

Exploring third spaces during pre-service teacher online intercultural conversations

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Abstract

We examined intercultural conversations in English between South African and Dutch pre-service teachers during a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project. Unlike traditional COIL research, which emphasizes good practices and professional development, our approach explored the significance of everyday conversations in finding common ground. Through video analysis, we explored instances when common ground fostered a third space—a hybrid, in-between space—with the potential to promote equity and inclusivity. Results highlight how intercultural, professional, and personal conversations created temporary moments of third space. The role of “connection” in a COIL project shows how specific snapshots of intercultural communication and personal and normative conversations give alternative insights into pre-service teacher professional development. These dynamics suggest the importance of a more humanistic approach through descriptions of small, everyday conversational snapshots. Results in this study confirm that a North-South COIL project using English as a lingua franca is an effective way to promote inclusion and mutual understanding.

KEYWORDS

challenged-based learning, COIL, pre-service teachers' professional development, third space, translanguaging

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and other types of virtual exchange projects have taken off in teacher-training programs in recent years. COIL is an example of internationalization at home (IaH), which refers to “the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments” (Beelen & Jones, 2015, p. 69). IaH is considered to be a more inclusive, sustainable way of internationalizing education compared to international stay-abroad programs. IaH advocates argue that focusing on the global is a restrictive approach that excludes most students for whom geographic mobility is limited at best (Almeida et al., 2019). Various studies have shown that there is an increasing demand for diversifying and internationalizing pre-service teacher education programs in an inclusive way (e.g., Gay, 2018; Howe & Xu, 2013; Merryfield, 2000). There are several drivers for this demand including educational, political, and socioeconomic. The European Union has been promoting intercultural competencies and citizenship education for several decades to shape a common sense of European identity (cf. Huber, 2012). In South Africa, following the Apartheid regime, the government also began to promote these competencies to begin building a new nation-state (cf. Naicker et al., 2022). A current driver is the global refugee crisis, which has had a high impact on student diversity in classrooms across the world. Nevertheless, teachers often struggle with culturally responsive teaching pedagogies in increasingly diverse classrooms (Gay, 2018).

COIL has gained significant attention in recent years as a promising approach for global, inclusive education. Outcomes from specific studies on teacher training programs and virtual exchanges, for example, the large-scale study EVALUATE (The EVALUATE Group, 2019), showed a growth in the acquisition of intercultural, digital, and foreign language skills, which encouraged teachers' interest in technological innovations and international collaboration in classrooms. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, educators from higher to primary education had to switch instantly from in-person education to online, which further accelerated online education including COIL projects. COIL is part of a broader scope of “virtual exchange” and originates from the State University of New York Center for COIL since 2006 (Rubin & Guth, 2015; SUNY COIL Center, 2024). COIL is viewed as an equalizing pedagogy because it seeks to establish hybrid spaces of co-creation of knowledge through intercultural dialogue (Almeida et al., 2019; Rapanta & Trovao, 2021).

COIL has the potential to democratize access to global education but also has liabilities. It can address inequalities and language barriers but must ensure equitable participation so that collaboration and communication take place on an equal footing. The key examples are COIL projects between partners from the North and South (cf. Wimpenny et al., 2022). A COIL project runs the risk of reinforcing dominant power structures within the internationalization process. This can happen when one partner's cultural perspectives and knowledge become dominant over those of another partner(s) (Howe & Xu, 2013). This dichotomy has been described as a longstanding pattern of core and periphery reinforcing power structures (Huang, 2018). Another potential risk is that while a COIL project can be a powerful means for preparing future teachers to navigate the complexities of intercultural learning, it can also result in binary views where participants stick to their beliefs and take no action toward exchange. Binary views can hamper a fruitful project or group process resulting in one-way transactions (Ryan, 2013). This raises the question of how can COIL projects be inclusive learning environments that democratize and build bridges, while educators and pre-service teachers manage their obvious sociocultural and linguistic differences (Howitt, 2019).

The aim of this study was to describe multilingual pre-service teachers' everyday conversations during a North-South COIL project while they tried to find common ground. Based on video and discourse analysis of online pre-teacher meetings, we describe the pre-service teachers' sociocultural and linguistic interactions while designing a citizenship educational approach. Through ethnographic snapshots (Demetriou, 2017), this study provides educators with insights into actual examples of intercultural communication during live, virtual interactions in a COIL project.

2 | NORTH-SOUTH COIL project

2.1 | Contextualizing the COIL project

This study describes the first cohort of an ongoing COIL project begun in 2022 between two teacher-training programs, one in the North (The Netherlands) and one in the South (South Africa). The project's objectives focused on the development of intercultural competencies and communication skills while designing (global) citizenship curriculum prototypes. The pre-service teachers used a challenged-based learning (CBL) approach. CBL is a multidisciplinary, pedagogical approach with an emphasis on authentic, experiential learning that encourages participants to actively work on real-world problems (Gallagher & Savage, 2023). The CBL method is open structured and emphasizes collaboration and co-creation (Leijon et al., 2022).

The COIL project used a lingua franca approach. Participants from both pre-service teacher-training programs had diverse ethnic, national, and linguistic backgrounds and most were non-native English speakers. The Dutch pre-service teacher-training program prepares students for jobs in bilingual and International Baccalaureate education. The participants from the Dutch program ($N = 13$) included multiple nationalities: Dutch, Spanish, British, French, and American. Participants' native languages were Dutch ($N = 9$), English ($N = 2$), Spanish ($N = 1$), and French ($N = 1$). A few of the Dutch participants were expatriates ($N = 2$), and English was their first language. The pre-service teacher-trainees from The Netherlands were educated in three subject areas: languages ($N = 5$), science ($N = 2$), and humanities ($N = 6$).

The South African pre-service teacher participants ($N = 17$) also had significant cultural and linguistic diversity. Native languages were English ($N = 6$), Sepedi ($N = 7$), Zulu ($N = 1$), and Afrikaans ($N = 3$). They were all prospective Life Orientation teachers. Life Orientation is a subject that aims to foster learners' personal development and help them make informed life decisions including health, environment, subject choices, further studies, and careers.

2.2 | COIL as a hybrid space to cross boundaries

Pre-service teacher participants worked in professional learning communities (PLCs) throughout the COIL project. PLCs are communities of practice wherein participants of various nationalities or cultural backgrounds voluntarily collaborate and share values and norms (Schaap & De Bruijn, 2018). Working in an intercultural PLC promotes collaborative skills and flourishes when participants find common ground through co-creation. The structure of a COIL project shapes possibilities for a hybrid space, thus facilitating an intercultural and interdisciplinary learning process (Jorgensen et al., 2022). Bhabha (1988) introduced the concept of a third space as a hybrid or in-between space. A third space is a space that potentially transfers and promotes equity and inclusivity, and where cultures meet on an equal basis and there is room for both dominant and marginalized groups (Jorgensen et al., 2022; Whitchurch, 2013). Maine and Vrikki (2021) have described how such encounters and dialogues can lead to cultural literacy, wherein culture is a fluid and dynamic co-construction. A COIL project can also become a social space where personal interests and life experiences are discussed or personal values and beliefs are shared (Jorgensen et al., 2022).

A COIL project with English as lingua franca (ELF) can trigger several language dynamics, for example, cross-cultural or interdisciplinary comparisons. The COIL project also had the potential to work as a translanguaging space, wherein national, ideological, linguistic, or disciplinary boundaries are crossed through brokering and negotiation during social interactions by using multilingual resources (Wei, 2018). The theory of boundary crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) interprets such instances when people move between metaphorical intercultural, linguistic, or other boundaries as moments that trigger learning mechanisms. In this theory, a boundary is an experience of (dis)continuity wherein people experience challenges or problems that hamper collaboration, communication, or other transfers between alternative (intercultural) practices in the social space (Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016). When people experience

discontinuity, they try to (re)position themselves between the (un)known and (un)familiar. This can also be described as boundary crossing: moving from discontinuity to continuity, a state where one is comfortable again and understands what is going on (Tsui & Law, 2007).

Language in a multilingual COIL project can be one of the important common denominators to create continuity. García et al. (2017) describe the concept of the “translanguaging corriente” [current] wherein multilingual individuals fluidly maneuver linguistically and culturally to create new forms of communication. García and Otheguy (2020, p. 26) emphasize how non-linguistic “multimodal resources...[of] speaker communicative repertoire,” such as “gestures, gazes, posture, visual cues, and even human-technology interactions” should not be ignored in the analysis of hybrid spaces. Ryan (2013) emphasizes how boundary crossing in a COIL project is also an example of transculturalism, when intercultural encounters and communication include reciprocity and lead to combined or even new cultural features. Li Wei (2018) proposes that experiences of transculturalism can include acts of translanguaging that might lead to a hybrid or third space.

2.3 | Intercultural conversations during a COIL project

In this study, we used an inductive, ethnographic approach to describe and analyze pre-service teachers’ intercultural conversations during a COIL project. We did not view intercultural communications as a linear or circular process, as, for example, Dearsdorff (2009) proposes, but rather as an unpredictable, arbitrary process. The Dutch pedagogue Gert Biesta (2023) argues that traditional pedagogies for intercultural communication have put an emphasis on effective communication strategies and other preparations for future intercultural encounters. Biesta describes this approach of intercultural communication and competencies as a pedagogy of empowerment or a type of pedagogy that creates a symbolic harness between what is often described as meeting the “self” and “the other” (e.g., Byram, 1997; Dearsdorff, 2009). Biesta (2023) favors a pedagogy of disarmament—an open, two-sided encounter with less emphasis on an ideal intercultural interaction. Disarmament acknowledges the complexity and messiness of the world around us, in which intercultural communication is not always effective and appropriate. A pedagogy of disarmament places a strong emphasis on the encounter itself, which is unique, bound by time and spatiality, and should provide enough freedom for pre-service teachers to act according to their personal beliefs. Biesta (2023) states that intercultural encounters can thus become fruitful moments that can affect pre-service teachers’ personal development or growth.

We used a similar open and ethnographic approach to unravel examples of this pedagogy of disarmament in our COIL project by focusing on the everyday recorded video conversations during PLC meetings. Pink (2007) defines the term “ethnographic video” as constructed video footage from which knowledge is produced in conversation and negotiation between informants and researchers. A video is seen as “ethnographic” when its viewers judge that it represents information of ethnographic interest (Pink, 2007). Derry et al. (2010) describe video recordings as technologies that provide researchers with powerful microscopes that greatly increase interactional detail. A descriptive, snapshot case study design will be used to highlight important instances during the participants’ conversations (Demetriou, 2017).

Verbatim analysis was used to analyze generated qualitative data: video recordings of PLC meetings and transcripts (Schiffrin et al., 2001). In the first round, we (the two researchers) watched the videos several times, analyzed transcripts through close reading (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 82–84), and compared interpretations. In the second round, we used NVivo for open coding of the transcripts (Boeije, 2010; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). A cross-case analysis (Merriam, 1998) in NVIVO compared similar and distinct discussions within the various PLCs. From this analysis, we moved to the selective coding phase, which gave insights into how the groups discussed sociocultural differences, teaching, and citizenship education or the CBL design process. Examples of provisional codes were “we statements,” “cross-cultural comparison,” or “being a teacher.” In this stage, we began to understand the dynamics between the individual and the group (PLC) and focused on what became the three main themes: intercultural, professional, and personal conversations.

In the final part of our analysis, we used our theoretical framework of boundary crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) to examine examples of (dis)continuity in the findings. The data sources and NVivo analysis were studied again through close reading (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 82–84). We rewatched the videos because discontinuities in communication, such as pauses, body language, and laughter, were more explicit in these data. In this final round, the two researchers again compared and discussed their findings.

3 | RESULTS

The aim of this study was to explore multilingual pre-service teachers' everyday conversations during a North-South COIL project using ELF and describe how they try to find common ground. We described and analyzed instances where common ground fostered a joint, third space: an intermediary zone facilitating common ground and connection (Bhabha, 1988; Jorgensen et al, 2022). Results highlight how three dimensions shaped the conversations of the PLCs and established a third space through three types of connections: (1) intercultural, (2) professional, and (3) personal. Outcomes in this study show how these connections shaped moments of a third space wherein the participants' differences in language, culture, age groups, disciplinary backgrounds, or North and South origins temporarily faded away. In those moments, within conversations, the pre-service teachers found a state of continuity and a sense of belonging (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011).

3.1 | Connecting during intercultural conversations

English was a second language for most South African and Dutch pre-service teachers. This led to unique conversations featuring intriguing instances of (a) translanguaging, (b) moments of uncertainty or ambiguity, (c) reflective pauses, or (d) encouragement, all of which fostered connections. In general, instances of translanguaging helped to continue the pre-service teachers' discussions, especially enhancing the interpersonal dynamics within the group (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020). The integration of native language words, metaphors, narratives, or examples seemed to promote further connection, spark curiosity, and foster stronger rapport among the pre-service teachers.

3.1.1 | Connecting through translanguaging

Translanguaging means that the listener or reader receives information through the medium of one language and makes meaning of and applies it through the medium of another language(s). Otheguy et al. (2015) use the following definition of translanguaging: "the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages" (p. 283). Translanguaging is a conceptual lens that helps us understand the complex practices of speakers who live among distinct societal and semiotic contexts while interacting with others. The theory for this behavior is based on the idea that people who can speak more than one language—rather than possessing two or more autonomous language systems—have one single, large system of language (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020). As they try to make sense of and negotiate specific communicative contexts, for example, try to find common ground, they process their interactions by drawing on particular features from their linguistic repertoire (Wei, 2018). Results of this study underpin Lewis et al.'s (2012) view on translanguaging as sociolinguistic, ecological, and situated.

Snapshot 1: Afrikaans/Dutch

García and Wei (2014, p. 21) state that translanguaging makes visible the complexity of language exchanges among people with distinct histories, and releases histories and understandings buried within fixed language identities and

constrained by nation-states. This is important in this COIL project, which included pre-service teachers whose mother tongue was Dutch or Afrikaans. Dutch and Afrikaans originate from the same West Germanic language, but in the course of history they have diverged. Afrikaans is a Dutch dialect that originates from Dutch settlers in the South African Cape region in the 17th century, absorbing other language influences over time (Gooskens, 2007). In PLCs with South African pre-service teachers whose first language was Afrikaans, we found instances of translanguaging that briefly reconnected the two languages and cultures.

In the following snapshot, we see how translanguaging created a moment of third space when a South African pre-service teacher had difficulty explaining the concept of “upbringing” during one of the conversations in the group. A Dutch student uses the word “opvoeding” to describe the concept, which is the same in Afrikaans.

SA1: Like I know a mother... And I teach my children the right stuff and their vocabulary, but your mother doesn't do the same. You understand?

D1: No, sorry, what do you mean?

SA1: Something related with the children's friends and all that. Maybe if they like...

So, I want to speak in Afrikaans. Like visit each other. Okay, here we go. Maybe if the one friend visits the other friend and the mother can notice okay, she's [that child] not getting the same upbringing as my child. What's that D 1?

D1: 'Opvoeding', I know. Like 'upbringing'?

SA1: So that's where the teacher comes in to teach them the right stuff because the parent isn't doing it. Does it make sense what I'm saying? I don't know how to explain it.

Snapshot 2: Street language

The following snapshot demonstrates how translanguaging can play a role in discussions about sensitive themes, in this case, sex and sex education. Aldemir et al. (2022) describe these moments as “difficult dialogue.” Difficult dialogues are often related to discussions about identity and culture, and are emotionally or politically charged since the content is controversial or includes ethical issues. Translanguaging helps to create a sense of familiarity and safety or prevents embarrassment. In this snapshot, a South African pre-service teacher uses the word *stoof* during the discussion in English. *Stoof* is an Afrikaans term for sex in a particular cultural context in South Africa.

SA1: *Stoof*.

D1: What language is that?

SA1: Oh sorry, it's Afrikaans. Sorry, sometimes we just switch when we can't explain something, we go to another tongue.

D1: Oh, that's good. Because then SA2 can understand, and I can understand the bits. So, then we can talk.

SA1: And is this similar to the English word?

SA2: Yes.

D2: Yeah, it doesn't mean the same thing, I think, but it's the same label. It is, yeah, you don't say it at all.

3.1.2 | Connecting through reflective pauses

Research has shown that in virtual exchanges there are more pauses and interruptions compared to face-to-face interactions (Bitti & Garotti, 2011). Silence is not the absence of noise, but part of communication, and is often as important as speech (Jaworski, 2005; Verouden et al., 2018). Silences are also relevant signals within intercultural communication. Akiyama (2017) defines silences as contextualization cues that people use to indicate what they mean. In this case, silence is paralinguistic tempo, pausing, or hesitation. Silence can also be viewed as embedded in the interaction between people with various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Silence and words often contribute equally to

a conversation (Hoey, 2020). In her study on multicultural groups working in an online setting, Zhang (2023) highlights an instance when one of the participants consciously used silences to create entry spaces, or middle ground, for other participants. In our study, we found that silences were used as reflective pauses to promote group work or as an interactional strategy to be constructive in the conversations, for example, to be polite or create harmony (e.g., Zhang, 2023). The silences were signs of trust and promoted an implicit connection among the group members. We did not find examples of silences due to differences in language proficiency.

Snapshot: Silences

Pre-service teachers in this snapshot use silences while deliberating and formulating their essential questions for CBL, thus clearly opening spaces for others.

D1: How can we frame this question a bit more scientifically?

[8-s silence]

SA1: I'm thinking, but I can't think of any way. Because obviously, we know how to answer that question because we know which direction we are going in with vocabulary now. But if you are going to ask someone else that question, they are going to go their own way. So, I understand that you need to specify it more, maybe.

(...)

D1: Mmm, let me think...

[All group members are visible on the video recording, and they appear to all be contemplating the question at hand]

[12 second silence]

D1: Mmmm, oh, I know, maybe, it's a different question but it is going in the right direction, I think. How do children talk about sex without education...no...no that's not good either...

[6 second silence]

SA2: You can maybe bring it in with like, how do they talk... I don't know how to say it correctly... but

[D1 interrupts SA2]

D1: Sorry

SA1: No, finish yours first before you forget it

[students all seem to smile at this comment]

3.1.3 | Connecting through expressions of uncertainty and ambivalence

There were instances when the pre-service teachers openly expressed their lack of certainty or acknowledged their state of "not knowing." Those instances of uncertainty did not seem to include anxiety toward "the other," or ethnocentrism such as in Gudykunst's (1998) Anxiety Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory. There was a safe space in the group to share moments of not knowing genuinely and openly. By being open, uncertainty and ambivalence were not creating obstacles but instead helped the group process. These were examples that represented a pedagogy of disarmament (Biesta, 2023).

Snapshot 1: Confusion

D1: Yeah sorry, I'm confused now. Yeah.

SA1: With me I think it's just... with me it doesn't really matter what culture you come from. It's basically your background or your community that you come from that changes how you see sexuality or the topic of discussing sexuality with the children.

SA2: Yes, because everyone I ask, always they come from the same community. So that's maybe why everyone has the same opinion.

D1: Okay, yeah, okay. So, it was basically the same culture?

Snapshot 2: Cross-cultural comparison

SA1: No, I can't remember but it made sense in my head when I thought about it.

D2: I do believe though that each culture does teach sexual education. Just in a specific way. I'm just not sure how.
(...)

SA1: Like maybe your parents taught you some things like sexual education. My parents taught me some things, but they left out something here and they left out something with you. Understand? So, my parents taught me some things that your parents didn't teach you and vice versa. That's also where the teacher comes in. (...)

D2: Also, they use different terminology and they beat around the bush. Like they don't actually give the whole story, they like give you the birds and the bees. Or they'll make up a story.

SA1: Like when you are little you know they talk about the bird that brings the babies to the houses. And then when you're a little bit bigger they talk about... I don't even know. Yeah... the birds and the bees or they talk about a seed that is being planted in your tummy when you are pregnant, and you believe all this stuff. Should have rather talked to you straight about it. Like use the correct terminology.
(...)

D1: And this happens in all cultures you think? That they don't use the correct terminology?

3.1.4 | Connecting through encouragement

During intercultural communication, people tend to adapt their response to reactions of others (Akiyama, 2017). For instance, lack of listener response (e.g., uh huh and hmm) may influence the way speakers talk and cause overexplaining (e.g., the tendency to explain unnecessary information). Group conversations seem to benefit greatly from encouraging statements and positive wording. These include compliments and statements students use to validate each other.

Snapshot 1: Discussing stigma

In this conversation, the students in the PLC discussed the harmful stigma attached to depression and talking about it in the classroom.

D1: We can say a lot about it, so I think it's a great topic.

SA1: Ja, cool. Then I will write it down like that (...) as how can we reduce harmful stigma about depression through a courageous classroom conversation.

D2: Great.

SA2: Thank you.

D1: Is that a good phrasing? I guess we can always tinker with it a little bit later
but (...)

SA1: I think it's actually, I think it's, it's pretty good.

SA2: Ja, I agree.

D1: I'm thinking of the potential sub-questions now. We have the one then specific to depression—what is the impact of depression on academic performance regarding the relevance?

D2: Maybe we can, about like how it affects the classroom as a whole and like participation from students' side and stuff like that.

3.2 | Connecting during professional conversations

All participants in the COIL project were pre-service teachers. Despite differences in disciplines, educational backgrounds, and ages, discussion about teaching was a key element in all conversations, almost as a safe haven. Results show how instances of professional connection did not occur when the participants discussed CBL, project requirements, or prototypes. Connections were created during moments when the participants could relate citizenship themes to their individual teaching experiences. In particular, groups working on the theme of “courageous classroom conversations” found common ground, indicating that teachers and schools in The Netherlands and South Africa are dealing with similar issues (Lozano Parra et al., 2023; Swanepoel et al., 2017). During those moments, it appears that the pre-service teachers felt connected as beginning teachers, which helped to co-construct a sense of a joint professional identity (Garcia & Wei, 2014). The examples of connection showcase conversations about (a) the entanglement of teaching and linguistics and (b) teaching sensitive topics.

3.2.1 | Connecting when teaching and linguistics are entangled

The pre-service teachers from The Netherlands were often surprised by the challenging situations their South African colleagues had to work in. Conversations included comparisons in the numbers of students in classes and cultural and linguistic diversity. In this snapshot, the South African pre-service teacher explains what it means to teach in a multilingual classroom. This appeals to the Dutch pre-service teachers who are preparing to teach in bilingual and international schools.

Snapshot 1: Teaching in a multilingual classroom

D1: Maybe perhaps the freedom or the courage to share them? Because SA1, you just said, I thought it was very interesting, that you have about 11 official languages.

SA1: Yes.

D1: So, is there sometimes also a language barrier between the students?
(...)

SA1: Our official language is English. So, if say, you have someone speaking Zulu. A Zulu learner goes to an English school, first and foremost that student or learner has to learn English. Because that is the base, or the basic language be for every single person in South Africa.

D1: Hmm.

SA1: So, if that person cannot understand English, then it would mean that they would have to get a person or a teacher or an expert teacher or an expert class for that student in order to learn in English. Which means that they would be taught in their language. But at some point, it is going to get tricky and confusing, because at the end of the day, the instructions are given in English and questions will be in English.

D1: OK.

SA1: So, it's kind of difficult to wrap our head around that because there are so many languages, and so many challenges that we have. But the best solution would be to go to the school whereby your home language, your original home language, would be the home language of that school and then English would be the best additional language.

Snapshot 2: Entanglement of culture and language in South African classrooms

D1: Yeah, I just wonder like... we were talking about difference in culture, right?

(...)

SA1: What I mean (...) you get like the black race like it's a race. There are black, whites and whatever. And then in the black community there's different cultures. Like in KwaZulu Natal there's a lot of Zulus for example. But I think in Pretoria it's pretty much mixed because everyone studies there. So, it is Xhosa, Zulu, SeTswana. I can't pronounce all the words but there's a lot of cultures. And you don't necessarily always know which culture you are like talking with.

3.2.2 | Connecting through teaching sensitive topics

In the following snapshot, students work on the theme of "courageous classroom conversation" and discuss pupils' domestic situations. Several things are happening at the same time. The pre-service teachers discuss the various roles of teachers and parents with regard to sex education. They also talk about what language they should use. Finally, the group members make cross-cultural comparisons to figure out what a teacher should do. In Dutch schools, teachers are open and liberal about discussing sex education, while in South Africa, it is more sensitive. Bridging cultural differences becomes more complex at the end of the conversation.

Snapshot: The role of parents while discussing sensitive topics in the classroom

D1: (...) that's a very good point, that there is no such thing as "adult words" in sex education because everything is adult words—we are talking about sex anyway, right?

SA1: Yes.

D1: So, are you going to be beating around the bush like you say, or are we going to say it as it is? And that's then the choice, ja. Very interesting (...) So have you thought about any strategies already that we can implement?
(...)

SA2: Parents actually ask the teachers not to discuss it [sex] with their children. And I think it is something important to discuss, because some parents don't discuss it with them. So, then how should they know what's going on? You know, and I think it's also a big topic, because in South Africa, there was this huge, huge percentage, I think it was this year or last year, I don't know SA1, you can help me if you know about it, of kids, I think from 9 to 14 years old that had babies. Do you remember?
(...)

SA2: So, I think if you just discuss this type of stuff in class (...) that can prevent a lot of pregnancies like teenage pregnancies. And then my next thing was values because you don't actually know what the parents are teaching them. So, if you discuss in class, like, drug abuse is bad, and alcohol abuse is bad, then they think but okay my parents are (...) they are doing it, like each night (...) how do you tell them, but your parents are not a very good example? So, I think that's the type of stuff that is quite hard to discuss.

3.3 | Connecting during personal conversations

The structure of the COIL project emphasized collaboration and community building. Linguistic, cultural, and (inter)disciplinary boundaries had to be crossed to form a community (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). With time, the pre-service teachers felt more at ease and conversations moved beyond the project or professional issues. The participants started off as communities of practice: groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and then learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. In communities of practice, members usually build relationships that enable them to learn from each other. They care about their standing with each other and their shared interest: teaching citizenship. Community building and shared practices also promote social learning (Wenger, 2000). Social learning opens a social space to share (a) personal stories and (b) humor.

3.3.1 | Connecting through personal stories

Relating personal experiences and stories created a strong sense of rapport among the pre-service teachers and presented an invitation to others in the group to be vulnerable and share their own experiences. These stories also uncovered deeper meaning with regard to the larger theme being discussed. The participants shared personal stories to explain the citizenship content they discussed. Sharing personal stories triggered community engagement and created trust and understanding (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2022).

Snapshot 1: Personal-moral issues

One PLC worked on the question of how teachers can facilitate their students' emotional and mental well-being through learning activities. The COIL project was organized in 2022, just after the COVID-19 pandemic. This resulted in several discussions about the participants' private well-being during those years. The personal conversations made connections between the pre-service teachers stronger and also helped the discussions about designing citizenship education. Here is a snapshot of a personal conversation about lockdown and the impact on their mental health, including some moral dilemmas.

SA1: (...) it wasn't good. But it was just an example of how online learning and learning on campus can affect you because it is two different things. So, I was not used to that, and I am a person with anxiety, so a lot of the time when I did not understand something it would stress me out until I could figure it out. So that really took a toll on me mentally and that affected my wellbeing.

(...)

D2: So, the pandemic basically hit when I was in the last semester of my bachelors, and I was teaching (...) It was fine and I survived, and then somewhere during the first year I lost focus which was exceptionally bad because I had to submit my thesis during the second semester of my masters (...) So basically, I felt very down.

The discussion switches from personal experiences to teaching experiences

D2: (...) during my previous internship I had multiple students who had suicidal thoughts and one person even attempted it. It gets real and it gets you thinking, "what can I do to get them through this day?" How can I be of any support? Because I cried every single time a student came up to me with these kinds of things, these kinds of thoughts (...) I was just a starting teacher, and there are no courses at the university that prepare you for these things.

SA1: You don't really know what to tell them and obviously anything you have in mind like "don't think like that" you know, or "you will be okay" does not really help. I even had personal friends who were suicidal, and no matter what you see, you know that it is not really going to help.

Snapshot 2: A dramatic personal experience

In another PLC, the participants talked about the theme of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and discussed whether the focus should be on quality of education or gender equality. Suddenly the conversation took a new turn.

D1: (...) and if you have any personal stories or anything you want to share with us, also feel free to do that.

SA1: (...) the reason why I chose this gender equality thing is because I think it was around 2015, if not 2016, when I experienced a woman getting shot in front of my eyes at this other mall (...) that is when I realized that in most cases, it's always, not always, but then in most cases, it will be men who always violate women. So, I might not know the reason behind everything that happened on that day. But then I just had a very disturbing day after seeing a woman getting shot in front of my eyes. I don't know if she survived or not (...) That is what quickly came to mind the moment I saw gender equality as part of the SDGs. So yeah.

D1: OK, yeah that must be very, wow, very shocking.

3.3.2 | Connecting through humor

Humor can cross linguistic and cultural boundaries (Martínez & Morales, 2014). Humor often plays around with language—verbal humor is prevalent in an online setting such as a COIL project. It boosts positive emotions and channels creativity as well as connection. Humor can lighten conversations, foster group cohesion, and promote metalinguistic connections (Dávila, 2019; Ingram, 2023). During some conversations when the pre-service teachers were having rather serious conversations about electricity load shedding, for example, some group members felt the urge to joke and laugh. Instances of humor showed a mixture of linguistic and knowledge resources (Moalla & Ben Amor, 2021). Humor cannot be forced or planned. The videos showed that humor, like personal narratives, became part of conversations when the group members felt comfortable with each other. Humor helps conversational continuity and group dynamics (Bell et al., 2013). Instances of humor seemed to increase as the project progressed and the pre-service teachers became more familiar. In general, the South African pre-service teachers seemed to be keener on making a joke than the Dutch or making the project more playful. Humor showed up in various shapes, often during sociopolitical or sociocultural conversations.

Snapshot 1: Humor about sociocultural conventions

The following snapshot demonstrates how a discussion about a potential prototype (a roleplay game) ended with jokes about cultural examples of how to greet or congratulate one another.

D1: I designed cards that have real short situations. So, for example, you are going to a birthday party and an uncle you haven't seen in a long time wants to congratulate you by shaking your hand. And then that is just basically the situation. One student is the uncle, and the other one is the one who's celebrating his birthday. And then (...) the uncle has to say: 'hey come here let me shake your hand', for instance (...) And then the student is like, well, no, but they have to do that in different words.

SA1: Maybe we can actually use the hug example? (...) And make it a bit funny [using a] sweaty uncle.

D1: Yeah.

(...)

D1: Yeah, yeah, so I made it a bit humorous as well indeed (...) I've included hugging. I've included shaking hands with a total stranger (...)

SA1: Or you can just say, uncle with clammy hands?

D1: Clammy hands, yeah, I think, like make, like make it a bit funny.

SA1: Have you heard of it, SA2? Do you know what clammy hands are?

SA2: No, it's my first time to hear this.

D1: So clammy hands, I think those other people who always kind of have wet hands. Do you know those kinds? (...) For example, with hugging (...) in the Netherlands, it's very common to give three kisses on the cheek when you meet someone or when you want to congratulate them.

SA1: I hate that.

D1: It's a horrible tradition, but yeah, we do have it.

Snapshot 2: Running gags

In another example, one of the South African pre-service teachers joined online from a farm with specific background noises, which became a running gag. Here humor becomes a form of co-construction creating further communion (Moalla & Ben Amor, 2021).

SA1: [yells] I'm sorry there was a bug on me. Typical South African life.

D1: Yeah, again living on the 10th floor very few bugs get up here either. Well, so what I have now...

SA1: I don't know if you guys can even hear chickens in the background.

SA2: I can hear them, yes.

[laughter]

(...)

SA2: It's great—it makes me feel at home.

The next meeting:

D2: How's the chicken doing?

SA1: The chicken is fine (...)

D1: You still haven't eaten, right?

SA1: What?

D1: You still have to eat lunch, right?

SA1: Yeah, no SA2 has to eat lunch. I only had.

(...)

D1: You had the rice with the chicken. That was it.

SA1: Yeah.

D1: OK.

D1: Picking those nice grains.

SA1: Grains. Grains.

Snapshot 3: Humor puts things into perspective

During several instances, humor put complex issues into perspective when the pre-service teachers were discussing CBL. The short anecdotes touch upon the imperfections in life that can be amusing and make matters less serious, which also promotes a sense of belonging (Ruch et al., 2018). This snapshot is part of a conversation when the pre-service teachers discussed teacher and student well-being. The pre-service teachers went off track in their conversation, discussing humorous situations during online education in the COVID pandemic.

D1: (...) In my case I was working from home, I was still working for a company and I found it very difficult to be motivated and do the work. When you can't have social interactions with your colleagues anymore (...) For a week it was fun (...) You could stay at home and work in your pajamas [laughs] but after...

(...) Eventually, like every single day, you think like they are only going to see my sweater, so I will stay in my pajamas, and that really does something with your mood and motivation. Eventually I started teaching in my pajamas. I just could not be bothered [everyone laughs].

4 | DISCUSSION

This study examined pre-service teachers' everyday conversations during a North-South COIL project between teacher training programs from South Africa and The Netherlands. The aim of the study was to describe how the pre-service teachers found common ground. Results of this study show how they frequently felt connected during three types of conversation fragments: intercultural, professional, and personal.

Most COIL studies describe participants' intercultural, digital, or professional development, and tend to focus on good practices of collaboration and communication (Dovrat, 2022; Naicker et al., 2022; Zak, 2021). The results of our study suggest that educators should also look at other, more implicit dimensions to fully understand pre-service teacher learning, for example, the dimension of connection. Connection formed the social glue in this study and was the bonding agent in the project. We found third spaces during instances where pre-service teachers found common

ground or felt a sense of belonging during conversations (Bhabha, 1988; Jorgensen et al., 2022). A COIL project is a volatile learning environment that generates challenging moments in which participants struggle to collaborate with strangers, work with an open-ended method such as CBL, or have to manage sociocultural differences (Hänti et al., 2021). Feelings of discontinuity through obstacles and challenges are always lurking. This study shows how connection helped the pre-service teachers to overcome certain problems during intercultural collaboration. Connection was key in helping the participants move to a state of continuity when they collaborated between intercultural, professional, or personal contexts, followed by boundary crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Instances of boundary crossing appear to be similar to moments of third space.

Finding common ground and creating a third space is hard to capture. Some studies regarding third spaces see it as a transformative space (e.g., Jorgensen et al., 2022). Results in our study do not necessarily confirm those findings. The use of video analysis in this study showed how third spaces often appeared in practical, everyday conversations, and were not abstract, conceptual, or transformative. Finding common ground or feelings of being connected was often short and temporary. Third space was created during moments when the pre-service teachers were trying to understand the other, used translanguaging, creating temporary cross-cultural bridges, feeling safe to share private stories, or feeling at ease to joke and laugh. The conversations moved beyond personal responsibilities and concerns toward finding common ground and moved the group process forward. The pre-service teachers in this COIL project also built on existing knowledge and skills, which might have made it easier to find common ground. The pre-service teachers had various cultural backgrounds and were often already culturally sensitive because they lived in a multicultural society or had traveled intensively (cf. Hackett et al., 2023). During the little everyday snapshots of thirds spaces we described, the pedagogy of disarmament was made visible (Biesta, 2023) when there was synergy, and every member of the PLC was included. Such instances of a third space can also be considered as examples of Ubuntu showcasing human interdependence and humaneness (Waghid & Smeyers, 2012).

The conversations between the pre-service teachers in our COIL project with ELF showed how intercultural communication was key to cross boundaries between cultures, languages, or disciplines (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). In a North-South COIL project, ELF potentially has a political, binary connotation. In South Africa, English represents the language of power, hierarchy, and education, while African (first) languages are often referred to as languages of the heart (Botsis & Bradbury, 2018). We did not find explicit examples of how ELF caused tensions or obstacles for South African or Dutch pre-service teachers. However, during instances when the pre-service teachers tried to navigate discussion of sensitive topics (e.g., sex education) or cultural examples that were close their identities (e.g., moral issues), they frequently used translanguaging to express themselves. This finding concurs with Palmer et al. (2014, p. 769) who found that translanguaging “opens up spaces for students to engage in sensitive and important topics.” Translanguaging can be viewed as a linguistic repertoire from which one can select resources (García & Wei, 2014). The pre-service teachers sometimes used additional resources, for example, other linguistic approaches, to co-construct common ground, including reflective pauses, or humor. Our project did not include official translanguaging, or pedagogical translanguaging. Instead, the video recordings showed how a COIL project can promote natural, spontaneous translanguaging (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020). That raises the question of whether participants and coaches in COIL projects should consider translanguaging as a bycatch or should be more aware of its importance in finding common ground, as in this project in particular, when the two languages (Dutch and Afrikaans) shared the same linguistic origin.

Translanguaging is not just about language interactions, context and space also matter (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020). The aim of the COIL project was to design citizenship education in PLCs. The pre-service teachers' everyday conversations within those communities underlined how translanguaging helped to construct identities through intercultural interactions between sociocultural practices. During several moments of translanguaging, the pre-service teachers considered professional vocabulary, for example, when they discussed approaches to sensitive themes. That highlights the pre-service teachers' reflections on their professional identities through translanguaging (Creese & Blackledge, 2015). When the pre-service teachers talked about their personal lives, another type of third space surfaced when they felt connected through shared personal stories. Here the conversations moved beyond fixed language identities or the constraints of national or professional identities (García & Wei, 2014).

Pre-service teachers' personal narratives and humor felt like a lubricant during the COIL project. Those moments of connection made the conversations and the design process lighter, thus helping the pre-service teachers to bond. Cultivating a sense of humor enhances the quality of personal or social connections in an intercultural context and promotes positive sentiments. It is basically a bonding agent (Cann et al., 2009; Jensen & Dam, 2023). The role of personal narratives was two-sided. On the one hand, it showed examples of subjectification (Biesta, 2014) when the pre-service teachers expressed personal, autonomous, and/or independent thinking. At the same time, personal stories that were rooted in someone's life or culture transcended existing boundaries within the group and created a sense of communion (e.g., Naicker et al., 2022). The personal narratives made the other participants reflect and mirror, especially when they touched upon their own life experiences (Biesta, 2014; Kelchtermans, 2009). For example, when the pre-service teachers discussed well-being during COVID-19, they related to each other's stories, which created a temporary third space. This is similar to Li Wei (2018, p. 23) saying that within a third space, individuals weave "various dimensions of their personal history, experience, environment, attitude, belief, ideology, cognitive and physical abilities, into one coordinated and meaningful performance."

This COIL project was a collaboration between two teacher training programs from the North and South. Some studies view third space as a context that promotes social justice, equalizing differences between North and South (e.g., Wimpenny et al., 2022). In this study, we did not find examples where social justice or a North-South paradigm was at stake. Instead, our results showed instances of transculturalism and mutual understanding (Ryan, 2013), when the participants used cross-cultural comparisons in the design process or used translanguaging for intercultural understanding. During the personal and professional conversations, the study found that moral and normative dimensions were key when sensitive themes were discussed, for example, sex education or racism, or when the participants discussed the complicated sociopolitical situation in South Africa. This particular outcome underlines Wimpenny et al.'s (2022) statement of how a North-South COIL project can construct a more ecologic and pluralistic way of knowing, being, relating, and expressing. Results in this study confirm that a COIL project is an effective way to promote inclusion, meaning-making, and intercultural learning (Almeida et al., 2019), which underpins Guzula et al.'s (2016) notion that individuals can harness greater capacities and abilities when they adopt a heteroglossic approach to language and meaning-making.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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