Lessons from Octavio Paz in Online Intercultural Learning: Outcomes of a Mexican-US Collaborative Course

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Abstract

Octavio Paz helped us to understand the cultural shortcomings of our collaborative online international learning (COIL) course. We brought together 35 Mexican and US students in a virtual exchange and instructed them to create a bilateral migration agreement in one semester without our assistance or interference. The ambiguity of the assignment, and the students' autonomy in completing the task, required them to figure out how to collaborate across the political, cultural and linguistic divides. In preparation for this course, we studied much of the literature on how to build a COIL course, but we did not understand the importance of decolonizing our intercultural project. In our assessment of the course, we discovered the relevance of Paz's analysis of Mexican and US cultures and of Mexican-US relations. His insights explain why power imbalances emerged and how they obstructed the intercultural communication that we had hoped to achieve in our COIL course.

Keywords: COIL, online learning, decolonization, intercultural communication, Octavio Paz

Resumen

Octavio Paz nos ayudó a comprender las carencias culturales de nuestro curso de aprendizaje internacional colaborativo en línea (COIL). Reunimos a 35 estudiantes mexicanos y estadounidenses en un intercambio virtual y les encargamos que crearan un acuerdo bilateral de migración en un semestre sin nuestra ayuda ni interferencia. La ambigüedad de la tarea y la autonomía de los estudiantes para llevarla a cabo les obligó a descubrir cómo colaborar por encima de las diferencias políticas, culturales y lingüísticas. En la preparación de este curso estudiamos gran parte de la literatura sobre cómo construir un curso COIL, pero no comprendimos la importancia de descolonizar nuestro proyecto intercultural. En nuestra evaluación del curso descubrimos la relevancia del análisis de Paz de las culturas mexicana y estadounidense y de las relaciones entre México y Estados Unidos.

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Sus ideas explican por qué surgieron los desequilibrios de poder y cómo obstruyeron la comunicación intercultural que esperábamos lograr en nuestro curso COIL.

Palabras clave: COIL, aprendizaje en línea, descolonización, comunicación intercultural, Octavio Paz

Introduction

Collaborative online international learning (COIL) has emerged as a popular way for students to engage in intercultural learning. We learned about COIL when the pandemic shut down study abroad, and the international education administrators at our respective institutions pushed virtual exchanges as a way to give our students international interactions. We decided to create a semester-long COIL course entitled "Migration" that brought together students from our home institutions: the Legal Research Institute of the Autonomous University of Chiapas (UNACH) in Mexico and Juniata College in the USA. Our aim was to replicate some of the freedom, excitement and stress of a study abroad experience. We designed a course that required our students to work across a language barrier with peers in another country and to navigate their way collectively through an ambiguous situation to complete an assigned task.

Jon Rubin coined the term COIL in 2006. In his comprehensive, co-edited book on COIL, he reports that in 2018 less than 30 institutions of higher education devoted significant resources to COIL, but the COVID epidemic transformed COIL into a mainstream part of higher education so much so that most institutions could not manage the increased demand for COIL courses. According to Rubin:

> To Launch a COIL course, the instructor of a class at a higher education institution in one country links online with a professor and his or her class in another region or country. Together, their students engage and develop joint projects, usually over a continuous 5- to 8-week period. Only rarely are completely new courses created at either of the partnering institutions, because getting approval for new courses can take many months or even years and would likely delay the start of the COIL projects. (Rubin, 2022, p. 6).

Our COIL course did not follow Rubin's outline primarily because we had no difficulty in getting approval for the new course and because we wanted to devote the entire semester, not just several weeks, to the COIL project.

The students reported that our COIL course provided an intensive learning experience that strengthened their intercultural communication skills and that helped them to manage the stress of coping with ambiguity. Unfortunately, our assessment revealed that our students did not achieve two desired learning outcomes: 1) the ability to view the world and one's and others' place in it from multiple perspectives; 2) the ability to critique one's own cultural values and biases by comparing and contrasting them with those of other cultures (X College

Global, 2009). We discovered that certain cultural factors had negatively impacted the learning process. Gender was one of the factors in which we saw problematic behaviors and differences in attitudes between students of the two countries, with some female students reporting being sidelined or ignored during crucial activities. Other factors we observed were related to the students' interpretation of the goal of the assigned project. Some saw the activities as primarily competitive and behaved accordingly, trying to "win" a scenario in which we expected collaboration. During our attempt to make sense of these cultural factors, we learned a great deal from the work of scholars such as Kevin Anzzolin, Linda Hall, Erika Lindig Cisneros, Boaventura De Sousa Santos and Enrique Dussel. Most importantly, we discovered the relevance of Mexican poet, diplomat, essayist and Nobel laureate, Octavio Paz. Paz's collection of essays *El Laberinto de la Soledad* (1998) and other works that deal with Mexico and the United States helped us to make sense of the shortcomings in our course.

We agree with Anzzolin's assertion that 'Paz's poetic and psychoanalytic unfolding of the "Mexican character" expresses both the beauty and pain of living in a world where cultural differences exist' (2017, p. 388).

We created an impactful intercultural semester, but we never thought about the concept of decolonization as a factor in this project. We were naïve about throwing the students together, giving them a difficult task, and then stepping back to observe their interactions. In this essay, we review the structure of the course and the performance of our students, but our primary concern here is to describe our failure to decolonize this COIL course, and to explain the lessons that we learned from Octavio Paz. In troubling ways, our students' behaviors reflected Paz's view of US-Mexico relations: "The history of our relationship is the history of a mutual and stubborn deceit, usually involuntary though not always so" (1998, p. 358); whenever Mexicans and Americans attempt to collaborate, we have to do so under the heavy burden of a troubled history. It is not unexpected then to see students' and teachers' behaviors result in cultural conflict.

Literature Review

We were newcomers to COIL, but we had no trouble finding numerous resources to guide us ('Faculty Guide'; 'Resources for Developing'; Vahed & Rodriguez, 2020). Because we wanted to design our course in a way that would resemble some aspects of a study abroad program, we reviewed much of the literature on learning outcomes for experiential intercultural education (McBride 2020; Kolb 1984; "X College Global" 2009).

As we describe in the next section of this paper, our primary goal was not to deliver content to the students. Instead, our priority was to require the UNACH and Juniata College students to take ownership of the project; to struggle collectively with the ambiguity of the task, to build meaningful intercultural, interpersonal connections and then to find ways to

create a bilateral agreement on a controversial topic. We could not find any literature about a COIL course that had devoted an entire semester to a project like this. Our aim in creating this course was to break down cultural barriers and to promote intercultural communication, but it never occurred to us, until after the semester, that we needed to gain a better understanding of epistemological decolonization. We adopted Louis Botha's definition of this concept as one that "requires taking nondominant knowledges and their epistemes seriously to open up the possibility of interrogating and dismantling the hegemony of the Western knowledge tradition" (2021, p. 51). Anibal Quijano summarized one of the most important things we learned about what we had overlooked: "Epistemological decolonization, as decoloniality, is needed to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings, as the basis of another rationality which may legitimately pretend to some universality" (2007, p. 177).

Omolabake Fakunle, Chisomo Kalinga and Vicky Lewis (2022) provide a clear summary of the process of decolonizing international education. They assert that instructors must "move away from the Westernised, largely Anglo-Saxon, and predominantly English-speaking paradigm" and "acknowledge the hegemonic positioning of Western epistemologies" (2022, para. 2). Robert Aman summarizes decolonization by asking if it is possible to learn from the Other? He provides an important guide for shifting international education away from Eurocentrism and toward interculturality as an inter-epistemic project (2018).

There are some interesting studies about COIL and decolonization (Beelen et al, 2022; Wimpenny et al, 2022), and Carmen Ramírez (2020) provide important insights into the relevance of academic cultural differences in a Mexico-US COIL course, but we were surprised to find so little guidance on how to decolonize a COIL course. In particular, we could not find any studies about the relevance of decolonization to a COIL project that attempted to simulate a study abroad experience for a full semester. How do you decolonize a course in which the professors ask the participants in two countries to determine the process and the outcome?

Course Overview

The primary course designers were Alejandro Herrán at UNACH, a regional state university in Mexico, and Emil Nagengast at Juniata College, a small, liberal arts college in Pennsylvania. Herrán taught in the Politics department at Juniata College as a visiting Fulbright scholar for the spring 2021 semester. After returning to Mexico in May 2021, Herrán proposed to Nagengast that they create a COIL course that would bring together students from Juniata College and UNACH. Nagengast agreed and they chose the topic of migration as the focus of the course.

In July 2021, Juniata College approved the new course, entitled "Migration," to be offered in the Department of Politics in the fall 2021 semester. We chose intentionally this vague title because we did not want to hinder the direction that the students would take the course. For example, we considered using the title "US-Mexican Immigration," but this title would have sent the message that the course would focus on Mexican immigration into the US. We needed to let the students decide for themselves what aspects of migration they would make the focus of the course. Eighteen undergraduate students at Juniata College enrolled in this course. Most of them were political science students, but several came from other departments. Three of the Juniata students were fluent in Spanish. Three students had an intermediate level of Spanish. The remaining Juniata students had no proficiency in Spanish.

On the UNACH side, Herrán and his colleagues recruited seventeen graduate students from the Legal Research Institute[3] at UNACH to join this project as volunteers. As co-facilitators, Herrán brought in professors Alvarez, Giacomello and Flores, his colleagues at UNACH, due to their expertise in the field of migration policies. None of the UNACH students were fluent in English. Two students had advanced English skills, but the rest had no proficiency in English.

The students had one assignment in the Migration course: compose a Mexico-US Migration Agreement (MUSMA) before the end of the semester. The only rules that the professors provided were that everything in the MUSMA had to have the support of all the Juniata and UNACH students, and the students needed to provide English and Spanish versions of the MUSMA.

The Migration course at Juniata College met once every week in the evening. In week one, the Juniata and UNACH students and professors introduced themselves to each other via Zoom. In week two, the Juniata students discussed two assigned chapters about the history of US immigration policies in Michael Dear's book "Why Walls Won't Work: Repairing the US-Mexico Divide" (2015), and Nagengast gave the Juniata students a list of recommended readings about US immigration policies from think tanks in Washington, D.C. and from the Biden administration. In the same week, the Juniata students met outside of class to watch the documentary "Llévate mis amores", about a group of women feeding and helping migrants who traverse Mexico aboard dangerous freight trains (colloquially known as The Beast, "*La Bestia*").

In week three, both of the "delegations" (as we called the UNACH and Juniata student

3 The Legal Research Institute (Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas) is a graduate and postgraduate school at the Autonomous University of Chiapas. It offers degrees in law at undergraduate (Bachelors equivalent), and postgraduate level (Masters and Doctorate in Law). Complementary to teaching the Institute engages in research and one of its principal projects is the "Cátedras 232" project about migration, financed by Mexico's National Research Council, among other projects. Link to website: https://iij-x.mx/index.php/es/

groups), selected three representatives who held a three-hour Zoom session to negotiate the outline of the MUSMA. At the end of this opening meeting, which they recorded for us, the six representatives congratulated themselves on their work and reported that they were satisfied with the detailed MUSMA outline that they had produced. Unexpectedly, this agenda-setting session turned into the most controversial three hours of the course. In this meeting, the student representatives used primarily English. Of the three UNACH delegates, the two males defaulted to using English. The female UNACH representative could not function in English and was excluded from most of the conversation. The male UNACH delegates even conversed among themselves in English to the benefit of the Juniata students and to the detriment of the female UNACH delegate.

After this session, the female UNACH student representative reported through a private channel that she felt sidelined during the meeting. She could not speak English and her fellow UNACH delegates did not invite or permit her participation. When the rest of the UNACH students learned of this dynamic, they became displeased with the male representatives. They were also upset with the results of the opening negotiations. They viewed the MUSMA outline as lacking some important points that legal scholars should have demanded. For example, the UNACH students complained about the omission of human rights as a component of the MUSMA. The full UNACH delegation sent a revised MUSMA outline to the Juniata delegation. The UNACH delegation also requested that fifty percent of all future COIL communications be conducted in Spanish.

After receiving the proposed revision, the general feeling among the Juniata students was that the UNACH students had to abide by the results of the initial negotiations. They thought that the UNACH students had nobody else to blame for their shortcomings in the negotiation but themselves; still, a handful of Juniata students expressed a willingness to consider the new UNACH proposals. These dissident students were angry with the three Juniata representatives for their antagonistic approach in the opening negotiations and for disparaging the UNACH request to revise the MUSMA outline. After some intense debate among the Juniata students, the Juniata delegation agreed to accept the proposals from the UNACH students.

In week four, the UNACH and Juniata students decided who would work on each of the five MUSMA topics: border security, cross border movement, human rights, economic development in Mexico and Central America, and migrant workers. Each group consisted of an even mix of Juniata and UNACH students. Each policy group had to devise their own strategies for completing their respective sections of the MUSMA. They had to determine their own division of labor, timeline for completing tasks, method of communication, and frequency of meetings.

For the remainder of the semester the students worked only with the people within their respective topic areas. The work, experiences, and results of these five groups varied. The students expressed many frustrations about the level of engagement of students in the activities (these frustrations were targeted at classmates at their own college and at their peers at the other college), the topics they researched and negotiated, and the linguistic and technological competencies of the participants in each group.

The professors met with their respective students once per week throughout the semester for updates on the students' progress toward creating the MUSMA. The students did not record their Zoom meetings, so we had to rely on these debriefings (and on their journal submissions) to learn about what was happening in their weekly group meetings. The most common complaint from the students in the debriefing sessions was that the professors did not provide them with enough guidance. For example, many of the students wanted us to give them a lesson on how to draft an international agreement. Likewise, most of the students were frustrated that we did not set up required meeting times for each of the five topic groups. We refused to give in to their demands for more professorial intervention because we wanted to force them to solve these problems on their own.

Despite the students' discontent with the ambiguity of the task, the difficulty of working with students in another country, and the refusal of the professors to intervene in the process, the students produced an impressive bilingual document that contained interesting ideas and showed serious research and reflection. The final draft of the MUSMA was over fifty pages, consisting of an eloquent preamble and five detailed policy sections ranging from economic development to human rights (Mexico United States Migration Agreement). On the final day of the semester, the students presented the document on Zoom to a panel of ten professors and administrators from Juniata College and UNACH and then answered a long list of questions from the panel. The students expressed satisfaction with the course as a whole and with the MUSMA. Upon completing the course, many of them told us that they appreciated our decision to give them ownership of the entire negotiating process.

Problems with the Course

Gender Issues

Much has been written about Octavio Paz and his views on women. Controversy around his views is compounded by his fame. Its impact through generations of schoolchildren will be discussed later. Paz was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1990, for "impassioned writing with wide horizons, characterized by sensuous intelligence and humanistic integrity" (MLA, 2023). He was also a diplomat and wrote critically about the ruling party –the PRI– and about the political left in Mexico. He also criticized military dictatorships in Latin

America and the dictatorship in Cuba (Krauze, 1998). In 2020, Mexican anthropologist and feminist scholar Marta Lamas (2020) wrote critically about Paz's views on women and feminism. She finds that Paz, although burdened by an 'involuntary androcentrism' shows thinking that is influenced by and in line with the feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir. Her closing sentence captures the strength of Paz's thinking through history, she finds that the effectiveness of the writing in *The labyrinth of Solitude*:

> [...] fifty years later, is not derived from the validity of a cultural analysis of the Mexican reality, put together from the patriarchal definition of "the feminine" and "the masculine" within the symbolic order, but from a poetic reconstruction of ideas that articulate the configuration of what is Mexican.(2020, final para.).

It is this described strength and timelessness of Paz's insights that we find persuasive to use as a framework to discuss the results of our assessment of the course.

According to Paz:

> The ideal concept of manhood for other peoples consists in an open and aggressive disposition to combat; [Mexicans] accentuate the defensive character [...] The "macho" is a hermetic being, closed in on itself [...] Manhood is measured by invulnerability before enemy weapons or impacts from the exterior world. (1998, p. 11).

Sylvia Gonzales (1980) draws upon Paz to explain what she describes as the 'exaggerated sexism' in Mexico. Paz emphasized the alienation caused by traumatic historical events such as the Spanish conquest, the repeated frustrations of the post-revolutionary era, and US neo-colonialism. Gonzales (1980, p. 48) asserts that the Mexican "resolves his distrust, powerlessness, and insignificance through the personality of the macho."

The description of machismo by Paz, and other authors, should not be read as an indictment of men, specifically Mexican men. It is meant to be descriptive and objective. Since the writing of the Labyrinth important socioeconomic changes have influenced the culture of machismo in Mexico. Gutmann (2006) finds that, in contrast to "old timers", younger Mexican men refuse to categorize themselves as either macho or *mandilón* (a female-dominated man); but they rather prefer to think of themselves as 'neither macho nor *mandilón* (2006, p. 229). Paz's view of machismo resonates with that of Gutmann, being macho is both an ideology and the behaviors expressed by that ideology. By highlighting the prevalence of machismo in Mexican men's culture and thinking Paz, as other authors, encourages self-reflection and change.

We believe that the two UNACH male delegates in the opening, agenda-setting negotiations, while trying to show strength and to be perceived as equals by the Juniata students, defaulted into machismo. The effect of their discriminatory behavior was considerable, and we observed it in the opening negotiations, in the critical comments made by the rest of the UNACH students, and through the private complaints made by some

UNACH female delegates to their female professors. They undermined the participation of some of the female UNACH students and put much of the MUSMA negotiations under the control of the Juniata students. We conclude that the sexist behavior of the male UNACH students was an unconscious strategy to hoist themselves 'up' to the level of the Juniata students.

These two male Mexican students thought that they should comport themselves as Americans. This choice was probably unconscious and could be the result of a prompt by their teacher telling them to "not be dominated" by the Americans. They tried to show strength by speaking the language of the American students to the detriment of their female classmate. They ignored her contributions to the discussion when she offered them, and because the males defaulted to English they sidelined the female delegate. They also refused to acknowledge these behaviors when confronted in a group meeting. In an interesting showing of patriarchal influence and power dynamics, the female student recanted her complaints in the same public session. She preferred a submissive strategy of conflict avoidance than promoting further clashes with her male delegates and the whole group.

It is worth noting that most of the Juniata students who spoke out against their fellow delegates' treatment of the UNACH students were female. This female-led contingent of the Juniata delegation prevailed and they convinced the rest of their delegation to accept the UNACH request for a revised MUSMA outline and for the equal use of Spanish. Likewise, it was the female Juniata students who expressed feelings of discomfort with the way that some of the Juniata students talked about their UNACH counterparts. Our observations of the gender relations within the UNACH and Juniata College delegations support Lara-Cantu's conclusion that Mexican women are "self-sacrificing" as they have been thought to possess "dependent, submissive and passive attitudes" (1989, pp. 386-387). In their comparative study of gender relations in Mexico and the US, Schmitz and Diefenthaler (1998, p. 141) found that the masculinity scores for Mexican males were much higher than for Mexican females, whereas there was no significant difference between the scores for US males and females.

We use the concepts of intercultural communication, as developed by Hall et al, to explore the dynamics between the students. As originally developed by Edward T. Hall, the study of culture and context in communications has revealed itself as a useful framework to assess cultural learning and interactions. It is fitting that just as we discovered that most of our failings in designing and running the course were rooted in our omission to consider the richness and depth of cultural dimensions, we found that Hall (1959) described the circumstances of our failure: "Culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants" (p. 57).

It is appropriate, then, to review these concepts as they relate to the cultural difficulties that the students lived and expressed. The most basic and applicable concepts to the events we assessed are the dimensions known as *Individualism* vs *Collectivism*, Power *Distance* and *High* and *Low Context*. Neuliep (2020) provides useful simple definitions. Individualism vs Collectivism refers to how proximally people prefer to relate to each other. Individualistic cultures tend to be distant while collectivist ones tend to relate in close proximity. People in collectivist cultures tend to suppress emotional displays in order to preserve group harmony (2020, p. 471). *Power Distance* refers to how people in a culture allow or accept differences in power relationships. People from cultures with small power distances seek to reduce or minimize inequalities, while in high power distance cultures inequalities are accepted or even desired (2020, p. 471). *High* and *Low Context* refers to the degree to which people rely on physical or nonverbal forms of communication. *High Context cultures* are sensitive to nonverbal context, people from *Low Context cultures* are direct and verbal (2020, p. 472). We can already see that some of the behaviors of the students, particularly during the first negotiation, fall into some of these dimensions. We chose to focus on these three dimensions because the literature is broad, and while different dimensions developed by different authors may offer interesting insights into the cultural dynamics it is not practical for us, newcomers to the field, to try to over-extend our reach.

We understand that our assessment of gender relations within the UNACH and Juniata College delegations are controversial because of the essentialist nature of our assertions and because this was only one course with a small sample size. Nonetheless, we observed unexpected behaviors that we believe reflected important historical and cultural factors, and that often became obstacles to intercultural learning.

UNACH Colonial Mentality

Another source of tension in the course was the fact that the UNACH students felt more comfortable sharing their opinions about the negotiations privately with their professors, especially with their female professors. Many of the Juniata students were displeased when they heard about these private meetings with professors. They viewed these meetings as an indication of an unprofessional attitude, or as a weakness in the UNACH students. Trumbull and Pacheco provide useful advice on teaching culturally diverse students (2006), but their guidance did not help us to predict the power relationships that quickly emerged in our course.

In his analysis of the pedagogical value of Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Anzzolin (2017) provides more advice on how we could have anticipated the difference in views between the US and Mexico Delegations: he proposes using the concepts of *Intercultural Communications* (2017, p. 390).

First is the difference between High Context versus Low Context cultures. According to Anzzolin (2017), the US has a Low Context culture while Mexico has a High Context one. Since we did not consider this difference in how people evaluate the context of the actions of others, we failed to guide the students in understanding how their counterparts may communicate. Juniata students communicated directly and expected formal channels of communication. It is possible that the UNACH students expected more indirect communication with more formality to the proceedings. This could also be a factor in the male UNACH students' behavior in favoring English for direct communication. Related to this, Despagne and Grossie (2011) conducted critical research into the teaching of English in higher education institutions in Mexico, and some of their conclusions support the opinion that using the traditional "European" model of teaching and evaluation, like the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) without considering the students cultural heritage and localized knowledge may lead to language learning being used as a power display tool. We believe that the male students' behavior may reflect this dynamic.

When we studied the Zoom recording of the opening negotiation, we observed the female UNACH Student trying to convey her discomfort, even resorting to turning her camera off for long periods of time. It is interesting that her male UNACH colleagues did not pick up on those context cues. Regarding Power Distance, it is apparent that the joint dynamics of Power and High and Low Context dimensions help explain not only the behaviors of the UNACH students, but they also help to explain the backpedaling of the students when their private grievances were made public. The UNACH students reverted publicly to an authority-pleasing attitude when confronted with dissent from within the UNACH delegation. The best example of this was when the two male UNACH students were questioned by the UNACH professors in a public meeting about their sexist behavior in the opening negotiations. At this meeting with the professors, the full UNACH delegation came together to defend these two male students. Contrary to their previous private complaints to the professors, the UNACH students expressed no misgivings about the performance of these same students. We think this is evidence of students taking a defensive role, which seemed to operate at two levels. The higher one is submissiveness towards the professors –authority figures. The deeper level is defensiveness towards the Americans. It is worth noting that one of the legacies of colonialism in Mexico was a strong caste system that contributed to the restriction of social mobility (Nutini, 2009). The current Power Distance dimension is evidence of the lingering power of those colonial systems.

This behavior supports the idea that Mexicans, as a group, have a collective psychology that is closed and resistant to openness. It was Paz who best articulated the most famous, and probably one of the earliest, versions of this idea in his essay *Mexican Masks*: "Every opening of our being entails a surrender of our manhood" (1998, p. 10). His fundamental

claim is simple: Mexicans are a macho-centered population with a defensive stance towards others; to be open or to allow himself to be invaded are the worst acts of submission a Mexican man can commit. According to Paz, the rigid structure of tradition and protocol in Mexican society and politics is closely related to the strong, closed, macho-defensive posture that men in Mexico wield as shields. We also think that this behavior shows the difference between Individualism and Collectivism. When confronted, as a group, with the signs of internal dissent before a foreign agent, each member chose to step down and support the group. This aligns with Neuliep's assertion that group-face interests are valued above tangible goals (1998, p. 577).

Mexicans, as Paz explains, embrace tradition and excessive rigidness because these things provide security. This is an expression of High Power distance. On the other side of this idea, Paz sees women as the opposite of men, the embodiment of openness. This justifies their inferior treatment by the macho culture:

> The open one [rajado][4] is untrustworthy, a traitor or a man of suspect fidelity, who tells secrets and is incapable of facing dangers properly. Women are inferior beings because, by giving themselves up, they open. Their inferiority is constitutional, and it is found in their sex, in their "opening" [rajada], a wound that never closes. (Paz, 1998, p. 10)

Lindig Cisneros (2016) finds that the metaphors and stereotypes described by Paz have hurt Mexican culture and have contributed to the exclusion of minority groups and promotion of domination models. What should have been a critique of specific acts, ideas and expressions became a promotion tool. According to Lindig Cisneros, the international recognition of Paz as an author and Nobel laureate, compounded by the required reading of his essays in the high school curriculum, has resulted in a self-repeating stereotype that describes and prescribes how Mexicans act. Navarrete Linares (2022) coincides with Lindig Cisneros; his view is that ideologies have contributed to the exclusion of minority groups. One example he examines is the role of *mestizaje* as an ideology, which, in his view, was promoted as a 'harmonious and inevitable mix of the European and indigenous "races"', and he finds it as an "imaginary solution to an imaginary problem" (2022, p. 144).

Hall writes that:

> The Mexican fears the outside world, for each contact with it has been disastrous [...] He is frightened of the United States, of its military and economic power, but most of all of its cultural power. For this reason, the Mexican is basically isolated and emotionally approves of his isolation. (1972, p. 94).

4 The word "rajada" can have many meanings when translated. It can be a crack, breach, break, fissure and more. It conveys the opening of two sides by distance. A crack in a wall, as well as a slash in a cloth can both be described as rajadas. When used in the male form of the noun, "rajado" it is used as a pejorative way to call someone a coward. Paz's wordplay with these meanings gives the line special significance in lyrical and literal senses.

Our observations of the students' behavior during the course and the comments in their journals corroborate Hall's argument. When confronted with evidence of internal division, the UNACH students valued showing unity as a group above achieving their goals in the MUSMA. The negotiations with the Juniata students took a secondary role. They had to avoid being perceived as open or fragile by "the others". The "masks" that they wore for the Juniata students became more important than promoting bilateral interests in the MUSMA, in contrast to the transparent and assertive behavior of the Juniata students. This, again, is evidence of the Individualism versus Collectivism dimension at work. The united front that the group presented was more important for the UNACH students than representing Mexican interests in the negotiations.

Juniata Colonial Mentality

Paz observed the influence of history on the Mexican and United States identities: "If the different attitudes of Hispanic Catholicism and English Protestantism could be summed up in two words, I would say that the Spanish attitude is inclusive and the English exclusive" (1986, p. 406). During the opening negotiations, the Juniata students applied an exclusionary strategy, focusing on the topics that mattered the most to domestic US interests. They came out of the agenda-setting negotiation feeling pleased with their success in getting everything they wanted. The creation of the MUSMA outline was a battle to be won, which meant imposing 'US interests' on their Mexican counterparts.

Paz faulted US foreign policy for being self-centered: "[The] principal defect [of United States foreign policy] [...] is attributable not to the failings of American leaders, which are many, but to its being a policy more sensitive to domestic reactions than to foreign ones" (1986, p. 88). Instead of opening to the world to understand, collaborate and compromise in the pursuit of common goals, US foreign policy is often dictated by the impact it will have on specific groups inside the country (McCormick, 2012). Most of the Juniata students viewed the UNACH students as opponents, rather than as partners in an international negotiation with common interests.

In their journals, some Juniata students expressed anger, frustration, and even shame regarding the confrontational way that the Juniata delegation treated the UNACH students. One example from a participant's journal:

> It did concern me that the UNACH students weren't able to speak their minds on the treaty topics and had to go to their professor instead. If they didn't feel comfortable bringing their opinions up at the previous student meeting, will they be more open in the treaty topic group discussions?

This statement connects with a comment from one of the UNACH students:

> The interaction and forms of communication have been the main topic of debate, since assuming that the negotiations should take place in English generated a general reflection by part of our group about how Juniata's students perceive us, not only from the perspective of students but as a country or party to the treaty.

There were other expressions of frustration from some of the Juniata students about how their classmates treated the UNACH students. For example, "We need to stop calling the UNACH students 'the Mexicans.' Makes them sound like they're not people. I don't like it. They are not otherworldly creatures who have different brains." But there weren't any misgivings stated expressly about the differences in dimensions of intercultural communication or the zero-sum attitude that emerged in the negotiations.

In general, the Juniata delegation showed an exclusionary strategy, grounded in the traditional hegemonic US worldview. This view of power as a weapon to be wielded over others is the greatest mark of colonial thinking exhibited by the Juniata students. From this exclusionary perspective, the goal of the MUSMA was to impose US interests, with little regard for Mexican interests. This characteristically limited view of foreign policy hides a manipulative agenda, as Paz discussed in his essays. In this sense, it could be said that the Juniata students also chose power as a tool to help them to separate the moral consequences of their actions from the results. Thinking of themselves as "protectors of domestic interests" allowed most of the Juniata students not to feel empathy for the UNACH delegation. The dissenting students within the Juniata delegation reflected a more open view, willing to consider the perspective of others and their needs. The UNACH students, who have training in international human rights, view power as a duty for compassionate negotiation, one in which compromise is not weakness, but a necessary part of a mutually beneficial collaboration. As noted in the gender section, it is interesting that within the Juniata delegation the inclusive sentiment was voiced primarily by female students.

We believe that Brazilian scholar Boaventura de Sousa described these default mentalities when he wrote about the conflict of epistemologies. De Sousa (2015) postulates that traditional Western epistemology has historically conflicted and eliminated the local and traditional ways of knowledge. He proposes reasserting the local and traditional epistemologies to produce what he calls "southern epistemologies" to counteract the combative, self-centered assumptions of Western thought. This coincides with Enrique Dussel's philosophy of liberation, a philosophical movement that sprung up in Argentina in the second half of the twentieth century in search of a framework that allowed overcoming the legacy of colonialism and philosophy. In Dussel's words (1985), the departure point of the philosophy of liberation "is an

ethico-political option in favor of the oppressed of the periphery: respect for the exteriority of the other; geopolitically and socially speaking, listening to the word of the other" (1985, p. 175).

Course Design Problems

The students were not the only ones to default to colonial thinking in this project. We professors also fell on traditional views of the relationship between power, knowledge, and collaboration. After the semester, we recognized that the scenario chosen for the course, and our decision to give the students full autonomy over the negotiations and the outcomes, laid the groundwork for cultural conflict.

In the first week of the course, in an effort to add authenticity to the COIL experience, Prof. Nagengast instructed the Juniata students to behave as a real-world delegation representing the US government. Some of the Juniata students reported that this guidance had instigated them to "advance American interests," as opposed to seeking to learn from their Mexican counterparts. This confrontational, zero-sum attitude reflected an important aspect of US identity, that of self-centeredness, especially regarding the international perspective. Paz described this as three separate traits that Americans share intuitively: "Their reluctance to confront the outside world; their inability to understand it; and their lack of skill in manipulating it" (1986, p. 86). This is, again, evidence of the individualistic nature of the culture in the United States.

The UNACH professors gave no specific "role-playing" instructions to their students. The UNACH students expected an academic-type exchange, where collegiality and partnership would be more important than 'winning' any negotiations. Nonetheless, the UNACH professors also showed the influences of colonial legacy frameworks. For example, before the course began Prof. Herrán told the UNACH students that he expected them not to be intimidated by the overconfident Americans. He primed them to behave like mentors, because they were more knowledgeable of international law and migration. Rather than being combative with the younger Juniata students, Herrán suggested, the UNACH students should be supportive and patient. As facilitators and teachers, we expected students to benefit from the struggle with ambiguity; now we can see that the lack of clear expectations and instructions can create obstacles to intercultural communication.

The Benefits of Communication

The evidence of colonial thinking decreased as the five smaller policy groups engaged in their activities. Some groups embraced technology to assist in communications, especially for translation, through apps like Slatch or Google Translate, but in all of the groups, we saw evidence of students realizing that effective communication was necessary for them to

complete their sections of the MUSMA. Two quotes from the journals show the importance that students placed on effective communication: "Since we have few verbal communications, our communications tend to be more implicit. I think this is one of the main reasons for frustrations to occur between us", and "The content of our conversation is most important, not the means through which it is communicated." We discovered a relationship between the amount of communication between students within each of the five policy groups and each group's level of satisfaction with the final version of the MUSMA.

Although students expressed frustrations in their journals at every stage of the course, the nature of the frustrations changed as the groups advanced in their activities. In the beginning, and directly after the agenda-setting negotiation, they were frustrated mainly with "the other side's" conduct and intentions. As the students interacted more directly during the group work stage, they described the expected frustrations related to collaborative work: not enough engagement from some members of the group, the difficulty in organizing synchronous work sessions, and problems with communication. In the end, however, many of them expressed personal gratitude and admiration for their group members, from both countries. As we moved through the semester, almost all of the students decreased their expressions of frustration. We believe that this was the result of improvements in the effectiveness of communication within their policy groups.

Lessons Learned

The literature regarding the decolonization of the curriculum, and social research in general, states that researchers must be aware of and vigilant to avoid —or at least to identify— cultural obstacles. We agree with Anzzolin that "rather than building walls between teachers, students, and cultures, Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad* continues to challenge us, over seventy years after its publication, to cross pedagogical, scholarly, and especially, political and cultural borders" (Anzzolin, 2017, p. 395). We set out to create an exciting international experience for our students and we plowed ahead, without questioning the consequences of the structure of our course. As a result, we produced a scenario that fostered an adversarial relationship and then exposed the real-life power imbalance of US-Mexico relations. COIL course designers need to understand how different epistemologies will affect a COIL project, especially regarding learning outcomes and cultural learning.

Course facilitators must study the history of the country and region in order to predict or at least to recognize colonial-inspired behaviors of the students and teachers. Paz helped us to understand what happened in our course, but we should have been aware of these situations before the semester began. We needed to educate ourselves about certain behaviors that are predicted by colonial thinking. This would

have prepared us to understand how they express themselves, how prevalent they are in the student population, and how to work through them with the students. These skills would have greatly enhanced the intercultural learning in our course. The course designers must embrace the cultural history of their respective countries and consider what behaviors are manifestations of colonial influences. For example, we could have anticipated that a three-representative group of Mexicans composed of two males and one female, conducting high-stress negotiations with foreign "adversaries", might have led to the expression of machismo and discrimination against the female student. We could have discussed the scenario with the students beforehand and created controls, such as assuring that each participant had the chance to voice ideas and objections; make the students aware that their cultural and historical biases may express themselves as conflict behavior, and not treating these biases as personal flaws. Instead, embrace them as features of the course.

Students must understand that cultural learning and collaboration often occur through conflict and discomfort. Students must not be shamed for having or expressing colonial thinking. The role of the facilitators is to educate the students about how everybody is subject to the influences of their culture and history. For example, if we had explained to the Juniata students that students in Mexico have a more authority-oriented view, then the former would not have felt betrayed when the latter resorted to 'back channels' to seek help from their teachers. Due to our failure to consider this specific cultural characteristic, the incident resulted in unnecessary tension and a missed learning opportunity for the students.

Conclusion

This COIL project taught us that in an era of jingoistic politics, Octavio Paz's writings are still a valuable contribution to multicultural classrooms. Reading Paz as a guide for understanding intercultural relations and for promoting intercultural learning imposes a powerful demand on us as teachers and facilitators. To achieve meaningful learning we have to guide students in the difficult tasks of self-reflection so that they —and we— can be aware of the masks we wear. Only by staring at the mirror of intercultural communication can we hope to discard the masks that protect us, and thereby expose ourselves to real acceptance and learning. Our COIL course showed us that the colonial legacy materializes through orthodoxies in thought and behavior. These forces are strong and resist interventions, but Paz himself suggests how to combat them: "The only effective arm against orthodoxies is criticism, and in order to defend ourselves against the voices of intolerance and fanaticism our only recourse is the exercise of the opposing virtues: tolerance and freedom of spirit" (1980, pp. 414-415).❧

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