Global Social Innovation Lab: Theoretical Perspectives

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This paper examines the use of education theories in designing and implementing innovative digital education strategies at a global scale. The text overviews issues associated with research and theory-based teaching in education practice. For the purposes of this investigation, the authors focus on a single case, a Global Social Innovation Lab that has been implemented in November 2021. The Lab was designed to enable students from four continents to engage in a collaborative problem-solving exercise, aimed at developing creative, entrepreneurial ideas to address global health and wellness problems in Covid times. The Lab creator and three co-authors, share their perspectives on the Lab design and implementation, contrasting the pedagogical challenges they encountered with educational theories that can be consulted in such situations.

Key words: social entrepreneurship education, social innovation lab, cross cultural experience, education theory in practice

Introduction

This paper examines the role of educational theories in implementing innovative digital approaches to global social entrepreneurship education in practice. The study addresses the case of a Global Social Innovation Lab (SIL) implemented in November 2022. The Global SIL is designed to motivate and teach students from different regions how to collaboratively develop sustainable, socially innovative, entrepreneurial solutions to global problems.

The coauthors of the paper are advanced level education students in Canada. They focus on practical pedagogical issues that have emerged in the process and discuss theoretical concepts they drew upon while participating in Global SIL. The co-authors also describe their backgrounds and experiences, as well as the challenges they faced while working with a large group of diverse participants from four continents. The Lab developer draws on her multidisciplinary knowledge and educational practice in support of the design of the exercise.

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate how education as a discipline may contribute to global, virtual, and social entrepreneurship education. Drawing from this single case study, the authors aim to highlight how educational theories can be combined with lived experiences in the design and implementation of innovative learning strategies. This paper is the first in a series of studies that will be published in other regions, reflecting the SIL implementation experiences of students and faculty from different cultures and disciplines.

While co-authors share their subjective views only, the team analyses their experiences through a disciplinary lens and opens the door for further educational research related to the application of theory in a rapidly changing global learning community.

Social Entrepreneurship Education Landscape

Social Entrepreneurship Education (SEE) has recently emerged as a sub-discipline in post-secondary education (Abel & Maria, 2021). The rapid proliferation of SEE is driven by the successes of social entrepreneurs in practice and their ability to simultaneously create both social and economic wealth (Haworth et al., 2012). Thus, SEE strategies are evolving to enable students to create entrepreneurial solutions that sustainably address social problems.

Social entrepreneurship aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (Leal Filho, et al., 2020). Moreover, it appeals to Missing Entrepreneurs (MEs), a demographic segment that includes women, immigrants, the disabled, the elderly, and youth who are close to the sources of social challenges (OECD & OCDE, 2021).

Although social entrepreneurs are primarily driven by social goals, in practice, they implement economically viable solutions for persistent problems such as poverty and inequality. These innovators use business tools to generate revenue while serving community needs (Radjou et al., 2020). Many of them belong to MEs demographics and they aim to solve problems that directly affect their lives. In recent history, social entrepreneurs created effective, profitable ventures in multiple sectors, from microfinancing to renewable energy solutions (Brkic, 2020).

Different from highly competitive business entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs work collaboratively and support each other in achieving collective social and environmental goals (Groom, 2018). They draw on cross-cultural knowledge and transfer business ideas globally.

While new socially innovative entrepreneurial approaches evolve in practice, SEE remains largely based on Western perspectives and business concepts, failing to include values and ideas conceived in other cultures (Lundström et al, 2014). As a result, current SEE strategies often fail to attract MEs who experience social problems (Boysen, 2020).

A SIL model is an innovative problem-solving strategy used globally by community groups, businesses, educators, governments, and non-government organisations (NGOs), to engage diverse participants in collaborative efforts focused on addressing social problems (Kyriaki, 2017). The SIL model has been successfully used in a broad range of problem-solving situations where it is necessary to include perspectives of diverse groups to create innovative solutions (Westley et al., 2015). Most of the applications of the SIL model to this date have been implemented to address regional challenges in the public sector such as immigration, the refugee crisis, or health priorities (Westley et al., 2015).

The paper adopts a case study approach to examine the online application of the Global SIL. The method adopted in this paper treats co-authored contributions prepared autonomously by graduate education students Liu Yulin, Shah Tejal, and Tong Liangyu as a data set that is used to draw conclusions and make recommendations for further study. The paper presents a retrospective analysis of the SIL implementation through the lenses of foundational educational theories selected as pertinent, by participants. It is important to note that all co-authors agreed to make their contributions to this paper at the same time so that the opinion of one person would not influence others.

Global SIL Description

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)'s report *Missing Entrepreneurs (MEs)* (OECD & OCDE, 2019), and the UN Agenda 2030 (UN, 2021) have highlighted the importance of youth involvement in solving social problems. The education sector needed to respond to this request in virtual environment during the COVID pandemics.

Global SIL was developed as an innovative educational strategy aimed at engaging students in developing solutions to global challenges through virtual intercontinental collaboration in crisis conditions. A multicultural team of professors teaching the Innovation and Creativity Course at South China Normal University (SCNU) has launched the Global online SIL in pandemic conditions. The SCNU team opened their online classroom to colleagues from three universities located in North America, South America, and Europe. They invited students and professors to join the SIL. Academics and senior administrators from the University of Prince Edward Island in Canada, PAR University College (PUC) in Croatia, and Universidad Tecnológica Metropolitana de Aguascalientes (UTMA) in Mexico, responded with enthusiasm to this call. Academics from all three universities rapidly found creative ways to enable their students to participate. All invited students volunteered to engage in the SIL.

The team of academics, complemented by experienced social entrepreneurs, worked with a group of 120 students from eleven countries. The objective was to generate business ideas that can sustainably address global health and wellness problems that have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. The process was designed to challenge participants to rapidly come up with solutions while facing multiple challenges. In a short, two-week period, the participants attended an introductory lecture introducing the problem, the content of the exercise, the process, and the expected deliverables. Students were organised in multiregional teams of five to eight members. Teams were supported by daily mentorship sessions, and online access to the academic team and other students through a dedicated project LinkedIn site. Students were asked to engage in the problem-solution process, while experiencing language barriers, working in different time zones, and struggling with software compatibility issues. The requirement was to refine the problem, design solutions, and create demos, drawing on unique perspectives of each culture and students' social realities.

In the next sections, the co-authors introduce themselves and provide their unique insights into the Global SIL while outlining the foundational educational theories that they have used while engaging in this experience.

Global SIL Developer's Perspective

Background Information

My name is Tatjana Brkic and I am a social entrepreneur, educator, and global citizen. I act as a social entrepreneurship mentor, a professor, and a volunteer at universities in Europe, Asia, and South and North America. I obtained undergraduate and graduate degrees in business, science, and engineering in Europe and Canada. My academic training is complemented by thirty years of professional experience in the industry, education, and sustainable development. Over the last seven years I have designed and implemented multiple innovative solutions in post-secondary education focused on social innovation, entrepreneurship and business applied research.

Analysis and Application of Theory in Practice

I have designed the SIL to mimic real-life experiences during a global crisis, drawing from educational practice, and professional work. Throughout my career, I have continuously performed literature reviews and engaged in applied research and consultations with academics and entrepreneurs who share similar interests.

The Global SIL was designed as a cross-cultural and robust educational approach to building problem-solving skills. The design left a lot of space for students to interpret the lab's objectives in a way that reflects their realities. The ultimate goal of this collaborative effort was to gain insight into how we can, as educators, best enable our students to learn what they need to know to collaborate at a global scale and use social entrepreneurship strategies to create innovative, sustainable solutions to social problems in crisis conditions. My focus in the design of the exercise was on knowledge content and conceptual framework. I have facilitated the learning process through a dialogical approach, meeting with teams of participants daily to discuss their ideas, recommend strategies to create social and economic wealth, and refine problem-solution models proposed by participants. While I was not driven by foundational educational theories in the initial design of the Lab or its implementation, I found that pedagogical approaches that foster dialog (Vygotsky, 1997), were well aligned with the mentorship strategies that were implemented.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges with technological compatibility, language, and time differences, all teams came up with viable ideas. The exercise was conducted in a non-competitive atmosphere, without financial reward. Students spent hours engaged in tasks, asking each other about their lives, families, personal problems, difficulties, and joys. Teams have also created unique artworks that represented the spirit of their group, showing symbols of each culture and main ideas. The collaborative approach taken by the academic team transferred to students and we all worked together toward the same goal. Shared values and a common purpose have driven participants to put significant effort into this Lab.

Global SIL Facilitators' Perspectives

Tong Liangy's Perspective

Background Information. My name is Tong Liangyu. I am studying Education at the University of Prince Edward Island. Previously, I took social science at Ritsumeikan Asian Pacific University in Japan. I started to study far from my hometown at the age of 12, went to Japan to study at the age of 19, and then came to Canada to study English again at 24. During my college years, as a research assistant, I witnessed many international students struggling to adapt to the new environment. I felt that I could give students engaged in SIL the benefit of my experience and help them to adapt to other cultures.

When I joined the group, there was an inevitable question in front of us. What should be our topic? The Chinese and Mexican students had never met each other, and everyone looked so eager to jump into the main question and skipped team-building exercises.

Chinese students and Mexican students had very different concerns when talking about the topic. Chinese students preferred to discuss topics related to COVID-19, while the Mexican students were more concerned about community health and safety. The discussion between the two sides did not produce effective communication. Chinese students

did not understand the dangers of theft and robbery in the Mexican community from the cultural and environmental perspective; Mexican students did not understand China's strict strategy for dealing with COVID-19. I interpreted this as a lack of cultural literacy.

Analysis and Application of Theory in Practice. Cultural literacy is a term created by American educator Eric Donald Hirsch Jr. He described cultural literacy as a reading and writing ability that can grow only by experiencing cultural life, history, and art (Hirsch, 1987). This theory also means that if students are not exposed to other cultures, environments, and arts, they will not develop an international perspective and cultural literacy to deal with globalization. García, (2016) stated that destabilization is one of the essential conditions to grow cultural literacy. When students realize that the world is not the same as what they are familiar with, they will carry out new exploration and cognition.

In this project, I played the role of appeasing students and providing guidance. Due to time zones and different schedules, it was difficult for the Mexican and Chinese students to organise group discussions. I tried to be a bridge of communication. I contacted the Chinese students to discuss with them according to their time difference, and I would also meet with the Mexican students according to their schedules. For Chinese students, I was a person who shared the same culture. For Mexican students, I was a person with long-term study experience sharing the same time zone. Both sides frequently expressed their ideas and raised questions.

Moreover, I contacted the team members and had talks with them individually. I learned that some students' reluctance to express their ideas in group meetings stems from their lack of confidence in language ability and cultural understanding. I tried to reassure them and reinterpret the other students' ideas and views from another perspective. At the same time, I persuaded them not to be too attached to the outcome of the exercise.

Conclusion. As online education continues to become a formal and established educational model, many traditional education methods need to be altered. The cultural differences and ideological conflicts brought about by the globalization of education are more pronounced. Based on my lived experience, students who study from home are not exposed to other cultures as much as international students who take the initiative to go abroad. This project allowed students to develop global cultural literacy, but it cannot fully substitute for an immersive experience. After one to two hours of online meetings every week, they return to their daily life and forget the anxiety and uneasiness just caused by cultural collisions. It is hoped that after the end of the pandemic, global education will become a norm, and students will have the opportunity to communicate and learn face-to-face.

Yulin Liu's Perspective

Background Information. My name is Yulin Liu. As an international student from the University of Prince Edward Island completing my Master of Education degree, I was so honoured to be invited to collaborate in Global SIL. I completed my undergraduate studies at Kyoto University in Japan and the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. I worked in teams with Chinese, Japanese, and Swiss classmates and professors using both English and French. I was confident and excited to join the Global SIL and cooperate as a team leader. It turned out to be a fun and educational project for all participants.

Application of Theory in Practice. Through this exercise, I realized that the situation was different during the present pandemic. To accomplish our common goal in this lab, I applied my knowledge of Freire's critical pedagogy (2014) to the real situation. The combination of principles from textbooks and real-life problems could be regarded as an experiential learning process. I enjoyed implementing Freire's critical pedagogy in facilitating the work of a global team and eliminating barriers related to foreign language or backgrounds.

My group was comprised of four Chinese students, two Mexican students, and me as the sole Canadian student. Before this project, I believed in the stereotypes of my group members. My biggest mistake was planning conversations with different members based on their nationality instead of their true personalities.

The second most challenging thing was coordinating schedules. Although the internet supports communications across continents, the time difference remains a challenge. Mexican students also needed to do part-time jobs.

Implementation of Freire's Theory. I felt inspired by reading Freire's book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2014). This lab aims to encourage students to collaborate to address the questions in real life, so we need to critically analyze and provide an ethical and unique answer. Freire's critical pedagogy theory and his concept of the dialogical relationship align with this goal. Love, equity, and respect are the most emphasized tenets in critical pedagogy, which means people access the feeling of love from each other's expression of caring, compassion, and passion (Freire, 2005). The first step is to accept and respect different people's ways of thinking by understanding and emphasizing their backgrounds and growing up stories. We should never categorize and homogenize people solely by nationality and identity. For example, even though we are all Chinese, it was improper to assume other Chinese members' actions only because we share the so-called "same value and culture." And in turn, the other Chinese participants also unnecessarily judged me based on their mindset system of "what a person should or should not do as a Chinese person". A cross-cultural situation happens every time in our life when we talk with different people. Each individual has unique "culture symbols" and personalities, just like fingerprints. I applied critical pedagogy theory in the lab and built the dialogical relationship among group members. Everyone's contribution to timetable designing was respected and equitable. For the student who failed to join the discussion in time, I communicated with them individually. It worked well, and we managed to finish the work on time.

Conclusion. As a cross-cultural project, this international lab was not designed to break stereotypes or give the participants intercultural experiences. The goal was to enable people to work together, to expose real issues in different contexts, and construct solutions. Even though people have the same level of education and have been given the same information, they interpret themselves differently according to different life experiences, mindsets, and cultural backgrounds. The dialogical approach I applied in the Project supported effective ideas exchange. By applying Freire's theory, I have improved my capacity to accept and respect diversity in collaborative work.

Tejal Shah's Perspective

Background information. My name is Tejal Shah. I am a research scholar with a doctorate in Physics and a Master of Education. The SIL came as an option in my Master of Education course. The project was spread over four universities, including my university in Canada. It seemed very interesting as it included a global approach to innovative entrepreneurship and collaboration. My team included four Chinese and three Mexican undergraduate students with different backgrounds.

My education made me the most experienced person on the team, and I knew that my team would look to me for guidance. I took up the responsibility to bind the varied timelines and be their leading light. The major issue we faced was having a discussion at one fixed time. I decided to have two different meetings at two different times and to be the mediator between the talks.

The next challenge was to choose an appropriate name. As we were dealing with different cultures and places, it was very inappropriate to favour any one of them. Hence, keeping ancient Greek alive and the concept of proposing a new idea, we chose the name "The Neóterikos." The idea agreed upon was to build an application that dealt with the people who need help with mental illness.

As a team, we were able to develop an application that we named "KyUgether" in a short time, and we successfully presented it on the final presentation day. The journey throughout the process was very engaging and exciting.

Analysis and application of theory in practice. Although Bronfenbrenner ecological model (1979) was originally a theory of human development, it has been applied in a variety of other contexts due to its usability in positioning experience and individual identity as separate forms. It has an increasing use as a model to explore educational transition (Durden & Witt, 2010; Sanagavarapu, 2010 as cited in Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013). According to Bronfenbrenner, an individual must engage in an activity with sufficient frequency and increasing complexity for positive development. The ecological model positions the individual in the center of the overlapping systems, which range from the closest to the distant influences on their development (Golinkoff et al., 2017; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013). The patterns of the ecological systems helped me to understand that my team members have varied backgrounds and experiences. This information collected through interviews had a direct influence on the approaches I used. In this exercise, I also learned that there are different kinds of businesses. Social enterprises are driven by social goals and their profit requirements are not the key factor.

Conclusion. The project was executed in a span of a few weeks; hence the time was not sufficient to fully explore the potential of such concepts; however, it helped to define the spontaneity of individuals to help their communities. Further research is needed to explore the experiences of individuals who experience life and learning in different regions.

Discussion

The Global SIL presented two sets of challenges for participants, faculty, and designers:
1. conceptual design challenges focused on knowledge content and strategies that students across cultures need to learn to create sustainable solutions to global problems; and
2. the implementation challenges associated with facilitating online collaboration among diverse, geographically dispersed individuals.

The co-authors of this paper approach the challenges from a disciplinary perspective of education, focusing mainly on the implementation challenges.

Theoretical Perspectives on Implementation Challenges

The co-authors who facilitated the exercise focused almost exclusively on implementation challenges and pedagogical theories that support global communications. The co-authors drew on three different theories to successfully navigate through the exercise. Each co-author has identified two sets of challenges:
1. cross-cultural communications, and
2. the coordination of online teamwork while facing time differences and language barriers.

Each of the co-authors points to a different aspect of cross-cultural communication and highlights the theories that can be used to overcome the challenges that arise in such situations. While all co-authors point to similar obstacles, they propose different pedagogical paths. The differences in the way co-authors address the situation are aligned with educational theories that resonate with their lived experiences and appeal to their lived experiences as education professionals.

Cross-cultural collaboration has been addressed by several education theories. The co-author Liangy identifies a theorist, Hirsch, who contributed work on cultural literacy (Hirsch, 1987). In his work, Hirsch proposes that communication and interpersonal learning need to be complemented with consistency and keen observation, describing these skills as cultural literacy (Hirsch, 1993). He further outlines that the ability to understand and fully participate in any given culture depends on opportunities to observe society in close proximity (Hirsch, 1993). This theorist argues that it is important to incorporate the atmosphere of change into the team culture when creating entrepreneurial ideas (Hirsch, 1987). According to this theorist, problem-solving and innovation skills increase in response to cross-cultural challenges (Hirsch, 1993).
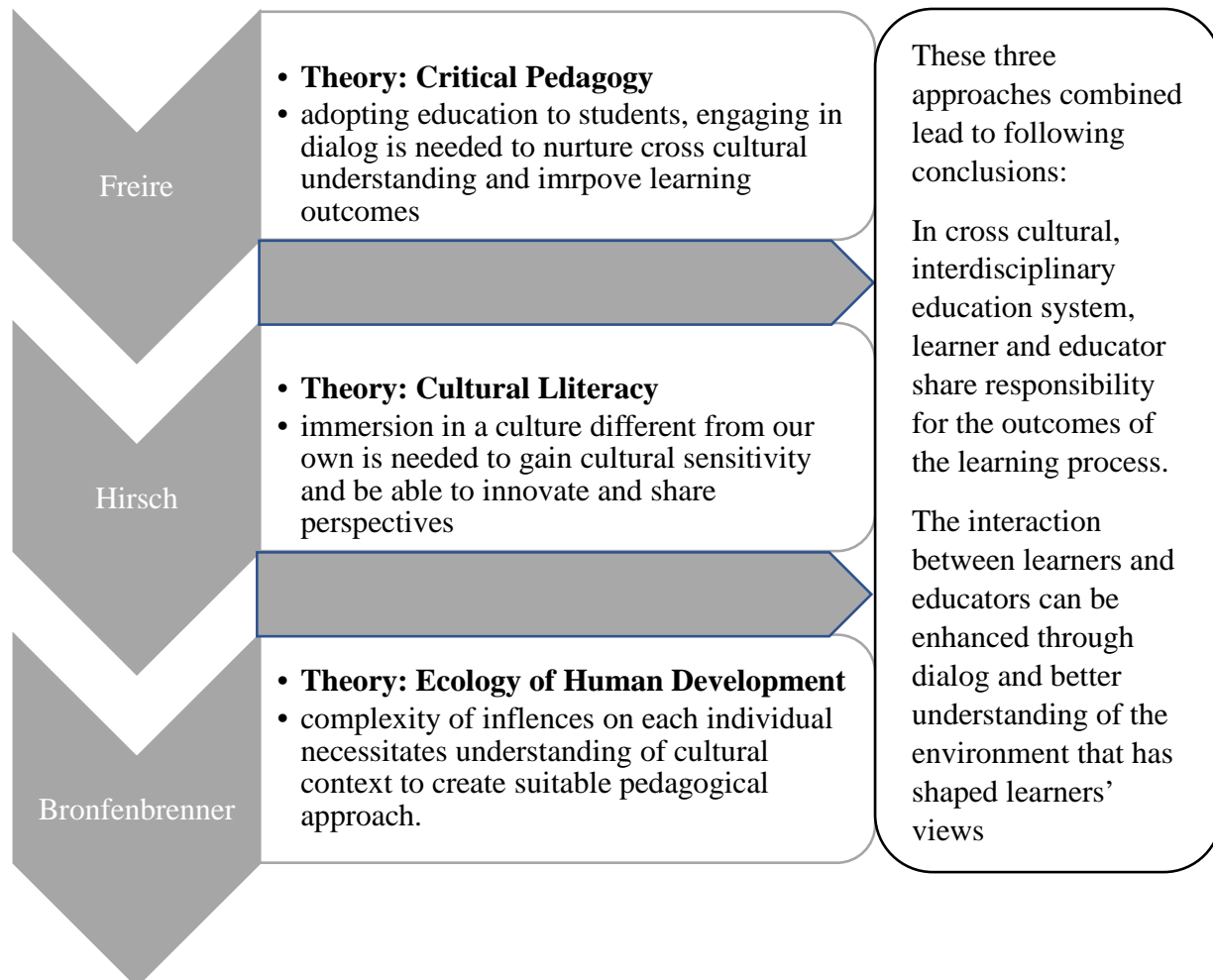
The co-author Shah points at the theorist Bronfenbrenner who made his mark in pedagogy by proposing Ecological Systems Theory. Bronfenbrenner also conducted cross-cultural research on character education (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). This theorist examined post-secondary education practices in several countries, comparing the praxis and challenges encountered by students (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner's work can be used to draw conclusions about the strategies that can be implemented to adapt innovative educational approaches. Furthermore, this proliferous author developed a theory that offers so called bioecological perspectives on human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). Bronfenbrenner proposes that humans create the environment that shapes their own development (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). In his bioecological theory of human development, the theorist claims that what makes us human is our ability to shape reality in intricate physical, social, and cultural ways (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner sees humans as capable of acting in a way that nurtures positive social development (Bronfenbrenner, 1976).

The co-author Liu drew on Freire's work. Freire's ideas, associated with his critical pedagogy concept, focus on the use of dialog as a tool that may enhance practitioners' ability to respond to learners' needs in a flexible way (Freire, 2018). The theory proposed by this author calls on educators to adapt to their students and learn alongside with them (Freire, 2018). Through this process, society will achieve the democratization of knowledge and solidarity in learning, leading to a better understanding of problems and the emancipation of the oppressed (Freire & Oliviera, 2014).

The figure below outlines the perspective of each theorist.

Figure 1

The Perspective of Each Theorist

Freire
- **Theory: Critical Pedagogy**
- adopting education to students, engaging in dialog is needed to nurture cross cultural understanding and imrpove learning outcomes

Hirsch
- **Theory: Cultural Lliteracy**
- immersion in a culture different from our own is needed to gain cultural sensitivity and be able to innovate and share perspectives

Bronfenbrenner
- **Theory: Ecology of Human Development**
- complexity of inflences on each individual necessitates understanding of cultural context to create suitable pedagogical approach.

These three approaches combined lead to following conclusions:

In cross cultural, interdisciplinary education system, learner and educator share responsibility for the outcomes of the learning process.

The interaction between learners and educators can be enhanced through dialog and better understanding of the environment that has shaped learners' views

Both Hirsch (1993) and Bronfenbrenner propose high level pedagogical guidelines. While Hirsch (1993) recommends cultural immersion to acquire cultural literacy and challenge personal views, Bronfenbrenner puts an onus on researchers and educators to adapt their approaches to learners. Freire proposes a dialogical approach to enhance learning outcomes for both the learner and the educator. When synthesized, the three theories combined regard the success of pedagogy as a variable that is dependent on both learners' and educators' efforts to understand each other.

It is interesting to note that none of the co-authors draws on the well-established cognitive theories proposed by Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1997) and Piaget (Piaget, 2000). These theories highlight the importance of the practice of cooperative learning which has been one of the main characteristics of the design of the Global SIL. Vygotsky provided strong arguments in favour of peer learning and collaboration in problem solving (Vygotsky, 1997). In addition, Piaget proposed social interaction and collaboration as strategies that lead to better learning outcomes (Piaget, 2000).

While the theories offer different perspectives on education and pedagogy, they are complementary and can all be applied in the implementation of SEE. The co-authors have found value in each of the frameworks when facing practical problems. Although the philosophers who have developed different frameworks may not have intended their theory to be supportive of the online, multi-time zone, cross-cultural education approach, their ideas have proven useful in practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, educational theories offer a rich collection of brushes that can be used by practitioners to paint their own pedagogical vision and strategy. Pedagogical theories propose several strategies that can be used to enhance problem solving and innovative capacities.

Interdisciplinarity and effective cross-cultural communications leading to agreements about social priorities through a dialogical perspective have been built into the design and implementation of the Global SIL. Educational theories were used to further enhance the proposed pedagogy. Global SIL design and implementation indicate that practice and theory can lead to similar conclusions.

In the absence of a theory that unites economic and social wealth creation through education, it remains important for SEE professionals to look for creative ways to develop curricula that cover business and economics concepts as well as ideas developed in other social sciences.

Although several theories described in this paper have found their place in the implementation of the Global SIL, this study has several limitations. The theories reviewed in this paper do not include all disciplinary approaches. The facilitators are Canadian graduate education students, exposed primarily to literature written in English. The design and application of SILs in SEE is a very recent phenomenon in regional educational practice. The community of practitioners who have successfully implemented this approach is small.

A need to rapidly develop effective online education strategies as well as solutions to global problems has emerged in the COVID crisis. The Global SIL has shown promise and initial success. All 120 students have been able to finish the task and develop creative and innovative solutions in only two weeks, despite the cross-cultural communications challenges and online delivery.

This complex global crisis may continue as we confront natural resource scarcity and increased costs of travel. Humanity needs new approaches to education to continue with the global knowledge exchange, rapid innovation, and generation of social and economic wealth.

While educational theories provide pedagogical support for SEE, they do not sufficiently address core issues: simultaneous social and economic wealth creation and knowledge needed to teach social entrepreneurship. Further interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research in SEE is highly recommended, both applied and theoretical. It is important to look at SEE drawing on the best practices of successful social entrepreneurs across cultures.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Liangyu (Leeon) Tong, is an educator. He has a Master's degree in Education, and a Bachelor's degree in Social science with more than eight years of experience working in three different countries. He is working on helping newcomers participate in local culture. He participated in the project when he was in the Master of Education degree course at the University of Prince Edward Island.

Yulin Liu is a passionate learner and explorer in academics and life, with Masters degree in Education and Bachelor degree in Foreign Languages. She has studied and lived in six different countries for the past six years. During this adventure, she learnt four languages and acquired cultural literacy. She participated in the project during her Master of Education degree course at the University of Prince Edward Island.