European Journal of Geography

Research Article

Small but smart: international shared virtual class link-up during the pandemic 2020-2021 - third-level students in Ireland and Israel

Tal **YAAR-WAISEL**[1] & Gerry **O'REILLY** [2]

[1] Oranim College of Education, Israel,
[2] Dublin City University, Ireland

Abstract
This paper explores the experiences of a cooperative class link-up between geography students and teachers in Ireland and Israel in 2021 during the Coronavirus lockdowns, and hence the use of virtual education. There was a followed-up class in 2022. The aim was experimental T&L, enhanced by cooperative approaches, with the objectives of getting students from different cultures to interact, discover their shared geographies, and reflect on their self-perception of their countries and preconceptions of other countries and people. Implicit in the PBL was to gain greater awareness of cultural and critical geopolitics. Another aim was for the two lecturers managing the course, to share their pedagogies and experiences. This paper is not simply exploring the 'teacher telling or guiding the trainee teachers' what to do but calling on lecturers and trainers to reflect on their own attitudes and perceptions in delivering quality Geographical Education. Student group work entailed a series of activities: (i) Icebreaker: Hello – Ireland and Israel. (ii) Model lesson: joint preparation of a geography class on Ireland and Israel. (iii) Fieldwork: development of a joint virtual trip for students to Israel and to Ireland emphasizing the places selected by each subgroup; and (iv) an evaluation of the experiences of the class link-up. The main communication devices used were Zoom for joint class sessions, while students selected WhatsApp for small mixed group work. Despite some challenges for students and teachers, in their evaluations, they all agreed that the experience was positive for them.

Highlights:

-Cooperative class link-up: third-level geography students-teachers in Ireland and Israel.

-T&L: international students sharing geographies and perceptions.

-PBL-Advantages: foster awareness of critical and cultural geopolitics.

-Lecturers sharing geography education pedagogies and experiences.

-Geographical education: Tools - WhatsApp and Zoom

1. INTRODUCTION

This article explores the discovery learning experiences of a shared Geography class link-up involving 85 students (over 2021 and 2022) and two lecturers with one at Dublin City University, east of Ireland, and the other at Oranim College of Education in northern Israel. However, the emphasis here is on the link-up in 2021. Adapting to the educational situations during the lockdowns, we explored the possibilities of virtual education that took place within and between both countries. The primary aim was collaboration in teaching and learning (T&L) targeting Geographical Education, enhancing interculturalism and teacher training while sharing competencies and skills for both students and lecturers. The objectives included getting students to interact, cooperate, empathize, and ascertain similarities and differences in their own taken-for-granted geographies, and to reflect on their own perceptions of their countries but also their presumptions regarding another country, people, and culture, and where these preconceptions may have come from e.g., international news, social media, movies and so forth. This required creating learning challenges for the students, led us to develop a curriculum through distance learning at short notice. This offered us the possibility to get out psychologically of the routine "Zoom software" class pandemic environment, and for many students, in their imposed lockdown zones to experiment with cooperative T&L and PBL. While they had to rely on technology, simultaneously they took advantage of it leading to innovative variations in distance learning. Therefore, this project was the result of the evolving reality that would eventually feed into future so-called new norms in education.

The main working language was English, and the students were broken down into six mixed nationality groups of approximately seven students each. These were self-selecting groups in the home college before contacting their cohort group abroad, while a minority of students needed to be put directly into groups for a variety of reasons, including their level of fluency in the group working language. The communication devices used were Zoom for the entire group class, and students within each small group auto-selected the device that they deemed best suited their own needs. In the first place, they selected to create WhatsApp groups, and in the second rank came Zoom. Of the six groups, five used WhatsApp for most of their communication, while one group split their communication between WhatsApp and Zoom in approximately equal proportions.

2. BACKGROUND

An important factor of the research and course delivery was that it was carried out during the global Coronavirus pandemic (2020-2021) (Wieland, 2022; Galvani et al., 2020) and consequent lockdowns, necessitating the use of virtual teaching for long periods. The international class link-up venture was motivated largely in reaction to the challenging psychological environment being experienced by many student teachers and lecturers alike, living and working in abnormal circumstances, and confronting the dangers of anomie. The emergency encouraged the lecturers to adapt, develop and deliver the link-up classes that would allow students in whatever their specific environment, to participate in the virtual class, helping to combat isolation and enhance wellbeing, and to make new human empathetic connections beyond their borders in Israel and Ireland. Hence, cooperation remained the lynchpin in all the T&L processes.

In discussions, while students organically referenced their experiences regarding Covid-19, the lecturers took the judicious decision not to do formal joint project activities on the omnipresent pandemic due to the stresses and tragedies experienced by many students and lecturers in their personal, family, and social lives. They needed a virtual and psychological environment that was as pleasant as possible. In progressing education and wellbeing, large and small group work was organized and based on a series of activities, feeding into each other.

The experience for the lecturers was challenging at times, and they tried to keep their input as light touch as possible in order to facilitate the spontaneous aspects of the students' cooperation, empowering auto-organization, peer learning, leadership skills, and intercultural relationships, alongside their personal and professional development. Despite some defies for students, in evaluations, they agreed overall that the experience was positive and especially in their organizational and management discipline, higher-order thinking, and having fun counteracting some of the pandemic blues.

3. Literature review

To maximize the benefits of international collaboration, the students were fully appraised that while the work was experimental in a challenging environment, cooperation by all was essential to its successful outcomes in learning, and the course expectations were clearly outlined (McEwan, 2007). As McEwan clearly states: *"All students can benefit from working with partners to cognitively process important vocabulary and content knowledge. Hence, the cooperative learning model is essential for struggling learners to succeed in the classroom. Cooperative learning differs from simple group work in two important ways: (1) Individual and group accountability are built into every activity so that all group members are required to participate and produce, and (2) group members are taught and expected to fulfil certain roles during the cooperative process. Heterogeneous cooperative groups provide students with control over their own learning and afford those struggling with the opportunity to work with strong academic role models."*

The lecturers aimed at developing effective, dynamic learning and support. This included the need to facilitate active, participatory, and interactive learning for students, with the aim of achieving educational goals, i.e., the optimal development of student self-potential. The fact that student group discussion could be anywhere and anytime, wherever they are located is important here, but also to keep in mind the pandemic conditions in different locations and jurisdictions. Largely, the time is free, and unlimited in conducting group discussions via social media or internet. Nonetheless, lecturers still limit the time for collecting assignments for the students. This "can increase students' motivation to learn independently and creatively, in doing assignments and can increase student grades" (Ningsih et al., 2019). As Silalahi and Hutauruk noted: *"Cooperative learning… emphasizes cooperation between students in groups. The basis of this is the idea that students discover it easier to find and understand a concept of facts if they discuss the problem with each other. Members of a group in cooperative learning, usually consisting of four to six people, where group members are formed are heterogeneous based on differences in academic ability, religion, gender, and ethnicity…Learning activities favor the interests of those who teach… (in order for) Efforts for learning to be focused on students, it is necessary to apply a cooperative learning model which is a form of change in mindset in learning activities…"* (Silalahi and Hutauruk, 2020).

Both lecturers and students in the respective countries learned that heterogeneity certainly existed, within and between both the Israeli and Irish groups. For example, ethnicity, languages, and religions - regarding first language speakers: some Irish/Gaeilge speakers in the DCU group (who had never made this known to the lecturer, nor are such students required to do so), and some first language Arabic speakers in the Oranim group. The same trends existed concerning religion or religious-cultural affiliations. In the contexts of our classes and cultures, the lecturers did not ask the students orally or in written questionnaires about any such ethnocultural affinities, in order to avoid risking alienating some students. Knowledge of such ethnocultural affinities only arose organically in the cooperative work. This helps to substantiate the hypothesis that cooperative skills help develop communication and the division of tasks between group members (Silalahi and Hutauruk, 2020). Therefore, as they state: *"…cooperative learning can benefit students who work together to complete academic*

tasks because they provide services as tutors to peers who require deeper thought about the relationship of ideas contained in certain material. The cooperative learning model is broad acceptance of people who differ according to ethnicity, religion, culture, social level, abilities, and disabilities. Cooperative learning provides opportunities for students with different backgrounds and conditions to work interdependently on shared tasks and with cooperative reward structures and learn to respect one another" (Silalahi and Hutauruk, 2020). This necessitated extra effort from the lecturers in Oranim and Dublin. Lecturers could not rely on any binary type of a pedagogical or cultural echo chamber; this would have gone against the aims and objectives of the link-up.

It is self-evident that learning must be in an agreeable atmosphere and hence the cooperative learning model would not be effective if the learning atmosphere were not pleasant (Silalahi and Hutauruk, 2020). Therefore, a major challenge for the lecturers was to create and sustain in as far as possible a pleasant ambiance in the virtual class. Significantly, for the lecturer in Dublin, a student from the Northern Ireland border area requested a consultation explaining that he held strong views on Palestinian issues. During our consultation, he decided that it was best to avoid creating any form of binary defensive or reaction barriers with the other students that could impede group discussion, especially in the initial intercultural encounters. He decided to broach the subject through questions, rather than starting with his own fixed opinions. Political cultural legacy issues from the conflict in Northern Ireland (1968-1998) include extremists from the pro-British Loyalist community appropriating Israeli iconographies such as flags and those from the Republican and/or Nationalist community using Palestinian images and flags, trying to promote geopolitical parallelisms and mythologies in an oversimplified binary manner.

The link-up between Oranim and Dublin benefited from the previous pedagogical experiences of the authors in international class connections. Hence, they decided that concepts of identity, place(s), and citizenship had to be integral to the cooperative PBL. They agreed that ideas regarding identity, place, citizenship, and positive and negative stereotyping are central themes in education that can pose defies in the T&L processes. Crucial elements in learning are student interest and empathy in the material and the aids being used (Jiang and Shulan, 2020). Therefore, the themes used regarding places and people, through digital media provide the ideal environment for student self and group discovery with learning going beyond oversimplified binary logic within the 'us and them' classification syndrome (McManus and O'Reilly, 2011). We drew on the experiences of previous international collaboration and sharing modules. Substantial research in synchronous and asynchronous online communication in T&L existed prior to the Coronavirus lockdowns that helped to enhance our work during the emergency regarding meaningful learning (Redmond et al., 2018; Peacock and Cowan, 2019; Coomey and Stephenson, 2018; Mahlangu, 2018).

A shared Geography module took place in 2012-13 and in subsequent years between the University of Northern Colorado (UNCO, facilitated by Prof. Phil Klein), and SPC-Dublin City University (Gerry O'Reilly and colleagues) who collaborated on a Moodle-based course for students assisted by the AAG's (Association of American Geographers) Centre for Global Geography Education. The selected CGGE National Identity module examines geographic characteristics of identity and the interplay of culture, politics, and place based on the theoretical background that falls into the three categories: (i) conceptual framework, (ii) regional case studies, and (iii) collaborative project-based learning (PBL). The conceptual framework introduces key concepts, theories, and analytical approaches to geography. This framework provides students with the background needed to think geographically about global issues ranging from identity to nationalism, migration, environment, and so on. Following this are the theoretical and thematic aspects with case studies illustrating the geographic concepts, methods, and technologies used to investigate and solve problems in different places and countries. The case studies feature a variety of spatial thinking activities and other resources

for teaching how to analyze issues from geographical perspectives. Geographers from different countries developed this CGGE module collaboratively (Solem et al., 2010, 2013).

From 2012 to 2018, further inter-Lecturer cooperation took place in an international module link-up with the HAN University of Applied Sciences, - Geographical Education in Nijmegen, the Netherlands (team leader Prof. Marieke Kleinhuis) and SPC-Dublin City University (Gerry O'Reilly and colleagues). The emphasis was on sharing and developing skills, for fieldwork and trips carried out in Ireland and the Netherlands by mixed student groups. Building on this, other PBL projects took place within the context of the PEERS program led by the University of Teacher Education, Vaud - Lausanne in Switzerland (Gilles 2017; O'Reilly, 2017). Significantly, similar topics and curricula development for PBL takes place in the EUROGEO context (Villanueva et al., 2009; Matzka and O'Reilly, 2009).

Similarly, Oranim College in Israel is involved in a tripartite collaboration in geography education with the University of Hamburg, Germany, and the University of Paris - France (Profs. Sandra Sprenger, Caroline Leininger-Frezal, and Tal Yaar-Waisel). Collaboration existed during the pandemic, in which students from these institutions were required to teach each other about the existing education systems in their respective countries and explore different topics on the subject of water. While the exchange was rich, they encountered complex and challenging use of distance learning and finding solutions, which in the long term will be beneficial for both lecturers and student teachers in learning by doing processes. In discussions, between the lecturers in Oranim and Dublin we agreed that by its very nature, geography revolves around human-environmental and inter-human phenomena, and therefore has political dimensions, even if not always obvious, nor overtly stated by teachers. Teaching political issues encounters difficulties and barriers in various places around the world (Grayson, 2015). For example, a study examining the knowledge and understanding of geopolitical teaching in the US at the beginning of the 21st century shows that there is a lack of attention and awareness of geopolitical issues (Holm and Farber, 2002, 2011). The researchers found that although understanding geopolitical processes were significant for teachers in times of change, the knowledge they demonstrated was very poor.

The geopolitical issues surveyed relate to the international economy and international markets, the power of states, cooperation between countries, and multicultural cooperation; for instance, the Olympics reflects the need for cooperation, but also nationalism in its various forms. Also explored were environmental issues such as climate change and sustainability, human rights and places, migration, and population growth. The researchers found that the source from which the respondents gained most of their knowledge was not the education system but the media (Holm and Farber, 2002, 2011). This research was a harbinger of the challenges faced from day to day nationally and internationally throughout the COVID pandemic period and its legacies e.g., development of appropriate anti-coronavirus inoculation and drugs, supply chains with production-arrival timeframes, rollout, distribution within and between countries. Geopolitical issues also arose, when the pandemic brought about the re-closing of borders around the world, and therefore raised the complexity of borders at all levels (Newman, 2020). According to Holm and Farber (2002, 2011), in Europe, the contents of the study were examined, and it was found that the perception of "European integration" is derived from a national point of view in each country and that the textbooks serve as "vehicles of nationalism" (Sakki, 2014). Therefore, the importance of teaching actual geography is in two main directions: (i) specific to the field of knowledge - the importance of the geographical knowledge of the behaviour of adults; and (ii) the assumption that discussing real disputes improves the critical thinking of students (Sziarto et al., 2014). According to Miles (2011), *"there is an irony in the inverse relationship between the importance of the subject, as teachers believe, and their willingness to talk about it in classrooms. Teachers want to lead their students to higher-order thinking. Teachers enjoy and feel that they are promoting their students' abilities while teaching the lesson. Geography teachers want to relate to the current reality in the classroom, in addition, to teaching historical information. Yet it is important to*

emphasize to teachers the importance of educating youth in political thinking, evaluating alternatives, and drawing conclusions. A student in a democratic state must develop the tools for independent thinking and establish positions that he or she can formulate after learning and understanding reality" (Miles, 2011). According to Yaar-Waisel, *"the teacher's role is to expose the students to various perspectives. The subject of the teaching of borders is complex and therefore cannot be taught in only a few hours. While studying this topic, the student should be aware of different viewpoints and varied opinions and will then be able to assess the problems and complexity of the topics being discussed"* (Yaar-Waisel, 2020, 2021).

Teachers must remain cognizant that the essence of Geography remains scale, and therefore comprehend the interrelationships of scales and power from their local lived realities but connecting to wider national, regional, and global levels (O'Reilly, 2019). This hinges on the students' literal and phenomenological habitus experiences in their daily lives. Social media and virtual depictions of the world increasingly influence this. Therefore, the term geopolitics is not simply a synonym for statecraft or international relations that reduces it to the narrow dialectics of the traditional 'nation-state' discourse. New and radical approaches to the topic, where the etymology remains geo (territory) and politics (power) at multiple scales concern the geographical realities of each teacher and student in situ wherever that be - disease containment versus diffusion, or water, or global warming whether in Ireland, Israel, or elsewhere. This is exemplified by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that highlight the centrality of 'place' at all scales – national and transnational as illustrated by the carbon cycle challenge, while SDG4 Education is crucial – To ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (De Lázaro Torres and De Miguel González, 2022). In order to promote an integrated understanding of the SDGs and especially Number 4, the lecturers hoped that in their reflections and especially in small mixed groups, students would also engage in non-formal task questions in an organic reflective way. For instance, some students in Israel were curious as to why there were two political capital cities on the island of Ireland, while some students in Dublin were questioning why different sources gave the political capital of Israel as Tel Aviv and others as Jerusalem. Some students were surprised to discover that Britain had been responsible for creating the borders of mandate Palestine and for the new statelet of Northern Ireland, at exactly the same period in 1920-1922.

The post-1998 generation of student teachers in the Republic of Ireland has limited knowledge of the so-called Troubles (1968-98) in Northern Ireland (NI), having grown up in the era of political peace. Like students in NI, they are often challenged to gain a deeper understanding of the wider dynamics of subliminal and formal cultural, political, and community allegiances within NI, and their own habitus and wider geographical North-South scales with the population in the Republic, and at East-West levels with citizens in Great Britain. The same S-N and E-W dynamics also pose defies for the teaching of Geography in the Republic, NI, and in England, Scotland and Wales. Such challenges exist elsewhere as in Israel, and in the neighbouring countries as well as in teaching geography in the larger MENA region. Compounding problems surrounding the pandemic, in 2021, protests, riots, and airstrikes occurred in Israel, Jerusalem, and Gaza during the period of the class link-up, that students followed on their social media. A missile attack on Israeli cities was followed by a military operation in Gaza in May 2021, known in Hebrew as the "Wall Guard" (Shomer ha-Chomot שומר החומות) and in Arabic as the "Sword of Jerusalem" (معركة سيف القدس Maarkat seif el kuds). Arab Israeli protests took place especially, in mixed-ethnic cities. Some students from class, from different communities, took part in these street activities. During the same period in NI, there were political difficulties exploited by some activists. Frustration was growing in pro-British Unionist parties and paramilitary groups because of the new post-Brexit arrangements for NI and the rest of the UK, based on an international EU-UK agreement with the Republic of Ireland being an embedded member state of the 27 EU bloc. Politically, Northern Ireland (16.75% of the total geographical area of the island) is in the UK state, with NI containing 28% of the total population on the island of Ireland but with no natural physical

geographical boundaries on the 500 km border. Old ghosts from the pre-1998 Peace Agreement began to resurface. The UK 2016 Brexit referendum to leave the EU resulted in a 52% Yes vote in the UK. However, 56% in NI and 62% in Scotland voted No to leaving. Hence the 'democratic' deficits spatially in the majority-minority aspects of such referenda. Some observers expect two referenda to be held in Ireland, one in NI and one in the Republic on the issue of reunification in the coming decade, as catered for in the international 1998 Good Friday Peace Agreement. To succeed, majorities in both parts of the island would need to support Northern Ireland's transfer from British/UK to Irish sovereignty. Essentially, so-called two-state solutions have proved problematic in Ireland and Cyprus. The vast majority of the Irish students who participated in the Israel-Ireland class link-up project were born after 1998, and have no direct experience of the 'Troubles' (1968-1998) and may face the challenge of translating such events and processes into their teaching careers and contributing to sustainable peaceful development and SDG 16 (Pogatchnik and Giovanna, 2021). Having to reflect on such issues and articulate answers in the cooperative international link-up work with Israeli students helped empower students and will have positive effects on their future teaching.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1 Materials and Methods

Students: the link-up involved 49 students from Dublin City University and 36 people from Oranim College of Education, Israel i.e., for both linkups in 2020 and 2021. Students at DCU are studying for a BA degree in geography, and most of them go on to PG teaching training programmes, having completed their primary degree. The age range of the Irish students was 19-26 years old. The students from Oranim College are studying for a teaching certificate. Some are studying for a BA degree, while others already have a degree, but are studying for a teaching certificate in geography. Israeli students' age range was 22-48 years old. Altogether, participation was approximately 50% male and 50% female. In planning, the objectives were attuned to the student and institutional realities in the respective environments. Objectives: The principal goal of the Israel-Ireland project was to enable students to have cooperative PBL, experiential, and meaningful distance learning.

(i)   Experience a new form of study.
(ii)   Learn new competencies and skills.
(iii)   Deal with technological and techno-didactic challenges.
(iv)   Overcome concerns and obstacles, including language differences and time-zone changes.
(v)   Transcend and overcome perceptions of stereotypes.
(vi)   Collaborate with unfamiliar colleagues and experience this, in teamwork.
(vii)   Contribute her/his knowledge, and to learn from others.
(viii) Draw conclusions from the experience.

Students were in six working groups of 7-8 students. They received initial contact information i.e., email addresses. The onus was on them to arrange an initial meeting before a specified date for the respective mixed groups and to select a leader or chairperson. Lecturers gave students detailed instructions regarding the ethical conduct required at sessions and the tasks to be completed. Their second meeting was set for an all-class joint date for all participants. Then there followed small group breakout room teamwork, concluding with an all-group discussion. In the respective institutions, whole class linkups were restricted due to logistical reasons. This included different start and end dates for semester 2, timetable clashes for students, and teachers, and the necessity for lecturers to deliver the official 'assigned modules' for the academic year. The teaching challenges were compounded due to the different demands on lecturers and the institutional (new) teaching norms that were

evolving due to the pandemic emergency and changing rules. In DCU, the 10 ECT/Credit module given on GRM (Geographical Research Methods) based around the theme of scale and power, is evaluated on four continuous assessment (CA) projects, and implicit in this is UNDP Sustainable Development Goals including SDG-4 Education and SDG-16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. The CA topics deal with territorial scales and power dynamics:

- CA 1: in the student's local home areas.
- CA 2: at national and international levels.
- CA 3: intergovernmental activity and NGO actions.
- CA4: cooperating with students in another country with the aim of developing greater awareness of similarities, differences, and approaches in geographical education.

Among the main tasks in CA 4 (International link-up) were to:

i.   introduce and share students 'own' and 'national' geographies with other students outside Ireland.
ii. develop lesson plans and
iii. to create joint student field trip itineraries, enhancing competencies and skills for imagined or virtual trips to Israel and Ireland.

However, the emphasis remains on discovery in the cooperative multifaceted experiences of learning in intercultural groups. Naturally, as geography students, they were aware of the concepts of boundaries, contested borders and identities, instability, conflict, and peacebuilding.

To facilitate the students in Ireland, a workbook was available to enhance their own work diaries and note taking. This was also available for the Israeli students who adapted it to the realities in their own institution. In Israel, students were asked to deliver a lesson plan about Ireland's Geography as part of the curriculum investigating an "unknown" country - Analysing unique phenomena ("Nativ") - physical as well as human Geography - using geographical tools - analysis of maps, graphs, and images. Students had to develop T&L activities that could be evaluated in their specific pedagogy courses. Tasks, content, and delivery cut-off dates were given to students in an orderly manner. This posed certain challenges for the lecturers, due to time management and the requirements of the respective curricula, modules, and institutions. An abridged version of the workbook instructions is as follows:

Part 1. Getting to know Ireland and Israel: Small mixed group work.

Activity: Icebreaker - Hello Israel and Ireland.

Theme: Perceptions of other places and countries.

Icebreaker questions included attitudes to living in Israel or in Ireland, and 'perceptions of Israel from Ireland' and vice versa. As a follow-up to this, the aim was to make a lesson to present Ireland and Israel to students, but adaptable to different age levels that could be used by teachers at primary or secondary (middle and high) school levels. Students had to develop the methodology themselves after discussion and questions in the mixed groups. Each sub-group was asked to present a short video of their work using MP4, PPT, or similar. Students were required to keep their individual notes, work diary records, including communication experiences for reflection and discussion. Overall, the initial student fears and shyness subsided due to their enthusiasm and cooperation. The ice-breaking tasks and processes proved to good effect. A process of cooperative learning took place. Students stated that they had "profited" from the experience.

Part 2. Virtual fieldtrips: Small mixed group work

This entailed a joint two-hour session for a Zoom link-up for all students and lecturers participating in the PBL with the methodology being as follows:

1. Introductory opening shared by the lecturers and followed by a "Kahoot" game based on different geographical and cultural knowledge regarding the respective countries. The students performed well and very much enjoyed this activity.
2. This activity was followed by the topic-specific work, "discovering 'places' in Israel and Ireland" that the students had been preparing in mixed groups. Essentially, the key questions included, 'Where are the best places to visit in Israel and Ireland? What are your recommendations for your partners in the respective project countries regarding field trip visits?'

The aim here was cooperative group learning and creating a collective product. This entailed short mixed group reports, giving information with maps, photos, locations, web links, and so forth. Then using any relevant material; each national subgroup makes out a field trip workbook by using the concept of places, including iconic or symbolic spaces, with at least three places that citizens in the respective countries identify with. The national sub-groups prepared for a whole class Zoom session, a list of places in their home country for the students from the 'other country' and then explained why visiting them would be educationally enriching. Then the paired Israeli - Irish subgroups, exchanged material for the respective critical comments to make any alterations necessary before the final presentation i.e., short video, MP4, PPT, or similar. By using the relevant material from the above, each national subgroup had to make out a field trip workbook using the concept of places: iconic, symbolic, memory spaces where possible – that are important for students, citizens, and identity. At least four places from each country in the mixed group work were recommended, with no repetition of places selected within groups or between them, so as to assure as wide a spread as possible of places in the learning process for all students, and to avoid limiting 'place' to a restricted number of national stereotypes. Each student had to fill out a table regarding the significant place chosen giving its full name and the official address (but also adding any alternative names and the languages used) as well as the GPS Coordinates. Students filled in five target keywords associated with each place and then gave the full web address or other details e.g. journal article titles, books, or YouTube, that they used in their research. Photographs used were downloaded mostly from secondary sources, as students could not go out to take their own photos during the lockdowns or other restrictions on movement. While students collaborated in getting this information to fill in the table, each individual student had to write up his/her place selected in Israel or Ireland, as learned in the mixed group work.

4.2 Preliminary research findings

The main success here was the fun learning that students discovered in communicating their love of places in their respective home countries and discovering interesting foreign new spaces in their cohorts' countries. Nonetheless, they tended to revert to tourism-guide speak as probably gleaned from the web sources that they had selected. In the lecturers' feedback to the students, it was highlighted that greater reflection on the auto-selected places would enhance their in-depth learning, as would more greatly input into comparative work on the places in both countries that would facilitate more higher-order thinking. This also affected the quality of their lesson plans.

Students' written comments to the following questions:

1. Q: Is this your first time studying with people from another country?

A: 100% of the students stated that it was.

2. Q: Please describe the thoughts you had before the activity.

A: The main keywords were collocations of 'fear' and 'enthusiasm'.

3. Q: Were the things you thought about before the activities found to be true? Please give examples.

A: 80% said they were not true, while 20% gave ambiguous answers.

In general, the students stated that they enjoyed the project and that their fears of 'the unknown' disappeared as the collaboration progressed. Significantly, they managed to find a common language literally and metaphorically, and most of them took an active part in the meetings.

Students were asked to:

a. State the main positive, and then the main negative experience that they had with T&L and PBL in this joint class project.
b. To answer the question, if they were managing such a joint international student project next year – how they would do it, and to be realistic, taking into account the challenges and opportunities that they had experienced, and to fill out a questionnaire.

Results and sample of student comments:

a. Students felt that the lecturers were enthusiastic, and this positively influenced their learning, emphasizing that this was a "one-time opportunity" and a challenge that can be successful. "That's what gave a positive boost to the whole project."
b. "Project management in English creates an initial inequality." For half of the participants, English is a foreign language, and not used daily. However, "talking about tasks ahead of time, allowed for overcoming concerns and tolerance on the part of the native English-speaking students. Working in mixed groups greatly helped overcome this obstacle."
c. Differences in semester periods and time gaps. While the semester in Ireland begins in January and ends in May, the semester in Israel begins in early March and ends in late June. However, with goodwill, we found enough corresponding weeks for cooperation. Independent student organization of meeting times helped in some cases but created 'prolonged discussions and minor difficulty in several groups. The time zone differences (two hours) did not pose major difficulties. In previous whole class linkups between Dublin and Colorado, the 7-hour time difference proved to be problematic.
d. Age differences between Irish and Israeli students - were significant in the eyes of the students. They spoke about "different goals" in the respective "national" age cohorts. Nonetheless, the recommended activities and common tasks caused these differences to become insignificant over time.
e. The "technology can be challenging but by pre-preparation for the various tools we used, this created simple solutions. For instance, "an early checking of the game "Kahoot" and the use of "Google Forms" certainly helped".
f. Shared accurate and clear explanations of the steps allowed students to focus on getting to know each other and worry less about the final task and CA products for grading.

In the students', own voices:

> *"I was excited and optimistic thinking about the activity. I thought it would be a very interesting and informative project and give me an insight into life in Israel", "I thought that there would be some difficulties i.e., language barriers and time zones, that would delay the progress of the project.", "I felt a fear of the language but also excitement towards experience."*

> *"I was unsure how well it would work, how well we would all communicate, and if we would all collaborate well", "It wasn't as scary as I expected", "It was enjoyable to learn about a new country", "All in all, there was a well-balanced distribution of information among the group between both parties"*

> *"I think that most students put effort into their work and had different ways of presenting these tasks", "The important thing is to engage with your group as much as possible (calls, texts, meetup, etc.)"*

> *"Everyone was very optimistic about the project and very open to giving information about their countries, different cultures, and places of memory", "I was interested in how life differs in their country in comparison to ours, it was great to hear their view of Ireland also!"*

> *"I was excited and optimistic thinking about the activity. I thought it would be a very interesting and informative project and give me an insight into life in Israel", "I was excited to interact and communicate with students from Israel so I could gain an insight into their lives in another part of the world", "A good opportunity for geographical international acquaintance and interesting sharing. "*

> *"I was a little apprehensive. I was not sure where the wind would blow and whether the conversation would be pleasant and enriching or perhaps tense", "There were warm and helpful meetings", "I came across the language barrier, but in my opinion, as a group, we were able to overcome it", "The truth was that it was refreshing and fun. The Irish students were welcoming, and it was easy to talk. It was a pleasure."*

Overall students and lecturers benefitted from working on cognitively processing geographical material and vocabulary; content knowledge in two very different physical and cultural geographical environments. The cooperative learning model was essential for students often struggling in the pandemic environment and with students in Israel for whom English is a foreign language. The lecturers did not make explicit reference to CLIL - Content and Language Integrated Learning i.e., students learn Geography and a second language such as English simultaneously, while students in Dublin became acquainted with basic words, greetings, and expressions in Hebrew. EUROGEO actively supports CLIL in geography education (Zwartjes, 2022; Costa and D'Angelo, 2011).

4. DISCUSSION

This paper explored the experiences of an international cooperative class link-up between students and teachers in Ireland and Israel in 2021 during the pandemic lockdowns, and hence the use of virtual education within and between the two countries. There was a followed-up link-up class in 2022. The primary aims were achieved i.e., experimental T&L for students and lecturers from different cultures to interact and share their geographies, enhancing higher order reflection supported by the cooperative learning model. Implicit in this was a series of tasks building into PBL to gain greater awareness of geographical education on multiple levels including (geo)political geographies. A noteworthy aim was for the lecturers managing the course, to share their pedagogies and experiences. In short, we learned to work with the

possibilities available and to adapt to what would work for the whole class and what were institutional-specific curricula for the respective Dublin and Oranim student groups. Small group work entailed a series of activities and tasks: (i) Icebreaker: Hello – Ireland and Israel. (ii) Model lesson: joint preparation of a geography class on Ireland and Israel. (iii) Student Fieldwork: preparation of a joint virtual field trip for students to Israel and to Ireland emphasizing the 'places' selected by each subgroup; and (iv) an evaluation reflection of the experiences of the class link-up.

This cooperative learning went further than simple group work whereby individual and/or group accountability existed in each activity. All group members were required to participate and produce in different ways fulfilling their respective roles. This facilitated the multi-layered heterogeneous nature of the groups, including the multifaceted ethnocultural specificities within and between the groups from Israel and Ireland. Students took control over their own learning and helped those struggling with peer support providing student academic role models within the smaller mixed groups. In the pandemic environment, all students were more aware that cooperation and tolerance were essential in learning, and in achieving goals.

The dynamic group interactions were active, participatory, and quality interactive learning took place. The aim of achieving educational goals furthered the optimal development of student self-potential as confirmed by students in their own words in non-formal post-project interviews. Essentially, student contact was through WhatsApp discussions that took place wherever they were and at times that they decided and organized themselves, in the pandemic conditions in different locations, personal spaces and realities, and jurisdictions. In one virtual session, students were delighted to meet two babies by accident in Israel. The student mothers had not intended to introduce their babies, but the little boy and girl made their presence heard and so the other students asked to be introduced to them on screen.

In order to facilitate the students, the lecturers set a minimum number of whole class sessions via Zoom and set limits to the time for collecting student CA work. This increased students' motivation to learn and to create, producing greater CA originality in most cases. As Silalahi and Hutauruk (2020) argue, the cooperative learning model aids a change in mindset in learning activities for a substantial number of students. Students discovered it easier to find and understand facts when they discuss the problem with each other.

The heterogeneous aspects of the two groups had to embrace the differences in academic ability, language, religion, gender, and ethnicity (Silalahi and Hutauruk, 2020). Both lecturers and students in the respective countries learned that heterogeneity certainly existed, within and between both the Israeli and Irish groups. The participants (students and lecturers) were obliged to grapple with different forms of cultural and intellectual binary logic and to deconstruct preconceptions e.g. that English was the first language of all the students in Dublin, or similarly that Hebrew, though the language of instruction in Oranim College was the first language of all the students there. Knowledge of the many ethnocultural affinities only arose organically in the cooperative tasks and PBL work. Cooperative skills increased by developing communications and the division of tasks between group members. Peer learning provided opportunities for students with different backgrounds and conditions to work interdependently on shared tasks in the cooperative reward structures, and to learn further to respect one another. This necessitated extra effort from the two lecturers and greater cognizance of the binary type of pedagogical or cultural echo chamber i.e. an environment in which students or lecturers encounter only beliefs or opinions similar to their own so that their prevailing views are reinforced and alternative ideas or teaching methods are consciously or subconsciously rejected. A foremost challenge for the two lecturers was to create and sustain in as far as possible a pleasant atmosphere in the virtual world to help students proactively cooperate in their learning.

The lecturers made the decision that the challenging times and speedily changing technology occasioned by the pandemic offered opportunities for improvement in T&L, cooperation, and PBL. This included a greater effort for cross-national collaboration amongst both lecturers and students. We had to lead the students forward in the often-unknown changing daily circumstances brought about by Covid, including the campaigns and rollout of the inoculations, as well as the activities of the anti-vaxxers (anti-Covid-vaccine) and their misinformation in the respective jurisdictions and wider world. The Irish students gained an understanding of why Israel became a model country in genuinely responding to the pandemic, with its public communications systems, rapid responses of the state and health authorities, and collaboration with civil society. As one student from Israel commented, 'We're used to emergencies.' Respectively to the lecturers, students were further aware that geography education requires renewal and adaptation to the specific current realities such as the pandemic. In their normal inter-group conversations students spoke of the vast differences between daily temperatures in Israel and Ireland. This prompted comments regarding changing weather conditions and global warming. During the class link-up period, the students witnessed changing political environments endangering the Peace Process in Northern Ireland due to fallout from Brexit, and violent conflicts in Israel and Gaza; now no longer for them just events out there in cyberspace and social media, but affecting in some way, the real people that they had met in the respective groups. Together they witnessed via social media the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022, as we embarked on another joint link-up class. Doubtlessly consciousness of these experiences will translate into the future geography classes of these trainee teachers.

We did not know to what extent the students would be able to cooperate during the lockdown, and that included their individual health issues. We wanted to keep the lecturer input as light touch as possible, to encourage greater voluntary spontaneous input from the students. However, we were in full agreement that the students would be exposed to organizing, cooperating, and sharing tasks together, and not fall into the negative binary aspects of competitive national teams trying to 'beat' the other side. Overall, this collaborative aspect was successful. Essentially, we took the opportunity to create more innovative teaching including using such aids as Kahoot or a humorous geography quiz based on data from both countries, which proved to be the right choice for enhancing student learning. Our main duty was to accompany the students in their concerns about the meetings, assignments, and their own abilities in making connections, and to work in mixed groups. Nonetheless, by its very nature, the international link-up class is in a certain national identification sphere that some students felt that they had to play to a foreign audience. To counteract this, natural flow discussion was encouraged by the lecturers to avoid any students either being seen or seeing (unwittingly) themselves as stereotypes in representing their country.

As one student proud of her culture and country stated: The project makes us feel "Yes, we have something to give, even though we are small...". The necessity of teamwork enhanced the ability to explore new things, the use of diverse online and virtual education sources, and the creation of a challenge for students in this cooperative project. Comparing T&L experiences, including PBL from this inter-institutional link-up, students gained the most from the small mixed group work that holds much potential for cooperative learning and PBL. The rapidly changing virtual sphere and other teaching technological innovations accelerated the students' need to adapt and share information in the use of apps and programs as observed in putting material together in producing mixed group videos for CA. Key lessons learned from the collaborative learning link-up class for future use include:

i. Formal 'all class' link-ups can be sustained at a minimum number helping to avoid the differences encountered in formally scheduled timetables, dissimilar time zones, and the respective institutional administrative organization.
ii. Now, recording lectures visually with automatic transcriptions of the text can provide more flexibility for teachers and enhance the objectives of CLIL, alongside the

management of breakout rooms and small mixed student group work. However, it must be noted that the 'automatic transcriptions' – may look acceptable on-screen during sessions, but when they are downloaded by the lecturers, they are often scrambled and jumbled. Therefore, these so-called transcriptions have to be well edited for students who legitimately miss sessions, especially where the university policy is to give such written material to them. Editing this material can be very time-consuming.

iii. Students can organize their 'own times' for communicating outside formal class time when necessary. This needs the goodwill of all students concerned and a strong cooperative learning ethos.

iv. Overwhelmingly, in this project, students opted for using WhatsApp in their communications between themselves. This included direct oral communications, but also WhatsApp groups and subgroups for oral and written contact – a rapidly evolving area in student communication and discussion, that has to be embraced by educators whether they like it or not. Students preferred lecturers not to have access to their WhatsApp group communications and sessions, as this could debilitate their spontaneous flow of banter, language, and ideas. They agreed that they would select group leaders who could do light touch monitoring, and if difficulties arose including inappropriate language or behaviour, they could liaise with the lecturer. This worked well and enhanced the student's sense of independence and not feeling that the lecturer was watching them.

Overall, lecturers and students found the educational experience enriching on multiple levels, whatever the difficulties encountered. Nonetheless, the challenge remains for academics, and especially lecturers and teacher trainers to help bridge the gap between what students believe that they 'know' (influenced by social media), and what is required by curricula and the realities of the students' habitus or daily environment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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