

Immersive Critical Thinking in Asynchronous Sociological Classrooms - A 360 Global Learning Experience

Abstract

This article presents an overview of recent advances in Teaching critical thinking skills in asynchronous classrooms. This paper utilizes 360 global learning experiences to demonstrate how critical thinking can be achieved in asynchronous global classrooms. Data is extracted from students' online discussions and learning projects among 147 American and Costa Rican students. Thematic analysis method is used to manage and analyze data. Findings reveal that weekly online conversations provided students with an experiential learning opportunity; comparative analysis of social policies in learning projects created a critical thinking process to analyze, synthesize, and assess information they find online and obtained from classroom exchange. The study-abroad experience further enhanced critical insight already gained in the global virtual classrooms to the lived experiences. The author argues that critical thinking is a process. Through personal involvement in class interactions, group learning projects, and preferably onsite study abroad experiences, critical thinking is an immersive experience evolving in the process of learning. Meanwhile, sociological imagination is developed through micro-level of personal experience sharing and macro-level of comparative understanding of social policies across nations in a virtual classroom.

Heying Jenny Zhan

Associate Professor at
Georgia State University
(Atlanta, USA)
E-mail: hghan@gsu.edu

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Introduction

Critical thinking is often regarded as the “hallmark of a good education” (Hammersley-Fletcher & Hanley 2016: 978). Faculty in most higher education institutions in the West have a responsibility to encourage fostering students’ critical thinking abilities and skills throughout their academic career. What does critical thinking mean exactly?

Critical thinking, according to Goldsmith (2013, p.9) is “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.” Based on this conceptualization, the process of critical thinking involves three domains: knowledge, self, and the world (Barnett 1997). Knowledge is often contextual; self is often a subjective filter of the “world” of information and knowledge. In global virtual classrooms, can students from different social and cultural backgrounds across national borders develop critical thinking skills through the learning process asynchronously? This study offers some insight into this question.

Background

Critical Thinking in Sociological Teaching–360 GLE

360GLE refers to 360 degrees of global learning experiences. It is “a global education platform featuring curated, interactive, multidisciplinary content from global experts around the world, purpose-built to internationalize curriculum and promote study abroad.” (studyabroadassociation.com 2025). In this website, there is an extensive video library including content from around the world, featuring interactive 360 degrees of global experiences. Different from the 360GLE embedded in the study abroad association, the campus community online-global-learning website defines 360 as a “sustainable access framework,” through which “institutions can streamline operations, engage more students, and remove financial burdens”

(Global 360). This model delivers “scalable, high-impact online global learning programs while promoting traditional study abroad.” Whether it is through study abroad or online community global learning, 360GLE enriches students’ learning experiences and increases students’ knowledge about a specific country or region that students are exploring about their people, cultures, and various topics relevant to a specific field. However, no specific video or film is tailored to enhance critical thinking in the field of sociology and comparative social policies. This paper explores the applications and implications of 360 GLE in real asynchronous classroom settings in addition to study abroad programs in sociological teaching.

Study Abroad Programs

Study abroad programs have been viewed as a high impact activity of a college education. They have been promoted at university campuses “as a way to acquire new knowledge and skills, enhance personal growth, and foster professional development” (Luo & Jamieson-Drake 2015: 32). Previous research has indicated that study abroad experiences may improve participants’ cognitive skills and elevate interest in international economic, political, and cross-cultural issues when compared to those who do not participate (Grabau 2007, Mckeown 2006, Pascarella and Terenzini 2005).

Participation in study abroad was significantly and positively associated with student gains in the ability to understand moral and ethical issues, communication skills, academic performance and overall satisfaction (Luo and Jamieson-Drake 2015). Study abroad participants are reported to have greater academic engagement (Dolby 2004, 2007, Hadis 2005, Vande Berg 2007), and higher graduation rates (Posey 2003).

Typically, Caucasian, female, and students with resources are more likely to participate in study abroad programs (Salisbury et al. 2009). Male, minority, and students from lower social class are less likely to participate in study abroad programs (Luo and Jamieson-Drake 2015). Even though study abroad programs are highly promoted in higher education, only about 2% of over 21 million students enrolled in US colleges and universities participated in study abroad programs in 2011-2012 before

Covid era (Luo and Jamieson-Drake 2015: 30). A major deterrence for this participation is the financial cost associated with the travel and related activities.

One of the important features of a study abroad experience is experiential learning. “Experiential learning emphasizes the central role experience plays in the learning process and offers a holistic integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, perceptions, cognition, and behavior” (Soyer et al. 2023, p. 151). When students have an opportunity to immerse themselves in a culture abroad during a study abroad experience, they have a chance to learn about the other cultures and social policies by experience. Then, they reflect upon their own perceptions and experiences in comparison. This comparative experiential learning allows students to re-evaluate the world around them based on the experience. This process itself embeds three domains of critical thinking, knowledge, self, and the world into the experience of study abroad (Barnett 1997). However, when the entire world was under lockdown, or when students do not have the resources to study abroad and experience this worldly experience, how can students access experiential learning opportunities? This is when global virtual exchange came in to offer a contribution.

Global Virtual Exchange

Global virtual exchange can be traced back to the end of the Cold War in 1988 (Ilearn.org 2007), it became most widely used to enhance foreign language learning in Computer-Assisted Communication (CAC) (O’Dowd 2017). Still, online learning in higher educational institutions constituted only 15.7% of all classes prior to the onset of Covid-19 epidemic (Kozimor 2020: 181). Within a month, in March of 2020, all face-to-face classes were converted to online remote teaching and learning in the U.S. This online teaching lasted for one semester in some universities; over 2 years in most universities in some countries, such as in China. Virtual learning expanded rapidly since the Covid-19 pandemic (Stevens Initiative 2020; Vásquez 2022; Zak 2021). Virtual learning involving multiple groups in different locations is often referred to as virtual exchange.

Virtual exchange requires four main components by definition: 1). It is a people-to-people educational program or activities; 2) it is enabled by technology; 3) these people or groups are geographically separated; and 4) there is the support of educators or facilitators (<http://evolve-erasmus.eu/about-evolve/what-is-virtual-exchange/>). When this geographical separation is across national borders, this exchange is labeled, “global virtual exchange.”

Since Covid-19, researchers have found that global virtual exchange can be beneficial to students’ learning experience and outcome. Lee et al. (2022: 91), found that international virtual exchange “leads to higher average GPA” in successive semester after taking the course and it also increased students’ graduation rates. Furthermore, virtual exchange enables an international experience for large groups of students that might otherwise not experience global learning (Abdel-Kader 2020). Only 5% of African Americans out of 15% of its student population; 9% out 17% of Hispanic students participated in study abroad programs (Alami et al. 2022). Global virtual exchange is affordable for all students on campus with no additional out-of-pocket cost. Underrepresented populations are more likely to benefit from international experiences through virtual exchange (Redden, 2012; Xu et al. 2013). Global virtual exchange provides first-generation college students with a cost-effective way to gain international experience, helping to address disparities in financial resources for travel abroad. Consequently, students who participated in global virtual exchange “demonstrate an upward trend in intercultural competency” (Commandar, 2022, p.14).

Global Comparative Analysis and Critical Thinking in Sociological Teaching

In the process of obtaining knowledge, global comparative studies offer deep understanding of a similar social phenomena in different social contexts. For instance, by examining Islamophobia comparatively in three major cities of Madrid, Paris, and London, Eseverri-Meyer (2024) found, Muslim activists in these 3 mega cities used similar “bonding” or “bridging” social capital but different techniques to organize social groups against Islamophobia because of the different social contexts in each mega city.

Global comparative understanding may easily slip into over-generalization. After comparative analysis of treatments for psychosocial disabilities across countries in the Global North and Global South, Ito (2023) challenges this “binary thinking” because East Asian countries are neither global north, nor global south. He proposes “discarding” the binary thinking.

Similarly, Egege and Kutieleh (2004) found that students in the East, such as from China or Japan, are often perceived as “lacking” in critical thinking abilities. They are typically “obedient” and “quiet” in the classroom compared to Western students who are “independent” thinkers capable of challenging teachers or authorities (Zhou et al. 2008).

In a global virtual classroom, when obedience or independence are not easily identified, quiet students may have equal access to online learning, then, the challenge becomes: how do faculty encourage critical thinking in online sociological classrooms? In sociological teaching, sociological imagination is considered as the “first essential concept” and the “first essential competence” (Palmer 2023 p.1). What is “sociological imagination” and how to teach “sociological imagination” in sociological teaching?

Mills (1959) defined sociological imagination as “a quality of mind” that enables individuals to “analyze the micro, macro, and historical factors surrounding any phenomena” (Palmer, 2023, p. 2). Some sociologists have taught students’ sociological imagination through sociological writing (Gordy and Peary 2005) or participating in service learning (Simpson and Elias 2011). Others emphasized teaching critical thinking skills in sociological teaching. According to Richard and Miller (1996), critical thinking includes 6 “abilities” to detect assumptions and values, to assess if an argument is logical, to draw inferences from data or evidence, to evaluate if evidence support a conclusion, to detect missing information, and to think up alternatives, inferences, and arguments (p. 33). In post-Covid-19 era, technological advances have enabled students in different parts of the world to share the same virtual classroom cross-national borders asynchronously. Few sociologists have examined innovative ways in sociological teaching with sociological imagination to instill critical thinking.

This study adds to the literature of sociological teaching by integrating 3 different modes of teaching: global virtual exchange, study abroad programs, and 360 global learning experiences. In so doing, we hope to offer insights into how asynchronous global classrooms can foster critical thinking by transnational dialogues, in addition to onsite study abroad experiential learning with assistance of 360 GLE web-learning resources. Consequently, we hope to shed light in sociological imagination in asynchronous classrooms of sociological teaching.

Research Context and Methods

Data for this article is drawn from the course, “Global aging and Families.” It is a senior level undergraduate course cross-listed for sociology, gerontology, and public policy students at a University in Southeast of the United States. While students are recommended to have completed introductory courses in sociology or gerontology, this recommendation is not a mandatory requirement. In traditional in-person teaching semesters, class enrollment typically ranged from 20 to 35 students. Following the shift to online instruction at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, enrollment in the online iteration of this course increased to 48, which was the maximum enrollment limit set by the university for senior level undergraduate classes.

During Covid-19, the university launched a Global Virtual Exchange initiative to encourage faculty with international connections to expand their classrooms virtually abroad. As part of this effort, a semester-long training course was provided for instructors who participated in this initiative. After completing the training, the faculty launched the first virtual exchange with a university in China in the Fall of 2022. In the Spring of 2023, this class was launched as a global virtual exchange class with students in Costa Rica, having a week of study abroad program as an optional participation during the Spring break in March. This paper focuses exclusively on the experience of Global Virtual Exchange between American and Costa Rican students in 2023, 2024, and 2025.

American and Costa Rican students shared the same textbook, syllabus, and class activities. The course was structured into four major components: 1. Gaining

knowledge of global aging and social policies through textbook readings, supplemented by weekly quizzes and two examinations. 2. Experiential learning by weekly cross-national dialogues through online discussions between U.S. and Costa Rican students. Each participant was required to pose one thought-provoking question and respond to two peers—one international and one domestic. 3. Learning projects as an individual and group efforts combined. Each student was required to select a country for their focused study and research, then, this country is grouped into different models of healthcare and retirement systems, such as Bismack, Beveridge, national insurance, out-of-pocket, and mixed. To limit the number of students within each group, three more groups were added based on geographic locations: African, Asian, North/South American countries. 4. Study-abroad participation and reflections was an optional part of the learning process. Study abroad participants were required to have a site visit to an aging service organization in America before going to Costa Rica, sharing the site visit power point before departure. After returning, they were required to write a reflection paper. All these readings, weekly interactions, learning projects, and study abroad activities were designed to achieve the 6 learning objectives, simplified in 3 goals: 1. Knowledge acquisition; 2. Experiential learning, and 3. Critical thinking. In this research, I will focus on how critical thinking is immersed in the process of learning in 360 degrees of global learning experiences.

Data sources

This paper utilizes 3 class activities as data source 1. Online weekly communication, 2. Two learning projects, 3. Study abroad reflection papers, as primary qualitative data to generate understanding of how 360 degrees of global learning experiences can embed critical thinking in the learning processes. Data of online weekly communications and discussions was retrieved from weekly students' exchanges or conversations posted on the Packbacks platform. Packback is an online learning tool that facilitates online classroom learning and exchange. It has the function of encouraging thought-provoking questions by setting a curiosity score of a

certain level, such as 60. Short posting or unsupported claims generally receive lower than 30 points. Posts with substantive details supported by personal experiences or references often receive 60+ curiosity scores. It also detects plagiarism as well as short or meaningless remarks. Students were required to post one thought-provoking question per week and respond to two classmates within the same week. One response should be addressed to an international student, while the other should be directed toward a domestic student. Each odd week, the instructor provided a general question as a guideline; during even weeks, students are encouraged to raise self-generated questions based on the readings or prior class discussions.

From the spring semester of 2023 to the Spring of 2025, a total of 1345 contextualized questions and 2512 responses were posted among 147 American and Costa Rican students. Each contextual question and response ranges from 100-300 words. Using it as a database, the researcher started with a stem key words search based on the major themes covered in the class and levels of experiential learning and critical thinking. The first search with key words, such as “healthcare, medical insurance, hospital, doctor visit, medical cost, etc..” generated 28 pages 6441 words of conversations in 2023 Spring; 19 pages 10, 507 words in 2024 Spring; 43 pages, 14, 517 words in 2025 Spring. The second search was based on keys such as “pension, retirement, financial planning, savings.” The third search focused on intergenerational relations, with key words such as “intergeneration” “grandparents” “elder care” “parental care” “grandchildren” and “long-term care.” In total, the online conversation data yielded 217 pages, 67, 037 words of text. To further narrow down the focus, this paper included only those conversations that involved both American and Costa Rica students in the question and response format.

Data from learning projects originated from two assignments: one focused on comparative healthcare, and the other on comparative pension systems. For study-abroad students, they replaced the second learning project of comparative pension systems with comparative long-term care policies and services. To complete each learning project, students must first select a country for in-depth study while all students were required to study the U.S. and Costa Rica about their health care and

pension systems (see Appendix 1, p. 20-29). Based on the country they select, students were grouped by healthcare models, such as Bismarck, Beveridge, National Health Insurance model, etc. The Bismarck model is represented by Germany, funded by employer/employee co-payment into a healthcare fund. It is pooled into a national “sickness fund” (Whittington et al. 2021, p. 162). The Beveridge model originated in the United Kingdom, in which the government is the single payer and single provider in the National Health Service (NHS) system (Ibid., p. 163). The National Health Insurance (NHI) model is represented by Canada, which pools funds like Germany, but the government is the single payer like in the U.K. (Ibid., pp. 164–65). In the second step, students were expected to write a research paper to compare the three countries using statistics included in the table (See Appendix 1). In the third step, each student was expected to write a comparative paper of all the countries in the model or group. In the fourth step, students in the same group were expected to have a group meeting and create a Power Point Presentation to rank the countries in the group in various indicators, such as life expectancy, GDP per capita, number of doctors per capita, etc. Finally, students must record their group presentation and post it on iCollege, an online app, that facilitates mutual learning. All students were expected to peer-review the power point presentations of the group project and rate them. The rating criteria were provided by the instructor (see Appendix 1, page 29). They cover major aspects of group participation, including quality of the content, group participation rate, visual effect of the presentation, and presentation quality etc. The group that received the highest score would receive 10 extra points (2 percentage points) for each member. The group that received the second highest score would be rewarded with 5 extra points (one percentage point) for each member.

Data Analysis

Because the class is organized by themes, theme-based data analysis makes good sense. Using NVida-14, the researcher started data analysis using stem-words to understand the top 50 most frequently used words in the data of weekly Packback online conversations. Only top 10 most frequent key stem words are included in this

paper due to space limitation. This frequency of key stem words was further analyzed by locating the contexts and frequency of the conversations, which represent the themes or categories of the coding (see Table 1).

Table 1: Frequency and Contexts Key words and stem-words

Words	Frequency	Context	Frequency within	Contexts, Categories, themes	Critical Thinking
Retire, retirement, retiring, retired, retirements, retires.	473	-Time/age to retire --Knowledge for retirement --retirement benefits --financial stability/security for retirement --Savings for retirement	36 45 109 127 156	-Social/familial context -National differences -Comparative	Personal, familial, experiential, Societal, systemic
Care, caring, cared, careful, cares	276	--take care of (a family member, financial needs) --Long-term care insurance --access/resources to health care --primary care, care doctor, care provider, quality care, specialist care --care process, emergency care, home care, urgent care, preventive care, Tri-care, professional care --avoiding care, no care --Medical care cost and access --careful financial planning	42 6 74 34 27 6 75 12	-family experiences -care types and qualities -care access or lack thereof -financial planning and care planning	-Familial, -experiential, -communal, -Comparative, -Cross-national comparisons, -connecting personal to national.
Health, healthy, healthcare, health condition, health insurance, health insurance plan	255	--protecting health, health condition, emotional health, mental health, good health, better health, health behavior, healthy life-style, health habit --Healthcare cost, healthcare planning, healthcare coverage --health insurance, healthcare experiences -- health check-up, health literacy, digital health literacy, health information, health decisions, health anxiety, health clinics, public health	36 82 61 76	-Health, health behavior, health life-style, health habit -healthcare cost and access -personal experiences of healthcare --health literacy and public health	-Personal, -familial, -Experiential, -national comparative -connecting personal, familial, to national differences

Insured, insurance, insurances, insurers	244	--health insurance --not having (health) insurance, --insurance plan, insurance coverage, --workplace insurance, private insurance, --insurance through family; off family insurance -- insurance cost, good insurance, bad insurance --Social Security Insurance, Long-term care insurance, Disability Insurance,	78 8 68 35 24 25 6	-healthcare access, -Healthcare coverage -personal or familial --cost of insurance -types of insurance	-Personal, -Familial -Contextual -Experiential, -comparative
Age, aging, ages, aged	218	--age to retire --retirement age --aging population, global aging, understanding of aging --healthcare expenses as people age, aging and illness, --aging services, aging perspectives, aging in another country, aging in America --aging parents, aging adults, aging process --aged individual issues as I, my siblings, parents age	36 40 21 31 27 46 17	-when to retire -healthcare and aging -aging related services	-personal -familial -national -global -comparative -conceptual -connecting persona, to social, to global
Plan, planning, plans, planned	207	--Financial plan, financial planning --pension plan, retirement plan, savings plan, 401K plan --Have planned, Action plan --plan on (having kids, lower reliance) --payment plan; insurance plan	55 70 23 24 35	-Financial planning -retirement planning -Action plan -payment plan -insurance plan	-personal -experiential -familial, -systemic -national differences
Savings, save, saved, saving	202	--money saved (to save) before/for retirement --savings, financial plannings, savings and investments --how much to save --when to save? The earlier the better, early savings, saving every month --Important to save --Savings and pensions, retirement plans, 401Ks	24 70 12 16 22 58	-When to save -How much to save -where to save, -importance of saving	-personal -experiential, -exploratory, -comparative, -systemic

Family, families, familial	196	--retirement experience in the family --family experiences and communications, --immigrant families --family bond, family ties, family obligations, live with family, family help, family responsibilities, family recipe, family herbal treatment --low-income family, family having no health insurance --adding family member, and child-birth cost --family, taking care of grandparents, or older family member, culture, family loyalty, --family bond suffocating	70 37 6 28 8 20 26 1	-familial experiences -Family bonds and exchanges -cost or raising a family -social class and family experience differences	-familial, intergenerational, -social class and family differences -immigrant families -Contextual, - experiential -Comparative
Social, socially	188	--Social Security (income, eligibility, running out, benefits) --Social media --Social activities/services/policies --Social care, socially acceptable...	98 46 32 12	-Social Security as a program - communication -social norms, services, policies	-Social systems -social media --Comparative --contextual
Need, needed, needing, needs, needy	180	--Need to (work, rely on others, save, support family, need to start preparing for retirement, plan, live comfortably, need to see doctor, specialist, surgery, medication, dental care; government need to take action, need to have social programs) --Basic needs (cost of living, food, rent, transportation, in need), the need for affordable healthcare -- need for assisted living --emotional need --support old age or aging parents' needs, meeting the residents' needs, in times of need, our needs in the future, addressing the needs of the older adults	88 48 12 8 24	-need as a personal action -need as a noun for basics -types of needs -need at national level (affordable healthcare)	-personal, -contextual, -societal Linking personal needs to national needs

Source: Information provided by the author.

The final step of the data analysis is the higher level of abstraction to understand the level of critical thinking that students may have gained in these conversations. The researcher acknowledges that the themes did not “emerge” fully from the selected data; rather, they are revealed by the researchers who actively worked to “capture implicit meanings beneath the data surface” (Clarke & Braun, 2018, 108). For example, the dialogues about healthcare and medical care were seemingly personal and descriptive. Yet, beyond personal stories of experiences are the varying national, regional, racial, and gendered experiences embedded in personal story-telling. This is a type of experiential learning that goes far beyond personal experiences. In critical thinking, these discussions exposed students to different cultural norms and social contexts. It increased students’ cultural sensitivity and critical thinking ability. For research and publication, IRB approval was obtained (H25403). No students’ names, identifications, or characteristics are revealed. Data is reported at an aggregated scale to ensure confidentiality. The data set remains private and is not publicly accessible. For confidentiality purpose, the names of both American and Costa Rican universities involved are not disclosed.

Findings

Critical thinking by Asynchronous Online Conversations

Discussions about Healthcare

In each week, students are required to conduct on-line conversation by raising one thought-provoking question; and respond to one international student, and one domestic student’s questions. In week 5, students are learning about healthcare models and systems. Meanwhile, students are writing a paper on comparative healthcare systems and practices in the U.S., Costa Rica, and a third country of their choice. During this week of study, students must log online to carry on a conversation with classmates about this topic. In the “instructor’s guidelines” section, students are encouraged to share their personal or familial experiences of the most recent doctor

or hospital visit (see Appendix 1, p.13-16). These shared experiences cover issues related to issues of health insurance, the co-pay, the weight of co-pay relevant to monthly income, the wait-time, the transportation to and from this medical visit. In this dialogue, students must raise a curious question based on their own experience. Because the guidelines for these curious questions are very experience-based; students tend to have very engaged conversations.

Based on key and stem words search of the weekly conversations, students discussed health and health care related topics 255 times; Another 244 times were discussions about health insurance. If combining these two, the total healthcare and health insurance related discussions ran up to 499 times, the highest frequency in the weekly discussions.

In the discussion of the importance of having healthcare insurance, one student raised the question: “How has health insurance covered your medical expenses or failed covering your medical expenses?” Three students responded to this question, three additional students followed up the responses of these students as second level responses to continue the discussion, all sharing their experiences of not having health insurance. One student wrote, “I, unfortunately, don’t have health insurance and I haven’t for a long time. Not having a real job is the biggest factor contributing to this...” The second student stated, “I hate how health insurance is so hard to access. I didn’t have insurance for awhile as well and didn’t qualify for Medicaid until I became pregnant...” Another student wrote, “Growing up, my family didn’t have health insurance because it just wasn’t affordable for us...” Three other students shared their experiences of being dropped out of their parents’ health insurance at age 26. One student shared her grandmother’s kidney stone surgery, costing \$28,700, paid by Medicare, \$4100 copay after Medicare; another student shared the cost of her mother’s retina eye surgery at \$10,000, paid by Medicare.

Meanwhile, a Costa Rican student shared her experience of taking her daughter who had autism to receive care. “In the hospital, we waited for the doctors, and they reviewed her and dispatched the medicines. It was a long Sunday night, but we received great medical assistance. No fee was charged for any transportation, medicine, or visit.”

She explained because she, as all other citizens in Costa Rica, paid a monthly fee of 10% of her salary into the “Caja Costarricense del Seguro Social”(CCSS).

The reading of the comparative healthcare systems, the sharing of actual experiences between American and Costa Rican students, and the reflections among students themselves have led to a path of critical thinking with a practical implication.

Among the many heated questions and responses, one student raised a deeply curious question:

“Do you have a sickness fund?” Inside the question, the student added these details:

“After reading chapter 6, it is said that the Bismarck model follows a plan where employees and employers pay into a "sickness fund" then this fund is allocated to cover the health care for everyone in that country. This made me think, dang, I don't have my own sickness fund and living in the United States, where healthcare is not universal, I would be screwed if I did have some serious medical issue.”

Students have already understood from the textbook about the Bismarck model; their personal experience of not having a sickness fund living in the U.S. make them become “critical” of their own self and the world they are living in.

Three students responded to this question. One student said:

“I definitely can relate to this post. Since I don't have a sickness fund and I live in a country where access to healthcare is not guaranteed, I would be completely out of luck if I ever developed a severe medical condition.”

As shown, these questions and responses are based on personal experiences, inspired by newly gained knowledge of Bismarckian model of sickness fund, and critical of one’s own standing within their own “world”. Students are more knowledgeable of better healthcare systems in other societies, such as Germany and Costa Rica. They became critical of American health care system and brought this knowledge to one’s own personal growth for healthcare emergency fund. This process of critical thinking is developing a “quality of mind” in Mill’s words, that allows them to make connections between the individual at micro-level, the healthcare system in the U.S. at the macro-level, and cross-national comparisons at global level (Palmer 2023). This process of thinking is an example of “sociological imagination” in the making.

Discussions about Comparative Pension Systems

In week 9, students were reading about comparative retirement policies, meanwhile they were conducting research for learning project 2 on comparative pension systems. In the same week, they were encouraged to talk to their own family members about their pensions and retirement planning and share these familial conversations and experiences with their classmates online about pensions and retirement planning. Based on key words and stem words search, retirement-related discussions had 473 repetitions among the weekly discussions.

In the discussion of retirement preparedness, a non-traditional American student wrote these comments, after her question of “have you put some money aside for your retirement?”:

I am 54 years old and staring down the road at retirement in about 13 years makes me realize I do not have enough saved and have a lot of resources to put in place. The time goes by so fast, especially when you are raising children and so focused on current bills, feeding and taking care of your kids. When seeing the different systems of all the countries, especially the US and how social security actually works and what it means for me when I retire, I had a huge wakeup call!

A Costa Rican student asked, “Do you have plans for another income for your retirement, or do you plan on living only by your pension? Fifteen students responded to this question; some of these responses include:

“I am planning for retirement by saving.”

“I have planned another income besides the future pension.”

“I have many ideas for continuing to prepare for retirement.”

“I have so many things that I love to do. I love to write, I love to create music, I am an Uber driver...”

Clearly, saving for retirement is a topic that brought the learning of social policies home to families and individuals. Students can easily relate to these questions at the personal and familial levels. These questions and answers make them think about today as well as their planning for the future.

Discussions about Intergenerational relations

Issues related to students' familial experiences received a lot of attention and heated discussions. The second most frequent key words were related to care and caring; there were 276 frequencies of care related topics. The contexts of these conversations were often familial, intergenerational, relational, or long-term care related exchanges. One student asked: "Do you think having children ensures that someone will take care of you when you are older?" Four classmates responded to this question.

"Not particularly. I think it has to do more on tradition and resources...When I was born my great grandma was seven months widowed, and she offers my parents to live with her to on one side accompany her and on the other for my parents to save money for a house and for them to have help with me when I was a baby."

In response, another female student shared her own caregiving experience:

"Now I'm an adult and I take care of her when she has to be alone, not because a responsibility or because only I am available but because I want to spend time with her and I think taking care of her as a thank you for everything she had done for me."

A female student from a Mexican family background added: "I can speak a little bit about the Mexican culture. It is typically expected that once your parents get old, they will come live with you, and you are expected to take care of them."

Using personal and familial experiences of intergenerational mutual care, another female student told her own family stories in 3 generations, she said:

"I do not think that having children ensures that one would be taken care of. I have witnessed, over time, the ways in which two generations were cared for during their older age. My great grandmother lived with her daughter, me and my grandmother, for close to 25 years before she died. Then when my grandmother begins to have mobility issues, her daughters took care of her until she needed around the clock care, so she spent the last seven years of her life in a nursing home..."

These weekly conversations provided students with experiential learning based on personal experiences in different social and cultural contexts. The three domains of knowledge: informational knowledge through textbook reading about different models of healthcare or pension systems; personal knowledge about life

details; and comparative knowledge between one's own experiences with experiences of other individuals in a different social context, by comparing sickness fund and lack of universal healthcare, a process of critical thinking for students was generated, and was evolving as the semester progressed. This process of critical thinking would otherwise have been too abstract to make much sense.

Critical Thinking by Comparative Group Projects

While students are reading the textbook about healthcare policies in different countries and participating in weekly discussions about healthcare experiences among themselves, they are also doing a group learning project on comparative healthcare systems. As discussed earlier, all students must read articles assigned about American and Costa Rica health care systems, in addition, each student must study a third country. On the due date, all students must post their papers on a discussion board where all other classmates are able to access. The first step of comparison is within the group, either by models of healthcare, such as Bismarck, Beveridge, and National Insurance models; or by continents (Asian, African, Americans). At the end of this comparative process, students gained a broad understanding of healthcare or pension systems among several countries in the model or group, their comments demonstrate a process of reflective and critical thinking:

One student said: "I believe as Americans, we tend to see other countries as second grade. This project has solidified my belief that not only could we be doing better but so-called 2nd grade countries are doing so much better." **(Self-reflective, critical of self and American policies—sociological imagination in the making)**

In this case, the American student clearly referred to "Costa Rica" as a second-grade country because its GDP per capita is a little over \$20,000/per capita per year in the first paper he wrote, compared to over \$60,000/GDP per capita in the U.S. in 2022. But as he deepened his study, he came to understand that this second-grade country offers much better healthcare than the U.S. This critical learning is based on knowledge, weekly conversations, as well as comparative understanding through the learning project.

Another American student commented:

“I learned about how other countries go about healthcare and working on this project really opened my eyes. It showed me that America is behind in making insurance accessible to everyone and makes having healthcare a privilege instead of a right. I would suggest that there should be more programs that are cheaper and more accessible in the United States for lower income communities and people.”

Again, the comparative lens allowed this student a comparative understanding which leads to critical thinking and comments.

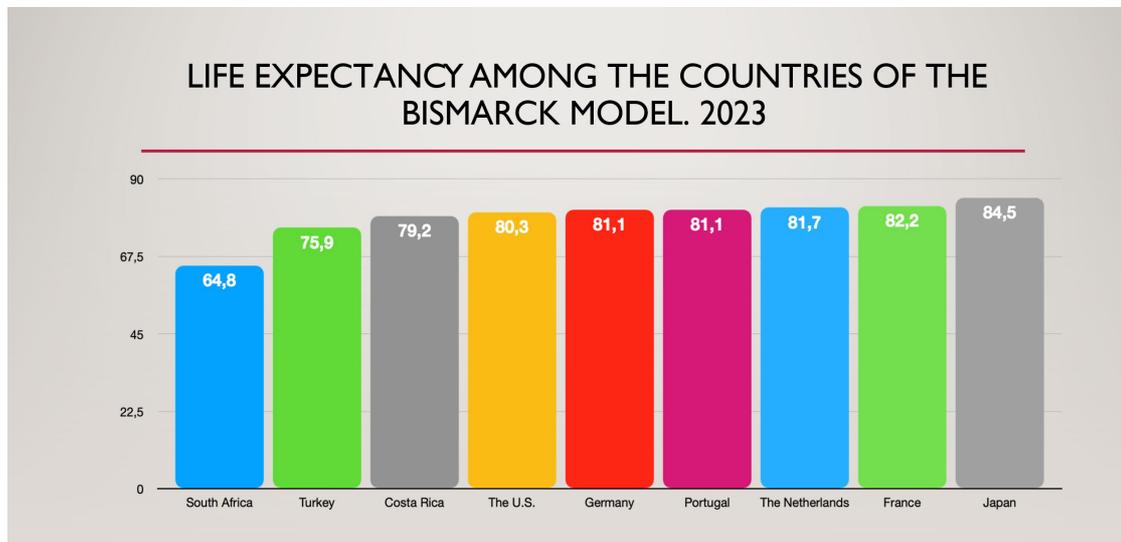
A Costa Rican students wrote,

“Despite being an underdeveloped country, Costa Rica has a very good healthcare system and health indicators, comparable with developed European countries. Nation-building history and economic models play a key role in today's healthcare system.”

All Costa Rican students signed up to study a European country for their learning projects; they were curious about its advanced healthcare systems. At the end of the project, Costa Rican students gained a certain level of satisfaction and pride about their own healthcare system. These comments from Costa Rica students, of course, were shared among the group members, as well as among all students in the final comparative project of the group presentations.

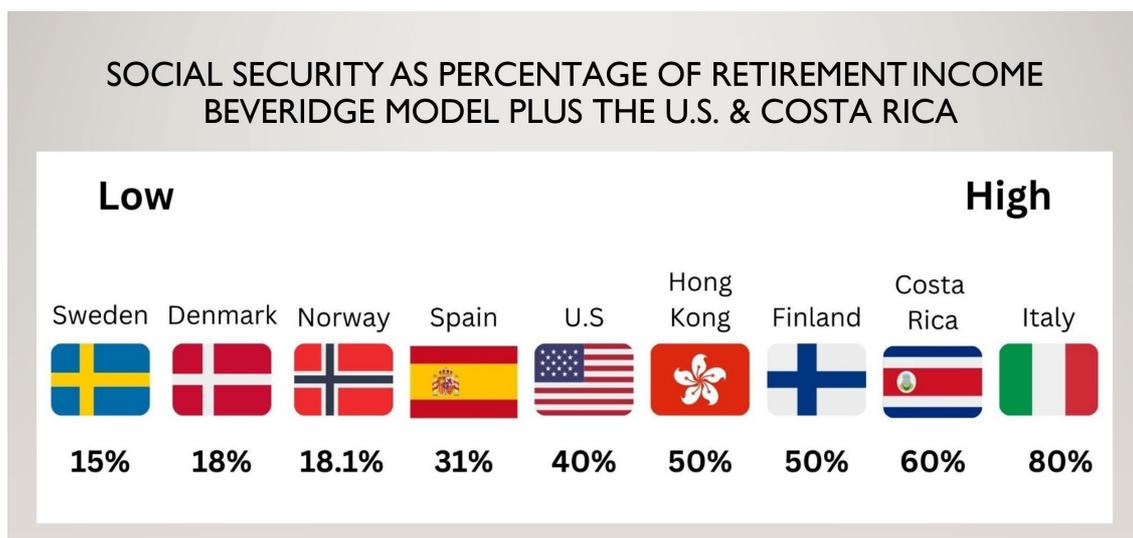
Toward the end of the class, each group must present their group project using a recorded video and Power Point Presentation. After the presentation, all students must post their evaluation of each group. The instructor provided an evaluation rubric that covered participation, content quality, visual effect, and level of meaningful insights etc. (see Appendix 1, p.29 for detail). This rating process encourages students to compare all countries studied among their classmates in 6 groups. When these group projects were presented in a Power Point Presentation format, students gained a visual effect that could have a lasting impression on their comparative understanding and critical thinking. Below are a couple of visual slides presented by students (See figure 1 and 2).

Figure 1: Example of Group Projects on Comparative Life Expectancies



Source: Information provided by the author.

Figure 2: Group Presentation of Comparative Pension Systems



Source: Information provided by the author

Critical Thinking through Study Abroad Experiences

During the Spring Break, a group of students in the class (ranging from 8 to 14 out of 48) signed up to participate in the study abroad program in Costa Rica. It is a one-week experience in San Jose from Sunday to Sunday in mid-March. Before departure, students in the U.S. were required to visit an aging service site and share a Power Point Presentation to the participants on the Friday before departure. Most

students visited an assisted living facility, nursing home, adult day care, and/or senior center. A few visited AARP or Social Security.Gov local headquarters. This presentation itself is a learning process. Most students never knew the basic cost of an assisted living facility in the U.S.; few knew that Medicare did not cover long-term care. After learning that the basic assisted living facility in the U.S. costed \$4000+ a month, they went into Costa Rica with curiosity. During the week of study abroad in Costa Rica, American students shared classroom discussions with classmates whom they already met virtually and exchanged questions and answers on-line for several weeks. During the face-to-face meeting in San Jose, a selected 3 American students presented their site visits in American assisted living facilities; Costa Rican students explained specific aging policies and practices in Costa Rica. In the following days, American students visited several aging services in Costa Rica, including two assisted living facilities—one publicly funded, the other privately-run; one senior center, a geriatric and gerontology hospital, and a few tourist communities. After comparing services and prices, study-abroad participants wrote these comments:

“... we were able to appreciate how Costa Rica's society is community-based and how it often protects citizens from being without protection, even if they are poorer than the average person in America. While traveling to Costa Rica, we also saw how even though the average American may be richer than the average Costa Rican, the quality of life for an average Costa Rican is better than an American.”

The study abroad experience made American students humbler about their “great” American systems and higher incomes. They became more reflective and critical. Other students commented on the impact of study abroad on their understanding of social policies and societies in general:

“...my study abroad trip to Costa Rica has been a life-changing experience that has not only broadened my understanding of global social policies but also helped me appreciate different cultural approaches to healthcare, long-term care, and environmental sustainability... As a visual and hands-on learner, being able to see and engage with the material firsthand made a huge difference in my understanding of social policies and healthcare systems.”

While in Costa Rica, some students got sick due to having different foods, particularly seafood. In each trip, 1 to 4 students could need medical attention, most

often because of a stomach problem. In 2024, three students had ceviche on the day of arrival, by the second day, one student got sick, by the third day, all three students who shared the ceviche adventure got sick. One of the three students was particularly having severe problems of vomiting and diarrhea. In the middle of the day, the instructor had to take the sick student to a clinic in a rural area outside San Jose in the middle of nowhere. The student received exclusive attention in a private clinic--had shorts, IV, and medication. Before checking out, the student quietly spoke to me with an anxious voice, "I may not have enough to pay for this doctor's visit." The instructor, of course, told the student not to worry. Even though there was global travel health insurance through the university, the travelers must come up with the initial payment and receive reimbursement later. At check-out, the student paid less than \$150 everything included.

This experience was discussed repeatedly among students themselves on the bus, during the whole trip, and later online in the classroom. They were expecting several thousand dollars for this medical bill because it was a private clinic, and there was medication, shots, and IV. In the U.S. it could be several thousand dollars. The high medical expenses in the U.S. made our student ill at ease when she was in the clinic. Upon returning, the student wrote:

"I was able to observe how the Costa Rican healthcare system operates—not merely as a policy, but as a lived reality—by being fully immersed in San José. I witnessed firsthand how universal healthcare is not just affordable but also highly regarded as a human right through debates in class and conversations with local students. These one-on-one encounters brought abstract policy debates to life."

Teaching and learning are a process. In this process, students have dialogues online about guided topics by sharing experiences in daily lives among themselves and across borders. Meanwhile, classmates work on comparative social policy projects together. For the few fortunate students who were able to participate in study abroad programs, they further immersed themselves in the country and social systems they are reading about. All these experiences, global virtual exchanges online, comparative learning projects, and study abroad site visits have combined to contribute to a critical learning process in which students find the truth themselves

and answer the questions they raise, in critical learning steps. The whole learning process is “sociological imagination” in the making with personal experience-sharing at the micro-level, social system comparison at macro-level, and global comparative understanding at cross-national levels.

Discussions

This paper examined sociological teaching using 3 different modes of teaching: asynchronous global virtual exchange, study abroad programs, and 360 GLE. Since Covid-19 pandemic, asynchronous classes are becoming more common because this mode of teaching allows increasing number of students who must hold a regular job or raise a family to complete learning tasks at their spare time. As shown, online discussions in asynchronous global classrooms, if designed properly, can create opportunities for students to obtain critical thinking skills and develop sociological imagination. Gaining critical thinking is not a one-time event; it is a process. The instructor must conscientiously design the course with critical thinking in mind. Critical thinking as a process combines weekly conversations among students themselves, semester-long reading and learning projects, and regular sharing of personal, familial, and travel experiences. As the semester progresses, their critical thinking evolves, and sociological imagination develops.

Critical Thinking in Asynchronous Sociological Teaching Classroom:

In asynchronous classrooms, even though students do not meet face to face, they do have the opportunities of having dialogues with each other on a weekly basis. These weekly conversations serve as an experiential learning component for students to learn and understand each other’s experiences of social policies, such as healthcare, pension systems, and long-term care in their daily life encounters among themselves and between students in the U.S. and Costa Rica. Learning projects are a step-by-step progression into a group comparative project allowing students to gain a global and comparative scope in the process of learning. Consequently, a critical thinking perspective is gained through bringing together three domains of critical

thinking process: knowledge, self, and the world (Barnett 1997). Asynchronous classes may not have the same advantage of face-to-face interaction; it, however, adds a new dimension of the learning process by interactive learning online. Quiet students do not have to be stereotyped to be “obedient” (Zhou et al. 2008); Instead, they can be interactive and outspoken at their own home, online, after doing all the house chores and childcare. Bringing in personal experiences and reflections about “sickness fund” at the micro-level, comparing healthcare systems in the U.S. Germany, and Costa Rica, students are developing a “the quality of mind” for sociological imagination (Mill 1959; Palmer 2033). Students come to dispel the assumption that Costa Rica is a “second grade” country through critical thinking and comparative understanding. This ability to draw conclusions based on knowledge rather than assumption is a clear example of critical thinking in the making (Richard and Miller 1996). As technological advancement is ever-changing, sociological faculty may need to further explore innovative ways to expand sociological teaching incorporating new technologies in sociological classrooms.

Embedded Study Abroad Program and 360 GLE

In this class, study abroad program was only a one-week onsite experience during the Spring Break. Although the participants were often 5-15 percent of the class, they gained additional insights from travelling abroad and seeing how Costa Rica healthcare, pension systems, and long-term care are managed in real life situations. Many of the study abroad participants never traveled abroad, this study abroad experience gave them the first opportunity to build confidence, independence, and worldly knowledge.

The real-life experiences in Costa Rica gave study abroad participants an additional chance to learn and reflect with a critical stance. Students who went in with a strong sense of superiority returned with a genuine sense of humbleness. The site visits in a foreign country made them reflect their own cultural values, quality of life, and meanings of lifestyle in the U.S. The 360 GLE websites provided additional resources for students with additional curiosities; and expanded their scope of

learning beyond the course and learning projects. Most importantly, the combination of learning from online conversations, comparative learning projects, and study abroad experiences are themselves offering 360 degrees of global learning experience.

Study Limitations:

When offering courses with foreign students, language barriers can be the first issue. In global classrooms with Costa Rica, language barrier stands out as the first obstacle because Costa Rica is a Spanish-speaking country. The enrollment of Costa Rican students is limited by the language ability of the student participants. Consequently, there was an imbalance of domestic and foreign students. While there were always 40+ American students, Costa Rican students started with, 5, then 10, then 14. Some of these enrollments ended up not completing the whole semester because of their limited English levels. During the semester, a few American students would reach out to the instructor asking why their questions were never answered by international students. The instructor had to explain the imbalanced class size between American and Costa Rican students. Group activities and presentations across the borders were also a challenge. Many American students often work during the day to make a living and do their homework at home in the evening; some students work in the evenings as waiters or waitresses. Finding a time all group members could come together to record a group video for Power Point Presentation was a challenge. Consequently, after two years of practice, this part of the group exercise was abandoned in the recent class design.

As a research study of teaching pedagogy in sociology, this paper is limited in its methodological design. Because this global virtual exchange class was offered as a mode of teaching to promote study abroad or global experiences during Covid-19 pandemic era, the author did not plan to conduct a survey or pre- and post- test about the mode of teaching and its effectiveness. The researcher relied on students' online interaction and learning projects as primary data. Consequently, there was no research question or research measurements going into research design and data analysis. After teaching this course several times in global virtual contexts, the

researcher generated research questions in a reflective teaching process to improve future teaching: how can asynchronous global virtual exchange generate critical thinking in sociological teaching? Despite this limitation, the process of sharing and learning is hopefully insightful for other sociologists, educators, or communicators, in teaching, reflection, and implementation for future global virtual exchange, study abroad program designs, and research on teaching pedagogy.

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