

## Digital Storytelling: Meaning-Making of Cultures and Intercultural Competence in a Collaborative Online International Learning Project

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### ABSTRACT

*The growing impact of globalization on communities underscores the importance of intercultural competence development in higher education. Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), a platform for global academic exchanges and cross-cultural engagement through digital storytelling, holds significant potential for enhancing intercultural competence. A COIL project focusing on the exploration of culture was designed and implemented in two courses, one in the United States and one in France. This case study examined how digital storytelling was used for students' meaning-making process of culture and its impact on the emergence of their intercultural competence. We used content analysis of students' digital stories about culture, their virtual conversations, and reflection papers to answer the research questions. The findings indicated that students used a variety of digital storytelling tools such as personal narratives, visual storytelling, reflective audio narration, and multimodal storytelling to represent their culture. With these tools, students demonstrated emergent outcomes of intercultural competence. This study supports the notion of creating authentic international learning communities in which students effectively use digital technologies to express and negotiate cultural representation. Implications for students, higher education professionals and administrators are offered.*

**KEYWORDS:** Digital storytelling, multimodality, intercultural competence, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), meaning-making

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The growing impact of globalization on communities underscores the importance of intercultural competence development in higher education (Niculescu & Bazgan, 2017; Papadopoulou et al., 2022; Siljamäki & Anttila, 2021; Wereszczyńska, 2018). Yet, its complex, multilayered nature has led to varied interpretations, and a consensus on its definition remains elusive (Deardorff, 2011; Heinzmann et al., 2015; Williams, 2009). Hammer et al. (2003) described intercultural competence as “the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways” (p. 422) and emphasized that its development is closely tied to an individual’s intercultural sensitivity—the capacity “to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences” (p. 422).

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Although intercultural competence and intercultural sensitivity are distinct, they are interdependent and share affective and attitudinal elements that enhance the perception, understanding, and appreciation of cultural differences (Tarchi & Surian, 2022).

Intercultural competence refers to the ability to navigate diverse cultural settings effectively, relying on intercultural sensitivity to perceive and appreciate cultural differences (Hammer et al., 2003). Deardorff (2006) argued that the challenge in defining intercultural competence lies in identifying its constituent parts. She proposed a definition that integrates the necessary attitudes, knowledge, and skills for effective intercultural communication, a definition that garnered strong academic support. Barrett (2013) expanded on this definition, describing intercultural competence as a multifaceted blend of values, attitudes, knowledge, understanding, skills, and behaviors that foster effective communication, cultural sensitivity, and meaningful relationships with diverse individuals. Therefore, higher education professionals must contribute to students' intercultural competence development.

Digital technologies offer innovative avenues for educators to foster intercultural competence in an inclusive learning environment. The development of digital technologies has helped overcome geographical barriers and foster creative exchanges on a global scale. Their widespread adoption has led to the emergence of digital storytelling as a powerful learning tool that has been increasingly embraced across diverse academic fields (Kim & Li, 2021). Creating digital stories goes beyond the boundaries of traditional narrative and multimedia production as they are purposefully crafted to evoke emotional responses and promote active engagement between the creator and the audience (Jamissen, 2008). As students engage in creating digital stories that empower them to take ownership of their narratives, they have opportunities for recognition and affirmation. These projects also foster validation and a newfound sense of agency and self-expression, which allows students to take control of their stories and confidently highlight their voices (Faulkner & Gurran, 2016).

As digital storytelling might enhance intercultural competence, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) takes this concept a step further by providing a platform for global academic exchanges and cross-cultural engagement. COIL projects enable students from different countries to work together on shared tasks. This collaborative learning environment encourages students to engage in meaningful dialogue, share their cultural narratives, and reflect on their experiences (Asojo et al., 2019). Moreover, COIL promotes dynamic learning environments through partnerships with international educators to co-design courses and deepen discipline-specific understanding (Rubin, 2017). This pedagogical approach enhances students' cross-cultural awareness across shared multicultural learning environments and facilitates cross-border collaborations (Rubin, 2016, 2017). Furthermore, COIL projects have been found to have a positive impact on student motivation (Nishio et al., 2020), cultural awareness (Marcillo-Gómez & Desilus, 2016; O'Dowd, 2020), second/foreign language acquisition (Liu, 2023; Nishio et al., 2020); socio-political exploration (O'Dowd, 2021; King de Ramírez, 2021), and support for underrepresented groups (Poe, 2022; Wimpenny et al., 2022). In addition, students gain valuable skills such as teamwork, communication, and critical thinking (Dorner, 2018; Vahed & Levine, 2019), which are essential for their future careers. As such, COIL serves as a key platform for cultivating the intercultural skills necessary for success in today's diverse educational landscape.

By integrating digital storytelling within COIL projects, educators can create rich, immersive environments that enhance intercultural competence and prepare students for their future careers. Building on this trend, we designed COIL projects with a digital storytelling component on culture in courses in the United States and France. This paper reports on a study

which examines how digital storytelling was utilized by college students in two countries to express their meaning-making process of culture in a COIL project and explores their intercultural competence as it emerged throughout the project.

## Literature Review

Digital storytelling is defined as the use of various digital tools—including audio, video, imagery, graphics, and text—to create and share narratives that convey meaning (Sage, 2018). The process usually involves crafting a personal narrative into a concise, 2–5-minute audio-visual piece, told in first person and enriched with supporting audiovisual elements, aimed at conveying a distinct message through edited vignettes that bring the story to life (Poletti, 2011). Additionally, it enables the integration of a broader array of representational resources with a wider scope than individual texts, images, or recordings, creating a space for popular culture, family narratives, and local and global spatial contexts (Pahl, 2011). The prevalent availability of computers in schools, coupled with access to affordable and intuitive multimedia editing software, has significantly contributed to the digital storytelling integration into classrooms and curricula (Kim & Li, 2021) across academic disciplines and educational levels, from early childhood to post-secondary education (Robin, 2016). This has enabled its almost seamless integration into contemporary approaches to teaching and learning (Grant & Bolin, 2016).

Each digital story component serves a specific purpose; therefore, crafting such stories inherently prompts individuals to assess the effectiveness of every element in communicating their intended message while simultaneously portraying aspects of their own identity (Ribeiro, 2016). From a constructivist perspective, the significance of digital storytelling resides in the dynamic process of building knowledge, the accompanying reflective process, and the resulting enhancement of the individual's curiosity, means of self-expression, and creative potential (Towndrow & Kogut, 2020). Notably, this approach has been considered more effective in encouraging student reflection than written accounts (Austen et al., 2021; Pahl, 2011).

Digital storytelling offers numerous advantages that significantly enhance students' educational journey and overall learning outcomes. These benefits have been demonstrated in the improvement of students' creative writing skills and general communication skills, increased retention capacity, strengthened comprehension of learning material, and enhanced motivation and engagement in addition to an improvement in critical media literacy skills (Afrilyasanti & Basthomi, 2023; Alalem, 2023; Chaisriya et al., 2023; Ergül Sönmez & Urfali Dadandi, 2023; Grant & Bolin, 2016; Harjono & Wiryotinoyo, 2021; Smeda et al., 2014). Research has also shown that digital storytelling can serve as a valuable tool for language learners to actively engage with the new language and enhance both their receptive and productive skills through authentic and meaningful practice (Lee, 2020; Rahimi & Yadollahi, 2017). Moreover, the creation of digital stories enables educators to establish a multifaceted connection across disciplines between the curriculum and the student's experiences, which helps create and maintain a holistic and inclusive learning environment that transcends disciplinary boundaries (Hernández, 2023).

Creating digital stories can encourage students to concurrently hone their multimedia skills, deepen their understanding of the subject matter, and engage in reflective self-discovery. This reflective self-discovery leads students into a deeper understanding of other cultures and their own which are essential steps toward developing intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). By focusing on their narratives, students can situate themselves within a particular social construct and interpret the world around them by themselves (Humairoh, 2023). For instance, digital stories

created by undergraduate students who had participated in a study abroad program have displayed students' enhanced reflection and connections to cultural self-awareness, alternative worldview lenses, and curiosity about other cultures (Hamilton et al., 2019). Similarly, Sepúlveda Larraguibel et al. (2022) observed that digital storytelling enabled students who studied abroad to reflect on and articulate nuanced aspects of their identity development during their traveling experience, including shifts in self-perception, self-esteem, and their envisioned ideal selves, as they engaged with a foreign cultural context.

This emerging intercultural competence is further facilitated by designing and sharing digital stories which can facilitate transformative learning and enable individuals to learn key aspects of anti-oppressive and anti-colonial practices without leaving their home community (Sunderland et al., 2020). Engaging in digital storytelling can facilitate meaningful conversations about diversity by connecting course material and teaching methods to diversity and cultural competence. Projects rooted in sociocultural exploration foster students' understanding of social issues and promote productive dialogues that enhance awareness and empathy (Grant and Bolin, 2016). Through this approach, students can critically reflect on their everyday environments, build connections, reflect on their own history, and advance personal and societal change. By creating culture-based digital storytelling projects, students delve into their own cultural identity while gaining valuable insights into the diverse ways individuals perceive the world and shape their own identities (Humairoh, 2023). All these steps take them toward the gradual development of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2011). As storytellers, students assume agency over their learning process and develop a more critical and reflective mindset that demonstrates ownership of their educational experience (Miley, 2009). This creative process empowers students to voice their experiences and viewpoints by incorporating narration and meaningful cultural artifacts that will help craft a relatable and engaging connection with the audience (Kim & Li, 2021). At the same time, digital stories help educators gain a deeper understanding of their students' experiences and perspectives, which can offer valuable insights to inform their teaching approaches and foster a more empathetic and inclusive learning environment (Kortegast & Davis, 2017; Skouge & Rao, 2009). Therefore, by implementing this approach, educators can facilitate students' various identities expression and enrichment with intercultural competence while engaging in specific learning experiences.

Despite its many benefits, digital storytelling also presents certain challenges and limitations that educators and students must navigate. One of the primary concerns is the digital divide, which refers to disparities in access to technology and digital literacy skills among students (Smeda et al., 2014). Students from underprivileged backgrounds may struggle with access to necessary devices, software, or stable internet connections, which can hinder their participation in digital storytelling projects (Kim & Li, 2021). Also, many educators lack formal training in digital literacy, making it difficult for them to effectively integrate digital storytelling into the curriculum (Tan et al., 2024). Another significant barrier is the time commitment required for both students and educators to create high-quality digital narratives. Instructors often struggle to allocate sufficient time within rigid academic schedules, as digital storytelling involves planning, content creation, and technical skill development (Beck & Neil, 2020). Similarly, Ikenga and Nnamdi (2023) noted that some educators hesitate to adopt digital storytelling due to their lack of familiarity with digital tools, which can create inconsistencies in implementation across institutions.

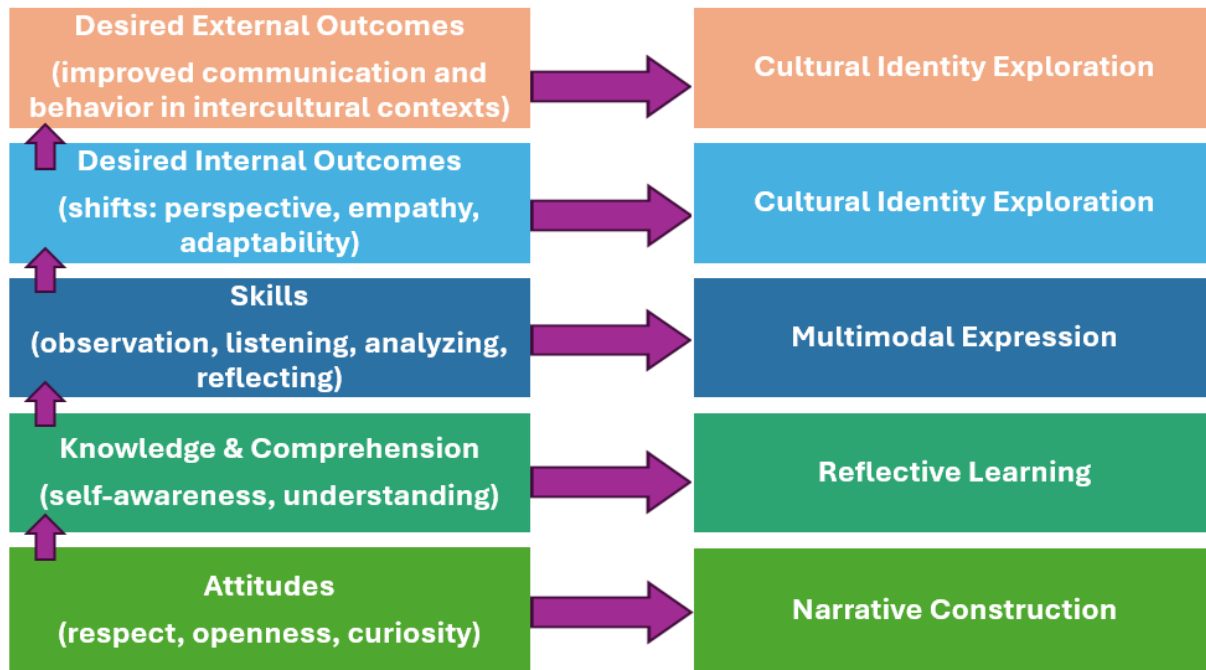
Ethical considerations also pose challenges when implementing digital storytelling. Students sometimes experience discomfort when sharing personal narratives in digital formats, as

these stories may expose them to unintended scrutiny or misinterpretation (Goldingay et al., 2018). Additionally, concerns over privacy and data security must be addressed, especially when student projects are shared online or involve sensitive topics. Assessment remains another critical issue. Tan et al. (2024) argue that traditional grading rubrics may not fully capture the creativity, intercultural insights, and narrative complexity of digital storytelling projects. This lack of standardized assessment criteria makes it difficult to evaluate student work fairly and consistently. Furthermore, ensuring the originality and authenticity of digital storytelling content can be challenging, particularly when students rely on pre-existing digital resources or external media (Grant & Bolin, 2016). To address these challenges, educators and institutions must develop comprehensive strategies that support equitable access, provide adequate training, and establish clear guidelines for ethical and effective digital storytelling practices.

To analyze the role of digital storytelling in fostering intercultural competence, this study draws on Deardorff's (2006, 2011, 2012) Intercultural Competence Model. This model outlines the process of developing intercultural competence through a sequence of attitudinal, cognitive, and behavioral components. It begins with foundational attitudes—respect, openness, and curiosity—which inform the acquisition of cultural knowledge and self-awareness. These elements, in turn, activate skills such as observation, analysis, and reflection, which lead to desired internal (shifts in perspective, empathy) and external (effective intercultural communication and behavior) outcomes. While Deardorff's model captures key aspects of intercultural learning, it does not explicitly address how digital and networked learning environments facilitate this process. Digital storytelling provides a structured yet flexible medium through which students engage in reflective, multimodal storytelling that fosters deeper intercultural understanding. By creating and sharing narratives, students contextualize their own identities and perspectives within a broader cultural framework, thus advancing their intercultural competence (Hamilton, 2017; Sepúlveda Larraguibel et al., 2022).

To illustrate the intersection of digital storytelling and intercultural competence, we developed an approach that builds on Deardorff's model, highlighting the narratives' role in enhancing students' intercultural competence (Figure 1). This approach visually represents the integration of Deardorff's model to intercultural competence with digital storytelling as a pedagogical tool for fostering intercultural competence. It highlights how digital storytelling elements align with and support the key stages of intercultural competence development to offer a structured approach to understanding how students engage in intercultural learning through digital storytelling.

*Figure 1 Intersection of digital storytelling and intercultural competence*



On the left side, Deardorff's framework to intercultural competence is depicted using a layered structure that illustrates the progressive development of intercultural competencies. At the foundational level, attitudes (respect, openness, and curiosity) establish groundwork, emphasizing the importance of engaging with diverse perspectives. Building on these attitudes, knowledge and comprehension promote cultural self-awareness and an understanding of various cultural contexts. Next, skills (observation, listening, analyzing, and reflecting) are honed through active practices that enable individuals to navigate intercultural experiences effectively. Finally, higher-level internal outcomes -such as shifts in perspective, empathy, and adaptability - culminate in external outcomes, namely the capacity to communicate and behave effectively in intercultural contexts.

On the right side, digital storytelling is presented as a complementary pedagogical tool that supports each component of intercultural competence development. Narrative construction aligns with foundational attitudes by encouraging students to articulate their experiences and engage in cultural self-exploration. Reflective learning reinforces knowledge and comprehension by prompting students to critically analyze their identities and interactions with different cultures. Multimodal expressions which include text, audio, images, and video enhances intercultural skills by allowing students to experiment with diverse forms of communication and representation. Lastly, cultural identity exploration contributes to both internal and external outcomes, fostering deeper engagement with intercultural learning and enabling students to develop global awareness and effective cross-cultural communication skills.

The arrows connecting digital storytelling elements to this layered structure illustrate how storytelling facilitates each component of intercultural competence development. As students construct and reflect on their narratives, they engage in an iterative learning process that propels them through the various layers of Deardorff's model. This integration underscores that intercultural competence is not acquired passively but is actively developed through dynamic, reflective, and multimodal storytelling practices.

This approach in Figure 1 can offer educators and researchers a conceptual tool for understanding the relationship between storytelling, reflection, and intercultural skill development. It emphasizes that narratives serve as a bridge between personal identity and global perspectives, empowering students to critically engage with their cultural experiences, expand their worldview, and cultivate the competencies necessary for meaningful intercultural interactions. Thus, integrating digital storytelling into international online learning projects can enable students to develop narrative skills while exploring cultural identities, crucial for enhancing intercultural competence (Mackey & Aird, 2021).

## Research Questions

In this case study, we aimed to explore the following research questions:

1. How do college students use digital storytelling to convey their understanding of culture and their representation of culture in a COIL project?
2. What intercultural competence emerged in students' virtual communication and reflection?

## Methodology

### Context and Participants

This study took place in two university courses: one in the United States and one in France, during the fall of 2022. The university in the United States is a mid-sized, regional comprehensive institution that offers undergraduate and graduate degrees. The course with the COIL project aimed to develop competencies for education minors to teach culturally and linguistically diverse K-12 students. The university in France offers undergraduate and graduate degrees in oriental cultures and languages. The course with the COIL project was offered for students in interdisciplinary cultural studies and addressed topics related to the relationship between culture and language, fostering essential skills for cross-national contexts.

Twenty-four students participated in the study: eight in the United States, and 16 in France. Their ages ranged from 20 to 24 years old. Two American students were bilingual; the remaining were monolingual English speakers. The students in the United States majored in different disciplines such as psychology, business, and interdisciplinary studies, but all had education as their minor. Students in France were all multilingual; seven identified as French nationals and the others were from different countries, such as Iran, China, Russia, Egypt, and India. These students majored in oriental languages and took intercultural communication courses.

Considering the shared course objectives, the instructors co-designed a COIL project titled "*Each life is a treasure box*" with the purpose of (1) raising students' awareness of their culture and cultural identity, (2) developing skills for negotiating meaning about cultural identity, (3) using multimodality tools to ensure efficient intercultural communication, and (4) reflecting on competencies in intercultural situations. The project was conducted in English, because all students in France had good English proficiency, and the students in the United States did not speak French. During the preparation stage, the course instructors had weekly online planning meetings to discuss the timeline, tasks, and potential challenges, such as language barriers,

technology issues, time zone differences, and cultural differences. We randomly created eight teams, each including one American student and two students from the university in France.

The project took place over six weeks to allow time to complete the steps involved. First, the students familiarized themselves with the project guidelines and received information about the partner university and students. During the following two weeks, each student created an individual digital story about their own culture. To portray their cultural background, they were encouraged to draw upon their personal and professional lives, as well as experiences within their families, school, workplaces, and the community where they had lived. Next, the team members shared their five-minute digital stories with each other and arranged a mutually convenient time to meet via Zoom, WhatsApp, or other media platform. After viewing one another's digital stories, they engaged in online discussions, asking questions, elaborating on specific aspects of the stories, and negotiating the meaning of culture and identity. These conversations were audio-recorded. Finally, each student wrote a reflection paper on their conceptualization of culture and the outcomes of the project, including competence development and challenges they encountered.

### **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

After the semester ended, we requested permission from students to use their COIL project for this study. In this case study (Stake, 1995), we used the following data sources (1) instructors' notes from the planning and implementation stages, (2) students' digital story submissions, (3) virtual conversation recordings, and (4) reflection papers. We removed all identifiers from the students' submissions and coded each student as US1 for Student 1 in the United States, and FR1 for Student 1 in France. Three researchers, including one research assistant who was not an instructor in the courses, analyzed the data to ensure trustworthiness (Novell et al., 2017). First, we used a data analysis spiral, which included organizing the data, taking notes on emerging ideas, classifying codes into themes, developing and assessing the interpretation of themes, and representing the themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). We used deductive coding and started with an initial set of keywords and codes for students' digital stories, such as audio narration, visual storytelling, personal anecdotes, geographic context, and multimedia presentation. To understand intercultural competence as it emerged in the recorded dialogues and reflection papers, we used codes such as, respect, openness, curiosity, understanding about culture, adaptation, flexibility, empathy, and effective communication (Deardorff, 2012). Each researcher read the data several times and independently assigned excerpts to these codes (Naeem, et al, 2023). Then, we compared our analyses and identified patterns and connections among the emerging themes (Denzin & 2005; Williams & Moser, 2019). This resulted in four major themes regarding how digital storytelling was utilized to express culture/cultural identities, and three additional themes related to emerging intercultural competence.

### **Findings**

#### **Digital Storytelling for Meaning-Making of Culture**

In this study, we aimed to explore the methods of digital storytelling that students selected to convey their understanding of culture and their representation of culture in the COIL project. To make meaning of their culture and reflect on their cultural experiences, students used various



digital storytelling techniques, such as personal narratives, visual storytelling, reflective audio narration, and multimodal storytelling.

### *Personal Narratives*

Personal narratives were a frequently used technique across the participants' projects to share specific experiences that underscored their unique cultural backgrounds. Students in the United States often centered their personal stories on family traditions and geographical transitions. For example, US1 narrated her experience of frequent relocations, which required adapting to various cultural environments. Her story focused on the contrasts between private religious and public schools, highlighting how these differing environments influenced her values and sense of identity. This narrative underscored the adaptive strategies she developed through repeated moves, which helped shape a resilient, culturally fluid sense of self. Similarly, US2 used a family recipe as the focal point of her story, integrating personal anecdotes about cooking with her mother to emphasize the cultural significance of Italian family traditions. This narrative illustrates how culinary practices are key in preserving family heritage and cohesiveness across generations. Students in France also used personal narratives to convey the influence of family and heritage. For instance, a student with Russian heritage, FR1, shared the importance of her family's tea tradition, describing how these gatherings nurtured a sense of unity and continuity. In her narrative, she highlighted how simple practices can carry deep cultural significance. Similarly, FR4 reflected on family values, friendships, and the impact of her brother's passing, emphasizing how relationships have influenced her sense of self. Her narrative illustrated the importance of family bonds in their culture as an essential element of her identity.

### *Visual Storytelling*

Visual storytelling was crucial in enriching the students' narratives. Students in the United States incorporated family photos, maps, and images of culturally significant locations to visually illustrate their backgrounds, personal journeys, or significant relationships. For instance, US8 used a timeline of photos to showcase different stages in her life, such as key moves and milestones, as well as images of her cat, which visually symbolized stability and emotional growth. This approach allowed viewers to follow her journey of personal development and adaptation, emphasizing how identity is shaped by both experiences and the bonds we form along the way. Another student, US6, used images of American holidays, including Halloween and Thanksgiving, to showcase elements of her cultural heritage. Although the student minimized the use of personal photos, the inclusion of maps, holiday icons, and images related to Southern etiquette provided a structured view of her cultural background and her experience growing up in the American South. Students in France also used visuals to convey cultural diversity. FR10, a student of Comorian and Malagasy descent, integrated flags, photos, and images to illustrate the cultural contrasts between her life in France and her parents' heritage. This visual approach enabled her to represent both French and Comorian/Malagasy influences, providing a vivid representation of her hybrid identity. Similarly, FR15 incorporated maps, photos of Algeria and Romania, and other visual aids to contextualize her family's migration and the intercultural experiences that shaped them. These visual elements emphasized her family's journey and her evolving views on respect and kindness in intercultural interactions.

### *Reflective Audio Narration*

Several participants structured their narratives, using reflective audio narration to share insights into how they navigated the complexities of living between cultures. Students in the United States, for example, often contrasted their home culture with other cultures they encountered. US7, who moved from Cuba to Spain and then to the United States used audio narration to reflect on the impact of language variations on his cultural identity. He discussed how he initially felt set apart by his accent in Spanish and lack of English proficiency but grew to view his language diversity as a point of curiosity and self-assurance. Similarly, US3 used reflective audio narration to convey his experience of adapting between Brazilian and American cultures. He discussed the challenges of moving to the United States and learning English, initially feeling isolated due to his accent and linguistic struggles. He also reflected on his perception of Brazil as a third-world country and the contrast in opportunities and lifestyle he observed in the United States, which heightened his awareness of socioeconomic differences between the two countries. His narration illustrated his journey toward embracing a bicultural identity, showing how he transformed these challenges into strengths that enhanced his adaptability. Students in France also used audio narration to explore cultural contrasts and their implications on identity. FR8 narrated a personal experience with the medical system in Egypt, describing her cultural shock and the challenges of adjusting to unfamiliar healthcare norms in that country. Her voice in the reflective audio narration conveyed her initial discomfort and eventual acceptance, providing an exploration of how this experience reshaped her cultural expectations. Another participant, FR4, reflected on the influence of family, friends, and her partner, noting that relationships shaped her perspective and her value of global citizenship. Her closing sentences emphasized her commitment to cultural openness and the role of interpersonal connections in defining her self-perception.

### *Multimodal Storytelling*

Multimodal storytelling allowed students to construct complex, layered narratives by combining text, images, audio, and occasionally video clips. Students in the United States used these multimedia elements to create interactive and dynamic stories. For example, US4 shared her experiences as a military child growing up in various places due to her family's frequent relocations. She used visual aids like maps to illustrate her family's geographical journey and photos of herself at different ages and locations to symbolize her growth and change over time. These images represented not only the physical distance she traveled but also the emotional and social adjustments required with each move. Her digital story highlighted the challenges and opportunities associated with adapting to new cultures, schools, and communities, often within a short period. She expressed that this constant change developed resilience and openness, as she learned to connect with people from diverse backgrounds while maintaining family traditions as a grounding influence. Her journey reflects a culturally fluid identity shaped by adaptability, empathy, and an appreciation for diversity. Another student, US5, utilized Prezi to create an interactive presentation about her journey toward independence by structuring her story around significant milestones from home to college. Her use of visual aids, including photos of landmarks and logos, provided a dynamic progression of her narrative, visually symbolizing her transition to independence and growth within her cultural identity. Students in France also effectively used multimodal techniques. FR13, a student of French, Senegalese, and Central African descent, combined text, photos, and visual symbols in Canva to present his exploration of his heritage. He

used images of family, friends, and landscapes to visually convey pride in his diverse cultural identity, creating a layered narrative that reflected his complex connection to multiple cultural backgrounds. Likewise, FR15 designed her narrative in a scrapbook style by combining text, maps, photos, and short clips to illustrate her family's migration history and intercultural encounters. Her multimodal storytelling approach emphasized how experiences with cultural diversity and family values shaped her perspectives on respect and kindness.

### **Intercultural Competence in the COIL Project**

Regarding the second research question the analysis of students' virtual communication and reflection papers indicated attitudes of respect, openness, and curiosity from the projects' outset. Throughout the six-week-long projects, which included digital stories, virtual communication, and reflections, students demonstrated cultural knowledge as they practiced skills such as listening, observing, analyzing, and negotiating meaning. Ultimately, their engagement with peers from another country and their self-reflection activities resulted in emerging intercultural competence outcomes (Deardorff, 2012).

#### ***“It Is Important to Be Curious”***

Most students entered this course project with enthusiasm and curiosity for participating in a self-exploration of their own culture while learning about another culture and stepping out of their comfort zones. They described this learning experience as “exhilarating,” “beneficial,” and “enlightening.” Despite not having met their international peers before the project, students expressed respect and intention to dive into this cultural discovery. One student from France noted, “It is important to be curious about another person's cultural background because it is a key to having an effective interaction with them” (FR1). Similarly, one student from the United States noticed this openness and curiosity within their team, “Even though all three of us had varying backgrounds and upbringings we all share the desire to learn more about different cultures, languages, and new experiences” (US4).

#### ***Culturally Specific Understanding and Skills***

Students recognized that this project allowed them to immerse themselves in self-reflection about their culture, which ultimately resulted in a more in-depth cultural self-awareness. Developing their digital stories and engaging in follow-up conversations with international peers drew their attention to the congruence between cultures while they also acknowledged differences. For example, one student in the United States shared, “Immigration and culture shock resonated with the experiences I had growing up as an immigrant myself” (US7). Students in both countries also gained culture-specific insights into visible and intangible cultural features as they shared information about food, holidays, religion, health practices, educational values, and language variations, as well as about architecture and geography. Some students in France felt they had more knowledge about the United States than their peers about France and other cultures, with one saying, “Due to their country [United States] being the size of a subcontinent, they're closed off from the rest of the world in terms of general knowledge” (FR8). This sentiment resonated with an American student's reflection on her awareness and knowledge about culture,

saying “This was a good reminder to me to educate myself about other cultures and remember that the United States is not the center of the world” (US8).

As students described their engagement in this COIL project, they pointed out certain skills they needed and practiced. For example, the asynchronous time for creating digital stories provided time for in-depth cognitive engagement with the topic. One student from France elaborated on these skills “I could take the time that I needed to think, prepare, create, analyze, reflect, confirm and reconfirm my work” (FR4). In addition, another student emphasized the importance of listening skills while interacting with peers across cultures, “I think the most important skill is to know how to listen. I mean truly listening, listening before speaking, listening without judging.” (FR5). Overall, students recognized that, given the cultural and linguistic differences, they utilized analytical skills to interpret culturally specific situations and made concerted efforts to understand the other person’s perspective.

### *Emergent Intercultural Competence*

Students demonstrated emerging intercultural competence that was generated and nurtured through this international collaboration project. Several students mentioned flexibility, which is essential in cross-cultural and cross-linguistic communication. Some students in the United States provided specific examples for adapting their communication, such as using fewer colloquialisms, idioms, or slang in synchronous dialogues to ensure shared meaning-making. Students also mentioned using intentional hand gestures and careful pronunciation to articulate their ideas effectively. This flexibility supported successful communication, as one student noted, “I realized that people from different cultural backgrounds can find their commonality, reach a consensus, and finally build certain connections between each other. Communication therefore plays a crucial role in this process” (FR14).

In addition, adaptability to the peers’ perspectives and frame of reference was also present in the synchronous virtual meetings and reflected upon in the final paper. Students recognized certain cultural features that were unknown until they engaged in this meaning-making process. They concluded that these direct interactions with people from different cultures led to a multidimensional interpretation of values held by others without prejudice. Empathy also arose as a significant theme in many reflections; FR14 noted, “we find some resonance in each other’s life experience. This project let me know the importance of being open-minded and empathetic in my future life”. Overall, the students progressed from a personal level of attitude to an interpersonal level of intercultural competence by applying their knowledge and skills.

### **Discussion**

In recent years, the intersection of digital storytelling and intercultural competence has garnered significant attention in educational research, particularly within the context of COIL projects. This study has contributed to the knowledge base regarding the potential of digital storytelling to foster intercultural competence in an authentic learning environment of a COIL project. The findings suggest that digital storytelling allowed students in the COIL project to express their cultural identities through a combination of personal narratives, visual aids, audio reflections, and multimodal elements, while also demonstrating intercultural competences. Participants in the United States often emphasized family traditions, regional differences, and cross-cultural adaptation, while participants in France frequently explored themes of dual heritage

and personal growth through intercultural relationships. Using different storytelling techniques, students articulated complex cultural identities, highlighting the intersection of individual experiences with broader cultural influences (Faulkner & Gurrán, 2016). Although students took part in courses in only two countries, they represented numerous cultural, linguistic and experiential heritage, adding depth and breadth to the learning experience. Working in multilingual and multicultural teams (e.g., Egyptian, Chinese, Russian, and American) required students to employ intercultural attitudes such as respect, openness, and skills, e.g., analyzing and reflecting on their own culture and their partners' (Deardorff, 2012). This rich diverse background of the participants contributed to the inclusive environment that promoted learning and collaboration (Beljanski & Bukvić, 2020; Matei, 2022;).

From the beginning of the project, participants demonstrated crucial attitudes toward intercultural engagement, such as respect, openness, and curiosity (Deardorff, 2012). This initial openness facilitated meaningful intercultural exchanges, setting a positive tone for further exploration and self-reflection. These attitudes were critical for creating an environment where students felt comfortable venturing beyond their comfort zones to explore and appreciate cultural diversity. This aligns directly with Deardorff's (2006, 2012) model, which posits that a respectful and open-minded attitude toward cultural differences is the foundational step toward intercultural competence. Deardorff's model emphasizes the importance of knowledge about one's own culture, others' cultures, and specific cultural contexts, complemented by skills such as observation, listening, and analysis. The COIL project facilitated students' in-depth exploration of their cultural identities to promote enhanced cultural self-awareness, appreciation of cultural similarities, and recognition of differences (Asojo et al., 2019). The project also offered an authentic context to clarify their understanding of their cultural identity and communicate effectively to peers from different cultural backgrounds. Through this reflective process, students navigated complex cultural dynamics, leading to possible transformative experiences (Mezirow, 1997). As they encountered life experiences such as adapting to new cultures or overcoming biases, students engaged in introspection, recognizing their growth and transformation. Consequently, their understanding of cultural identity deepened, revealing it as dynamic, constantly evolving, and adapting in response to life's experiences. Ultimately, the digital storytelling process fostered this complex meaning-making process, allowing students to articulate their cultural identities and demonstrate desired internal outcomes, such as perspective and empathy (Girmen et al., 2019; Stork et al., 2022).

Building on this transformative process regarding the demonstration of intercultural competence, the digital projects showcased the significance of personal narratives in exploring cultural identities. The use of personal narratives in the students' projects provided an intimate look at their cultural backgrounds and offered insights into the role of family traditions, geographical transitions, and individual growth in identity formation. This aligns with studies on digital storytelling, which emphasize the value of personal narratives in fostering self-reflection and cultural understanding (Cunsolo Willox et al., 2013; Gunawardena & Brown, 2021;). The narratives allowed students to explore their identities in family and tradition with curiosity and comprehend their partner's narrative with respect and openness (Deardorff, 2006), while simultaneously contextualizing the impact of broader societal factors on their identity formation (Henrickson et al., 2022; Ribeiro, 2016). In addition to personal narratives, the incorporation of visual storytelling allowed students to add depth and texture to their narratives while visually contextualizing their cultural identities. By incorporating photographs of family gatherings, significant locations, and cultural symbols, participants effectively situated their cultural

backgrounds within a visual context, conveying the complexities of their cultural heritage (Khorin & Voronova, 2021). These projects demonstrated that visual storytelling could provide a unique avenue for students to both showcase and reinforce their cultural values and experiences (Boivin, 2021).

Reflective audio narration emerged as a powerful technique for students to address cultural contrasts, particularly as they navigated different languages, values, and social expectations. Through these stories, participants highlighted how personal experiences shaped their understanding of values such as respect and empathy while emphasizing the role of others in shaping their self-concept. This reflective practice harmonizes with Deardorff's model of intercultural competence (2012), which identifies self-reflection and self-awareness as essential for developing knowledge and comprehension of cultures. Audio narrations allowed students to explore the features of diverse cultures through a multimodal storytelling approach, where audio, text, and visual cues work together to deepen reflection. This multimodal approach emphasizes that knowledge is distributed across a network of experiences and mediated by diverse forms of communication (Kim & Li, 2021; Pate, 2019; Rizvic et al., 2020). Reflective audio narration within a multimodal storytelling allowed for richer meaning-making, by enabling students to navigate, articulate, and reflect upon cultural contrasts and similarities within a globally networked environment. Multimodal storytelling facilitated a holistic representation of cultural identity, capturing the intricacies that define an individual's cultural experience (Humairoh, 2023). Using diverse design styles provided a visual timeline of personal growth, emphasizing themes like respect, kindness, and adaptability that emerged through their intercultural experiences (Deardorff, 2012). Several students used collage-style visuals or symbol-heavy presentations by integrating national flags, and cultural icons to portray a hybrid identity that connected multiple cultural backgrounds. This approach underscored how their cultural values were shaped by both their family heritage and present environment (Ribeiro, 2016).

Within the multilingual digital environment of the COIL project, where English served as a lingua franca despite being the native language of only a few students, digital storytelling facilitated students' making meaning and negotiating cultural identities. By integrating verbal communication with visual representation and audio techniques, students reinforced and expanded the narrative scope of their stories. Furthermore, students demonstrated emerging intercultural competence through their adaptability and flexibility in communication, often adjusting their language to facilitate mutual understanding and foster a sense of shared meaning (Deardorff, 2012). This approach to communication is essential for future professionals, who must have skills to employ a range of techniques in conveying complex ideas and bridging cultural divides (Dervin et al., 2020; Li, 2019). In the COIL environment, the networked narratives emerged by promoting decentralized knowledge construction and interactive learning among students from diverse cultural backgrounds. As students learned from each other's cultural expressions, they concurrently enhanced their intercultural competence, exemplifying the potential of COIL initiatives to foster global citizenship and collaborative learning (Vahed & Levine, 2019; Vahed & Rodriguez, 2021). In this sense, the findings reaffirm the role of digital storytelling as an effective tool for enhancing intercultural competence and highlight its capacity for enhancing cross-cultural dialogue.

## **Implications and Conclusions**

In this study, multimodal digital storytelling provided students with an interconnected space to explore and communicate their cultural identities across multiple media channels. By

layering text, visuals, and audio elements, participants created knowledge networks that connected personal experiences with those of peers, collaboratively constructing a rich cultural narrative. The resulting multimedia narratives not only showcased students' cultural identities but also fostered empathy, understanding, and a deeper appreciation for the complexities of intercultural experiences. This aligns with emphasis on the importance of empathy and understanding in intercultural competence in Deardorff's Model (2012). While the findings strongly resonate with Deardorff's Intercultural Competence Model, they also suggest that digital storytelling introduces a more flexible, decentralized pathway to cultural learning and intercultural competence development. The nonlinearity of digital narratives and the interactive nature of storytelling provide a space where students dynamically construct and negotiate cultural identities. This case study's findings, although not generalizable, offer implications for higher education courses with similar learning goals.

To promote global-mindedness and intercultural competence, higher education professionals, administrators, and students can consider creating authentic learning situations, such as COIL, where students develop and practice essential job-related and transferable skills in cross-cultural and cross-linguistic dialogues. Incorporating digital storytelling and other technology-infused activities into higher education curricula can also enhance students' learning experiences. Furthermore, offering courses and learning experiences that broaden students' knowledge of other countries and cultures, including geography and history, can help foster a more nuanced understanding of global issues.

This study demonstrates that digital storytelling and COIL can foster intercultural competence to bridge cultural gaps and promote inclusive, global learning experiences. Digital storytelling provides students with a platform to express personal narratives and connect emotionally with diverse audiences. COIL complements this approach by facilitating international collaboration on shared tasks. Both methods empower students to explore and represent their culture while promoting mutual understanding through cross-cultural dialogue. To effectively and sustainably implement COIL projects, institutional support is necessary at multiple levels, including developing partnerships with international institutions and providing professional development and support for faculty. Building on this, further research is needed to explore the impact of combining COIL projects with digital storytelling in various disciplines.

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