

Results NIDIT Observations – VIP Seminar

‘Desigualdades en América Latina: ¿una historia sin fin?’

NIDIT-Task #2: International Teaching Training

Richard Vargas

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to report some outcomes of the class observations that NIDIT Task #2 “International Teaching Training” conducted on the VIP¹ seminar: “Desigualdades en América Latina: ¿una historia sin fin? The course took place between March 11 and May 27 of 2022. Note that the present results are not only descriptive but also analytical. Consequently, a small inductive classroom research was undertaken. The methodological sequence was as follows: online observation and documentation of events in real time and in context, analysis of the observed, interpretation of information obtained contrasting it with up-to-date theories in international digital teaching, and formulation of conclusions inferred from the gathered data and research process. Considering that cooperation, internationalization, and digitalization were key components of the aforementioned VIP seminar, the NIDIT observations explore and reflect on those practices of both teachers and students that permit to shade light on the development of intercultural competences of participants in virtual and cross-cultural environments.

Teaching and learning practices in the context of the VIP seminar

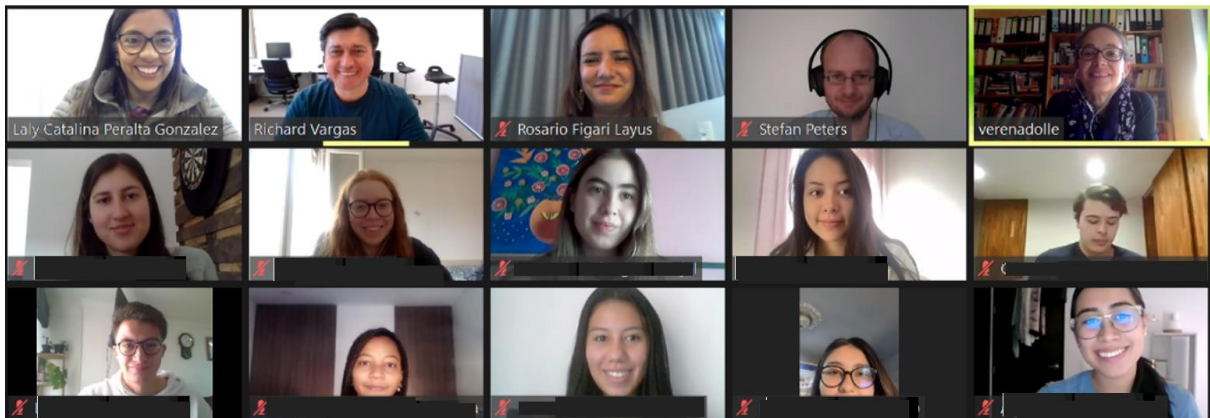
In higher education literature, concepts and approaches to teaching and learning are often interconnected. One of them is that of teaching and learning practices, both of which turn out to be much more effective and sustainable if both teachers and learners work together to dovetail their practices in academic global settings (cf. Blessinger & Sengupta, 2021, ix; Saúde, Raposo, Pereira, & Rodrigues, 2021, xx). Decoupling one from the other is a difficult task. These observations, however, address such practices separately in an analytical manner to explore the performance of both lecturers and students in international digital milieus. On the one hand, they seek to examine teaching practices aiming to increase students’ learning, performance, and socialization in online transnational scenarios. These contexts require teachers to find out innovative methodological alternatives that prompt students to work autonomously to organize, develop, and deepen their own learning while improving their intercultural competences

¹ VIP stands for Virtual International Programme. It features comprehensive online courses for students from both JLU and its international university partners. The ultimate goal of VIP seminars at JLU is threefold. Firstly, they aim to broaden opportunities for collaborative, virtual, and international teaching. Secondly, they foster cross-cultural and digital competencies of students and professors. Finally, they seek to boost student and faculty meaningful exchanges through virtual or blended mobility. For more information related to VIP seminars at the JLU, see Kahl (2022).

online. On the other hand, these observations also explore independent actions of international students as learning practices developed and performed with support from teachers. The implementation of student-centered instruction and environments that consider students and their learning at the core of the educational process fosters meaningful learning processes and challenging outcomes in students (Hoidn & Klemenčič, 2021) immersed in digital international environments.

Teaching practices

This section highlights teaching practices that lecturers used during the VIP seminar. Hanne Tange defines teaching practices as, “a phenomenon involving both concrete actions taken by teachers in order to enhance learning and [...] socialization facilitating students’ internalization of the practical knowledge necessary to perform successfully within a given programme” (2022, p. 15). As an international programme, the teaching practices of this VIP seminar stand out for their heterogeneity, interdisciplinarity, and transnational cooperation.



The VIP seminar with an interdisciplinary and heterogeneous academic environment²

Heterogeneity and interdisciplinarity are fundamental when working in international environments. Professor Stefan Peters made this clear in his introductory remarks to the seminar on March 11, 2022. Referring to the heterogeneity of all the VIP seminars offered by the JLU and its international partner universities, Peters raised the following question: how can we teach in heterogeneous international courses where different intercultural and social experiences prevail? This question was central to NIDIT teaching observations. Multicultural online environments require the cooperation and flexibility of an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural teaching staff. Thus, the professors Laly Catalina Peralta from Colombia (Universidad del Rosario), Verena Dolle from Germany (JLU), Rosario Figari from Argentina (JLU), and Stefan Peters from Germany (JLU) with different academic backgrounds and expertise in disciplines such as law, literature, political science, sociology, and anthropology used different but complementary teaching methodologies to approach the contents of the seminar. As a result, students from

² Some participants gave their authorization to appear in the photo. For data protection of the students who appear in the image, their names are hidden.

various departments were able to work together in the accomplishment of assignments, tasks, and projects making the VIP seminar a rich international online learning experience.

International cooperation efforts, both at institutional and faculty levels, were another highlight of this seminar. On the one hand, the international alliance between the JLU in Giessen, Germany and Universidad del Rosario in Bogota, Colombia allows the VIP seminar to function not only in local contexts both in Colombia and Germany, but also to find out common ground at a global level. Locally, the JLU works cooperatively with Universidad del Rosario to inform possible participants about the seminar. Furthermore, the academic international office of the JLU (Akademisches Auslandsamt der JLU) served as a resource of information and online academic marketing aiming to guide students interested in the VIP seminar. This prompted international students from different areas worldwide to register and attend this particular seminar. Considering it was open to undergraduate and Master's students from different departments, the seminar brought together diverse students with different academic profiles and cultural backgrounds. With the opening of this event to students from other JLU associated universities internationally, its global scope broadened to include participants not only from Colombia and Germany, but also from Peru, Japan and Ghana, among other countries. On the other hand, teaching cooperation enabled the design of an international curriculum. Given that the teachers of this VIP seminar come from different disciplines and nationalities, the teaching staff tailored an international curriculum suited to a cross-cultural audience. An internationalization-oriented curriculum should take into account the inclusion of content on current international issues, multifarious teaching materials, multicultural perspectives, (cf. Dychawy Rosner & Christensen, 2016, p. 23) and different tasks and projects to facilitate students' learning processes in an international digital environment.

Operating under COIL³ practices, the VIP seminar addressed aspects of an internationalization-oriented curriculum. Firstly, the seminar consisted of a multilayered content that permitted studying the current topic of inequalities in Latin America from different angles. In this vein, the thematic framework of the seminar comprised four major themes: *justicia distributiva* (distributive justice); *economía política de las desigualdades sociales* (political economy of social inequalities); *género, interseccionalidad y violencia* (gender, intersectionality, and violence); and *literatura y desigualdad* (literature and inequality). Despite its cross-disciplinarity, professors in charge of this seminar structured it in such a way that it looked like a unified teaching

³ COIL stands for Collaborative Online International Learning also known as 'virtual mobility', 'telecollaboration' or 'virtual exchange' (cf. Beelen, Wimpeny, & Rubin, 2021, p. 30). COIL is a virtual and cross-cultural teaching and learning model that enable instructors based on different countries co-design and administer an international digital course curriculum so that participants attend a short-term academic course. Students usually work with their international classmates to carry out meaningful tasks in a synchronous and/or asynchronous modus. COIL's potential is compelling because it allows for the incorporation of interdisciplinarity, takes into account different cultures and languages. All of this promotes the incorporation and development of global perspectives and intercultural competencies as an alternative to international exchange programs that tend to be costly for institutions and students (cf. Vericht Woodside & López Peñaloza, 2021, p. 79).

block interconnected with each of its parts. A case in point was that professors made sure to constantly referred to sessions already taught.

Secondly, digital teaching materials improved interaction among participants, and enhanced students' learning processes. Professors used information and communication technologies (ICT) for management and delivery of teaching contents, interaction and communication, counselling and guidance, and the design of tasks and projects. Via the online platform e-Aulas UR (Virtual Rooms), the Universidad del Rosario was in charge of administering didactic materials such as power point presentations, reading material, and additional handouts for each session. It also included deadlines, work guides, and explanations on methodological and assessment procedures. Professor Catalina Peralta introduced the use of the platform, showed the location of the material, and recommended that students use it to prepare or review the contents of the seminar. Furthermore, ICT enhanced teaching content delivery and enable participants to interact online through the digital platform *Zoom* and carry out meaningful activities using different digital tools like *Canva* and *Jamboard* as discussed later in this paper.

Thirdly, professors designed a program according to the international nature of participants. Note that both teachers and students alike came not only from different disciplines but also from other cultures.



One of the task with headlines of online newspapers to discuss Violence in social networks.

Accordingly, it was necessary to consider different views of working and studying the contents of the course. To do this, professors divided the academic program into two major sections. While the first part was about theory, the second one was on practice. The first section was between March 18 and April 8, 2022. It emphasized teachers' expertise and mastery of content. The predominant teaching format was that of the *lecture*. Lecturing is the default mode of instruction in many disciplines and has acquired lately during the digital era of teaching a bad reputation due to the centeredness on the teacher and lack of interaction and participation given to students (cf. Hoidn & Reusser, 2021, pp. 17–18). Nonetheless, lecturers of this VIP seminar fostered considerable student participation during the virtual lessons. At the beginning of each session, there were activities with short video-clips, headlines of newspapers, or photos that activated students' prior knowledge, increased their curiosity, and encouraged their participation. During sessions, questions and comments from students written in chat boxes allowed for clarification of items or for some students to provide their points of view or pose questions directly to teachers and classmates. At the end of each session, students had 15 minutes of class time to carry out interactive activities related to specific topics of the seminar under teachers' supervision. Here, students' work took place in breakout rooms.

Learning Practices

These observations conceptualize "learning practices" as those behaviors, processes, and actions that students perform with guidance and supervision from their teachers to reflect on, prepare, and practice as well as consolidate their learning within a cross-cultural and online curriculum. Learning practices require student-centeredness that takes into account not only students' learning processes but also the entire [international] learning [and digital] context (cf. Hoidn & Reusser, 2021, p. 18). This involves reviewing and preparing the contents of the VIP seminar, determining working rules, establishing a topic to research with a global general impact, fostering cooperative work among participants, and presenting a final *capstone project*⁴ that takes into account the aforementioned considerations. Learning practices also implies that students take responsibility for their own learning processes. In this vein, Beelen et al. remind us that online learning environments under COIL framework, "[prompt] students to pursue and persist in online learning spaces whilst also requiring them to take responsibility for organizing their own learning and that of others" (2021, p. 32). In this VIP seminar, students engage in their own learning practices under lecturers' guidance. These observations found that learning practices played an active role in the second general section of this virtual seminar between April 22 and May 6, 2022. This phase was project-oriented aiming students to be in charge of their own learning processes. Hence, teachers divided the whole class into four groups so that students could undertake their capstone projects based on specific case studies. Accordingly, the seminar assistant created a list to organize four thematic groups that students joined depending on their own interests.

Each professor counselled participants' teamwork virtually according to their disciplinary focus. The first group under the tutelage of Professor Catalina Peralta carried out a comparative analysis between different on-line delivery apps operating in Latin America. Professor Stefan Peters mentored the second group, which analyzed the quality of education in Colombian educational system. The third group, supervised by Rosario Figari, was divided into three sub-groups (violence against women combatants, gender violence in social networks, and pro-abortion feminist movements in Colombia and Germany). Professor Verena Dolle assisted the fourth group who worked on 'literature and inequalities'. To investigate students' learning practices in detail, these observations focused on the last group that was clearly international. Professor Dolle is of German origin. Two students were from Colombia, but one of them was in Italy while doing the project. A German student was also part of this group.

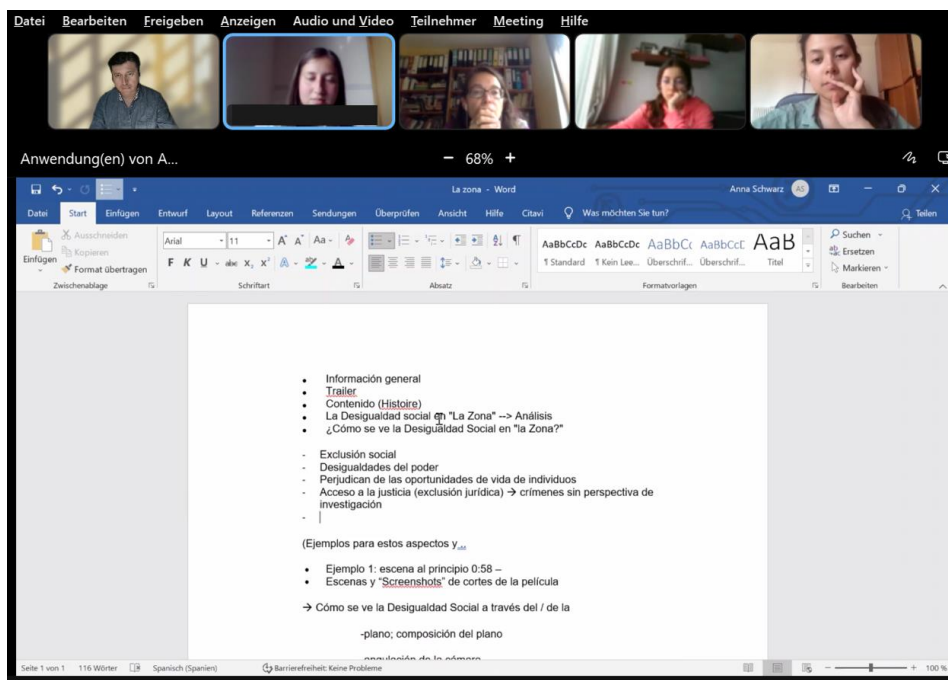
The sessions on April 29 and May 6 were preparation sessions to undertake the short-term research project and its delivery in front of others on May 20. The group met

⁴ A capstone project, also known as *capstone experience* or *culminating project*, is conceptualized as a multifaceted assignment (project in the framework of this VIP seminar) that operates as a final learning experience usually at the end of an academic program or learning-path experience. Similar to a college thesis, capstone projects require students to carry out investigative tasks that culminate in an outcome such as a product, presentation, or performance. These projects, which simulate the development and defense of a thesis, seek to foster critical thinking, problem solving, and skills in learners that will help them for their academic work, modern careers and jobs, as well as personal development. For more, see Swimelar (2020) and The Glossary of Education Reform (2016).

in Professor Dolle's virtual room. These sessions were germane because they addressed not only the *what* but also the *how* of the presentation. In addition, the students and the professor had the opportunity to socialize in a more personalized way in order to get to know each other on academic and cultural levels. This made way for cultural encounters and differences that are important in international education and communication. For example, one of the Colombian students informally greeted Professor Dolle with the expression: ¡Hola profe! (Hi teacher!). In addition, the Colombian students addressed others including professor Dolle as "tú", i.e. informally, in contrast to the student from Germany. Initially this was somewhat unexpected for the professor, since in German academic environments it is common to use the German pronoun "Sie" (usted in Spanish) in a formal manner between students and professors. However, professor Dolle later realized that this addressing coming from students was not a lack of respect, but as a form of closeness and trust in Colombian academic settings. Therefore, this preparation phase was essential for understanding cultural and communication diversities that are meaningful in international educational settings, which results beneficial not only for teachers, but also for students. Rawal and Deardorff assert that, "preparation is absolutely crucial [...] to understand not only differences in customs, contexts, social interactions, and communication styles but also [to] gain a greater self-awareness of [...] cultural backgrounds and communication patterns so that [teachers and students] are equipped to adapt to each other" (2021, p. 55).

In the first session on April 29, the group established the roles that each would follow as well as the approach to adopt in order to develop the capstone project. The role of the professor took on a new dimension. She went from being an experienced specialist in the area, as seen in her teaching session on April 8, to someone closer to her students during the preparation for the project. In other words, the power teacher-student relations prevailing in the classroom took a back seat on April 29 and May 6. The professor assumed the role of a guide rather than that of a simple lecturer acting as a facilitator, learning resource, and guide (cf. Schell & Janicki, 2012, p. 28) for students. Her main suggestions to develop their projects successfully were establishing a thesis, studying specific cases, developing arguments for or against, providing examples within the primary corpus, and presenting conclusions based on the analysis and interpretation of the case studies. These indications for the development of the project clearly resembled those necessary to conduct a research. The implementation of this type of research project in the framework of the VIP seminar among students under the guidance of their professor is akin to the 'constructivist learning model'. Accordingly, learners are in charge of their own learning process by exploring and discovering things all by themselves, transferring knowledge to new experiences or materials, using different mental skills like posing research questions, hypothesizing, predicting, imagining, and researching answers among others (cf. Schell & Janicki, 2012, p. 28). Students participated actively and they were the ones who decided on the material they would work with and how they would present their project. They selected as primary corpus to investigate two films, *La Zona* (Plá, 2007) and *También la Lluvia* (Bollaín, 2010) as well as one documentary *Los Gatos* (Wiesner & Hernández, 2022) that portray inequalities in Latin America. Each one decided to look for the material and research on it. They also agreed to bring their ideas together for the next session.

The second session on May 6 brought students' learning practices to the forefront. Both professor Dolle and the three students jointly formulated the learning outcomes for this session. Firstly, they named and described the material they were working with. In this case, they talked about the visual material and some difficulties they encountered while searching for the films. People could have access to the films in Colombia, whereas Germans experienced some restrictions for it. Professor Dolle suggested the German student to use the Romance studies library of the JLU to have access to the material. Secondly, each student illustrated their findings and justified them. They carried out a small presentation during the session to find out similarities and differences. They also agreed on unifying the presentations. Thirdly, they decided to work together using the free online software *Canva*⁵ for their final presentation in front of others. They also decided to work together asynchronously to edit the content. Finally, they planned their presentation for May 20 following an outline they created together and chose to implement an interactive activity using the online tool *Jamboard*⁶ the day of the presentation. *Jamboard* is a virtual whiteboard that allows others to interact visually so that they can work cooperatively. Eventually, they concluded to do this so that their audience could actively interact. Put another way, the use of the web-based tool *Jamboard*, according to professor Dolle and the students in this small group, could promote discussion among seminar participants and allows them to integrate prior knowledge with what they have learned in the presentation and during the VIP seminar. This session highlighted that giving responsibility to students to assume control of the preparation and presentation of teaching sessions brings several benefits such as increased engagement, creativity, empathy, and development of intercultural competencies.



Students discuss the outline for the presentation of their capstone project with their professor.

⁵ For more information, see: <https://www.canva.com/en/>

⁶ For more, see; <https://edu.google.de/jamboard/>

Teaching and learning practices to develop intercultural competence

Teaching and learning practices of this VIP seminar developed students' intercultural skills from the first meetings. Although professors followed the lecturing format to address important theory between March 11 and April 8, they also prepared in-class activities that allowed students to strengthen different skills they needed to perform in international environments. A case in point was the connection of the content of the VIP seminar with other international scenarios. Furthermore, students worked constantly in different small groups strengthening their participation. The sessions on April 29 and May 6, preparation phase for students' project, displayed cooperation between instructor and students. While the lecturer gave significant suggestions, students established how they contributed and how they needed each other to carry out and present the project in an innovative digital fashion. Both the professor and students discussed also the academic cultural contexts in German and Colombian environments. As an expert not only in the field of literature but also in didactics, professor Dolle assisted with suggestions on how to approach students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The students, in turn, collaborated by sharing their personal opinions as participants interacting with other cultures in their own academic environments. This discussion took place in a spontaneous and natural way.

Without noticing it, learners developed their intercultural skills by interacting with each other while preparing their capstone project. By being exclusively student-centered, the preparatory sessions allowed students to formulate innovative and challenging ideas as well as keeping in mind their international audience. According to Rawal and Deardorff, "[w]hen students work together toward a mutual goal (such as projects), they are better able to practice intercultural skills and learn meaningfully from each other" (2021, p. 54). Exchange of ideas and openness to different views among students from Colombia and Germany indicated how learning practices in online international environments develop participants' intercultural skills intuitively. In this vein, "online learning activities need to be developed to complement and add to each other's skillsets and to enhance the practice of intercultural skills" (Rawal & Deardorff, 2021, p. 55). Online coexistence with students from differing educational and socio-cultural backgrounds, nationalities and profiles was an ideal scenario that enabled participants in this group to form a unique and creative global and intercultural outlook for their presentation.

Students presented their projects on May 13, 20 and 27. Although the content of the presentations varied, the students followed a common presentation pattern. As seen during the preparation of Professor Dolle's group, each group introduced a thesis to support, submitted examples and arguments, and finally gave their concluding remarks. Some even posed research questions that helped them in their research for the capstone project. Students also managed time optimally. When necessary, the professor in charge of the group monitored the time and suggested students to gradually finish certain parts of the presentation and move to the next ones. At the end of each performance, there was room for discussion, questions or comments opened to all VIP seminar participants. Professors also commented on the content and form of the presentations. These observations interpreted feedback provided as a form of assessment. Seminar participants highlighted positive features of the presentations. Regarding aspects for

improvement, the feedback focused not only on what to do better, but also on how to do it. Consequently, each posterior presentation improved depending on the comments given by both professors and students on previous presentations.

Conclusions

The VIP seminar promoted the development of learning practices of students in an autonomous form but driven by teachers. This was particularly evident in three aspects of this seminar: instructional practices, learning tasks and outcomes, and assessment. Firstly, instructional practices implies that digital content, didactic material, and in general, teaching as well as learning procedures and approaches are clear, available, and doable for participants. As seen in the section devoted to theory, the professors of this VIP seminar carried out different didactic practices that had a positive learning influence on students. Here, it is necessary to highlight the role of ICT to maximize learning practices. Contents, didactic and supporting material, as well as explanations on methodology and assessment were available on the online platform e-Aulas UR. With an overview of the seminar contents, learners could make predictions, conjectures, or inferences, as well as activate previous knowledge, which stimulated interest and expectations in learners. Considering that learning material was always available for students in this online platform, they were prepared beforehand for their lessons. Consistent participation during the sessions made it possible to confirm this. Furthermore, methodology was open and accessible for learners. This way, explanations about activities, work guides, and additional information as well as extra material helped to instill curiosity and promote engagement in students. As a result, learning practices encouraged by professors of the VIP seminar improved, learners' participation increased and discussions were content-rich and elaborated. This was a constant in practically all the sessions of the seminar.

Secondly, the aforementioned teaching practices serve as illustrations of lecturers' teaching processes and behaviors that potentially influence student performances in online scenarios. Professors supported instructional practices with a consistent and blended use of synchronous and asynchronous digital tools. Besides, lecturers promoted and exemplified such tools during the sessions about theory. Students had fifteen-minute time to carry out tasks in breakout rooms. This fostered cooperation and active participation. The professors were attentive and supportive when students needed guidance. The combination between teaching and learning practices allowed students to incorporate and consolidate theory learned in a practical way. These tasks also prepared them for the capstone project that they were required to accomplish at the end of the course.

The presentation of the capstone projects turned out to be of high quality. The two preparatory sessions allowed both students and teachers to work in a cooperative manner. The indications given by the teacher to develop the project were in line with the constructivist model of learning where students are in charge of their own learning processes by carrying out challenging tasks that allow them to develop research skills, teamwork, planning, development and presentation of complex projects. The outcome, which was the final presentation of the capstone project in front of others, showcased students' engagement and efforts. One could observe that each presentation followed the guidelines outlined by Professor Dolle in her group during the preparatory phase.

That is, students presented a thesis to defend, provided arguments for and against as well as examples to support their thesis, and gave some conclusions based on their findings. This allowed participants to elaborate their ideas in an organized, argumentative, and structural way. Likewise, the audience seems to be more attentive to the material presented by their classmates and participate more.

Finally, the assessment was more formative than summative. The reason for this was that professors afforded multiple participation opportunities to students during the seminar. Being student-centered, participants were able to demonstrate their command of the topics in each session. The idea of having 15 minutes of presentation at the end of the session was a very good strategy. In this way, lecturers were able to give constant feedback. Meanwhile students were aware of their strengths and weaknesses. In general, professors granted on-going feedback to their students, which relates to formative assessment. Such assessment, beyond a grade, sought to make students aware of their abilities. Professors not only emphasized positive aspects of students, but also those they needed to improve. Students also received feedback from their partners as for how to carry out their presentations much better. This was positive for the group in general.

Professors provided feedback to students in three aspects: the small tasks performed in each session, the preparation and presentation of the project, and the final written work. Allowing the students to perform small tasks with certain outcomes, professors were able to monitor students' performance in-depth. Based on the outcomes obtained and presented, students got an idea of how their final presentation would look like. During the project preparation and presentation phases, participants also received constant feedback. Since these sessions aimed at project planning, participants had to be prepared with material that they could share with others. Students had to decide how to fit or integrate each contribution into the final presentation. The professor in charge of the group, in this case professor Dolle, concentrated in these two aspects as well as the cohesion of the presentations. The other professors did the same. They used these points in their respective groups to provide feedback. Another aspect to evaluate was a final essay that the students had to prepare based on their final oral presentation. Students had to write their texts by answering the research question or thesis elaborated during the development of the capstone project. Among the material for the seminar, the online platform also contained a document that provided students with guidelines to follow when writing the final text. Teachers would take into account both the form and the content of the final papers. Some important points that students had to take into account were to be able to write a text in a scientific way, i.e. to be able to analyze and discuss a topic. In conclusion, the VIP seminar "Desigualdades en América Latina: una historia sin fin?" is an exemplary teaching and learning scenario, based on good practices that foster cooperation, empathy, innovation, and engagement in participants. In this type of digital and international seminars, academic practices of professors and students turn both internationalization and digitalization into main tools to enhance student-centeredness while developing intercultural competences of participants.

The VIP seminar had positive takeaways that future academic events of this nature should consider for optimal online learning experiences. Nonetheless, there were also aspects that both professors and students should improve. There were students who did not follow certain parameters indicated in the instructions or were not prepared with

recommended readings for the sessions of this VIP seminar. Many professors struggle with these issues in their online classes. However, preparatory activities and group work sessions between students within this seminar served to create a cooperative environment among participants. Thus, lecturers should promote more small groups in breakout rooms for a total cooperative learning and scaffolding.

In relation to the presentation of the capstone projects, some technical difficulties related to the Internet connection surfaced. For example, a couple of presentations took a long time to upload when participants presented online. Professors and students could minimize this predicament in two ways. On the one hand, participants in a given group should be able to present other parts of the presentation or at least summarize each part. This in case one of the participants cannot open the presentation online. On the other hand, teachers should promote a deadline prior to the presentation day so that students can post their slides on the online platform.

An important part that was not within the scope of these observations was the final papers that students wrote for the VIP seminar. Similarly, to the presentations, students should also upload their papers in the online platforms. This would have some benefits. Professors could promote peer-feedback so that students, including lecturers who were not in charge of other groups, read their papers and can provide feedback. Likewise, students may have the opportunity to have different versions of their assignments in order to improve the final papers.

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