students Forum* for regular communication on the topics of the course (each student had to make at least six comments on three main topics of the course). Students Forum was a form of realization of the student-led learning strategy (Baran and Correia 2009). Except for the class topics, students discussed their countries, hobbies, life events, so that they became knowledgeable about the countries involved, their everyday life, and culture. Each student had to post a minimum of six times per module on the Student-led-discussion forum. This forum was a central point in the class: one third of a module grade depended on grades for posts—their quality, quantity, and regularity. On average, each post contained 300–350 signs; some posts were three times longer, depending on the topic and the student. The enhancement of cross-national knowledge and understanding was the essence of the course.

(c) Method of student' oriented teaching (personal communication of the professors with each student, sometimes – arrangement of individual deadlines for home assignments, explanation of course details, discussion of any personal problem in case a student asked for help, etc.). This method was extremely productive in a course where professors did not have face-to-face contacts with the students. As a result, a unique learning environment was constructed (Hanewicz 2017) that stimulated mutual interests and desire to learn more.

(d) Availability of all course materials online – there were three books, several mini-lectures, additional articles to read and discussed in the *Students Forum*. All the students had open access to all the materials. It was convenient for them. In case of some difficulties with English, Belarusian students could use dictionaries (all materials were only in English).

(e) Transparency of the students' assessment (students' grades). The system of grading has been provided from the beginning, and the results depended on the quality of written assignments and the number and quality of comments in the *Students Forum* for each student. This way every student could know what is his/ her level in class and could improve his or her performance before grading.

(f) Friendly atmosphere in an international distance class. There was no competition between the students, while all of them wanted to have good results on the basis of their new learning experience. In their post-class notes to professors the students especially admitted friendship that motivated them to participate and the high level of openness in the expression of their views.

The online asynchronous technology and online dialogue in the form of student-led discussions organized for regular interaction among the students and between students and lecturers seemed to be the most important key factors for the course's successful design. An additional factor that contributed to the course success was the regular technical and pedagogical support: it highly motivated the students in their individual work. Technical support was provided by the American IT specialists, while pedagogical support was provided by the professors. Perhaps, in other cases not all these factors can be so important, while in this particular class their combination played a decisive role in making this class successful.

3. Theoretical Basis of the Distance Course

The modern societies have a high demand for professionals and many young people want to receive an international degree to have better chances for employment, or a chance at better employment. These demands create a challenge for higher education: to teach more students and use educational technology to make the process of education inclusive, creative and attractive. Higher education can be assisted in meeting this demand with the methods and tools for teaching online, both domestically and internationally.

The major theoretical basis of the discussed international distance course was an educational theory constructed by the American educator and philosopher John Dewey (Dewey 1920). This theory highly promotes a dialogical form of learning and argues for the methods of education oriented to the students. Dewey's approaches and methods meet the goals of the international class. It is also called "an experiential learning theory" (Kolb 1984, 20) because it emphasizes the central role of personal experience in the learning process. Each individual obtains the new knowledge and feelings and combines the perception of knowledge, cognition and behavior.

However, in order to make Dewey's ideas fully applicable for the distance form of education, modern theories of distance learning developed by M. Moore (1991) and J. Hill (Hill et all. 2009) were used. This theoretical basis made it possible to systematize and analyze the new empirical data received from the students' assignments and their comments from the Students Forum, as well as interpersonal discussions between the professors.

It is necessary to mention that information related only to one long-lasting case study, therefore, it is not possible to distribute the results to other online courses. However, the empirical support of practicability of the selected design and features of this course made it possible to stress its teaching and learning effective and sustainability.

It also makes sense to add that the students in all the above-mentioned universities belonged to one digital generation: all the young persons whether - from Belarus or Russia or the US – wanted to get good knowledge and later to be employed in the knowledge-based economy (Commission 2018). Therefore, they try to get new knowledge and cultural experience from their international communication that can be of practical use for their future employment.

4. Research Results and Discussion of the Effectiveness of the Class

One of the major positive result of the course that greatly contributed to the personal development of each student was an intercultural dialogue arranged on the basis of implementation of Dewey' and Moore' theories.

Dialogue in different forms was at the center of our pedagogical approach in distance teaching. It was a key tool to organize cross-cultural international communication between the students. This tool was selected due to the recommendations of the theory of distance learning developed by Moore (1991). It is possible to describe dialogue as a means of exchanging information and opinions among the students and teachers. Through forum dialogue students and teachers participated in constant discussion making this class interactive and knowledge-enhancing. Moore stated that online learning can be viewed as a dialogue, i.e. as "the interaction between the teacher and learner when one gives the instructions and the other responds" (Moore 1991, 3). Within this theoretical framework a three-part pattern of cognitive dialogue was developed: (1) between the student and instructor; (2) among the students themselves; and (3) between instructors, as they also communicated online. The results of this class demonstrated the importance of all three kinds of dialogue. This three part pattern of dialogue differs from Moore as it included the communication between the instructors themselves, while Moore focused on the dialogue between the students and instructors. The results provided evidence of importance of a student-oriented approach in online teaching as it allows space for online interaction between the students that successfully replaces face-to-face interaction. Additionally, there was a regular communication between the teachers and students who were in need of technical help or help with the content of the course. This kind of communication was mutually beneficial: it helps us to improve the course and it contributes to the students' understanding of the subject and course technology. According to the students' post-class surveys, this helped to keep the students' interest in this class and motivated them to learn and compete with others. Overall, despite the free enrollment in the course, there were always enough students from all the countries. This result was in line with Garrison and Cleveland-Innes' statement (2005, 133) that course design significantly influences the nature of the interaction.

The dialogue was mainly student-oriented: both teaching and learning was directed by student motivation and curiosity. The pedagogical focus was on the students' forum because it was a major tool for their personal cultural development: the students posted online questions asking foreign peers about their countries and national cultures, discussing the details of social control in a particular country, or expressing their own opinions on difficult issues and therefore promoting discussion between the classmates. For example, American and Australian students wondered why capital punishment still existed in Belarus, and how Belarusians evaluate this phenomenon. Students also raised questions about the fact why many prisoners in Scandinavia are allowed to wear bracelets and live at home instead of in prison, whether cameras can be used for total surveillance, whether security is more important than personal freedom, and whether these can be balanced in a society. All of them shared information about the modern tools of control they knew. During such discussions students always followed ethical norms and expressed respect to the opinions of others regardless of whether they agreed. Ethical norms were described in the course materials provided online in the beginning of the course, and teachers carefully checked students' online communications from this criterion. Overall, the pedagogical tools were chosen to provide the students with the means for open dialogue among the participants to make every student feel like an independent or self-directed learner.

All the mentioned features of the course design, its model and the students' performance itself contributed to the success. A significant impact of distance class for each student was a

participation in the open communication between the foreigners and the deep cultural knowledge of countries and people gained on the basis of communication, the atmosphere of mutual engagement maximize the students' involvement in the group.

According to the students' messages during the performance of the class assignments, they appreciated international communication very much. They reflected a feeling of satisfaction in their positive comments after the end of the class. Here are few examples of such comments that reflect the common feelings of the students:

> *Belarusian Student: "Taking part in an international distance course is always a unique experience. A person can see something from somebody else's point of view, learn a lot and meet people from absolutely different cultures. What attracts me the most is that through this experience a person can see and break the wall [between cultures], understand why people from different cultures act that way, why they think that way."*
>
> *American Student: "This course was so interesting and gave us the chance to share experiences and cultures, and I think that it is amazing and I personally feel so blessed that I was able to be a part of such a phenomenal international class."*
>
> *Russian Student: "It was very good to meet the students from the other countries, learn about their experiences and despite all the differences, find out that there are also many similarities between us."*
>
> *Australian Student: "Initially I assumed that Australia would be similar to the US and quite different from Belarus and Russia but how wrong I was. It's been an enlightening experience which has expanded my appreciation of other cultures and accompanying social controls. Political and historical walls no longer separate us, as in the past and I think that's a good thing of it opens doors such as this course has, in making networks with peers across the globe."*

Overall, more than 50% of the students expressed their full satisfaction with the course which is in line with the level of satisfaction in traditional classes (Driscoll et all. 2012). Therefore the discussed experience of teaching this international distance class can be viewed as an example of successful practice that would be useful for teachers planning similar international distance courses on sociology. These students notes allow to say the following. The model's effectiveness was confirmed by the students' level of satisfaction with this class and the high level of student engagement. It enables students from different countries to equally communicate online and freely exchange ideas among themselves and with the teachers. Student-oriented teaching methods and the careful design of the course were also significant for success.

5. Conclusion

The received findings showed that a combination of technological, pedagogical, cultural, social and psychological aspects of international distance teaching makes it effective. It is assumed finally that an asynchronous university e-learning course focusing on the regular participation of international students in discussion forums can be a useful model for online collaboration where students from several countries are involved. The discussed practice confirmed that the selected technology is more appropriate for an international distance course as it makes it more flexible for students to work online, while dialogue provides space for students' creativity and for a feeling of social presence. Such methods of learning differ from the recent methods based on the Artificial

Intelligence that less focused on developing students' creativity and communication and therefore do not contribute to students socialization and critical thinking (Chaudhary 2024).

The received results also showed that during the positive international atmosphere and existence of the universities' agreements on the international cooperation it is possible to organize the courses that can touch upon the political and legal issues of the countries without making the discussion impossible for the students from the ex-socialist countries. In total, a global political atmosphere that allows cultural exchanges on the different levels between the advanced and developing countries and the people combined with the friendly learning atmosphere between the students and between students and teachers in the class can be extremely successful for individual development of each person involved in this process. Therefore, the investigation of research question of this paper, that was focused on the selection of the effective conditions for a successful online international class, provided a descriptive support for the statement that only under the certain conditions (both external and internal) the international distance classes can contribute a lot to the personal development of the students and stimulate their individual human potential. In case of the unfriendly political situation not only international agreements on the university cooperation become useless; the very existence of the international distance classes with the students from the countries that are in conflict are not at all possible. As a result, the new young generation living in such conflict conditions will be excluded from the international distance cooperation and lose a potentially important tool for the personal development in the global world. This conclusion refers not only to the classes in sociology: under the conflict political conditions any distance classes and exchanges of such kind are not possible. This is also a loss of a possibility to learn new distance technology for the students from the developing countries as such technology is usually provided by the advanced countries.

The current political situation that made impossible to organize international distance classes as described above also makes evidence of the importance of such classes in the past years.

For the beginning of the 2000s the discussed class was a new form of international education organized on the basis of distance teaching methods and technology. Carefully selected teaching methods and technological tools helped construct a friendly atmosphere for online learning, including cross-cultural communication, the exchange of experiences with international peers and support from instructors. The proposed design and methods differ from many other forms of international teaching. The discussed case provides the evidence that there are many approaches and teaching methods in distance education that can provide significant learning results together with the important cultural contribution to the personal development of the enrolled students. It is expected that such experience can be very useful for the future employment of the young people enrolled in such classes, especially in their possible communication with foreign countries as they broke the political stereotypes about each other and understood that all countries differ from each other but all people deserve mutual respect regardless of their differences and cultural originality.

The most innovative cultural aspect of this distance class was a student-led-discussion forum arranged as a part of each educational module to stimulate learning and intercultural communication.

The university international distance course need not replace or compete with any other forms of distance or traditional learning. The discussed class had specific objectives and it was focused on international collaboration. Only highly motivated English-speaking students voluntarily subscribed for this class as it was not a part of the official curriculum. MOOC classes are usually aimed to help students either with limited resources get a particular certificate. Blended classes meet the interests of a virtual generation preferring to use ICT in their education. International

distance courses cannot be organized on the same scale as other forms, focused on educational tasks within a particular university and functioning in the native language of the country. They are primarily oriented to the internationalization of higher education, i.e. to bringing benefits not only to students involved but to the university or a broader group of students or stakeholders. They provide a good practical pattern for university administration and teachers interested in expanding international cooperation in higher education.

The discussed long-term experience shows that the setting of such international university distance courses requires several conditions be present to increase the level of success and students' satisfaction with the course.

The landscape of the international distance teaching and learning in a country has to be scrutinized, taking into account the historical, theoretical, cultural and pedagogical differences between the students/countries involved in a such model. As the discussed experience and research showed, regardless of differences between the Americans and Russians, or Australians and Belorussians who were involved in our course, the model has proven effective for over the years of its successful operation.

A major limitation is that the discussed distance course was a single case study, although it was repeated several times with the same organizers and environment. Not all the universities and students could be involved in such class due to institutional barriers. The level of academic, linguistic and digital literacy of many students might be not enough for successful integration in global higher education, as well as the level of their motivation. However, the constructed model can be useful for other teachers as an example, although it might be difficult to replicate it in full even under the positive conditions. Currently it can be considered only as a case study organized in the 2000s.

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