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Lessons Learned: International Research Collaborations During COVID-19

Isabella Burns, Jenna Holland, Rachel Walters

Abstract

During this research experience, we navigated obstacles with communication, cultural sensitivity, time constraints, research methodology, and COVID-19. Our research group took part in a public sociology class that focused on community-engaged action research projects. Our research team worked with partners from Nepal, and in this article, we share how we overcame obstacles during our experience. We illustrate the benefits we found from this research project experience, the lessons we have learned, and the future advice we have both ourselves and for other undergraduate students conducting research.

Introduction

Through our research experience, although we encountered hurdles that revolved around cultural aspects, communication, time restrictions, and COVID-19, we acquired new skills that will enable us to grow individually as researchers, communicators, and team members. Suggestions pertaining to our experience include communicating firmer deadlines and expectations, having a set individual and method of contact, being open-minded about research topics and ideas, and lastly, fully listening to the project's partners.

The intent behind our research project evolved from a public sociology class our group attended together. This class focused on community-engaged action research projects as the purpose pertained to impacting some issue or organization in our community; at the beginning of the semester-long course, our mentor stressed the importance of paying attention to our partners' expectations of the research. Through a predetermined relationship between our university and a college in Nepal, we had the opportunity to build an international partner relationship with three Nepali students to conduct research in their country.

As a result of our partnership, we obtained an abundance of freedom in choosing a research topic -- our first stumbling block. Before our first Zoom call with our partners, we were ready to propose a potential research topic revolving around literacy. As Nepal was encountering substantial setbacks related to COVID-19, and our partners had the on-the-ground experiences we were lacking, they proposed to study the effects of COVID-19 on any given topic. We decided to concentrate on education. It was imperative to put full trust in our partners and their recommended methods. Their experiences and their input regarding individual decisions were critical to the research process. Because this was a hurdle we encountered early in the research, it is crucial not to become settled on one idea and listen to community partners, as they have more experience and knowledge.

Communication & Cultural Sensitivity

Our research group found communication difficult in two areas: a language barrier and a technological barrier. The official language in Nepal is Nepali, which we do not speak. The language barrier was an expected factor that affected how we conducted our research. Even though our partners in Nepal spoke English, we often had to alter our questions and comments for them to understand what we were trying to convey.

Communicating with our partners through Zoom was challenging with audio cutting out randomly or questions not being fully understood. Since our partners reside in Nepal, the clear communication option with them was Zoom. This was a platform that both sides were familiar with due to distance learning during COVID-19. As for our group, we had never met before; we had to familiarize ourselves and become comfortable with one another via online video chat, and we then had to come up with a well-planned and accommodating research project. As our research group started working on the project more, we became very comfortable with each other, and we developed friendships that are as unique as our research experience. In meeting our partners over Zoom, we were not aware of how the members were chosen for our research collaboration, and we did not know the deeper purpose of their research team.

Cultural sensitivity was a challenge in various aspects of the project, and it was foremost on our minds during the initial Zoom meetings. For our group in the United States, we had our idea of the proper communication etiquette for Zoom. When we met with our partners over Zoom, we had our cameras on, and we each had specific things we wanted to say or ask them. Alternatively, this was not the case for our partners as they did not have the same idea of Zoom etiquette as we did. Our partners never turned their cameras on, and only one person spoke for their group. As a group, we unanimously agreed that we did not need to question why our partners did not turn their cameras on or how they wished to communicate with us about the project because we wanted to avoid accidentally offending anyone. Our decision did not negatively affect our research with our partners, but we were not expecting to feel an additional distance in combination with the physical distance.

Since our partners were located in Nepal, and the current pandemic did not permit standard communication between our team members, communication was a factor that was critical to our research. Due to the language barrier and cultural differences, we needed to debrief after each meeting with our partners. Although we had Zoom meetings, and our research group conversed over text messages, it was important for the designated person of contact to relay all new information to each member of the group. We also tried to update our partners as much as possible.

Time Constraints

The difference in time zones was an uncontrollable factor that affected how we conducted our research. Our partners in Nepal are nearly 11 hours ahead of us. Early in the morning for us meant late in the evening for them, which limited the availability of Zoom meetings even more so. It was easy to navigate early morning meetings on our end; however, we hit an unexpected roadblock during the time between meetings. There was a considerable period where we would be awake and working on our project while our partners would be asleep. We found ourselves in situations where we needed confirmation, more information, or explanations on specific points, but we needed to wait until the next day to receive any response. We tried to address this issue by asking various questions during our Zoom meetings. Still, we could never predict where our research would take us and what new questions we might have after talking with our mentor or working on our research.

Unbeknownst to us, Dashain is a highly celebrated festival in Nepal that corresponds with their school year. When the festival starts, everyone travels home for a month-long break from academics to spend time with family. We first found out about the festival at the beginning of October 2020, when our semester-long course would end in the first week of December 2020. We were in the process of creating our survey questions and our research plan when one of our partners sent us an email warning that there was a large festival at the end of October, and

we would find a lowered response rate to our survey. After scheduling a Zoom meeting with our partners, we were stunned to find out that after October 30th, our partners would not be able to distribute the survey or send us responses for a month. We went from having nearly two months to create a high-quality survey and send it to our partners for distribution to a mere two weeks. This abrupt change caused us to put everything else on hold and focus entirely on our survey. We created multiple drafts, and at times we felt high levels of stress and panic over the new deadline.

Looking back, we can see the real obstacles here was a lack of knowledge about the time constraints and possibly mutual assumptions; our partners could have assumed we knew of their upcoming festival, and they did not think to bring it to our attention. We also did not make our partners aware of our class timeline as we had to have the research project completed by the first week of December 2020. This considerable obstacle forced us to be versatile in the aspects of the survey creation and distribution process. Our main recommendation based on this experience relates to setting clear deadlines and making sure all members of the research project are on the same page.

Research Methodology & COVID-19

Given the distance with our partners, the circumstances of the pandemic, and the implementation of social distancing, our desired methodology of conducting interviews was not going to work. With the time constraint of the festival as well as many other cultural aspects, the project was very unorthodox. Based on our class's guidelines and requirements, it was firm that our partners had to learn something through our research project, too; after asking them what they wanted to receive out of our partnership, they said they wanted to learn how we conduct research in the United States. Through this information, their roles within their team were still unknown, and this was difficult since we went with all the suggestions our partners provided. The atypical methods of research we performed were based on the cultural differences we were unaware of and the current pandemic. Going back to our partners' roles in the project, we were unfamiliar with what they wanted to be a part of or what they wanted to gain from this research. We were unclear if they wanted to help us create the survey, if they wanted to know our research process from start to finish, or if there was anything outside of the project that could have been beneficial to them. We did not know how the partners felt concerning our approach to the project; they did not share their feelings or their individual goals for the project.

Since COVID-19 precautions were different globally, we were unsure of the sensitivities associated with our partners and the pandemic. It came to our attention that the whole country was in lock-down while we were trying to figure out our methodology. Each partner had a different comfort level associated with the virus; therefore, in-person interviews were not an option. Since our partners were the ones that distributed the survey and collected the responses, we had to respect their concerns, and we went along with the method they saw as the best fit. Ultimately, the suggested method allowed us to narrow down our potential respondents, and we covered considerable ground in our survey. However, had COVID-19 not been an issue, our partners could have had more freedom to conduct interviews and surveys in more depth.

Our topic of COVID-19 effects on the education system posed challenges to our research as COVID-19 data is new and therefore limited. Initially, we relied heavily on local news websites in Nepal for our research on COVID-19 effects on education/remote schooling. Our academic research is limited to the Nepali education system and inequalities before COVID-19, and the digital divide in Nepal that may have influenced COVID-19 preparedness.

Project Benefits

Every project has its obstacles, but what helps us decide if our project was successful are the benefits and our positive experiences. For one, we had some amazing findings. We learned a great deal about how COVID-19 affects the Nepali education system, and we cannot wait to construct our final report for our partners, our peers, and our mentor. Our research group has improved our skills in communication and collaboration with individuals who have different cultural and linguistic approaches to research. This research was exciting to be a part of, and we were always thrilled to be working on any aspect of the project. Our mentor had a substantial impact on our research methodology, and we loved and appreciated all the work that she put into our project. We spent countless Zoom meetings discussing the project, and our group can agree that we are leaving this class with a new wealth of knowledge. However, the most important benefit that came along with this project was the relationship our research group created with each other. Being an undergraduate student during COVID-19 is difficult by itself, and we had to collaborate and communicate with each other for a group research project only via virtual platforms like Zoom, email, and text. Not only were we able to create and complete a research project, but we never had any disputes or issues amongst ourselves. We all made sure to be empathetic during this time of disruption, and we worked on creating a positive relationship. These benefits and our positive experiences helped us through the obstacles, and we are happy to finish this project knowing it was a success.

Advice for Future Research

When researching a team, it is also important to build a good connection. This can be done in many ways; one major aspect is having an agreed-upon communication platform, especially when working in different time zones. It is beneficial to have an informal way of contact, such as through a messenger app, and to have one designated person of primary contact that can relay information to team members. Working in different time zones and working across different cultures makes it even more necessary to communicate the timeline of a research project as school and work schedules may vary due to differences such as holiday breaks. Lastly, it is beneficial to use the sociological imagination and be open to a wide array of topics for background research as new research data, such as those surrounding COVID-19, are limited.