The laughter effect: Enhancing cross-cultural learning and cohesiveness in a virtual environment

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Abstract

This practice report investigates the role of humor in enhancing cross-cultural learning and group cohesion in virtual education settings. Most collaborative international learning training focuses on structuring content, co-teaching, and managing coursework for specific outcomes (Rubin & Guth, 2015). Beyond including time for icebreakers for students to become acclimated with each other, often much of the rest of the experience emphasizes task completion; this serious focus may contribute to discomfort and reduced engagement among diverse students. After witnessing this our first year working together in a collaborative online international learning experience connecting North American students with those from Muslim-majority countries, we explored how modeling and creating opportunities for shared laughter in synchronous group exercises might better promote a relaxed and engaging learning environment. Our findings, derived from qualitative feedback and quantitative surveys, demonstrate that humor enhances group cohesion and cultural exploration. Students reported increased comfort, enjoyment, and willingness to engage and humor-driven activities consistently rated as the most impactful and enjoyable aspects of the course.

Keywords: COIL, humor, playfulness, sustainability, United Nations

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1.   Introduction

Collaborative online international learning (COIL) is a high-impact practice that "engages students in global learning, facilitates access to co-construction of discipline-specific knowledge, and encourages exposure to different worldviews by engaging in cross-cultural interactions" (Vahed & Rodriguez, 2021, p. 597). Research on the effectiveness of COIL tends to focus on course design and content acquisition and not as often on learning outcomes (Ramirez, 2020). Related to this, we suggest another underexplored area is the potential of humor as a pedagogical tool to enhance objectives of cross-cultural learning and group cohesion. While most discussion of humor in the classroom is focused on either the teacher's behavior or course content (Davies, 2015), this practice report brings together both content and process by demonstrating the effectiveness of humor-driven activities to help lessen stress and foster authentic interactions to improve cultural understanding.

1.1.   Increasing group cohesion

Laughter is inherently social (Martin, 2007, p. 128). Jung (2003) suggests that the fundamental evolutionary purpose of humor and laughter is to facilitate cooperation between people. In other words, laughter facilitates laughter in others (Chapman, 1976). Simply smiling is viewed as "highly supportive conversational behavior in a small group setting" (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001, p. 129).

In academia, humor may be a tool to counter the increased levels of stress and anxiety among Gen Z students particularly in the area of forming relationships and connecting with others, which most find difficult to do (Medaris, 2023). COIL asks even more as students must connect and quickly be productive with strangers from another country. Co-constructed humor may offer a natural first step. As Dynel et al. (2016) stated, "the ability to produce humor (intentionally) and to recognise humor is inherent to human nature, regardless of how different each individual's sense of humor may be from others" (p. 53). We found this true as instructors randomly assigned to work together. Our first email exchange was wrought with unspoken pressure to make a good impression and foundation for a working collaboration. We shared a funny picture as a means of introduction and thus generated our first laugh, which served as a means of connecting, marking our acceptance of each other, and fine-tuning understanding (Davies, 2003; Morreall, 1983).

1.2.   Encouraging mental flexibility

Playfulness can be a means to encourage flexibility countering the inevitable complications of technology, time zone differences, language barriers, etc., found in COIL exchanges.

Masek and Stenros (2021) defined playfulness "as an openness to interacting with most contexts and expecting them to be emotionally rewarding. This form of playfulness is also described as a flexible capacity to engage even when the experience is complicated or ambiguous" (p. 18). While the priority is the experience, an atmosphere of playfulness can help to "prioritize engagement over external consequence, realness, or convention" (Masek & Stenros, 2021, p. 23). "Humor fosters an openness to novelty...an increased willingness to take risks to implement creative ideas" (Morreall, 1991, p. 369). Humor offers flexibility and openness, strengthens group unity or awareness, and connects group members emotionally (Ladilova & Schröder, 2022; Martin, 2007; Morreall, 1983). Despite differences, "a sense of sameness is realized through shared laughter" (Ridanpää, 2014, p. 705). When humor is successfully co-constructed by the participants – both words and nonverbals such as facial gestures (Ladilova & Schröder, 2022; Polimeni & Reiss, 2006) – a shared laugh may overcome previous misgivings between people, to relax and "be themselves" (Morreall, 1983, p. 128).

2. Objectives

While each of our classes had appropriate subject-specific learning objectives, we shared a comprehensive collaborative project goal:

- To engage as a global team to address concerns related to exploring one of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) that are shared with each campus community.

To foster this collaborative environment, we defined three overall objectives:

- Develop small group activities to complete in synchronous sessions that have students explore differences and similarities among their home countries, specifically looking at language, culture, and universities/education.
- Foster group communication strategies through tasks that are to be completed asynchronously.
- Introduce COIL work through the instructors' modeling and emphasizing humor and authenticity to lessen students' stress and anxiety about the collaboration.

3. Context

In December of 2020, a U.S.-based foundation initiated a COIL program aimed at connecting North American universities with those in Muslim-majority countries. We each applied, were accepted,

and subsequently paired as COIL partners. As in many such collaborations, on the surface, it appeared we had few commonalities. We had a religious difference, an age difference, a first-language difference, and a discipline difference. One of us comes from a large research university in Southeast Asia and serves as a faculty member in engineering; the other comes from a small, private liberal arts college in North America, teaching in communication studies.

The two classes we brought together also varied. Although both were seminar courses, one centered on leadership – an elective serving as the introductory course for a minor in that field – while the other focused on sustainability, a required core course. One was exclusively for first-year students while the other had students from across all four years. Because of differences in academic calendars, our joint project came at the start of the semester for one of us and for the other, at the end.

In 2022, our first year, there were a combined 30 students (16 from Asia and 14 from the U.S.). In 2023, there were a total of 54 students (30 and 24 respectively). In 2023, there were 48 students (25 and 23). Prior to the first combined class, all three years, students gave written consent for collection and sharing of the project experience, products, and feedback.

Figure 1. Overview of the collaborative project highlighting differences and commonality of creating a project based on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals


While English is the shared language, there is a large difference between being a native speaker and feeling confident to speak a second (or third or fourth) language. A beneficial approach was dividing our classes into small groups, ensuring equal representation of students from each school in every group. Consequently, we formed six to nine groups, each consisting of six to eight students.

We had two distinct advantages. The first is that both of our courses were flexible in their design, and we had freedom to structure the learning objectives to incorporate a COIL experience. The second is that through successful coordination with our respective registrars, the administrators charged with creating course schedules, we were able to synchronize the day and timing of our classes, facilitating weekly synchronous online sessions despite a 12-hour time difference (i.e., one class met at 8 a.m. and the other at 8 p.m.).

4.   COIL course design

Our COIL project was a four-week, full-immersion experience which means for those four weeks, the content of each of our courses was the COIL project. We planned for this experience within our respective 15-week courses to be complementary to the other content we each covered. We allocated 75 minutes each week for synchronous engagement via Zoom with the remaining group work completed asynchronously.

Figure 2. Google Sites website of the COIL course
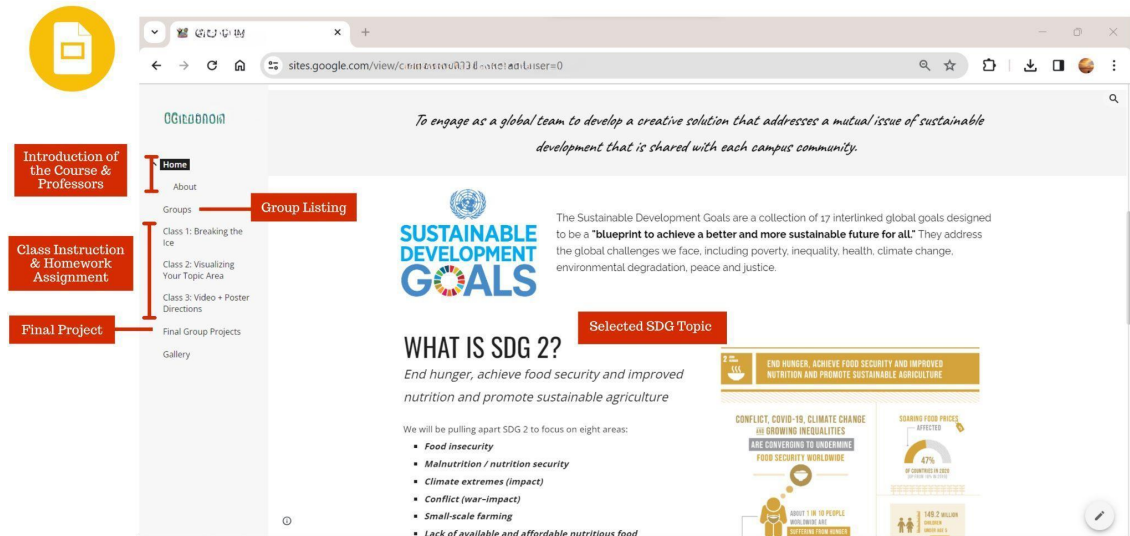
In addition to Zoom, we used Google for Education as our shared learning platform, creating a website for instructions and posting of homework and videos, which were uploaded to YouTube (Figure 2). For collaborative in-class activities, we used other online platforms, such as AhaSlides, Padlet, and Jamboard.

Following is an overview of the four-week schedule:

Class 1: Breaking the Ice

Dedicated to establishing connections among participants and fostering a collaborative atmosphere. Synchronous activities aimed to reduce initial hesitations and encourage open communication within project groups. After-class assignments focused on establishing a tool for asynchronous communications (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram message, etc.) and collaboratively completing an assignment.

Class 2: Visualizing Topic Area

Introduce the assigned Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) topic area. Students engaged in group activities aimed at deepening their understanding of the subject matter. (The group quiz, discussed below, is administered.)

Class 3: Project Launch

Reviewed instructions for creating a video and poster for their collaborative projects. Synchronous class time is given for them to work together. Subsequent work would be asynchronous – or synchronous if they arranged time to meet.

Class 4: Final Group Project Presentation

Each group presented their final video and poster. Two speakers–one from each country–showcased their collaborative efforts. This was followed by a collective reflection on the outcomes of the overall COIL experience.

4.1. Group quiz competition

While our approach guided participants through the project, and incorporated different ways in which we nurtured and modeled a playful learning environment, for the purposes of this practice report, we highlight an activity developed in our second year: a group quiz competition. What we

found is that the group quiz specifically contributed to fostering teamwork, cultural exchange, and humor and enjoyment.

4.1.1. Initial design

The first year we collaborated, we developed a 21-question general knowledge quiz focused on the two campuses. For example, there were questions on location of the university, number of majors, campus features and attributes, etc. To answer, a student was expected to explore the other school's website. Despite the open-web format, the quiz was individually graded and had to be completed prior to our first synchronous meeting. Our objective was for each student to establish a foundational understanding of the other's school.

Then, switching to an interpersonal focus when we met synchronously, we included "Six Differences," from the Intercultural Learning Hub (Vande Berg, 2016), as an ice breaker activity. The activity challenges students to find six similarities and differences among their cohort. The ice breakers were done in assigned small project groups via Zoom breakout rooms.

From students' verbal feedback to each professor and insights derived from post-course surveys, it was determined that the quiz did not alleviate the feelings of nervousness and anxiety preceding the initial online meeting. In fact, it achieved nothing of what we had hoped it would as it was perceived as another graded assignment. Direct verbatim quotes from collective COIL students (Year 1) in response to the feedback question, "How do you feel about our first online collaborative class today?" included:

- *It was hard to communicate properly*
- *Nothing in particular...... its just that we cant really open up that easily*
- *Difficulty breaking the ice*
- *It is really difficult to communicate*
- *They are so quiet*

The feedback highlighted our consistent concern related to the challenges of communication and engagement that would ultimately affect the ability of the groups to work well with each other. Upon reflection after the collaboration, we knew we needed to restructure the first two weeks, and the activities, to increase participation and engagement.

4.1.2. Improved design

The next academic year, we reshaped the quiz into a group competition. We moved it to being an in-class activity during our second synchronous session, and it was no longer individually graded. In our redesign, we added new questions about the countries, such as their geographic location, favorite national food, national bird, etc., and retained only a few questions about each campus, reducing the total number of questions from 21 to 12. The instructions eliminated emphasis on web research and encouraged relying on the expertise within the team; in other words, we told them to talk to one another.

Most importantly, we added two special features: a silly face group photo and a tongue twister recording (Figure 3; also see Appendix). The primary objective of these additions was to elicit laughter among the group members and, in turn, alleviate the anxiety associated with meeting their team members from different countries. The overall aims of this new quiz were to promote effective communication, encourage active participation, and incorporate ice-breaking activities, with the goal of enhancing the overall experience for students in subsequent collaborative classes.

Figure 3. Improved quiz design
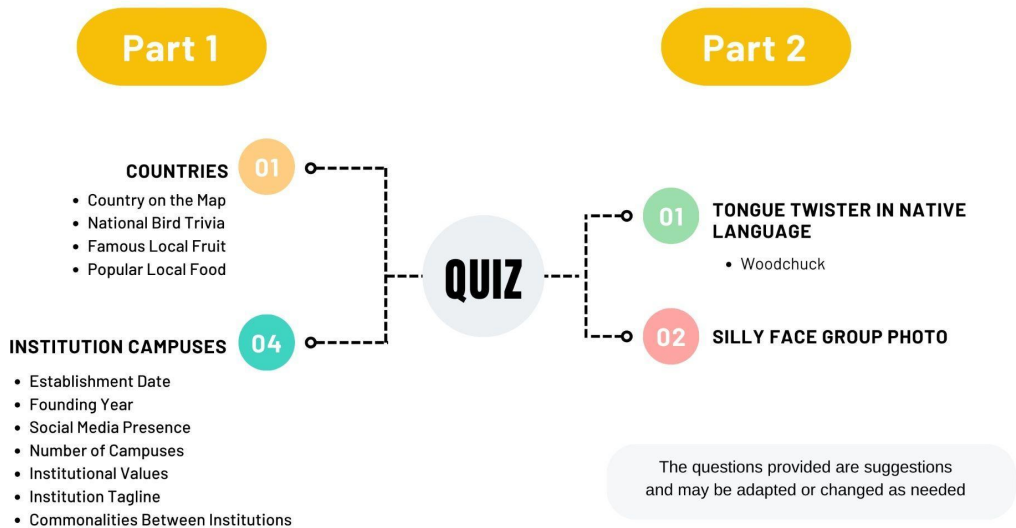
After receiving the briefing and all instructions from the professors, including imperfect modeling of the tongue twister, students were divided into Zoom breakout rooms based on their assigned groups. The competition between the groups was not time-based, so points were not awarded for finishing first. Instead, the evaluation centered on the number of correct answers in the quiz, the best tongue twister recording in each language, and the creativity of silly face photos.

The winners, announced the following week, were divided into three categories: the group with the silliest or most creative picture, the team with the best tongue twister recordings in both languages, and the overall group winner.

5.   Discussion of outcomes

Data for this project was gathered through a combination of methods: through taking notes while directly observing virtual sessions and through feedback obtained from the students. Observations during virtual sessions allowed us to assess participant engagement, communication dynamics, and the overall collaborative atmosphere. Additionally, soliciting feedback directly from students provided valuable insights into their experiences, perceptions, and suggestions for improvement. Through this dual approach, we sought to understand the project's impact on promoting cross-cultural learning and cohesiveness.

5.1.   Observation

The lecturer assumed the role of an observer, moving between breakout rooms within Zoom sessions. Our approach involved silent observation without active participation, allowing us to concentrate on studying students' interactions and behaviors during their activities and asking if the group had any questions or needed any assistance. This method provided insight into communication patterns, levels of engagement, collaborative behavior, and non-verbal cues exhibited by students.

In weekly meetings between the instructors, we shared our observations and feedback. In the first year (total 30 students from both academic institutions), we found that students exhibited more serious tones during interactions with fewer instances of casual conversation and significant periods of silence. Dialogue remained task-related. During the second year (total 54 students), we saw a change in the dynamics with students displaying more relaxed and open communications, engaging in conversations that extended beyond academic topics, with students sharing personal anecdotes and cultural insights. When we would drop into breakout rooms, students sometimes apologized

for not being on task. We readily encouraged them to keep interweaving personal sharing along with project work.

5.2.   Feedback

The data collection process for gathering feedback from students on the "Who We Are" Quiz competition activity involved an end-of-course structured set of questions aimed at eliciting detailed insights into their experiences and perceptions. The questions captured various aspects of the activity, including its impact on communication, cross-cultural understanding, engagement levels, and overall satisfaction. The questions were designed to be open-ended, allowing students to express their thoughts freely.

The feedback we received the second year was overwhelmingly positive. The quiz ranked as the top-rated activity in the "positively impacted you and your team" category and was repeatedly noted as the favorite. When questioned about whether the overall COIL project met their expectations, 83% of the students responded with "Absolutely–I had an awesome time." Notably no one expressed that it was not worth their time.

Figure 4(a) displays a word cloud capturing the most commonly used descriptor for teams as "collaborative," realizing one of our objectives when redesigning the activity.

Figure 4. Students' feedback on the description of their team

(a) Year 2 – 54 students

(b) Year 3 – 48 students

In the third consecutive year of our collaboration (total 48 students), we replicated the group quiz competition, achieving similar successful results as depicted in Figure 4(b). It also again ranked among the highest-rated activities under the category of "positively impacted you and your team."

Direct verbatim quotes from collective COIL students (Year 2 and Year 3) in response to the feedback question, "What was your favorite experience in this COIL?":

Year 2 (2022)	Year 3 (2023)
• *I think it was when we competed against other groups in the Google form. It was fun watching the [others] try to pronounce our language* • *When I have to speak in another Language and know more about their culture and background. It is really nice to meet them and I am really glad to be given this opportunity.* • *I learned a lot and it was a great experience working cross-culturally on a project. I made new friends and had a great time working with them.* • *I think my favorite experience was the group quiz when we had to learn about and compare our school and campus to theirs and their culture to ours because it gave us the opportunity to learn about and talk about different aspects of life that we probably would not have thought of or discussed.*	• *My favorite experience is when we participated in the competition between groups. We had fun talking about our own university, language and culture differences. And of course when it ended with the funny picture as well!* • *I liked the various activities we did. They helped lower our social guards and allowed us to be a bit more stress free.* • *My favourite experience is when we are having the quiz. My groupmates were so eager to win.* • *Seeing everyone's strengths play out and having fun while working on our quiz and project*

We achieved the aims we established by transforming a traditional quiz into a collaborative group competition:

- **Design quiz to be interactive and engaging:** The inclusion of activities like the silly face group photo and the tongue twister within the quiz made the quiz interactive and engaging for students. These elements go beyond traditional assignments, adding a layer of creativity and humor.
- **Encourage cultural exchange and understanding:** The group quiz served as a platform for cultural exchange. Students appreciated the opportunity to learn about each other's universities, languages, and cultures in a structured conversational exchange without instructors present.
- **Use humor and fun as learning tools:** The incorporation of elements like silly face expressions and tongue twisters demonstrated the effectiveness of humor as a tool for creating a positive and enjoyable learning experience. It not only added fun to the quiz but also served as a low-stakes introduction to each other's language.
- **Create opportunity to positively impact team dynamics:** The group competition and collaborative aspects of the quiz contributed to building strong team dynamics. Students enjoyed working together, learning from each other, and being able to see the strengths within their groups.

The improved quiz design, featuring elements like silly face group photos and the tongue twister, proved to be a successful and impactful component of the COIL project contributing to the overall positive experiences of students.

6.   Conclusions and implication

While our work encompassed three years and three different groups of students, it is difficult to generalize our success given the relatively small numbers (132 combined total three years across both institutions) and that as any instructor knows, each cohort behaves differently given the combination of personalities in a particular class. However, we found in years two and three that by emphasizing humor, the students developed a greater sense of community and collaboration, and we believe this could be replicated by others. The group competition quiz highlights the importance of humor as a tool for breaking down barriers and building understanding and empathy. Playfulness also seemed to address student anxiety of connecting with others.

There are two final points we would like to highlight. First, for those who are already feeling like they are being pushed outside of their comfort zone, making a crazy face and/or potentially being embarrassed by mispronouncing another's language, may seem too much. By modeling silliness as instructors, we opened the door for students to laugh with us. We cannot expect our students to lighten up if we are not willing to do so ourselves.

Second, some would argue that cross-cultural humor is fraught with potential misunderstandings. We agree that one should be cautious. By guiding students to use their creativity so that they co-construct what constitutes "silly," we established that humor has a place without belittling or singling out; that successful humor is linked to "successful role-taking" (Francis, 1994, p. 155). Likewise, by spending some minutes focused on the others' language, as Cornwall and Roy (2016) suggested, it may "assist in the removal of barriers to effective communication…and encourage interest, understanding and tolerance of cultures that may be different from our own" (p. 1213).

Typically humor depends on shared knowledge and background; and while in most intercultural situations this may be slow to develop, that is not the case in the COIL exchange which is, by design, an intentional shared, co-created experience. By recognizing the impact of humor on virtual collaboration, this COIL project demonstrates how laughter can be a catalyst for improving learning outcomes among diverse groups of learners and calls for additional empirical research on the effectiveness of humor interventions.

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Journal of Virtual Exchange

University of Groningen Press

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Appendix 1: Who We Are Quiz Instructions

Welcome to the "Who We Are" quiz! This is your chance to start learning about each other's countries, schools, languages, and more. This activity is designed to be fun and competitive, promoting effective communication and collaboration among your group members.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

Collaboration:	Work together as a team to answer the questions. Feel free to discuss and share knowledge.
Respect:	Be respectful of each other's cultures and backgrounds during the discussions.
Fun:	Enjoy the process! The quiz is designed to be both educational and entertaining.
Upload:	Ensure all your answers and uploads are submitted through the provided platform.

Good luck and may the best team win!

QUESTIONS ON THE COUNTRIES

1. Identify the Country on the Map
   - Select the correct country from the given images of global maps.
   - Example: Which of these maps shows Country X?

2. National Bird Trivia
   - Choose the bird that was almost selected as the national bird of a specific country.
   - Example: What almost became the national bird of Country Y?

3. Famous Local Fruit
   - Identify the fruit that is famous or unique in a particular country.
   - Example: What is known as the King of Fruit in Country X?

4. Popular Local Food
   - Select the most popular food in a given country from the images provided.
   - Example: What is the most popular food in Country Y?

QUESTIONS ON THE INSTITUTIONS

1. Establishment Date
   - Answer whether one of the institutions was officially established on a specific date.
   - Example: Was one of the institutions officially established on a specific date? (True/False)

2. Founding Year
   - Choose the founding year of an institution from the list of dates provided.
   - Example: When was the other institution founded?

3. Social Media Presence
   - Identify which institution is present on various social media platforms.
   - Example: Which institution is on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram?

4. Number of Campuses
   - Select the number of campuses an institution has for undergraduate studies.
   - Example: How many campuses does one institution have for undergraduate studies?

5. Institutional Values
   - Check all the values that are upheld by a particular institution.
   - Example: Which institution upholds these values? (Check all that apply)

6. Institution Tagline
   - Identify the tagline associated with one of the institutions.
   - Example: What is the tagline for one of the institutions?

7. Commonalities Between Institutions
   - Choose one commonality between the two institutions from the list of reasons.
   - Example: What is one thing both institutions have in common?

TONGUE TWISTER

- For this section, you will record two versions of a tongue twister. Each student is to try the following tongue twister in their non-native language (i.e., the principal language or dialect of their group mates). Decide who performs it the best and then record their attempt (you can use Zoom or a phone app). Repeat the process for the other group's language/dialect. Upload each of the two recordings.
   - Example: "How much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?"

GROUP SCREENSHOT PICTURE

- Take a screenshot of your whole group making funny faces on Zoom. Upload it. (One point per face)