CURRENTS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

Beyond the Traditional Classroom

Ana Pérez-Manrique

A quick look at news headlines, the state of the economy, or even a grocery list serves as a daily reminder of how global and international-dependent our lives have become. The world is no longer a place of unbridgeable distances that keep us each in an isolated compartment, but an interconnected stage where we all perform. As are so many other aspects of our lives, teaching and learning are also affected by this phenomenon: now, more than ever, the world has become our classroom. One of my favorite quotes, attributed to Classical philosopher and theologian St. Augustine, reads, "The world is a book and those who do not travel read only one page." In learning, we can choose to make those travels as literal or metaphorical as we want, traveling to distant countries, bringing in life experience from different worlds, exposing students to international news, or stepping outside the traditional classrooms into our neighboring communities. The articles presented here illustrate different aspects of how education can bring students into more meaningful contact with the world today, whether by participation in a study abroad semester, service in our communities, or exploration of other experiential learning opportunities, and how we can take advantage of this knowledge to improve our teaching.

In our first essay, "Online Learning and Chinese Students: Still Searching for the Right Blend," authors Xuemei Tian and David Quian call our attention to the impact that cultural differences and behavioral considerations may have on international students' learning outcomes. More specifically, Tian and Quian analyze Chinese students' attitudes towards and academic performance in online courses during their university abroad experiences. After discussing the reasons why Chinese students seem to be more reluctant to enroll in online courses, the authors argue for implementing changes in course format and delivery to help overcome this cultural obstacle, with the ultimate goal of providing a more meaningful online learning experience for all students, regardless of their background or place of origin.

In our next teaching report, "What's New? Assessing the Effectiveness of Current Events Assignments," Vanessa Ruget and Kristen Rosero explore how integrating a news project as a key component of the course material not only helps foster students' civic engagement and makes them informed global

citizens, but also contributes to their development of desirable life skills and aptitudes, such as becoming more selective and critical readers, making connections, questioning information sources, overcoming stereotypes, or applying class concepts to the real world around them. Pre- and post-test surveys confirm that an overwhelming majority of students found the news assignment beneficial and eye-opening and that it helped them stay engaged and interested in the class.

Integrating concrete world experiences, or experiential learning opportunities, into the course content and design is also key to achieve student engagement in online and blended courses, as Stephanie Foote and Deborah Mixson-Brookshire illustrate in "Enhancing Learning with Technology: Applying the Findings from a Study of Students in Online, Blended, and Face-to-Face First-Year Seminar Classes." As a result of their study of students' perceptions about learning in online and blended courses, the authors of this article suggest different pedagogical strategies that can be incorporated to enhance student learning and engagement, such as layering course content, flipping the classroom, guiding the creation of an online community, providing opportunities for reflection, or integrating experiential learning opportunities. According to the authors, "discussions that allow students to explore their life experiences and world events promote the development of a personal understanding of the impact of events on them."

In "Using Service Learning and Virtual Team Projects to Broaden the Curriculum and Enhance the Student Experience," Darina Slattery and Michael O'Brien share with us two service learning projects carried out among master's students at the University of Limerick, Ireland. Cognizant of the increasing market need for graduates to be culturally sensitive, to have a developed sense of citizenship, and "to be able to find their individual roles in global society," all attitudes that can be fostered through service learning, Slattery and

O'Brien describe two examples of project activities and provide student learning outcomes and recommendations for educators who wish to implement similar assignments.

As we step outside of our classrooms and venture into the world (literally or metaphorically), we often come in contact with other peoples, languages, and cultures. Then, effective communication and intelligibility become key elements of success. To achieve this end, Maite Correa and Frédérique Grim have designed a series of linguistic activities that they present to us in "Audio Recordings as a Self-Awareness Tool for Improving Second Language Pronunciation in the Phonetics and Phonology Classroom: Sample Activities." In their paper the authors propose a number of self-recording exercises "with the aim of: improving students' functional intelligibility and communicability, providing them with [linguistic] self-awareness and self-correction skills, and increasing their self-confidence."

Last but not least, Lisa Carpino, Julienne Ugalde, and Joan-Beth Gow invite us, in "A Photo Journal Assignment: Creating Opportunities for Transformative Learning in the Millennial Classroom," to "employ 21st century educational methodology to meet the learning needs of the 21st century students." The authors argue that using a photo journal as a pedagogical tool benefits students by creating a student-centered classroom, tapping into students' already existing familiarity with technology, and helping students stay actively engaged, thus allowing deep learning to occur. Grounded in a Bloom's taxonomy higher order thinking skills sequence that progresses from exemplifying to analyzing, critiquing, and, finally, creating, this experiential learning project fosters the students' collaboration, communication, and critical thought.

As always, I want to close this editorial by expressing our sincere gratitude to the dedicated team of referees, copyeditors, APA reviewers, and web experts who

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I hope you enjoy the issue. ◼◼

Online Learning and Chinese Students: Still Searching for the Right Blend

Xuemei Tian and David Qian

Abstract

This paper has emerged from ongoing research into the policy, behavioral and curricular issues associated with the online educational experience of Chinese university students studying onshore in Australia. It examines these international students' attitudes toward online learning, covering both positive and negative perspectives. It also provides an insight into methods that are being explored to provide greater engagement with these students, allowing them to feel more confident within the online learning environment. Earlier, preliminary research by the authors indicated that many Chinese students are uncomfortable with learning in online mode, and achieve more satisfactory results when participating in face-to-face classes. Arguably, these concerns are symptoms of a broader problem. To some extent, these concerns are exacerbated by cultural and behavioral considerations in both Australia and the home country. This is hardly surprising and is well-documented in the literature. However, the study described here identified another and perhaps more significant dimension to the problem: that issues of online versus face-to-face learning were in fact secondary to the core activity and outcomes of learning. The research findings suggest that a more considered and consultative approach that takes account of both cultural issues and 'learning as learning' could help provide a more meaningful learning experience not only for Chinese students but for other Asian students in Australia, which would manifest itself, in all likelihood, as a blend of online and face-to-face modes.

Keywords

Online learning, Chinese students, online education, culture

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Introduction

This paper is based upon research into an undergraduate course taught collaboratively by universities in China and Australia. The research was triggered by observations that the Chinese students concerned were much more favorably disposed to learning in face-to-face mode than in online mode. Seeing this as significant in today's digital environment, the authors sought to investigate how efforts to prepare students to become effective online learners in a global

workplace might be improved. It soon became apparent that although issues of online versus face-to-face learning were important, they were in fact secondary to a combination of cultural factors and the core activity and outcomes of learning. Before looking at the research implications and outcomes of this finding, the paper initially covers some background aspects and key terminology.

Online Education

Online education emerged in Australia in the late 1990s, with university vice-chancellors diverting substantial portions of their budgets towards computer infrastructure and redevelopment of curricula to encompass an online environment (Ryan, 1998), resulting in an exponential increase in online education (Abromitis, 2002; Ary & Brune, 2011; Clarke & Hermens, 2001; Kim & Bonk, 2006; Madden-Hallett & Ho, 2008; Ngai, Poon, & Chan, 2007; Scagnoli, Buki, & Johnson, 2009; Wang, 2006).

Although Australian researchers have conducted extensive research into online education, opinion as to its merits and effectiveness remains divided (Ary & Brune, 2011). Writing about its use in a high school context, for example, Gulatee, Combes, and Clayden (2011) report that in a school with a 10-year history of online learning, not all students had positive views of the experience. Their negative impressions were compounded by the fact that the staff believed that on-campus teaching produced better outcomes. There have been however, several studies that concluded that online education outcomes are at least equal to those of on-campus, face-to-face courses (Allen, Bourhis, Burrell, & Mabry, 2002; Arbaugh, 2002).

It is therefore relevant to ask whether researchers and teachers are discussing the same issues relating to the merits of the two modes of delivery. Gulatee et al. (2011) suggest that online learning should be considered as a new paradigm rather than as a substitute for the traditional face-to-face classroom experience. It may well transpire that online learners require a different skillset to effectively engage with and interpret online learning materials. However, acquiring this skillset will not, on its own, guarantee satisfactory online learning outcomes. There are other associated areas to be considered, such as interaction between instructors and students and developing technologies relevant to online learning and teaching (Ferguson & Ibbetson, 2005). Salmon (2005) has consistently argued that technology cannot be successful without appropriate, well-supported and focused human intervention, sound learning design or pedagogical input, and the sensitive handling of the process over time by learned online tutors. Much earlier, Cunningham (1998, p. 11) emphasized the importance of the following issues in the development of online education:

» Practical issues, such as questions of cost;
» Pedagogical issues including cultural differences in learning styles;
» Policy issues including accreditation and consumer protection from poor quality providers;
» Philosophical issues such as cultural imperialism, and
» Personal issues dealing with the attitudes of staff and students towards changing methods of delivery.

Chinese Students and Online Learning

The bulk of research into online learning has been produced by Western universities working predominantly with Caucasian students. In recent years, Australia has welcomed an influx of international students, primarily from Asia. Although current visa regulations allow international students living in Australia (known as "onshore students") to study up to 25 per cent of their total course units online, they have proved reluctant to choose this option. Research indicates that students generally choose online units for reasons other than

a personal liking for online study, such as having to repeat a subject or wanting to accelerate the completion of a degree course (Gulatee et al., 2011). Our own experience of teaching online courses to a particular cohort of Asian students, namely those from China, has revealed that they have consistently under-performed. Conversely, Australian-born students (and any students from an English-speaking background, for that matter) appear more adapted to this style of learning. There are various reasons why Chinese students prefer on-campus, face-to-face courses. These include cultural influences, language ability, learning and study practices, and wider perceptions of online education (Skinner, 2010; Wang, 2006). We consider each of these briefly:

» Cultural influences: Numerous studies, such as Bond (1986), Yao (1994), Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (1997), and Nisbett (2003) emphasize key cultural differences as a reason for contrasting performance between Western and Asian students. The basic factor is the contrast between the openness and informality of much of the West and Asian cultures' emphasis on collectivism and hierarchical relationships. Although these sources refer to Asian students rather than just those from China there is sufficient commonality in learning experiences and traditions across the continent that they are applicable to this study of the performance of Chinese students. Traditionally, according to Pratt (1992), the teacher in China is recognized not only as the deliverer of the content but also as a person responsible for the development of character and someone with whom the student develops a kind of relationship. The Australian Institute for Social Research (2006) reports that the most negative aspect of online education is often the inconsistent interaction between instructor and students.

» Language ability: For anyone studying in an overseas environment, a sound command of the local language is important; command of the language of instruction is arguably even more necessary in the case of online courses. This point is borne out both in feedback on our student surveys, where students attributed their apparent non-responsiveness in real time discussion threads to a lack of fluency in English, and elsewhere (Jun & Park, 2003) with Asian students found to be reluctant to initiate or take part in online discussions. This is not to overplay this issue or to say that limited proficiency in the local language is the only factor in play here because issues of culture, of cultural adaptation and teaching and learning practices are also relevant. It is mentioned here because in our study it attracted specific comment from students.

» Study behavior and methods: Online learning emphasizes individual development, student autonomy and active learning, all of which tend to conflict with the traditional teacher-dominated, passive learning techniques that dominate Asian learning institutions (Wang, 2006). Again, the research reported here reinforced indications from the wider literature that in China and Korea, teachers will tell students what to read, what is important, how to find resources, and what examples to follow. Students will quite slavishly obey and memorize the content. They are not encouraged to ask questions and lack both the knowledge of how to study independently and the skills necessary for research. In online courses when there are no weekly lectures, students are encouraged to find extra material to supplement their assigned reading. The experience of this research project has been that Chinese students in particular, regularly ask questions about their assignments

that need immediate answers, such as "which book(s) should I read," "what I should do for my assignment," or "do you have examples"; studying online is challenging for them, as answers on most occasions are not instantaneous. There have been many occasions at the university where Chinese students studying online units sought guidance from staff on a variety of matters relating to their study. They are often despondent as they consider they are being deprived of real teaching. Eom (2006) argues that responsiveness to students' concerns is the area where improvement is most needed if satisfaction levels in online education are to be increased. Likewise, Wang (2006) suggests that in facilitating Asian students' participation in online courses, teachers should make themselves more accessible and available for online consulting.

» Wider perceptions of online education: In the West, much of the impetus behind online education is a combination of the financial and delivery advantages it offers universities, notably the convenience and accessibility of online over face-to-face education. In China, however, the situation is quite different, and is driven not by financial considerations, but largely by government policies intended to educate large masses of people (Zhang, 2005). Furthermore, Zhang (2005) states that in China, people are predominantly negative toward online education and the credibility of online courses is often questioned. Although 67 public universities in China have implemented online courses, research reveals that in general, this is not regarded as being "real teaching" (Huang, Yang, & Li, 2011; Luo & Zhang, 2009; Xu, 2011). In China, there is also a widespread belief that only those students who possess lower academic ability and who cannot qualify for entry into mainstream

universities will take the opportunity to study online (Potter, 2003; Zhu, Gu, & Wang, 2003). One Chinese website, China.org.cn (2006), that maintains a section devoted to online and adult education, actively promotes itself as being of interest to students who have failed in their university entrance examinations and to working adults. The indications could be that the majority of the Chinese population regards courses delivered online as second-rate.

Clearly, as a result of these and other associated problems, many Asian students will struggle and, indeed, be at risk of marginalization in their new overseas learning environments (Ku & Lohr, 2003; Tu, 2001). This is hardly surprising when, as Wang (2006, p. 79) concluded, online teaching emphasizes individual development, student autonomy, active learning, and mutual communication, all of which conflict with the teacher-dominated, passive, and silent ways that are a feature of the Asian students' learning process. One of the outcomes from such cultural and institutional differences, surfacing in the research reported here, is that these problems are not generally encountered by local students. Despite all that has been written about the difference between western and Asian learning and between online and face-to-face learning, the real need is to resolve the issues of how best to use the online teaching and learning approach for all students. Ryan (1998, p. 19) expresses this well: "those of us engaged in developing online materials must ensure that we do not demean the quality of a university education. We must 'use' the tide, like Canute, for a greater good: in this case, to harness the teaching and learning powers of computers to improve the quality of education." In agreeing with this statement, it should also be added that the basic principle behind the desire to develop and refine online teaching techniques is the quest for improved and more effective and relevant learning. This was substantially the point of this research.

Methods

Research Questions

In our study we focused on the following research questions:

RQ1: What in general are Chinese students perceptions of online learning?

RQ2: What is the relationship between cultural background and online learning?

Participants

During the three year period from January 2009 to January 2012, 375 students from selected Chinese universities participated in a 2+2 CAP (Collaborative Articulation Program) program at one university in Melbourne. The students completed their initial two years of study at their home university, with a subsequent two years in Australia leading to completion of their degrees. Graduates received degrees from both universities. During their Australian semesters, all students were offered the opportunity of taking one or two online courses. Less than 5 per cent preferred this option. They selected online courses for one or all of the following reasons:

» visa restrictions limiting their time in Australia due to previous educational failures,
» a desire to graduate earlier, and
» the absence of a face-to-face alternative.

The three cohorts were comprised of participants from the majority of students who opted for face-to-face classes. The fact that a small minority, again around 5 per cent, of students in these face-to-face classes were native born offered an additional comparative element to the exercise.

Procedure

For this project, an interpretive methodology was employed using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data-collection approaches which employed both primary and secondary data sources. Figure 1 outlines how the research was conducted to the present time and also includes the ongoing research procedures.

The first phase involved a comprehensive literature study related to a wide range of teaching and learning topics which included both face-to-face and online aspects, e.g., alignment, active learning, online learning behavior, critical thinking, engagement, cultural behavior, internationalization, transnational education, and curriculum design. The purpose was to understand the trends, issues, and developments in the above mentioned areas, identify the gaps, and compare the theories with our practices.

The second phase involved the conduct of in-class surveys at the outset and completion of each semester. These surveys sought to obtain two types of feedback. The first related explicitly to online learning, for example student attitudes towards and understanding of online learning. The second focused on how changes made to the units by using a blended mode (in both content and context) affected students' attitudes to and understanding of online learning. The purpose was to investigate if these changes increased the students' active learning skills and improved their ability to study online.

The final phase involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with those respondents who had indicated their willingness to participate. A total of 20 students took part in these interviews. The purpose was to collect richer, more meaningful data to enable an effective evaluation of the new blended teaching mode, content, and delivery methods in order to further improve Chinese students' attitude to and confidence in learning online.

Figure 1 also indicates the procedures of the ongoing project research which extend from one university to several universities in Australia and ultimately, from the example of Chinese students, to Asian international students from other countries. The project explores the development of online education. In particular, the

project will attempt to identify the issues, challenges, and opportunities of Australian online education focusing on Chinese students' online study experiences and how Australian universities can best satisfy the needs of Chinese students in such a way that they provide an enjoyable learning experience.

Major Research Findings to Date

The survey questionnaire had been distributed during 2009 to 2012 to the participants – 375 students on the university's '2+2 CAP'(Collaborative Articulation Program) with majors in eCommerce or Business Analysis. Several units were specifically designed to combine both face-to-face and online activities in a blended mode, e.g., in-class discussion and case presentations, online virtual lectures, and online discussion activities by using discussion board, wikis, and blogs.

The investigation produced a rich mass of data and, with it, an increased understanding of the issues related to making online learning more acceptable to Chinese students. Tables 1 and 2 present both positive feedback and responses indicating students' doubts and concerns, as expressed in questionnaires and interviews, along with illustrative comments.

Although the contents of the foregoing tables contain more positive than negative feedback, we have put more emphasis on the latter as our research is aimed above all else at improvement. Tables 1 and 2 also shed light on two critical issues; those cultural issues addressed in the second research question and the issue of relative significance between online learning and learning *per se*. Commentary includes, for example, students' reference to the cost:value dimension of online learning and whether or not it was necessary to travel abroad to study online, along with mention of questions of "face" and preference for traditional learning styles. In the interviews conducted with students, a consistent theme was a generally low regard for the status of online learning and a feeling that they were not learning as much as they would have done in traditional face-to-face learning environments.

It could be argued that students' perceptions as captured in responses to specific questions might express individual rather than cultural views, that is, that they resulted from personal rather than group reactions. However, based on our face-to-face contact with the students concerned and, more importantly, the relevant literature, we are more comfortable with the view that acknowledges the importance of cultural factors in international environments, be they within multinational organizations or, as in this case, in an international collaborative education program. The research reported here suggests that the propensity to engage in open and, where necessary, constructively critical communication with peers and academic staff was much greater among Australian-born students than among Chinese students. The importance of culture was also reinforced in that the Chinese students found it much more difficult to break ingrained patterns of obedient, rote-type learning and operate as independent learners.

With regard to the issue of learning and specifically of alternative teaching modes (face-to-face and blended online), the student experience was equally revealing. Although it was not altogether unexpected to find that the majority of Chinese students had little or no experience of online learning, what was surprising was that in the age of Facebook and Google, and, indeed, of Chinese versions such as Baidu and Weibo, they lacked even basic research skills in Web searching. This proved to be a problem both initially in the completion of assignments and later as we sought to blend an online dimension with a more open and student-centered classroom environment. However, as the project unfolded it became apparent that what was most important here was not the mode of learning, be it online or face-to-face, but the learning (in terms of knowledge transmission and acquisition) itself, and, accordingly, that the teaching and learning process

Perceptions/Themes	Examples
Peer (social) support	"Discussing questions with others is good fun. We can learn from each other. It is better than just thinking of the questions by myself." "It was reassuring to find on the discussion board that other students had similar thoughts and concerns." "The opportunity to see how other people view issues can enlighten and broaden your own point of view. Perhaps they see an angle that you didn't, thus expanding your knowledge and understanding.' "Additionally, I recognized that each member would bring their own unique set of knowledge and abilities to the group."
Preparation for workplace team work	"It helps me to develop communication skills in a virtual environment. This is an important skill as most businesses require their people to be communicators in an online environment." "I wanted to participate in my Discussion and Support group to gain experience in working as part of a team, so that when I enter the workplace I am more able to work with other people."
Convenience	"The communication tools on Blackboard meant that I did not have to travel to the university every day". "The Blackboard tool made it very easy to communicate with other students and the lecturers" "Teachers set a flexible time frame, so I can do tests in the time convenient for me."
Time	"When in the classroom, during the discussion, I have to answer the questions straightaway. It makes me nervous as it is hard for me as English is my second language. In an online environment, I can think the questions and write down the answers properly." "I can search online or in books for the answers without worrying about losing face." " 24/7 availability of Blackboard meant that there was much less pressure on time" "Teaches me time management skills."
Learning styles and practices	"Allows me to learn at my own pace and with no interference from others". "I can listen to the virtual lectures and write down the parts I don't understand, read the overview materials and other references, and then listen to them again." "I can understand better through listening to the virtual lectures than to face-to-face lectures." "I can search online or in other materials if I am not sure about the answers."
Comfortable environment	"In an online environment, I can write and share my ideas with others without worrying about my poor English or saying the wrong thing."
Opinion on the blended mode	"There are some communication problems but my overall experience is not bad. Blended mode is suit for me as I have never studied online before. I think I will have problem to code if the unit is pure online unit." "As we never studied online, this blended mode is important. This will give us opportunity to learn more on how to study online. Lecturers explanation is useful and I can [learn] more about how to study online."

Table 1 – Positive student feedback on online learning

Themes	Examples
The lack of social connections	"I still like face-to-face communication. I feel comfortable when I talk to someone face-to-face, so I can understand his/her reaction of my question." "Face-to-face you can ask more personal questions, but you cannot do it online."
Delays in communication	"Hard to get a response from others in a timely fashion." "I ask lecturers questions but have to wait for answers. In the class, you can get an answer straightaway."
Quality of teaching	"I don't see online study as having same quality as face-to-face study." "I spent a lot of money and it is not worth it to study online. If I had wanted to study only I would not have needed to come overseas."
Self-management	"I think I am lacking in self-management skills, so don't like the online part." "Online study requires self-management and self-learning skills, I don't think I have these. I still like to listen to lecturers and have them tell me what to do."
Unit requirement	"It's a requirement, so liking does not come into it." "Participation constitutes a key component for the successful completion of the assignment tasks."

Table 2 – Less positive student feedback on online learning

should be reformed in order to address this issue. This demanded a replacement of the standard approach to teaching and learning as employed in the 2 + 2 course by one that promised to be more successful in engaging and motivating students to learn. Initially, this included the preparation and delivery of lectures and the conduct of tutorials in both online and face-to-face mode, with amendments where necessary in the case of online units. Results at the end of the first year of implementation of the changes were unimpressive. Following discussions with both internal and external colleagues, further reading, and enquiry, we recognized that more radical changes linking the theory and practice of alignment were imperative to better engage all students and help to turn them into active learners.

Over the following two years (January 2010-January 2012) the issue of active learning was addressed by continuously monitoring and amending the course content and related learning activities. Essentially, this resulted in a progression from a "talk and chalk" environment, in which knowledge transfer was largely one-directional from staff to students, towards a multi-directional, interactive environment in which there were no formal lectures and much of the learning activity was driven and ultimately determined by the extent of student involvement. Students were actively encouraged to participate, not just to listen. There was overwhelming support for the new approach to content delivery, with only minor reservations among students to do with time pressures and language difficulties. Students found the unit interesting and stimulating and mostly enjoyed the opportunities for discussion and presentation of findings in both face-to-face and online environments, including the chance to improve their written and spoken English. Not only had taking the unit made them more confident and better communicators, but also it had dispelled previous fears about online learning. The authors were especially pleased to find that students cited critical thinking and active learning skills as areas

where they had benefited particularly through taking the unit.

Discussion

There has been a significant amount of research into the components of e-learning, with, for example, Amaral and Leal (2004) identifying its key elements as lecturer, content, student, place, time and interactivity, and Turban et al. (eds.) (2006) listing the inputs for effective e-learning as:

» Visual: it should, when appropriate, use relevant images, video, audio, and other media, rather than simply text, providing information to learners;

» Concise: it should present written information clearly and briefly, because it is an important element of e-learning;

» Interactive: it should require learners to interact with the courseware through quizzes and multimedia activities, allowing them to practice their skills, demonstrate knowledge, discover relationships and new information, and reinforce learning;

» Engaging: it should appeal to learners' professional experience and emotions;

» Relevant: it should address learners' current needs or learning gaps;

» Feasible: it should provide technological infrastructure for enabling e-learning that is practically designed for learners' use.

» Empowering: it should provide access to additional resources, allowing self-directed learners to explore material relevant to their interests and achieving a more comprehensive knowledge outcome.

Although the above list is helpful, it can have the disadvantage of making the e-learning process appear deceptively simple. Costa and Silva (2010) argue that successfully incorporating these elements is more complicated. Clearly, what is required is a holistic approach that combines conceptual background with both procedures and technologies and which defines the following:

» e-learning process design;

» definition of learner competencies;

» framework for co-operation among teachers and students, including learning content and its packaging and deployment (or organizational structure and method of presentation); learners' profile; assessment activities; metadata structure; and system architecture (Costa & Silva, 2010).

Costa and Silva's (2010) approach serves as a reminder of the realities of the situation. This holistic perspective is necessary to address two of the key issues that emerged from the present research. First was the strong cultural dimension whereby Chinese students exhibited substantially different behavioral and learning patterns from Australian students. In adopting e-learning approaches in an attempt to break away from the perceptions and habits instilled by more traditional learning practices, it is essential not to overlook the continuing importance of cultural factors, as discussed above. Second is the fundamental indication that what matters here is not so much method or mode but learning. Online learning, just as with face-to-face learning (or a blend of both), will only succeed where students have been sufficiently engaged as active and independent learners in courses that are properly aligned in accordance with accepted practice (Anderson et al., 2001; Biggs & Tang, 2007; Blumberg, 2009).

Conclusion

This research exercise proved to be valuable for a variety of reasons. In the first instance, it reinforced the authors' perceptions of the problems faced by Chinese students within an online learning environment. Student responses to the unit changes that had been introduced, along with their suggestions for further improve-

ments, more than vindicated the research undertaken. Secondly, this turned out to be a learning experience that went beyond the specifics of a particular set of units, delving into the fundamentals of learning irrespective of a particular teaching mode. It emphasized the central importance of issues such as alignment, relevance, and meaning in course development and delivery. As indicated above, the major source of evidence to support the claims made here for improvement in the student teaching and learning experience is qualitative. The research is ongoing and will be informed by the findings from this initial phase of the project. ▪▪

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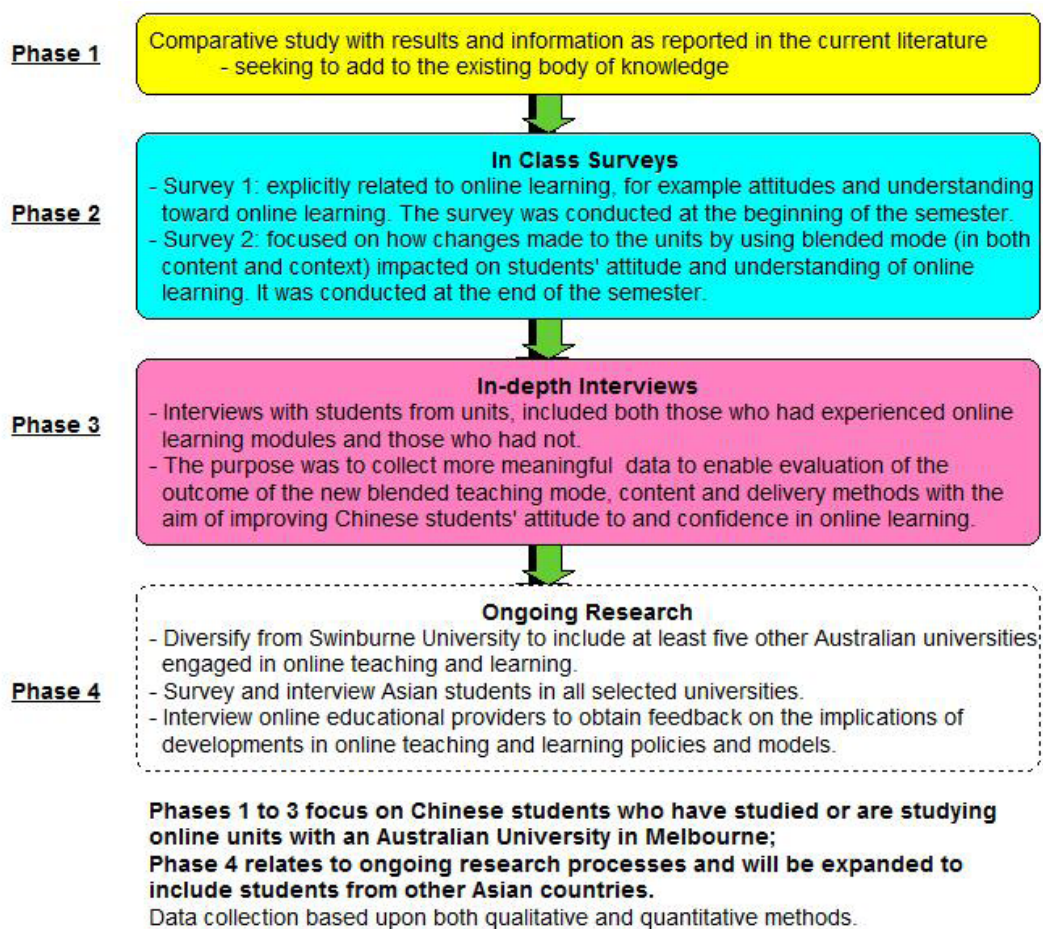
Phase 1

Comparative study with results and information as reported in the current literature
- seeking to add to the existing body of knowledge

Phase 2

In Class Surveys
- Survey 1: explicitly related to online learning, for example attitudes and understanding toward online learning. The survey was conducted at the beginning of the semester.
- Survey 2: focused on how changes made to the units by using blended mode (in both content and context) impacted on students' attitude and understanding of online learning. It was conducted at the end of the semester.

Phase 3

In-depth Interviews
- Interviews with students from units, included both those who had experienced online learning modules and those who had not.
- The purpose was to collect more meaningful data to enable evaluation of the outcome of the new blended teaching mode, content and delivery methods with the aim of improving Chinese students' attitude to and confidence in online learning.

Phase 4

Ongoing Research
- Diversify from Swinburne University to include at least five other Australian universities engaged in online teaching and learning.
- Survey and interview Asian students in all selected universities.
- Interview online educational providers to obtain feedback on the implications of developments in online teaching and learning policies and models.

Phases 1 to 3 focus on Chinese students who have studied or are studying online units with an Australian University in Melbourne;
Phase 4 relates to ongoing research processes and will be expanded to include students from other Asian countries.
Data collection based upon both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Figure 1 – Research Phases

What's New? Assessing the Effectiveness of Current Events Assignments

Vanessa Ruget and Kristen Hudak Rosero

Abstract

Instructors often integrate current events into their classroom, whether formally or informally. Yet, very little research has been done to assess the effectiveness of current event assignments. Our paper examines whether a "news blog" increases students' interest for current events, their willingness to develop and express their opinions, and their perceptions of whether news-based assignments help them understand (and apply) course concepts. We rely on the results of pre- and post-tests completed by 60 students in four different politics classes to gauge students' responses to the assignment, their consumption of news, and their appreciation of the importance of an informed citizenry. Results indicate that well-crafted assignments can provide several benefits: not only did our students enjoy completing the assignment and becoming "experts" on their countries; the assignment also seemed to have helped them absorb important course concepts and gain competency in media literacy. Further, student feedback identified points that can help strengthen current events assignments in future classes.

Keywords

political science education, current events, news blog, media literacy

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Introduction

It can be argued that a key goal of higher education is to help students become engaged and informed global citizens. In the last few years, a large literature has been devoted to the critical role played by class simulations, debates, and service learning projects in developing these civic skills. In that vein, this article focuses on current events and how they can also help foster students' civic aptitudes.

Our paper assesses the effectiveness of a "news blog" in increasing students' interest in current events, their willingness to develop and express their opinions, and their perceptions that news-based assignments help them understand (and apply) course concepts. We hypothesized that there would be a discernible difference in perceptions about current events and how they relate to class once the assignment had been completed. In particular, we rely

on the results of a pre- and post-tests completed by 60 students in four different comparative politics classes (two at Salem State University and two at Eastern Connecticut State University). Although this particular project considers the assignment in the context of political science classes, innovative ways of incorporating current events have applications across many disciplines, such as economics, sociology, geography, business, and education. The following section reviews the existing literature on integrating news in the classroom. We then present the methodology, implementation, and results of our study.

Incorporating the News: Why and How?

The role played by current events in college courses varies greatly, depending for example on the topic discussed, the professor's teaching approach, and the students' level. Many instructors opt to introduce news only casually and in an ad hoc fashion, for example by discussing news informally at the beginning of each class (see Canon 1999). This approach has the advantage of fostering a more informal atmosphere in the classroom by encouraging students to discuss issues of their interest. On the other hand, some instructors favor a systematic integration of current events into their syllabus, in particular through the creation of specific assignments, such as news related questions on the final exam (Dowty, 1999). In an American Politics course for example, Schattle (2003) requires students to monitor two foreign newspapers for at least one month to find out how the United States is perceived in other parts of the world. As a way to engage students in local politics, Morris and Macchiarola (1970) assigned newspapers from different states and required students to analyze state and local elections.

Going even further, some instructors ask students to get a subscription to a daily newspaper as part of their course requirement (Eisenstein, 1999). As argued by Rouyer, whose students in Introduction to Political

Science must buy a three month subscription to the *Christian Science Monitor*, "what better place than a newspaper to find the day-to-day application of political concepts and theories"? (1995, p. 36).

Finally, other commonly used techniques to incorporate news more systematically into a course structure include students' journals (Franklin, 1999), news clipping and scoring exercises (Eisenstein, 1999; Mitchell, 1999), current event debates (Canon, 1999), class news presentations, extra credits for "current events" on exams, and students and faculty blogs (Cheit, 2006). New technologies have significantly expanded the range of options, in terms of both news consumption and news-related exercises. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to review the vast pedagogical potential offered by these tools, it should be noted that they allow students and professors not only to more easily search for, read, and discuss news, but also to engage with news themselves by sharing or posting content online.

The goals sought by instructors who make daily news a key component of their class also differ.[1] Some instructors seek primarily to develop among students key academic skills such as critical thinking, reading, and media literacy. Lippuci (1999) teaches her students to "read the newspaper efficiently." In the same vein, newspapers have been used successfully in first-year seminars with goals ranging from developing newspaper literacy (Dusenbery, 1999; Green, 1999) to refining career choices (Hendrickson, 1999).

At a broader level, some professors hope to cultivate democratic citizenship among their students, in particular by encouraging them to stay abreast of ongoing events. Their goal may be simply to prompt stu-

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1   According to a special New York Times publication on this topic, using newspapers in class brings a host of benefits, including improving students' thinking skills, interest and motivation as well as preparing them for citizenship; involving schools in their community; and responding to the needs of businesses (Gardner and Sullivan 1999, p. 11).

dents to be informed citizens. For example, students in Dowty's Introduction to International Relations course must read all international news and editorials in *The New York Times,* bring the paper to class, and save key articles. Feedback from his students confirms that many become avid readers of the news (Dowty, 1999). Others expect that connecting students to key societal debates and events will spur their interest for politics. As observed by Rankin (2010, p. 259), "An understanding of current events, even controversial and heated contemporary topics, can also be key to stimulating a young person's interest and engaged learning."

Similarly, integrating news may help students form and discuss opinions and overcome stereotypes. For example, Koch (1994) found that when students were required to read *The New York Times* every day as part of an introductory course, they became both more inclined to talk about politics and current events with other students and more comfortable in voicing their opinions during political discussions. In another study, Lawrence (2006) found that despite several shortcomings, having students keep a blog to report and discuss news of a particular state of their choosing engaged them in state and local politics and gave them resources to use during class discussion. Several professors have also noted that having students read foreign sources or sources from states others than their own broadened their perspectives and battled their stereotypes (Morris & Macchiarola, 1970). One such instructor observed that integrating TV news clips into an American Politics course helped students move away from emotion and 'gut feelings' when analyzing key events like the War in Iraq (Rankin, 2010). In the same vein, by reading foreign sources and their account of US policies, students in Schattle's class were challenged in their perception of American power. As Schattle concludes (2003, p. 435):

> It is increasingly important for introductory political science courses to explore how the United

States and its global influences are perceived from afar. Incorporating the study of international news sources into undergraduate survey courses is one helpful strategy in furthering this end, and in their understanding of bias in media reporting.

In new democracies, introducing news sources in the course material also seems to deepen democratic outlooks such as support for basic freedoms (Morduchowicz et al., 1996). Researchers note, however, that these positive effects are usually rather small; one study even found that integrating newspaper reading into a course structure did not improve students' attitudes towards politics (Huerta & Jozwiak, 2008).

In addition, teachers of politics frequently seek, through current events, to make the course content more relevant and exciting and to help students absorb key concepts by illustrating them with timely examples. As Canon argues, "if the students can read an article about the Democratic National Committee and foreign money the same week that I am talking about soft money and campaign finance, the concepts become much more meaningful " (Canon 1999, p. 80). Introducing "fresh content" through the news is particularly appealing as a growing number of students complain about textbooks --which they find outdated and not compelling (Besser & Stone, 1999).[2] As an instructor quoted by Mosborg (2002, p. 327) argued, "I think kids become awfully passive when they read American textbooks, and that's why I use things such as *The New York Times*."

For example, students who read the *Christian Science Monitor* every day as part of Rouyer's introductory course reported that it contributed to their understanding of course concepts (Rouyer, 1995). Similarly, students who followed a faculty-led blog in a public

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2   Visiting Russia before the end of the Soviet Union, Bill Keller, a managing editor of the New York Times, noted that in many classrooms "The press was the curriculum" since textbooks offered very little content of interest beyond propaganda (Keller, 1999, p.18).

policy course at Brown "were able to see the connections between class and the larger world on a regular basis" (Cheit, 2006, p. 4). Similarly, almost 70% of the students enrolled in political science courses in the First Year Learning Community Program at Texas A&M University –Corpus Christi, found that the use of the New York Times as part of the course material made the class more relevant to them (Huerta & Jozwiak, 2008).

Finally, instructors who insert current events systemically into a course may wish to help students reflect about the media themselves and the role they play in politics and in setting the agenda. For example, Barbour (1999) expects students to become "critical and savvy consumers of the media." Her students must ask themselves a number of questions when reading articles from publications like *The New York Times* or *Newsweek* such as "Who owns the media source?" "Who is the journalist?" or "Is someone putting a spin on the story?" (Barbour, 1999).

Challenges of Integrating the News

Regardless of the type of inclusion or methods used, there are several key challenges in trying to make current events a key component of a college-level course.

First, reading and/or discussing the news in class is time-consuming and is ostensibly done at the expense of course content. Critically, if current events are discussed at the beginning of class, some students may feel as if this is a distraction from the "serious" part of the material and be tempted to arrive late or not to pay attention.

Second, students often do not have a prior habit of following daily news at all or do it in a superficial manner--for example by glancing at headlines on the internet while checking their email. So if current events are integrated only casually such as through an open discussion at the beginning of class, only a few students will participate while others will sit silently. On the

other hand, when prompted to start reading a newspaper, students may have trouble sorting the important from the trivial, distinguishing opinion pieces--such as op-eds and blogs-- from reporting, and identifying the political leaning of different media outlets. Students sometimes fail to identify adequate sources and are put off by the pay content of several prominent newspapers websites. Many have never used a site like Google News or a database like Lexis Nexis, which offer great tools for searching the news.

Students may also feel overwhelmed and discouraged by what they do not know or understand (such as the history and stakes of a particular conflict). New technologies accentuate these problems. For example, as noted by Kuzma (1998, p. 580), abundant information online risks creating an "information glut." The multiple formats in which news can be consumed today also make their identification problematic.

Third, integrating current events into a political science class in particular may give students the impression that political science is a glorified treatment of daily news. Some students already struggle to see the differences between academic and non-academic sources; worse, they may find the later of superior quality because they may be more updated and less filled with jargon. As a result, students will fail to recognize that social sciences endeavor to be scientific enterprises that rely on objectivity and neutrality.

In the same vein, making daily news a key component of a class may lead both students and professors to lack critical distance, especially when revolutionary events are taking place (such as, for example, during the Arab Spring). Further, integrating current events potentially introduces more controversy into the classroom. Besides, if the course is taught in a non-democratic country, students will be reluctant to openly discuss politics, even abstractly (Ruget, 2008).

Finally, incorporating news items also presents logistical or technical challenges such as the choice of

news sources. Left to their own devices, students will gravitate towards short online news items such as the ones posted on popular websites like Yahoo! On the other hand, by requesting that all students consult the same media outlet, instructors may convey the impression that they are imposing their own ideological preferences. Finally, grading news-related assignments can also be problematic. For example, it may seem arbitrary to assign a substantial portion of the grade to staying informed, something we would expect any good citizen to do.

Because of our student population, we also faced a few additional constraints in our respective institutions. Salem State University is primarily an undergraduate institution with enrollment of over 10,000 students. Eastern Connecticut State University is a four-year public liberal arts college with approximately 4,500 full-time undergraduates. Eastern Connecticut State University is located in a more rural setting, but both universities share very similar student characteristics. Most of their students are first generation college students. Many struggle with financial, family, and/or mental health issues. A sizable majority support themselves by working part-time or full-time, which often affects their attendance and course preparation time. As a result, reading a daily newspaper is relatively uncommon among students. Thus, time-demanding assignments like participating in online discussion blogs may work poorly because students already juggle academic and professional obligations. In addition, requiring students with limited financial resources to get a subscription to a newspaper is often not an option.

Description of the Assignment

For all four classes, the current events assignment was considered an important part of their coursework, worth ten percent of their final grade. The same assignment instructions were provided to three out of the four classes included in this analysis: Introduction

to Comparative Politics, and African Politics taught by Vanessa Ruget at Salem State University, and Asian Politics taught by Kristen Rosero at Eastern Connecticut State University. A copy of the assignment is provided in appendix A. The fourth class included in the study, International Political Economy also taught by Kristen Rosero at Eastern Connecticut State University, was given an alternative version of the assignment, described in more detail later in this section.

For the primary version of the assignment, students were asked to track current events related to one particular country throughout the semester. They were instructed that they would serve as the "expert" on this country and were expected to contribute details and perspective to class discussions. In addition they kept a running blog on events in that country. Thus the assignment was composed of two parts: the online component, in which students maintained a country blog highlighting interesting news stories related to that country and class topics, and an in-class discussion component, in which students were expected to contribute to class discussions regarding current events. This was considered an ongoing assignment to be completed by the students throughout the semester; the stated expectation was that they post a 150-word blog entry on their country at least six times throughout the 16-week semester, though they were encouraged to post more. Sample blog entries were provided with the instructions. There was no specific source requirement in terms of where their news came from, so long as it was considered a trustworthy source. Examples were provided in the instructions and in class. In each class, the current events blog accounted for 10 percent of a student's final grade.

The goals of the assignment, as presented to the students in the assignment instructions, were stated as follows:

The goal of this assignment is to emphasize the relevance of key concepts addressed in class by illustrating them with timely examples. Moreover, it is intended to provide students with a deeper understanding of a particular country, to help develop informed opinions and overcome stereotypes.

Thus, this assignment sought to address two of the goals frequently discussed in the literature. On the one hand, it sought to make the course content more relevant and exciting, to help students absorb key concepts with the use of current examples (Cheit, 2006; Huerta & Jozwiak, 2008; Mosborg, 2002). On the other hand, we hoped the assignment would achieve broader learning goals. First, we anticipated that students would learn to draw on these resources to become more comfortable in developing and expressing their opinions (Koch, 1994; Rankin, 2010). Second, we expected that a deeper understanding of a particular country could broaden students' perspectives and help them overcome stereotypes (Morris & Macchiarola, 1970; Schattle, 2003).

An alternative assignment was given in the International Political Economy class at Eastern Connecticut State University as a means of experimenting with a different format. In this class, students were assigned to teams.[3] Each team started with an assigned article from a different region of the world. Team members would then rotate in posting related articles to a shared blog. This "relay" format was used to encourage teamwork and collaboration, as well as competition between teams. At various "checkpoints" throughout the semester, the team with the most posts was awarded a prize (candy). Moreover, the more posts an individual student had, the more opportunities he or

she had to improve his or her grade for this assignment. Thus, there were both group and individual incentives. Appendix B provides a copy of these instructions as well. Like the individual based assignment used in the other three classes, one of the main goals for this assignment was to emphasize the relevance of key concepts through current events. The challenge of connecting each article to the previous one was meant to emphasize the interconnectedness of international economic events. The additional goal of promoting teamwork allowed for an interesting comparison of the effectiveness of news related assignments in group-based versus individual assignments.

Another difference in the format of these assignments is worth mentioning. At Eastern Connecticut State University, students posted their blogs on Blackboard, while students at Salem State University used Canvas. These learning management systems are broadly comparable but Canvas offers a more dynamic, user-friendly way to converse with students online and to provide feedback on assignments.

Methodology

To assess students' perceptions of the assignment and its effectiveness, we conducted a simple pre- and post-survey for each class. The pre-test survey was given during the first week of classes, while the post-test survey was given prior to the final exam and after the final post was due. Both were filled anonymously and students were informed that results would not affect their final grades.[4] The questions were designed to assess students' consumption of news (frequency and sources), their perceptions of how informed they were, their interest in

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3   As the blog assignment was online, teams primarily interacted via email and the online blog itself, while checking in occasionally with each other at the beginning of class. In this way, the team format did not place any additional burden on the students to meet outside of class.

4   It is acknowledged that any survey methodology can have the effect of eliciting a 'desired' response from the test subjects. However, the authors feel that the students approached this survey as an opportunity to provide feedback on an assignment and thus did not have a strong incentive to inflate responses. Moreover, as is discussed below, responses on the post-test were not in fact overly positive.

current events, their willingness to develop and express their opinions, and their perceptions that news-based assignments helped them understand (and apply) course concepts. The post-test also asked students to reflect on the effectiveness of the assignment itself, through both additional Likert Scale responses[5] and open-ended responses. These open-ended questions asked students to write down three positive aspects and three negative aspects of the assignment, as well as suggestions for future modifications to the assignment. These responses were then organized according to the various themes that arose and ultimately provided helpful qualitative data to supplement the analysis.

For the analysis, chi-square tests were used to determine a) if the frequency of students' news consumption changed significantly after the assignment and b) if students' feelings on the relevance of current events changed significantly after the assignment. For questions regarding the assignment itself, the chi-square test was used to determine if there was significant variation among the four classes, and particularly between classes using the individual assignment and those using the group-based assignment. The table below presents the response rates for each class:

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5   A five-point Likert Scale was used, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Implementation

According to our survey results, most students spent about one hour completing each blog entry—a very reasonable amount of time that did not theoretically prevent them from completing the rest of the course work. In fact, several students listed the fact that the blogs did not take too long to complete as one of the positive aspects of the course. One student wrote for example: "They weren't really time-consuming – they were enjoyable."

Students encountered two challenges when completing the assignment.[6] First, their initial posts were sometimes problematic, for example, because they were too opinionated, did not select appropriate news sources, or merely summarized the news without providing their own analysis. After receiving our feedback, however, most students learned how to complete the assignment appropriately. Second, although we provided our classes with a list of acceptable sources (as well as tips on how to find relevant stories), both the quantitative data and qualitative statements indicate that students occasionally struggled to find adequate

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6   From a faculty perspective, integrating the news can also be time consuming, both inside and outside of the classroom. In particular, commenting on students' individual posts is an enjoyable but lengthy task.

Class	# of Students Registered	Pre-surveys Submitted	Post-Surveys Submitted
Comparative Politics	19	14	13
African Politics	17	13	14
Asian Politics	19	16	17
International Political Economy	20	17	16
TOTAL	75	60	60

Table 1: Response Rates

news items. This was for example the case for about 23% of those in Asian Politics. Qualitative statements from the post-test survey also suggest that finding news stories was particularly difficult for students who had picked small countries and for those working on closed autocracies (such as Eritrea). Several students in the African Politics class also noted that they had trouble assessing the accuracy of the stories they found (two students in that same class observed that the news they commented on was often depressing).

Evaluation

Overall, students in all four classes had a positive response to the idea of integrating the news into the course. In the post-test, over 90% of them either agreed or strongly agreed that "keeping up with current events is important to being a democratic citizen." In the fourth class, African Politics, the number was close to 80%. But a comparison between the pre- and post-test did not reveal any significant changes among the students as far as their views regarding current events. This may be because a majority of students started out with fairly strong agreement with the statement. In addition, most had completed a current events project in another class: over 80% had already done so in high school. Close to 80% had also encountered a news related assignment in another political science class, and 75% had in another college class.

Tellingly, close to 100% of students in all four classes believed that the assignment should be used again. Forty percent of all students, however, (and 75% of students in the Asian Politics class) believed that some modifications should be made. The most frequently cited suggestions were to remove a two sources requirement, to allow students to write on a different country if nothing noteworthy had happened in "theirs," and to require periodic short class presentations so that students could share their findings with others.

More importantly, our study suggests that current events assignments may be at least moderately effective in making the class content more accessible to students and in increasing their interest for the news.

A More Interesting and Accessible Class

One goal of the assignment was to make the course content more relevant and exciting, using current, real-world examples to illustrate key concepts. Our results indicate that, from the students' perspectives, the assignment was largely successful in achieving this goal. A large majority of students in our classes (86.7% total) reported agreement that they enjoyed the class discussions on current events.

Large numbers of students also found that these discussions made the class more interesting, the class topics clearer and "more relevant," and that they helped them gain a new perspective on the course topics. Table 2 shows the percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement. These results are corroborated by students' qualitative statements. One student indicated that one of the things (s)he liked about the assignment was that "It is more interesting to follow current events than study only theory;" another wrote that is was "more relevant to daily life than a term paper." At least 14 (about 23%) said that the assignment helped them apply course concepts--including a student in African Politics who observed that she was able to "see how concepts discussed in class play out in the real world." In fact, several students made reference to the idea that the assignment, as one student put it, "took the course material to a relatable real world platform." Students also confirmed that it gave them a new way of thinking about class concepts. For example, one student in Asian Politics said (s)he liked that it "connected students with a country in a unique way."

Using chi-square values, we tested for significant differences among the courses. Generally, the weakest responses corresponded with the Asian Politics

	Total	Comp. Politics	African Politics	Asian Politics	Intl. Political Economy	Chi-Square
Enjoyed the class discussions related to current events	86.7	92.3	92.9	64.7	100.0	10.818*
Helped make the class topics more clear	80.0	92.3	100.0	58.8	75.0	13.469
Helped make the class topics more clear	74.6	84.6	85.7	50.0	81.3	11.348
Gave me a new perspective on course topic	81.7	76.9	92.9	76.5	81.3	9.827

* chi-square is significant at 0.1 level

Table 2: Assignment Evaluation
Percent agree / strongly agree

class. This difference was significant particularly in the question regarding class discussions, which were unfortunately more sporadic in the Asian Politics class. In this class, the instructor acknowledges that discussion of the current events posts needed to have been better incorporated into the structure of the class meetings. Students primarily saw the assignment as a way to earn extra points at the end of the semester, instead of consistently following through with it. The difference between this class and the others in terms of the students' evaluation of the assignment can therefore be attributed to weaknesses in implementation.

That being said, the qualitative comments from students in the Asian Politics class did confirm that the assignment was beneficial to students' understanding of the material. One student wrote, for example, that "when the professor is speaking I am not lost" and that the assignment provided "good brain food." Ultimately, the majority of students in the Asian Politics class did say the assignment should be used again, but with modifications.

Informed Citizens

The assignment clearly encouraged students to consult the news on a regular basis. The most striking change was in the percentage of students who looked at foreign news sources (from 6.7% at the beginning of the semester to 16.9% at the end, a statistically significant difference). In African Politics, the percentage of students who *at least* occasionally checked foreign news sites went up from 61.6% to 85.8%. In Asian Politics it grew from 50.1% to 75.1%. It should be noted that students were not specifically required to look into foreign news sources, though this may have been a function of the course topic and country-specific nature of the assignment. Another important change was in the number of students who listened to the news on the radio (from 8.6% to 20.3%). Our speculation would be that since many students commute to school, there may have been somewhat of a change in their willingness to tune in on their way.

In their self-evaluations, a large proportion of students (85%) agreed that as a result of the class and

	Before	After	Chi-Square
Major U.S. Newspaper (print)	11.7	15.3	3.109
Local Newspaper (print)	1.7	6.9	5.778
News Magazine	11.7	8.6	1.472
News Websites	40.7	53.4	3.387
News Feeds via email or social media	45	52.6	2.491
Evening News	26.7	23.7	0.749
Cable News	23.3	27.6	3.533
News Radio	8.6	20.3	12.149**
Foreign News Sites or Papers	6.7	16.9	8.452*

* chi-square is significant at 0.1 level

Table 3: Percent of Students who Reference Every Day

the assignment, they were "more likely to pay attention to international political news." This was the case with 76.9 % of students in Comparative Politics, 100% in African Politics, 70.6% in Asian Politics, and 93.8% in International Political Economy. This was also one of the most commonly listed positive aspects of the assignment in students' qualitative responses. As one student stated "I have started reading newspapers, watching the news, and I even sometimes comment on news blogs posted on the internet." One student noted that (s)he now knew where to find information while another declared that the assignment "sparked an interest in me to always know what is happening around the world and in my country." On the other hand, even after the assignment, generally no more than half the class reported reviewing the news every day.

Still, while our assignment did not necessarily encourage a significant number of students to start reading the news every day, the qualitative comments from students indicated that they were paying closer attention. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, not only were students encouraged to be more fre-

quent consumers of the news, some students actually acknowledged that it made them *better* consumers of the news. This was something we had not actively sought to measure in our surveys, but was rather something students themselves identified as a benefit of the assignment. For example, one student listed among the positives that the assignment "forced students to actually read *and understand* news articles" [italics added]. Another student noted that "it helped us retrieve valuable information out of long articles." One student seemed surprised at the number of sources available for news, saying "I never used the internet to find news – I now know many sources to find the news. [I] didn't realize all the news going on around the world that was easily accessible." Several students noted that the assignment encouraged them to access and utilize more numerous news sites than they normally would have.

Developing Opinions & Overcoming Stereotypes

The broadest goal of the assignment was to encourage students to become more comfortable in developing their opinions about international politics. However, somewhat surprisingly, completing a weekly news blog

did not significantly increase students' confidence in their knowledge of current events, except in the African Politics class. In fact, although slight, the decline in knowledge confidence for International Political Economy was significant. The percentage of students who liked to share their opinions during current events discussion even went slightly down (except, again, in the African Politics class)—although it was also remarkably high at the beginning of the semester in at least two of the classes. Table 4 indicates the percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement. The chi-square values indicate whether there was a significant difference in the responses before and after the assignment.

The difference between African Politics and the other courses is noteworthy. One particularity of that course was the high number of foreign (especially African) students enrolled—close to one third of the class. Most of them opted to "blog" about their country of origin. They were therefore potentially more likely to notice how much (or rather how little) they knew about the country's politics at the beginning of the semester and how much they had learned by completing the assignment. Perhaps they also took the assignment more seriously because of their personal bond with the country; rather than yet another academic task, the blog may have presented an opportunity to explore the politics of their homeland. As for students in the other three classes, it may very well be that the assignment actually shook their confidence and helped them to realize how much more they needed to learn.

Several students indeed maintained that the blog helped them become expert on their country of focus. As explained by one of them: the assignment "helped increase my knowledge and allowed me to have something to say during class discussions on current events." Indeed, at least twenty students observed that completing the news blog made them, "aware" or "more open minded" about what is happening in the world—thus

"I feel confident about my knowledge of current events"

	Before	After	Chi-Square
All	73.4	74.6	3.554
Comparative Politics	85.8	84.6	1.776
African Politics	53.9	64.3	4.111
Asian Politics	62.6	62.5	0.22
International Political Economy	88.3	87.6	7.987**

** significant at the 0.05 level

"I like to share my opinion in discussions on current events"

	Before	After	Chi-Square
All	80	79.7	0.11
Comparative Politics	100	92.3	2.443
African Politics	61.6	78.6	1.808
Asian Politics	75.1	68.8	1.077
International Political Economy	82.3	81.3	2.991

*Table 4: Confidence in Current Events
Percent agree / strongly agree*

suggesting that current event assignments can help students develop an opinion and overcome stereotypes. In the words of a student in Comparative Politics: "it opened my eyes and helped me become a more worldly citizen." Similarly, a participant in the African Politics class stated that being forced to follow the news "keeps students in tune with what is happening even if it does not affect them." Several International Political Economy students noted that the assignment gave them new "perspective" indicating that it "open(ed) (their) eyes on foreign views" and that they "got to see

different sides for all issues." Based on these qualitative comments, there does seem to be some confirmation that the assignment was able to achieve broader learning goals. One student in the Asian Politics class confirmed this directly, saying that the assignment "helped me develop opinions on international topics."

Contrasting the Team-Based Assignment

Finally, in addition to assessing the success of the assignment's goals, this analysis also allowed us to evaluate alternative types of assignments. As the following table illustrates, on several points, the team-based assignment was ranked slightly more strongly than the individual-based assignment used in the other three classes. However, the chi-square test reveals no significant differences between the two assignments.

Overall, students responded very positively to the group-based assignment. Although there were two or three students who did not like the group format, many students considered the group format one of the positive aspects of the assignment. Qualitative comments spoke of the interactive nature of the assignment as a

good way of getting students to work together. One student commented that (s)he liked that the group blog format "allowed me to see the opinions of my peers on certain current events."

As far as its implementation, students liked the progression of the assignments and the "checkpoints" which kept them on track. The requirement of making connections to each previous article also helped students better appreciate the subject material. As one student put it, "It allowed students to find connections that they wouldn't have made before." While there were a few minor recommendations to improve the assignment, either through smaller groups, more class discussion, or simply "more candy," the assignment was very well received.

Conclusion

Overall, we had a very positive response to the current events assignment in our classes. Some of the more general comments we received from students included:

» "More fun than writing pointless political science essays"

	Total	Individual	Team	Chi-Square
Assignment instructions were clear	93.3	90.9	100	1.558
Found it easy to find news articles	76.3	72.1	87.5	2.883
Enjoyed the class discussions related to current events	86.6	81.8	100	3.75
Made the class more interesting	80	81.9	75.1	1.647
Helped make the class topics more clear	74.6	72.1	81.3	1.586
Gave me a new perspective on course topic	81.7	81.8	81.3	2.934
More likely to pay attention to international political news	85	81.8	93.8	1.36

Table 5: Comparing Team-based with Individual Blog Entry Assignment
Percent agree / strongly agree

» "Honestly, this is a great assignment. Looking up info on websites about what's going on in other countries was fun and essential for this class"

» "Overall I thought this was a very effective and beneficial assignment"

» "I learned about countries I wouldn't have looked at otherwise"

» "The blogs were interesting and fun to do"

» "I learned how to blog"

» "This assignment made me a subject matter 'expert' on Syria"

» "The assignment kept me in touch with my home country"

» "I am more likely to keep up with current events now"

» "The current events I researched were also topics we discussed in other courses"

Beyond a positive response, our paper sought to assess whether this sort of assignment was useful in achieving certain learning goals. Not only did we want students to follow the news more closely; we also hoped they would gain a better understanding of course content, develop informed opinions, and broaden their perspective. Though there is certainly room for improvement, our results indicate that students believe this type of assignment can achieve these goals.

First, although we did not see a significant change, or even a very high number of students reading the news every day, many of them did indicate that the assignment encouraged them to pay closer attention to the news. Perhaps reading the news every day is not necessarily the best indication of whether an assignment like this can indeed make them 'more informed citizens.' Rather, the likelihood that they will pay greater attention, utilize different sources to find the news, and be able to glean important information from those articles are perhaps more important benefits. Thus, while we may not be able to expect our students

to read the news every day, we might expect them to become *better* consumers of the news.

Second, there was strong evidence that students felt that this assignment was an important element of the course itself and of their understanding of class concepts. A strong majority saw the assignment as manageable but beneficial. From an instructor's perspective, knowing that such assignments can make the class more interesting for students goes a long way in terms of keeping them engaged. Future assessments might consider the impact of similar assignments on the performance outcomes of students in the class.

Finally, we had mixed evidence that the assignment helped students achieve broader, life-learning benefits. To what extent did we see students developing their opinions and gaining a new perspective? On the one hand, the quantitative measures indicate that there was not a significant increase in their confidence of current events or in the likelihood of sharing their opinions. In fact, in some cases it declined. On the other hand, the qualitative comments from students frequently noted that the news blog made them "aware" or "more open minded" about what is happening in the world. These findings might lead us to speculate that there is perhaps an awareness created by reading the news consistently that makes students question their pre-existing views. Thus, the more they know, the more they realize they *do not* know – and this, after all, is an important step in learning. ◼◼

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Appendix A

Current Events Analysis

Goal:

Throughout the semester, students will be asked to track current events related to one of the Asian states. They will serve as the "expert" on this country and will be expected to contribute details and perspective to class discussions. In addition they will keep a running "blog" on events in that country.

The goal of this assignment is to emphasize the relevance of key concepts addressed in class by illustrating them with timely examples. Moreover, it is intended to provide students with a deeper understanding of a particular country, to help develop informed opinions and overcome stereotypes.

Requirements:

This is an ongoing assignment to be completed by the students throughout the semester. It is composed of two parts:
1. An online component, in which students maintain a country "blog" highlighting interesting news stories related to that country and class topics.
2. An in-class discussion component, in which students will be expected to contribute to class discussions regarding current events

At least six times this semester, you should post a paragraph-long blog entry on the Blackboard discussion board (approximately 150 words). Guidelines for each entry are as follows:
» Each entry must summarize one or more key news stories that are directly relevant to your assigned country and the course topic(s). Specifically, it should address the following:
  › What were 1 or 2 major developments in your country of focus in the last week?
  › How does this relate to major developments in the continent in recent months?
» As much as possible, your blog must also make connection to our course material. That is, how do these news items relate to a specific topic addressed in class or assigned reading? *Be specific!* Provide sufficient detail to make the connection.
» In general, avoid simply summarizing the news items. Provide a critical assessment of their relevance.
» Each entry must contain (and include the link to) at least 2 trustworthy media sources.
  Suggested Sources:
  › http://www.nytimes.com/pages/world/asia/index.html
  › http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world/asia/
  › http://www.cnn.com/ASIA/?hpt=wo_bn4
  › TIP: you can also set up news alerts for your country

Grading:

Students will be assessed on a scale of 1-5 based on the following:
» the relevance of the news items to the class topic
» the timeliness of the article - each entry should be related to events within a week of the post
» the clarity and strength of the write-up
» Participation in class discussions

BONUS points will be given if you can incorporate news stories from locally operated news outlets.

Appendix B

Current Events Assignment
International Political Economy

Goal

The broad goal of this assignment is to identify current events related to international political economy and to draw connections across countries and contexts. A "relay" format is used to encourage teamwork and collaboration, as well as competition between teams. For each team, the immediate goal is to make as many connections as possible.

Instructions

Each team will start with an assigned article from a different region of the world. Once the initial article is posted on the blackboard discussion board, team members must take turns (rotating through all team members each time) posting a follow-up article related to some aspect of the previous one.

Articles

» News articles should be from reputable news sources, with links to the original article(s) provided.
» Suggested sources:
  › The Economist: www.economist.com
  › NY Times Business Section: http://www.nytimes.com/pages/business/index.html
  › The Wall Street Journal: http://online.wsj.com
  › Financial Times: www.ft.com
  › BBC News Business Section: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business/
  › IMF News: http://www.imf.org/external/news/default.aspx
  › WTO News: http://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news_e.htm
» Foreign news outlets may also be used.
» Be cautious of news blogs. Wherever possible, try to find the original news item(s) being referenced.
» You may also find it helpful to set up a Google news alert.

Connections

» Students are encouraged to be creative with the connections made. Try to speculate what the impact of the event might be, which other countries might be affected, etc. Has it lead to further action by governments, corporations or international organizations? Is there something similar happening elsewhere?
» You are not limited to events in the region where the original news event took place. In fact, the goal should be to explore how widely connected political economic events actually are.
» Keep in mind that news stories unfold and the consequences of an event may be felt for some time. Therefore, do not expect connections to appear all at once.
» Do not be redundant with the news stories. Follow-up posts should be *related* events, not just a new report on the same events. Also, keep in mind you want to facilitate subsequent follow-ups for fellow team mates as well.

Write-Up

» Each new article post must include a brief write-up (no less than 150 words) explaining the connection to the previous articles.

» These write-ups will serve as the basis for the Current Events portion of your grade. Each write-up will be graded according to the following 5-point scale:

> › 1 = poor - connection is not clear, write-up is incomplete
> › 2 = below average - a weak case for the connection is made
> › 3 = average - connection is made, minimum write-up requirements met
> › 4 = above average - write-up goes beyond minimums, makes a clear connection
> › 5 = excellent, well-written, creative & insightful connections

» Note that the more write-ups that are posted, the more chances you have to improve your average scores, and thus this portion of your final grade.

Check-Points

» To make this relay a bit more exiting, there will be four check-points throughout the semester which will allow team members to share with the class some of the connections they've been making and where their topic has taken them.

» This will also be an opportunity to see which team is "winning" – that is, which team has made the most connections. Expect prizes…

» Check-point dates are listed on the syllabus.

Enhancing Learning with Technology: Applying the Findings from a Study of Students in Online, Blended, and Face-to-Face First-Year Seminar Classes

Stephanie M. Foote and Deborah Mixson-Brookshire

Abstract

As increasing numbers of undergraduate students are taking courses online or in blended formats, instructors are challenged to conceptualize how active and engaging teaching and learning can be adapted to these formats. It is also important to understand who these online learners are, their expectations about the courses they are taking, and their perceptions of the academic abilities needed for success in college-level courses. This study examined the perceived impact of instructional tools used in blended and online first-year seminars on student learning and engagement in the course. Findings from the study have been used to inform pedagogical suggestions for online and blended course instruction that are presented at the end of the article.

Keywords

distance learning, hybrid, online teaching strategies, online, enhanced learning

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Introduction

The U.S. Department of Education's Learning at a Distance Report (2011) indicates the number of undergraduate students enrolled in one or more courses offered through distance education rose from 8 to 20 percent in 2008. In addition to the increase in classes offered wholly online, there is growing interest in using technological resources, such as learning management systems, online blogs, or group or collaborative project tools and software, in all course formats, whether face to face, online, or blended, to create new opportunities for learning and engagement (Hamdan, McKnight, McKnight, & Arfstrom, 2013). As more courses move to an online or blended format, instructors are challenged to conceptualize how the active and engaging style of many classes can be adapted to fit these formats. Also emerging is a growing shift that views "students as creators rather than consumers" of knowledge (Johnson, Adams Becker, Estrada, & Freeman, 2014, p. 7). While many of these changes are student centered (Hamdan et al., 2013), faculty who are accustomed to teaching in traditional classroom settings may struggle to fully

understand who these online learners are, their expectations about the courses they are taking, and their perceptions of academic abilities.

Recent research suggests that students who take courses taught using online methods can learn as much as students enrolled in traditional face-to-face courses (Mangan, 2012). Yet, 66% of the 4,564 faculty who participated in a study about online education indicated that the learning outcomes achieved in online and blended courses were inferior to those in face-to-face courses (Allen, Seaman, Lederman, & Jaschik, 2012). These conflicting findings suggest faculty may perceive online teaching and learning to be less effective than traditional instructional methods. Further, the findings may suggest faculty members do not feel adequately prepared to teach online.

With a growing number of undergraduate courses taught in online and blended course formats, there is an increasing need for faculty to teach these courses. While some faculty are "more pessimistic than optimistic about online learning" (Allen et al., 2012, p. 2), there are faculty members who are using online methods to transform their teaching. This article draws on the findings of an ongoing study involving first-year seminar students to determine the perceived impact of instructional tools used in blended and online seminars on student learning and engagement in the course. The purpose of the study was to determine what influence, if any, course design and delivery pedagogies in first-year courses taught using elements of online, blended, or distance learning have on perceptions of student learning and engagement. First-year seminars were chosen for this study because these courses are largely absent from the existing research on online, blended, and distance learning courses. The early findings from this study provide context for the information in this article, and they have been used to inform the pedagogical strategies described here as well.

Perceived Impact of Instructional Tools on Student Learning and Engagement

Methods

The first-year seminar classes in the study were all taught at Kennesaw State University (KSU) and used the learning management system (LMS) to deliver some or all of the course content. There are four distinct first-year seminars (KSU 1101, KSU 1111, KSU 1121, and KSU 1200) taught by full-time faculty in the Department of First-Year and Transition Studies, as well as by part-time faculty and staff from across the campus and adjunct instructors who are hired to teach 1-2 classes per semester. Standard learning outcomes provide a focus for the content for each of the four different seminar offerings. These outcomes fall in the following areas: Life Skills, Strategies for Academic Success, Campus and Community Connections, and Foundations for Global Learning. The current study only includes KSU 1101, the general academic seminar. KSU 1101 was chosen because it is the only first-year seminar offering at KSU that is taught in all three formats: face-to-face, online, and hybrid. All of the first-year seminar classes, including those in this study, are taught in small sections of 25 students, although online sections are offered with larger enrollments (between 35-35 students).

A mixed methods approach was taken to collect data over a period of four years from 500 first-year students in 23 online, blended, and face-to-face sections of the first-year seminar. Additional data were collected from the instructors teaching those sections of the first-year course. A variety of data collection tools (i.e., the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Personal Report on Communication Apprehension, customized questionnaire of student perceptions, student grade point averages, course syllabi, etc.) was used to gather student and instructor perceptions, as well as academic performance information.

Selected Findings

Findings from the ongoing study suggest that approximately 42% of students enrolled in online or blended sections of the first-year seminar either prefer not to participate in online group discussions or are undecided about participating. When students were asked to rank what they felt was important in an online environment/course, they consistently rated communication with instructor higher than communication with other students; sometimes it was rated as the most important aspect of the course environment. The participants' interest in communicating more frequently with the course instructor than with other students in the course helps explain the lack of interest students expressed in discussion board participation. Ultimately, these emerging findings appear to demonstrate the participants' engagement with individual instructors vs. their engagement with peers in the course. Discussion boards are a common feature in online classes because they provide a way to engage students in discussion around a topic or idea while promoting interaction. Yet, as the initial analysis of data in the aforementioned study suggests, students may not perceive this to be an effective pedagogical approach.

The majority of the participants in the study, from all of the different section types, indicated they perceived that they were "effective" in the area of academic skills (e.g., note taking, test taking, etc.), and there were only minor changes from pre- and post-surveys. Similarly, more than 60 percent of the participants indicated they were effective time managers, further suggesting the students self-reported academic skills needed to be successful in the course. Approximately the same number of participants agreed that online assignments and/or classes were an effective way to learn; in the post-survey more than 70 percent agreed or strongly agreed. Related to these findings, more than 90 percent of the participants reported a positive self-concept/self-esteem/motivation, yet only 35.2%

strongly agreed when asked if they were able to do things as well as most and 40.3% strongly agreed in the post-survey.

The survey instrument also asked participants to rank, in order of importance, a list of 15 items that were derived from existing literature about first-year student transitions (Koch, Foote, Hinkle, Keup, & Pistilli, 2007). Many of the items on the list were topics that are commonly addressed in first-year seminar classes, such as academic skills, health and wellness, and campus resources. Participants ranked the following items as most important to them: family, attendance in college classes, faith/spirituality, and study for college classes; homesickness and utilization of campus resources were ranked lowest on the list. When they were asked to rank order 16 aspects of course design and delivery, participants indicated the following were most important: clear instructions provided by the professor, student self-motivation, and student time management skills. Least important, according to the student ranking, were the semester plan for the course presented by the professor, required online live class meetings, and reading comprehension. The following section applies the findings from this study to establish a conceptual framework and pedagogical suggestions for online and blended course instruction.

Strategies to Increase Student Learning and Engagement in Online and Blended Courses

The *Model of Student Learning and Engagement in Online and Blended Courses* (Figure 1) was developed based on findings from the current study and Kolb's theory of experiential learning (1984). Specifically, the following three dimensions in Kolb's cycle of learning (1984) have been incorporated in the model: concrete experience, reflective observation, and active experimentation. The model demonstrates the interaction students in the current study described with the course content, their peers, and the instructor. In the

online and blended courses in the study, those interactions often occurred in the context of the Learning Management System, which was also the vehicle used to deliver the course content, assignments, and activities. In this role, the LMS provided a platform for the engagement to occur. However, the LMS is less important than the elements that exist in the engagement part of the model; these aspects of the course are foundational because they influence student learning. The relationship of students with their peers and the instructor were transactional, which suggests that those interactions affected all involved, and were significant in the student's experience in the course.

Figure 1. A Model of Student Learning and Engagement in Online and Blended Courses

The following describes the engagement part of the model, as well as the four major components in this area: concrete experience, active experimentation, reflective observation, and enhanced skills. Furthermore, in this section, strategies and examples are provided for each of the aforementioned components.

Engagement

Course Design

Aspects of the course design provide the foundation either to encourage or to discourage student engagement. For example, layering course content in blended courses can involve creating "interdependence between online and face-to-face" (Glazer, 2012, p. 5) course content. To use this strategy, instructors would front- or backload information. Front-loading involves students' learning the new information before class; when information is back-loaded, it is introduced to students in class (Chatfield, 2010). Back-loading can be particularly effective in introductory classes (Foote & Mixson-Brookshire, 2013). In online courses, layering information can involve introducing a basic concept through a lecture, video, or PowerPoint presentation and then asking students to apply their understanding of it through an assignment or discussion. Alternatively, students can be asked to complete an assignment or activity as a means to introduce the concept. The first-year seminars in the current study used front-loading methods which allowed "the instructors to expand on the basic knowledge students developed on a particular concept" (Foote & Mixson-Brookshire, 2013, p. 9).

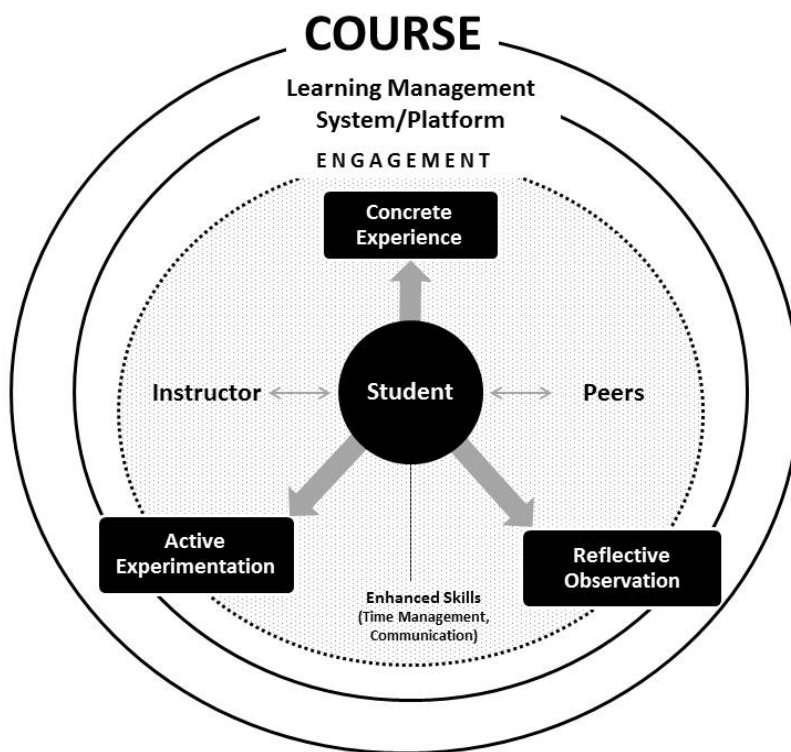Similarly, the use of flipped classroom strategies, which commonly involve "giv-

ing students access to lectures before they come to class and using class time for more engaging activities" (Straumshein, 2013, para. 2), can also be an effective approach to course design. Although there is limited empirical research involving flipped classrooms (Hamdan et al., 2013), there is research supporting the foundational aspects of the model, including the "shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach to instruction" (Hamdan et al., 2013, p. 6). With an emphasis on active learning, flipped classroom pedagogy encourages students to apply information they may have learned in the course readings and/or lecture, often delivered through the LMS, to solve problems or analyze case studies. These strategies often result in marked increases in engagement and critical thinking (Hamdan et al., 2013). Many of the blended sections of the KSU 1101 class in the current study used the flipped classroom strategy.

Communicating course expectations is another important aspect of engagement in online and blended courses because when students understand what is expected of them, they are more likely to become engaged. For example detailed syllabi that include a description of instructional methods, guidelines for appropriate online communication (or netiquette), and online navigational tools that describe the LMS are all fundamental to the ways in which expectations are communicated (Foote & Mixson-Brookshire, 20013). Finally, engagement is also affected by the depth and breadth of the online community that develops among the students in the class. When an online community develops in classes taught in blended and online formats, activities and assignments that are collaborative can promote meaningful interaction and engagement.

Course Delivery

Instructors teaching online can employ pedagogical approaches that maximize opportunities for student learning and engagement. Conducting virtual office hours; providing weekly update videos; creating open discussion boards (e.g., 24-hour café or a water cooler area); developing a series of 1-minute videos or "lecturettes" to clarify a challenging topic or idea that was presented in the course material, or to introduce a campus resource; and incorporating introductory videos (from the instructor and students) are all strategies to encourage and facilitate engagement in online and blended courses. Furthermore, these are pedagogies that are consistent with research on active learning strategies (Michael, 2006).

Concrete Experiences

For example, providing students with concrete experiences engages them fully in their own learning; they are essentially "feeling" the experience and learning from it (Kolb, 1984). To accomplish this, instructors of online and blended courses could provide experiential learning opportunities that engage the student's senses, including virtual meetings and rooms/spaces. Further, facilitating discussions that allow students to explore their life experiences and world events promotes the development of a personal understanding of the impact of the events on them. In this area of the model, students should be encouraged to "own" the experiences they are sharing, and civil discourse should be encouraged to prompt students to respect diverse opinions and ideas.

Active Experimentation

The active experimentation aspect of learning in online and blended courses puts the product in the hands of the students; according to Kolb (1984), in active experimentation, students use the new knowledge or ideas they have gained in the class or by other means. In an online setting, students could create their own videos and virtual presentations to apply their knowledge through the use of the new or enhanced skills they have learned in the class. Individual or group discussions around case studies, including those that present ethical dilemmas, can encourage students to apply information

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and ideas from the class while promoting interactions with the instructor and peers.

Reflective Observation

Finally, opportunities for reflection should be incorporated throughout the course. The participants in the study described in this article felt confident that they could be successful in the course, but when they compared themselves to others in the class, they did not perceive their abilities to be as good as those of their peers. When students are prompted to reflect or to engage in reflective observation, they begin to understand how learning works and who they are as learners; as a result, they may create new identities for themselves as learners and students. Providing opportunities for peer review and feedback on assignments and projects, and encouraging online discussions allows students to begin to reflect on and integrate their personal experiences and learning, which may result in "a deeper and more personal connection to the course content" (Foote & Mixson-Brookshire, 2013, p. 10).

Enhanced Skills

An outcome of engagement in online and blended course is skill enhancement. While students are involved in each of the other components in the engagement area of model, they are developing skills such as time management, communication, and use of technology (e.g., various applications and programs), which can be transferred to other learning experiences (both in- and outside of the classroom). Although most courses do not intentionally attempt to cultivate these skills in students, as research suggests, these skills can develop organically as students negotiate learning in an online blended learning environment.

Discussion

The current study demonstrates the role instructors and instructor presence play in an online environment, particularly in online and blended first-year seminar courses, although this finding might be generalized to other undergraduate courses. Instructors also play an important role in facilitating interaction between students through the course content, design, and delivery. These interactions, particularly those that occur between students and peers and students and instructor, are particularly important in online and blended courses. It is through interactions in the course that students begin to develop friendships and supportive networks. Because the students in the study were all in their first semester at the university, they may not have had opportunities to develop friendships; thus, they perceived family to be more important than other types of supports. Often, when instructors provide structure, as well as occasions for interaction to occur in online and blended courses, students develop friendships or sustainable relationships with their peers and faculty.

In addition to cultivating interactions in online and blended courses, student learning and engagement in the course can be enhanced when there are opportunities for students to reflect on their own learning or even revise assignments based on peer evaluation and feedback. Although students may feel confident in their skills, as those in the current study did, applying new knowledge and skills and then reflecting on that experience can provide deeper, richer learning experiences. Varying course assignments, activities, and methods of assessment can keep students interested and engaged in the course. Moreover, course delivery and design can also encourage students to learn about things they might not otherwise. For example, in this study, participants were not interested in campus resources, yet these resources, particularly those that are accessible to online learners, can help students continue to improve their academic skills, strategies, and engagement in the course and with the institution.

There are many potential implications for this research. Specifically, it could influence the ways in which instructors organize and approach their online

and blended sections of the first-year seminars. Further, the findings from this study may be transferred to other traditional gateway courses (e.g., English composition, math, etc.) to inform the design and delivery of these courses in an online or blended format. The model in this study can serve as a framework on which online and blended courses can be designed because it considers the various aspects of engagement and learning in blended and online learning formats. Furthermore, because distance learning is growing and emerging, there is a wide range of potential applicability for the findings in the current study. ▪▪

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Using Service Learning and Virtual Team Projects to Broaden the Curriculum and Enhance the Student Experience
Darina M. Slattery and Michael P. O'Brien

Abstract

In recent times, there has been a steady increase in civic engagement activities in Irish higher education settings at both undergraduate and post-graduate levels. However, there is limited literature to-date describing the nature of these activities and how they have affected learning outcomes and enhanced the overall student experience. To that end, this article presents two case studies. The first describes how service learning activities were successfully integrated into the curriculum to facilitate students' engagement with the wider community, and the second describes how students were required to collaborate online in virtual teams. For both case studies, this article summarizes the project activities and describes the learning outcomes for students. It concludes with various suggestions for how these types of projects can be adapted for use in other disciplines and presents some considerations and recommendations for teachers.

Keywords

Service-learning; civic engagement; curriculum design; graduate skills; collaborative learning

Introduction

In today's global society, there is a need for graduates to possess skills other than just disciplinary knowledge; they also need to be culturally sensitive and in tune with the needs of the wider society and the forces that bear on it (Stearns, 2009). In addition, they need to be able to find their individual roles in global society (Bourn, 2010). This article outlines two projects coordinated by faculty members to develop graduates' skills and attributes. The first project requires students to engage in service learning to enhance their civic engagement, and the second requires them to collaborate virtually with students in geographically disperse locations. This article also highlights various issues that need to be considered by teachers implementing such initiatives in their own programs and makes recommendations for how similar projects could be adapted for other disciplines.

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Literature Review

Service learning and civic engagement

Denby (2008) describes service learning as a form of experiential learning, i.e., "learning from experience." Essentially, service learning has its origins in Dewey's (1938) theory of experience, which states that the interaction of knowledge and skills with experience is the key to learning (Jacoby, 1996). Morton and Troppe (1996, p. 3) further describe service learning as "a form of experiential education, deeply rooted in cognitive and developmental psychology, pragmatic philosophy, and democratic theory." Service learning is only one form of experiential learning. Other forms include volunteer programs and practice-based and community-based outreach. However, unlike the latter types, service learning is integrated into a curriculum and has the intentional goal of encouraging and developing civic skills along with fostering a sense of civic responsibility in students (Battistoni, 2000). Furco (1996, p. 38) describes service learning as "academic work in which the community service activities are used as a 'text' that is interpreted, analyzed, and related to the course content in a way that permits a formal evaluation of the academic learning outcomes."

Lee (2009, p.1) further defines service learning as "an instructional method in which students learn course content by actively participating in thoughtfully organized service experiences related to that content." In other words, learning takes place via *active* participation and immersion in carefully thought-out service that essentially aims to meet the respective requirements of the community. In order for the learning process to be enhanced, it is imperative that service learning be properly integrated into the curriculum, allowing for adequate time for all parties to self-reflect on the service experience itself.

In practice, "service learning theory begins with the assumption that experience is the foundation for learning and various forms of community service are employed as the experiential basis for learning"(Morton & Troppe, 1996, p. 21). The overall aim, therefore, of service learning is that students (with the guidance of academic staff), acquire valuable skills, increasing both their proficiency as practitioners and their knowledge of the field of study in a way that is sensitive to their individual abilities. Researchers such as Drane (2001), Morgan (2002), and Parker and Altman Dautoff (2007), amongst others, have found that students who are directly involved in service learning activities tend to develop a keen sense of citizenship and political astuteness.

In service learning, Bringle and Hatcher (2009) suggest that the most unique civic dimension of this pedagogical approach is that students not only "serve to learn" but also "learn to serve." Service learning enables students to interact with groups that they would not likely otherwise interact with; groups may include students from other disciplines/majors or external community groups or indeed a combination of both. Brody and Wright (2004) argue that it is these inter-group exchanges that essentially lead to the numerous positive outcomes for students involved in service learning activities. Most educational psychologists would concur that "one cannot share in discourse with others without [eventually] learning" (Denby, 2008, p. 22).

Howard (2003, p. 3) states that service learning is different from traditional teaching specifically with regards to "the role of the student, the role of the instructor, the kind of learning that is valued, and the emphasis on social rather than individual responsibility." Although service learning has generally been accepted and implemented as a sound pedagogical approach, it is only in recent times that it has gained more widespread recognition and support in educational institutions and across university programs. Students learn by interacting (and actively immersing themselves) within communities and are subsequently rewarded by academic credits at the end of the project/assignment.

Civic engagement, a form of service learning, can be defined as "collaborative activity that builds on the resources, skills, expertise, and knowledge of the campus and community to improve the quality of life and to advance the campus mission" (Bringle & Hatcher, 2004, p. 127). Student involvement in the community development process is beneficial to the professional and personal development of the individual and also to the overall functioning of community development initiatives. In the context of service learning and civic engagement, Harris, Denise and Thomas (1989) demonstrated that students benefit significantly when they "evaluate empirically tested community development knowledge and apply it in the community setting" (Honadle & Kennealy, 2011, p. 3). Students not only benefit from feedback through faculty members and the formal assessment system, but from real-world interactions with members of the community served. "Civic professionalism places scholars inside civic life rather than apart from or above it, working alongside their fellow citizens on questions and issues of public importance" (Peters, 2003, p. 185).

While similarities exist between Irish and U. S. higher education civic engagement activities, there are, however, some notable differences. For example, service learning program facilitators outside of the United States find that U. S. service learning models and their respective "terminology, design, and outcomes, are not directly applicable outside the U. S." (Iverson & Espenschied-Reilly, 2010, p. 3). Boland and McIIrath (2007) suggest that we need to examine the various ways social context and indeed culture shape perceptions with regards to service learning. They also argue that "localization" is paramount when introducing new pedagogical approaches in a culture and advocate for the development of a common terminology to standardize dialogue and conversation amongst academics, facilitators, and stakeholders alike.

The Irish experience

Service learning is well established and mainstreamed as part of teaching and learning within many higher education institutions internationally (Healy et al., 2014). However, there is limited information on the implementation and impact of service learning in the Irish context. With the exception of health science disciplines, it is only in very recent years that service learning has begun to take root within the Irish higher education curriculum (Lyons & McIlrath, 2011; McIlrath, 2012; Watson et al., 2011).

This emerging development has recently been supported by the Irish government's 2011 policy vision, which fully endorses the civic mission of higher education so that "higher education institutions should have open engagement with their community and wider society and this should infuse every aspect of their mission" (HEA, 2011, p. 12).

The recent significant growth in civic engagement activities in Irish higher education shows that there is an increasing keenness to incorporate the civic aspect into higher education in Ireland (McIlrath et al., 2009), particularly at postgraduate and professional development levels. The various reasons for this change in focus include the fact that civic engagement activities are now often considered for promotion and tenure purposes. Furthermore, the success of many service learning initiatives in the United States demonstrates that they can also have significant pedagogical merit. While there is a steady growth in civic engagement activities within the Irish higher education sector, what remains somewhat unclear is the exact nature and scope of such activities. To partly address this gap, this article describes a civic engagement case study in one Irish higher education institution. But before we discuss that case study, we will review some literature on virtual teams, as virtual teams are the focus of our second case study.

Virtual teams

Martins, Gilson and Maynard (2004, p. 808) define virtual teams as "teams whose members use technology to varying degrees in working across locational, temporal, and relational boundaries to accomplish an interdependent task."

Kayworth and Leidner (2000) identified four major challenges faced by global virtual teams: project management, communication, culture, and technology. To-date, a number of studies have examined the importance of team leaders to project manage virtual teams. Because virtual teams can be more challenging than face-to-face teams, project managers are essential to the success of a virtual team project. Bell and Kozlowski (2002) stated that team leaders are responsible for establishing trust, respect and obligation between team members; Lurey and Raisinghani (2001) stated that leaders must encourage and develop team member relations; and Chase (1999) argued that it is the responsibility of leaders to identify problems early on. In a virtual team environment, team members rarely meet one another face-to-face (if ever), so it tends to be more difficult to establish trust. In addition, problems can easily go unnoticed, so it is vital that a project manager or leader be aware of issues and able to act on them swiftly. In a study by Flammia, Cleary and Slattery (2010), where team leaders were not assigned by faculty members, the most successful student teams were those where team members voluntarily divided up the roles and responsibilities based upon individuals' strengths (by having, for example, a student with a strong background in computers serve as technology leader).

As regards challenges relating to communication and culture, Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1998) also discussed the importance of trust in virtual teams and found that trust must be formed early on in the project; as discussed earlier, the project manager can play a pivotal role in helping to establish trust amongst team members. On a related note, Coppola, Hiltz and Rotter (2004) found that a positive social atmosphere and predictable patterns of communication were essential if trust was to be established early on and maintained. Teams that do not engage in socio-emotional communication (i.e. any communication that is not related to the specific task at hand) sometimes have less overall subjective satisfaction with team projects (Flammia et al., 2010). Other issues relating to communication include miscommunication and a lack of shared understanding (Dickey et al., 2006); on a related note, a shared understanding can take longer to develop in virtual teams than in face-to-face teams. Cultural differences can also greatly affect the success of virtual teams (Vogel et al., 2001), which is why it is important to teach students about intercultural communication.

Virtual teams are not possible without technology, so appropriate technology choices must be made, particularly with regards the type of rich and lean media that should be used for communication. When the concepts of rich and lean media were first devised, face-to-face discussions were the richest form of media and the least rich (or leanest) media were formal numeric documents such as those produced in computer output (Daft & Lengel, 1983). Nowadays, rich media include videoconferencing capabilities. Rich media such as these should be made available to teams (Furamo & Pearson, 2006; Watson-Manheim & Belanger, 2002) as they facilitate immediate feedback, personalization, and nonverbal cues—features often found lacking in leaner media such as email and discussion forums. Nonetheless, sometimes team members welcome the delay provided by lean media if they are lacking in confidence or language proficiency and wish to consider their online contributions more carefully (Sivunen & Valo, 2006). Consequently, team members often mix-and-match lean and rich media, depending on the task at hand and the desired outcomes. A study by Flammia, Cleary and Slattery (2010) found that student teams

mostly relied on asynchronous lean media (in this case, email), even though rich media such as videoconferencing tools were also available to them.

In the next section, we will discuss one university's initiative to broaden the curriculum, as well as initiatives undertaken by individual faculty members to enhance the student experience, by introducing civic engagement and virtual team projects into the curriculum. Whilst these activities have been used internationally with great success, they are relatively novel in the Irish higher education setting and therefore warrant further study.

How to Broaden the Curriculum and Develop the Skills of Graduates

There is a growing awareness in the Irish higher education setting of the importance of achieving and maintaining a balance of *breadth* and *depth* by focusing on generic and transferable skills (particularly communication, innovation, and entrepreneurship), as well as experiential learning opportunities (e.g., community-based outreach and service learning activities). Curricula designers must focus not only on disciplinary competence and excellence, but also on ensuring that graduates are highly competent within their area of expertise and bring their disciplinary knowledge to bear on real world problems and challenges. Graduates must be confident enough to take action and initiative across a range of domains and demonstrate a continued commitment to lifelong learning and development of their respective skill sets, as these skills will be needed when they enter the workforce. They should continuously aim to adopt a responsible, civically aware, and engaged approach to their actions and decisions at work and in society, and higher education can help cultivate such an approach and attitude.

There are a number of strategies that can be employed by faculty members to develop these skills and attitudes, although the implementation of these strategies usually varies depending on the discipline being studied by the student. In a broadened curriculum, students should ideally be taught about the importance of intercultural communication and cultural sensitivity and also given opportunities to work with culturally diverse groups wherever possible. As discussed earlier, online media can result in additional issues such as lack of personalization and nonverbal cues, so students should also be taught how to behave and communicate online. Faculty members should showcase best practice in online communication and deal promptly with issues such as lurking and flaming. As most teams are virtual, to a certain extent, and communicate using leaner technologies like email, graduates are expected to be able to communicate clearly and effectively with team members, regardless of their geographical location. The ability to write for international audiences and localize global content are additional skills that should be nurtured in students, but unfortunately these skills are rarely taught in Ireland, except in some English and technical writing programs.

In the next section of this article, we will discuss two projects undertaken by faculty members that aim to develop these skills and attributes. The first project is a civic engagement project that required students to use their technical and communication skills to develop information resources for the wider local and national community. The second project is a virtual team project that required students to collaborate online with students in geographically-diverse locations, to develop websites.

Case study 1: A civic engagement project

This section of the article details a recent case study at the University of Limerick whereby faculty members adopted a technology-supported approach for service learning focused on civic engagement. The University of Limerick is well recognized for its pioneering pedagogy, including its long-established Cooperative Education program which facilitates student work

placements during their course of study. The University of Limerick (UL) Practicum, however, is a new initiative that enables undergraduate and postgraduate students to engage in projects in collaboration with internal faculty and external bodies. The ultimate pedagogical aim of the civic engagement project described in this case study was to engage master's level students with practical problems, build their core values, communicate the relevance of the research to them, and transform their learning through service learning so they would be better equipped to work in a global and multicultural society when they graduated.

The University of Limerick Practicum and the Ennis hub project

Ennis (Co. Clare, Ireland) has been proposed as a hub town by the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) for various reasons, including its location, infrastructural services, and community spirit. The UL Practicum has joined with the NSS in an attempt to enhance Ennis in that role, gathering the opinions of locals and creating a vision for the town of Ennis in the year 2020.

The assignment

For this particular assignment, M.A. students studying technical communication and e-learning were asked to appraise the existing Practicum website and to propose a suitable redesign. The students were also required to design and develop one of the Practicum sub-sites (the Ennis hub website) and in doing so liaise with all relevant parties (i.e. the general public, city councilors, and architects) in this regard.

The assignment comprised three parts. The first part involved an *individual proposal* for the redesign of the existing Practicum website. The second part consisted of a *group proposal* for the design and development of a new Ennis hub website and the third part required students to develop a *group website* for the Ennis hub.

The objectives of the assignment were as follows:

- » To assess each student's ability to write an individual proposal for possible redesign or improvement of an existing website, taking into account the theories and practices of technical communication, information design, and interactive media, as covered on their program of study.
- » To assess each student's ability to write a collaborative proposal for the design and development of a new website, taking into account the theories and practices he or she had studied.
- » To assess each student's technical proficiency in using industry-standard tools to collaboratively develop a web site.
- » To assess each student's ability to collaborate with peers on a real-world project.

Learning outcomes and the student experience

This pedagogical approach proved a very worthwhile exercise and had significant benefits for students in that they:

- » Engaged in individual and team problem solving to meet the assignment brief.
- » Developed their collaboration skills, both on- and off-line.
- » Fostered links with industry and the wider community, not only online but also through face-to-face meetings.
- » Showcased their technical development skills, culminating in a more grounded sense of self-achievement.

The following quotes from students involved in this civic engagement project help encapsulate its pedagogical merit:

i. "This project provided us with invaluable, on the job, work experience that we would have not gained if we had followed any other project route."

ii. "The chance to work with various clients, follow project briefs, be creative in our design work and work on four different development projects is something that we would recommend to any future students of the course."

iii. "We were able to develop our interpersonal skills, communication skills and presentation skills immensely as we attended and spoke at meetings throughout the course of the project."

iv. "By the time the project concluded our time management skills had improved tenfold and we will be able to transfer these skills to our careers in the near future."

Central to the overall success of this project was the way that it united students with community activists, policy makers, entrepreneurs, and academic staff. It is anticipated that future broadening of the curriculum efforts at UL will enable the development of students' life-long learning capacities and create new transferable skills, which will unite academia even more with the outside world. As stated earlier, this is a relatively new way of teaching in the Irish higher education system.

Case study 2: A virtual team project

Whilst the previous section of this article described a civic engagement case study, this section describes a case study about the virtual team projects which are coordinated annually by faculty members at the University of Central Florida (UCF) and UL. The students participating in the virtual team projects undertake various programs ranging from undergraduate English to postgraduate e-learning and technical communication (master's level). Whilst the specific deliverables differ from year-to-year, the objectives of these virtual team projects have included:

» Requiring students to collaborate online using lean and rich media technology.

» Requiring students to collaborate with students from different programs and cultural backgrounds to develop project proposals and reports.

» Requiring students to use their research skills to research intercultural communication—a topic they must be aware of for their future work roles as Technical Writers, Instructional Designers, and Content Developers in international corporations.

» Requiring students to use their technical skills to design and develop websites.

Faculty research pertaining to virtual team projects between UCF and UL has already been reported extensively (see for example Flammia et al. (2010)). The virtual team case study discussed in this article, however, focuses more on the students' deliverables, as well as their experience and learning outcomes.

We will now focus our article on one iteration of the project, whereby master's level students were required to work in teams to design and develop websites about an aspect of intercultural communication. The students were told that the target audience for the websites was other students of technical communication and e-learning who were learning about the topic for the first time. Teams were required to assume that the audience included students from diverse cultures and they were given a list of possible topics that they could research, including introduction to cultural theory, guidelines for interacting across cultures, and writing for international audiences.

In terms of deliverables, each team was required to write an *initial group project proposal*, outlining the topic and scope of the web site they proposed to develop. They were also required to outline the resources they planned to use, as well as the prerequisite skills they were bringing to the project. Mid-way through the project, each team was required to write an *interim group project report*, outlining each member's role in the group, describing how they were using technology in their team activities, and showcasing examples of any

development work already undertaken. At the end of the project, the *completed website* was graded not only on the quality of the interface design, but also on the content and overall organization. *Individual wrap-up reports* gave students opportunities to discuss their personal experiences of working in a virtual team. In these wrap-up reports, students were asked to discuss how they used technology to communicate, to describe how they built a cohesive team, and to outline their positive and negative impressions of virtual teamwork as well as any recommendations they had for future virtual team projects. Finally, they were required to demonstrate the completed website to their classmates, via a *videoconference*.

Learning outcomes and the student experience

In terms of learning outcomes, the virtual team projects gave students opportunities to develop:

» In-depth knowledge of some aspect of intercultural communication, as they were required to research the topic for their websites.

» Written and oral communication skills, as they were required to write collaboratively for the Web.

» On- and off-line collaboration skills, as team members had to collaborate face-to-face with their classmates, as well as with their teammates across the Atlantic. This also required them to become more globally aware and culturally sensitive in the online community of inquiry.

» Technical skills, in terms of using Web 2.0 technologies (e.g., online chat and videoconferencing tools) and web development software (e.g., Adobe Dreamweaver).

In addition, the problem-based learning (PBL) nature of the project required students to engage in deep reflective learning as there was no "right answer." Instead, students were required to use their knowledge of theories, as well as technical skills, to meet the project brief as best they could. Students were required to

demonstrate not just discipline-specific excellence but also cross-disciplinary proficiency. The postgraduate students had to teach the undergraduate students and *vice versa*, and they had to learn to work together to create a project that best demonstrated their combined efforts.

As regards the student experience, many students were able to critique their own performances, as can be seen by the following comments extracted from post-surveys:

i. "We all very much felt a part of the decision-making process. … [And] it was a pleasure to work in the team… [because] we had a great work ethic."

ii. "Another successful strategy adopted by the team was assigning roles to each team member at a very early stage."

iii. "We were able to build a cohesive team because we stressed the personal relationship as well as the academic relationship."

In this project, we found that teams that engaged in non-task communication, as well as task communication, tended to trust their teammates more, tended to enjoy the project more, and were more successful as a result, in terms of final grades awarded.

Ways These Projects Can Be Adapted for Other Disciplines

Whilst not all teachers are involved in the disciplines of writing or technology, we believe that all teachers can leverage aspects of our student projects and adapt them to their own disciplines. For example:

» Genealogy students could research the backgrounds of residents living in their area.

» Nutrition students could develop handouts that promote healthy lunches for school-going children.

» Business students could develop draft business plans for small businesses in their locality.

» Engineering students could design and develop a prototype for a start-up business.

» Archaeology students could design public spaces.

Further still, teachers could combine virtual team projects with service learning projects, by asking students to collaborate online with students in other countries to develop resources for the wider community.

Considerations and Recommendations for Teachers

Despite the many advantages of these projects, teachers should still be mindful of the challenges inherent in them. From a professional point of view, teachers need to give careful consideration to the implications for their workload and whether it is worth the effort in terms of outcomes for students. In service learning projects, success often depends on the commitment of external stakeholders, so there can be an element of uncertainty for students and teachers throughout the process. For example, if external stakeholders do not provide timely information, this can create unnecessary stress for students as they attempt to meet internal coursework deadlines. Service learning initiatives might not run as expected and teachers may have to make sudden decisions to facilitate students' completion of the project. Students expect their teachers to know what is going on but this is not always feasible; for some teachers, this is a major drawback. To counteract this, we recommend that teachers have a back-up plan (e.g., an alternative grading rubric) in case the external partners are unable to commit fully. Students should in no way be penalized if a project fails due to external reasons.

Virtual team projects require significant planning from the outset because teachers need to coordinate courses and write assignments that meet the curricular needs of both programs. If assignments are too difficult or guidelines are not clear, teachers may have to provide extensive support to students. Teachers need to be aware that virtual team projects will probably require

significant input from them throughout the process, not just in the early planning stages.

Unfortunately, service learning and virtual team initiatives tend to be action strategies (driven by faculty members, from the bottom up), rather than policy strategies (facilitated from the top down), so there may be insufficient incentives for faculty members to get involved (Duster 2013). However, some higher education institutions have addressed this by considering such initiatives for tenure and promotion purposes. On a related note, Duster suggests that there could also be a "civic engagement ranking" for higher education institutions, whereby "each institution could generate its own version of such engagement, but the key measure would be student assessment in exit interviews or exit questionnaires" (2013, p. 46).

In addition to highlighting the professional challenges that may be faced by teachers, we can also make some practical recommendations that might help teachers implement these kinds of initiatives. Flammia, Cleary and Slattery (2010) found that virtual teams performed better if they were also given opportunities to engage in socio-emotional communication, not just task-oriented communication. To do this, teachers could arrange early-stage videoconferencing sessions, whereby students get opportunities to introduce themselves to one another but are not required to discuss the specifics of the assignment. Another strategy that can be employed is to co-schedule classes in both geographic locations and afford students some in-class time to work on their assignments; we found that this helped alleviate some of the time zone problems encountered by students.

Other recommendations include dividing team roles based on individuals' strengths, or at least advising students to do so if they are selecting their own roles; mixing students from different educational backgrounds and cultures; and issuing real-world projects

wherever possible, so students know that their efforts will benefit the wider community.

Finally, we recommend that students are given guidelines on:

» How to communicate online. We have found that many students are unaware of the nuances of online communication. Issues such as lurking and flaming are common but once students are given guidelines on what is/is not appropriate (i.e. basic netiquette), they are less likely to make those mistakes. Because our students were only from Ireland and the United States, there were few significant cultural differences; nonetheless, subtle differences such as different attitudes to work and sense of humor were evident at times.

» How to manage meetings. Students often find it difficult to manage meetings, particularly if they are undertaken entirely online. To facilitate these activities, we provided sample meeting templates and we recommended that they meet at least twice a week.

» How to deal with conflict. Because conflict is almost inevitable in teams, students need to learn to deal with minor conflicts themselves and only involve the teacher when their own attempts to diffuse the situation have failed. In our case study, common areas for conflict included uncooperative or non-participating team members and personality clashes. On a related note, we recommend that virtual teams comprise *at least* three members, because the loss of one team member can have major repercussions for the remaining team members. Also, we recommend having roughly the same number of students from each geographic location, to facilitate team dynamics and division of the overall workload.

Conclusions and Further Work

This article outlines some approaches taken by faculty members at one university to broaden the curriculum, develop graduate skills, and enhance the student experience. It also outlined some of the learning outcomes for the students involved. We highlighted some issues that need to be considered by faculty embarking on service learning and virtual team initiatives and made recommendations for how similar projects could be adapted by faculty members from other disciplines. One possible direction for future research could be to compare the learning outcomes of students who participated in similar projects, with those who did not. For example, it would be interesting to determine if virtual team projects lead to better learning outcomes than face-to-face team projects. ▮▮

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Audio Recordings as a Self-Awareness Tool for Improving Second Language Pronunciation in the Phonetics and Phonology Classroom: Sample Activities

Maite Correa and Frédérique Grim

Abstract

Poor speech intelligibility, inarticulate speaking skills and lack of confidence in oral communication often result in speakers being judged as unknowledgeable, unable to make intelligent decisions, or lacking credibility. Meanwhile, it is common for second language (L2) instructors to feel that their students, even at the advanced level, have serious pronunciation difficulties. In fact, students speak fluently (they are not afraid to talk), but they might experience challenges in being understood by native and non-native speakers of the target language. This paper proposes the use of audio recordings and provides examples of self-awareness activities and self-analysis projects to help improve students' L2 pronunciation. These suggestions also provide pre-service L2 teachers and instructors in other fields involving communication with tools to detect, diagnose and manage their own students' pronunciation.

Keywords

Pronunciation; phonetics & phonology; recording technology; educational linguistics; self-awareness

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Introduction

Poor speech intelligibility, inarticulate speaking skills and lack of confidence in oral communication often result in speakers being judged as unknowledgeable, unable to make intelligent decisions, or lacking in credibility (Morley, 1998; 2005). In fact, it is common for second language (L2) instructors to feel that their students, even at advanced levels, have serious pronunciation difficulties.

Throughout the history of language teaching, the focus on pronunciation has shifted from non-existent (grammar-translation method), to indispensable (audiolingual method), to minimal (communicative methodology) (Anderson-Hsieh, 1989; Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996; Pennington & Richards, 1986). In fact, communicative methods in the 1990s emphasized pronunciation (and grammatical accuracy) only if it did not impede communication, leaving instructors feeling that pronunciation had "fallen to the wayside" (Elliot, 1997) or was "at the bottom of the list of priorities" (Morley,

2005). As a result, many L2 students are not afraid to talk but nevertheless experience challenges in being understood by both native and non-native speakers of the target language.

This paper proposes the use of audio recordings and provides examples of self-awareness activities and self-analysis projects that will not only help improve students' L2 pronunciation (Lord, 2005), but will also provide future teachers with the necessary tools to detect, diagnose, and manage their students' pronunciation difficulties. Although the focus of this article is L2 learning, the points made here can be transferred to other fields such as English as a Second Language, Communications studies, Journalism studies, or other areas where communication skills comprise a significant component.

National Standards and Program Goals

The goal for most foreign language programs at the college level is to have students graduate at the advanced-low level (as measured by the 2012 *ACTFL[1] Proficiency guidelines for speaking*), which requires students to be able to:

> participate actively in most informal and a limited number of formal conversations on activities related to school, home, and leisure activities and, to a lesser degree, those related to events of work, current, public, and personal interest or individual relevance (*ACTFL Proficiency guidelines for speaking*, 2012, p. 8).

Geared toward future teachers, the ACTFL/NCATE[2] Program standards for the preparation of foreign language teachers (2002) requires candidates not only to speak at a minimum level of "Advanced-Low," but also to: "identify phonemes[3] and allophones[4] of the target language", "understand the rules of the sound system of the target language", and "diagnose their own target language pronunciation difficulties" (p. 12).

We frame our discussion under a communicative-cognitive approach to teaching pronunciation, a learner-centered approach that—while maintaining communication as its ultimate goal—also develops speech awareness and self-monitoring/correcting skills (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996). The expectation, then, is not for students to attain native-like pronunciation, but for them to "convey their intended message without misrepresentation or confusion, and […] be understood by native speakers unaccustomed to dealing with non-natives" (ACTFL Proficiency guidelines, 2012, p. 10). We agree with Morley (1991, 1998, 2005) that a broadly constructed communicative-cognitive approach to the teaching of phonetics and phonology is "more effective than a narrowly constructed articulatory phonetics approach" (1998, p. 21), and that the goals of such a course should be: functional intelligibility (i.e., speech should be easy to understand and not distracting even if accented), functional communicability, increased self-confidence, and speech-monitoring abilities/speech modification strategies for use beyond the classroom. The following section will cover pronunciation problems that can impair communication. Although the examples are based on Spanish and French as L2s, the practical aspects of these suggestions can easily be applied to other languages.

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1   American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.
2   *National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education.*

3   A class of speech sounds identified by a native speaker as the same sound (Bergmann, Hall & Ross, 2011).
4   One of a set of non-distinctive realizations of the same phoneme (Bergmann, Hall, & Ross, 2011).

Teaching and Assessing Pronunciation

Examples of major pronunciation problems in French and Spanish

Minimal pairs are pairs of words with different meanings that differ in only one *sound* (regardless of the way they are spelled). For example, among the examples illustrated in Table 1 is the difference between *le* (singular definite article) and *les* (plural definite article), which lies only in the vowel ([lə] vs. [le]). These contrastive sounds (phonemes) can change a word's meaning when substituted for each other in a word, but do not necessarily have the same contrastive power or distribution in all languages. This fact can become a major source of miscommunication in an L2.

French	Spanish
Le/les	Todo/toro
Dessus/dessous	Hermano/hermana
Blond / blanc	Ahora/ahorra
J'ai / je	Cana/caña

Table 1 – Examples of Phonemic Differences (minimal pairs)

Also seen in Table 1, the source of confusion between *toro* and *todo* stems from the fact that [t] and [ɾ] (also called "flap[5] t") are two realizations of the same phoneme (allophones) in English. As such, they do not have contrastive power (in intervocalic position there is no possible minimal pair when interchanging those two sounds), whereas in Spanish they are two distinct phonemes with contrastive power. This is what Eckman, Elreyes, and Iverson (2003, p. 175) called an 'allophonic split'. Additionally, when there is a sound in

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5   A sound produced by bringing two articulators together very quickly (Bergmann, Hall, & Ross, 2011).

the target language that does not exist in the native language (L1), failure to distinguish between two words with those phonemes (such as *blond* and *blanc*) can also occur.

Most pronunciation or phonetics and phonology programs of study make use of numerous minimal pairs, like the ones illustrated in Table 1, because: (1) phonemic contrasts are very noticeable for the native speaker, and (2) they can lead to confusion. However, as will be explained below, there are other pronunciation problems that need to be addressed to improve overall intelligibility.

Other pronunciation problems

As seen in Table 2 (on next page), there are other types of pronunciation problems that contribute to what the listener can perceive as a "heavy foreign accent." These are often deemed as not so vital in the classroom (and often overlooked by instructors desensitized to foreign accents) because they do not convey a change of meaning. However, they might, in fact, decrease intelligibility and comprehensibility.

Mispronunciations involving sub-phonemic differences are even more difficult to eradicate than ones involving phonemic differences because the sub-phonemic differences do not change the meaning of words (since no minimal pairs are possible). For example, it is not uncommon for advanced speakers (and even teachers) to pronounce [veɾiˈtej] instead of [veʁiˈte] in French or [əˈzuɫ] instead of [aˈsul] in Spanish. As a consequence, explicit focus on how these sounds work might be needed to help learners recognize that the intended sound and the produced sound are in fact different.

Other pronunciation problems not receiving enough attention in most pronunciation courses (but

French	Spanish
Diphthongization (*beau*, *verité*)	Diphthongization (*tengo*, *tomé*)
Aspiration of plosives (*pot*, *thé*)	Aspiration of plosives (*pato*)
Assimilation (*observation*, *absence*)	Voicing of [s] (*presidente*)
Final consonants (*table*, *soupe*)	Dark/velar [l] (*salsa*, *azul*)

Table 2 – Examples of Sub-Phonemic Differences
(no minimal pairs)

which are nevertheless important in achieving intelligibility) are those related to suprasegmental[6] features. Aspects such as rhyme, pitch, stress, or intonation can have a negative effect on both comprehensibility and the listener's perception of the speaker (Anderson-Hsieh, 1989; Derwing, 2008; Pennington & Richards, 1986), and they need to be included in the program of studies.

Design and assessment problems

Assessing oral skills poses many challenges for instructors (Dansereau, 1995). They often lack both class time to evaluate each individual student and the knowledge to design reliable and valid assessments. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to address oral skills in general, going beyond traditional drills that involve only minimal pairs is required to address these pronunciation challenges.

Assessing pronunciation through traditional drills is thought to be convenient because such drills are fast and easy to grade. However, even after practicing minimal pairs such as those in Table 1, many students go back to the original mispronunciation when attempting to use those words in context (what we are calling the *minimal-pair effect*). This implies that even students who can prove that they understand the theoretical difference between two phonemes in the target language, and even if those students are able to distinguish those phonemes when listening or producing a minimal pair (at the word level), they will not necessarily apply this knowledge when the focus shifts to the production of a longer segment, such as a phrase or a paragraph:

> Teaching isolated forms of sounds and words fails to address the fact that in communication, many aspects of pronunciation are determined by the positioning of elements within long stretches of speech (Pennington & Richards, 1986, p. 218).

Thus, gradually shifting focus from word to discourse level would be beneficial in assessing not only segments in isolation, but also coarticulatory[7] phenomena (blending and overlapping of sounds) and suprasegmental features that occur in authentic, fluid conversation. The following section offers a series of activities to practice this shift from words to authentic speech.

Using Audio Recordings – Examples of Activities

The nature of pronunciation activity design and assessment needs improvement. To address some of the challenges previously mentioned, we have designed a set of activities involving the use of self-made audio record-

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6   A phonetic characteristic of speech sounds, such as length, intonation, tone, or stress, that "rides on top of" segmental features (Bergmann, Hall & Ross, 2011).

7   Co-articulation: The adjustment of articulation of a segment to accommodate the phonetic environment it is produced in (Bergmann, Hall & Ross, 2011).

ings. For this purpose, multiple web-based applications or free audio recording software are available that can be easily installed on computers (in the language lab or at home) or mobile devices, such as phones or mp3 players (see list of recommended software applications at the end of the article).

To avoid the "minimal-pair effect" defined in the previous section and address suprasegmental features, we suggest that exercises progress from minimal pairs to tone units with the aim of shifting the student's focus away from the word itself to a communicative situation. This way, if the student is able to pronounce a word in context without knowing what the focus of the assessment is, she will have demonstrated emerging acquisition of that allophonic distribution[8].

The following are sample activities that focus on helping to develop speech awareness, self-monitoring and correcting skills through the use of recordings.

"Temptations" (possible transfer errors) and recording

After having practiced with minimal pairs and having studied the different allophonic variations in their L1 and L2, students are given a set of sentences to record. Before doing so, they have to find ten "temptations" that non-native speakers would likely encounter in those examples and explain them. For example:

> Prompt: "Cuando termine la tarea iré a la universidad"
>
> Possible response (in target language): "The 'u' in *universidad* has to be pronounced as a [u] and not as a [ju] because in Spanish, initial 'u' is never palatalized."

Depending on the student's level or knowledge of phonetics and phonology, more or less technical language and transcription might be appropriate. This is an activity that can be repeated several times throughout the semester, each focusing on what has been learned

up to that point. When assessing this activity, points should be given for:

i. Written section:
    » description of temptations (is the temptation accurately explained?)
    » transcription of the word or whole sentence (if applicable)
ii. Recording:
    » avoidance of their temptations (were they able to resist the temptations they chose to explain in the written part?)
    » avoidance of other temptations seen in class
    » overall recording (stress, rhythm, intonation, liaison/linking, etc.)

Anecdotal results: Reflecting on the possible temptations before doing the actual recording helps students focus on those parts that will be more difficult to pronounce. Afterwards, they can listen and self-assess whether their recording is "good to go" or needs to be re-recorded.

Comparison between first and last recordings

At the beginning and end of the semester students are asked to record the same text. At the end of the semester, they compare the first and last recording and write a report focusing on their accomplishments throughout the semester and additional improvement that could be achieved in the future. Here are some anecdotal examples of their reflections:

i.   "At the beginning of the semester, I aspirated most of the [p, t, k] but now I do not."
ii. "Now I do *liaison* most of the time."
iii. "I still voice some intervocalic 's' and I need to work on this."
iv. "Some of my [ʁ] still sound like [ɾ]."

Anecdotal results: Being able to see their improvement throughout the course raises students' motivation and increases the face-validity (validity and relevance to the eyes of the student) of the activities and the course in general.

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8   The set of phonetic environments in which a sound occurs (Bergmann, Hall & Ross, 2011).

Report on non-native speakers

Students listen to an authentic sample recorded by a non-native speaker of the target language (in the target language) and a sample recorded by a non-native speaker of English (in English). Then, they write a report that includes accomplishments and suggestions that they would give to the speaker in question (anecdotal examples below). Samples can be controlled (a reading for which the student has the script) or free (a spontaneous conversation) depending on the listening level of the student.

i.   "Speaker X adds an epenthetic 'e' before the group [sk] because this consonant cluster is not allowed in Spanish."

ii. "Speaker Y pronounces the glottal[9] [h] as a velar [x] because in Y's dialect (Mexican) the closest to [h] (which does not exist) is [x]."

A variation of this activity could be carried out with samples from native speakers from different dialect areas. Students would write a report about the differences they find between the dialect they use in class and the dialect displayed in the sample:

i.   "Speaker Z's 'multiple r's' sound different from the one we have studied in class."

ii. "[d]'s and [t]'s before [i] or [u] sound palatalized in this dialect of French."

Anecdotal results: Being able to analyze and detect the pronunciation level/problems of other speakers helps students realize that having a foreign accent is natural and that their objective should not be native-like pronunciation, but intelligibility.

Poem

This is a very useful activity for students of a language like French, whose spelling and pronunciation differ greatly. For this activity, students choose a poem that they like in the target language and then transcribe it phonetically (only appropriate for advanced students

in phonetics and phonology courses). Then, they memorize it and practice by recording and listening to themselves several times. The following components are assessed:

i.   Transcription of the poem. This has to be completed in advance of the recitation for the student to have the correct transcription during the recitation part.

ii. Final recitation of the poem in front of the teacher. Students are allowed to read from the corrected transcription, but not from the written poem.

iii. Points can also be awarded if the student provides proof of several practice recordings.

Anecdotal results: With this activity, students learn to shift their focus from the orthographic writing to the phonetic transcription and develop their pronunciation in this literary context. Noticeable improvements are found in the absence of diphthongs and of "parasite" final consonants, often not pronounced in French, although present in the orthography.

Open-ended questions

After practicing specific phonemes in class, students are given a series of personal open-ended questions related to themes studied in class. They record themselves, listen to their answers, and can then decide to practice several times until they are satisfied. To guide the students in their work, the grading rubric is provided. Possible questions that could be asked are: Which region of France/Latin America would you like to visit? Would you want to learn French/Spanish slang? What do you like to do during your free time? Do you think sports have too much importance in your culture? If you could change something in the world, what would it be? Students are asked to justify their answers as well.

Anecdotal results: Students appreciate answering authentic questions while practicing the sounds they use in class. This allows them to focus on the supra-

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9   [h] produced by the glottis.

segmental aspect of the sentence and integrate the current phonetic foci.

Self-report for Heritage Speakers of the target language

In this activity, heritage speakers record themselves at the beginning of the semester (spontaneous paragraph and/or a pre-defined text). At the end of the semester, they analyze whether or not they do what they have learned in class, and also report on dialectical differences between their dialect and those studied in class.

Anecdotal results: Heritage language learners enjoy this activity because they are able to produce a firsthand analysis of how they actually pronounce their language. It is often a surprise for them when they realize that they indeed do what other natives do.

Advantages of recordings

The use of recordings offers multiple advantages to *instructors*, including the following:

a. Additional class time: if the recordings are assigned as homework, class time can be devoted to other things.

b. Better assessment: recordings can be replayed multiple times, improving assessment reliability.

c. Better focus: instructors can focus on problematic words or sounds within sentences (avoiding the "minimal pair effect").

d. The bigger picture: replaying recordings can give an opportunity for instructors to go beyond minimal pairs and focus on suprasegmentals (stress, rhythm, intonation).

e. Checking for improvement: as students record themselves several times during the semester, instructors can go back to check if improvement has occurred and where.

f. Different levels of study: most of these activities can be carried out at any level with slight modifications (the higher the level, the more technical language and/or transcription might be expected).

g. Flexibility of location: being able to listen to the recordings from home or from the office, without having to be in a computer lab, also facilitates the rater reliability (objectivity of the grading) on the part of the instructor.

h. Heritage speakers: these activities can be modified slightly for heritage speakers, whose main aim might not be improving pronunciation, but developing speech awareness and correcting skills (in line with the communicative-cognitive approach to teaching pronunciation that we follow). This way, heritage speakers can become aware of possible problems to address if they decide to become teachers.

Additionally, the use of recordings offers the following advantages to *students*:

a. At home: if assigned as homework, recording themselves at home can lower students' anxiety.

b. Repetition: students can repeat the recording if they are not satisfied with the results.

c. Self-monitoring: checking for errors before submission helps develop speech-monitoring abilities.

d. Flexibility of location: recordings of this nature can be done in any setting where the students have access to a smartphone, a tablet, or a computer with a microphone. Most personal computers are set up for this practice already. This eliminates the requirement of recording in a computer lab where all students are recording at once, adding noise and discomfort for shy students. In a more relaxed atmosphere, students are more likely to produce more natural speech.

e. Feedback: teachers can audio-record themselves in response to students' recordings, which can provide more precise feedback, with the correct pronunciation that students can hear as often as they would like.

f.   Revision: after getting instructor's feedback, students can return to original recordings and revise their errors.

g.   First and last recordings: as students record themselves several times during the semester, they can go back to the first recordings and see for themselves how much they have improved.

Disadvantages

Although the use of recordings seems to address many of the design and assessment issues mentioned in previous sections, there are still some disadvantages worth mentioning:

a.   Technical problems: Being prepared for software (and hardware) not working properly on all computers/devices, server downtimes, students/ instructors who are not computer savvy, wrong file formats, corrupt files…

b.   Time: grading recordings is time demanding for the instructor.

c.   Careless students: some students will not take advantage of the chance of repeating their recordings and they will submit the first recording they complete, usually full of hesitations and repairs, which are also hard to rate.

d.   Perfectionist students: other students will never be satisfied with their recordings and will spend too much time repeating them.

e.   Not communicative: Recordings should never replace real interaction with other speakers of the language. Instructors should have some "live" samples of what the students can do spontaneously.

f.   Longer recordings: as recordings become longer, they also become more difficult to rate, decreasing assessment reliability.

g.   Not setting realistic goals: as instructors become accustomed to students submitting their best,

they may become unrealistically demanding when grading "live" assignments.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed a set of activities (under the constructed communicative-cognitive approach) that maximizes the use of recordings with the aim of: (1) improving students' functional intelligibility and communicability, (2) providing them with self-awareness and self-correction skills, (3) increasing their self-confidence, and (4) improving feedback/assessment accuracy on their performance.

Although the activities presented were designed for phonetics and phonology courses, they can be easily customized as a pronunciation component in basic language courses. In fact, although pronunciation does not often receive much attention in beginning and intermediate language classes, past research shows this to be the best learning period to acquire better pronunciation (Chela-Flores, 2001; Dansereau, 1995; Derwing, 2008; Elliot, 1995; Lord, 2005, 2010). The use of self-awareness activities like these may also help prevent fossilization. In addition to foreign language classes, such activities can be used in a variety of fields in which learners can record themselves, reflect on their own performance, and improve the tone of their voice, make stronger points, avoid stuttering, and become more comfortable with answering pre-planned questions. ▪▪

Useful Free Software/Applications

There is a vast array of free applications that can be used to record audio files and edit them. We suggest the following:

»   AudioBoo (web-based, mobile devices) (http:// audioboo.fm/)

»   Vocaroo (web-based) (http://vocaroo.com/)

»   Audacity (PC and Mac) (http://audacity. sourceforge.net/)

» Garage Band (for Apple products) (http://www.apple.com/ilife/garageband/)

» Screencast-o-matic (web-based) (http://www.screencast-o-matic.com/)

» Lingt Classroom (web-based) (https://lingtlanguage.com/)

» VoiceThread (web-based) (http://voicethread.com/)

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A Photo Journal Assignment: Creating Opportunities for Transformative Learning in the Millennial Classroom

Lisa Carpino, Julienne Ugalde, and Joan-Beth Gow

Abstract

This reflective paper explores the use of a digital photo journal as a pedagogical tool to actively engage students. A photo journal tells a story in pictures, yet it is more than just a photo album. It is a systematic way of observing and organizing specific course material grounded by learning outcomes and depicting relevant themes and topics. It requires students to work collaboratively to determine which photographs best represent the concept they are trying to depict. Students must relate and evaluate course content and design a tangible product to be critiqued by their peers and professors. The pedagogy used for the photo journal project emphasizes higher order thinking processes and reinforces global skills such as critical thinking, communication skills, and uses of technology. The assignment's use in two different disciplines—psychology and a freshman seminar course—emphasizes its versatility as a multidisciplinary instrument for learning.

Keywords

student-centered pedagogy, millennial generation students, collaborative learning, active learning, technology in learning

Introduction

In the 21st century college, Millennial Generation students are taught by people educated in 20th century classrooms. In the authors' experience as students, we were accustomed to sitting and listening to lectures, and our professors were likely unfamiliar with the notion of *active learning*. An overhead projector and VCR were the extent of what most of us knew as technology. Our professors did not feel compelled to "engage us" or make what we were learning relevant to our lives. It was simply assumed that we would learn because that was why we were in that particular course, and the relevance and practical applications of what we were learning would become clear later. The classroom environment was indeed instructor-centered.

From the authors' experiences, the expectations of today's college students are far different. When they step into a classroom, they want to know that everything they are learning has some practical use, and they want to be

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active rather than passive learners. They are accustomed to having attention focused on them and to thriving in student-centered classrooms. They want to experience the course content, not just read and hear about it. In a time of economic uncertainty, they want to know that they are graduating from college with marketable skills. These skills include proficiency with problem solving and critical thinking, effective verbal and written communication, and the ability to work collaboratively.

Millennial Generation students have been brought up in an age of fast-moving technology and have little tolerance for anything they believe to be monotonous or dull. They perceive themselves as master multi-taskers, and it is no wonder that we as instructors compete with the lure of Facebook, Instagram, and text messaging within the classroom environment. A major challenge facing educators today is how to engage this Millennial Generation in the process of learning.

When surveyed, these students express strong preferences for project-based experiential learning and indicate that they take away much more from a class if they are able to participate in a hands-on manner (Bowen et al., 2011). Indeed, 21st century learners, surrounded by technology-rich visual cues, process information in nonlinear ways (Jones, 2012). *Creating*, the highest level of Bloom's taxonomy of higher order thinking skills in the revised version (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Bloom, 1956), is appealing to them. In response to student preferences for experiential learning, we developed a digital photo journal project. While providing means of documentation and assessment, photo journals are also powerful collaborative tools. In addition, photo journals make possible a form of storytelling that appeals to Millennial Generation students. Stories can provide a context for and connection to course concepts resulting in a deeper and longer lasting understanding of content than occurs when students lack personal connection to the concepts being taught (Abrahamson, 1998). Digital storytelling

has been used in many disciplines as a tool for deeper learning, thus supporting the higher order thinking skills that top Bloom's hierarchy (Barrett, 2006). To the authors' knowledge, the literature is sparse on the benefits of using a digital photo journal as a pedagogical tool, and this manuscript contributes substantially to that body of knowledge.

The use of a photo journal supports the constructivist approach to learning in which students build on course concepts as they move up the rungs of Bloom's taxonomy to construct their own knowledge. This pedagogical tool has been successfully used in two very different courses, Human Lifespan Development and First-Year Experience. The assignment reinforces the development of global professional skills such as collaboration, critical thought, and communication. Because students can relate their personal experiences to the content, the photo journal project connects them emotionally to the concepts being taught. Emotional connections are positively correlated with strong academic outcomes (Wyatt & Bloemker, 2013). Caring about and connecting to material is central to the desire to learn (Zull, 2006). Alternatively, the loss of enthusiasm and curiosity somewhere between childhood and the arrival at college is identified as a critical problem, and Fried (2013) points to the irrelevance many college professors place on personal meaning. Most college faculty, however, would agree that being able to think critically is an important learning outcome in any college course, and critical thinking is a compilation of many aspects of learning: acquiring information, developing skills, being engaged emotionally, and making meaning (Fried, 2013). The photo journal we describe in this article supports all of these learning areas.

Our interest in engaging students causes us to reflect on the student-centered nature of the photo journal, its multidisciplinary application, and its technological appeal to 21st century digital natives. In addition, we were able to use the project to cover

course-specific content by grounding the assignment in learning outcomes and by identifying relevant criteria to guide students through the experience. When the instructor facilitates the process, a context is created for student-centered learning. The pedagogical concepts, strategies, and teaching tips presented below will facilitate the transfer of this tool to other courses and disciplines.

The Photo Journal as an Effective Pedagogical Tool

A key strength of the photo journal project is that it engages many aspects of Bloom's (updated) taxonomy. The use of verbs from Bloom's (revised) taxonomy to describe the learning process is a perfect framework for implementing an active learning tool such as the photo journal. Using instructor-defined course learning outcomes as an anchor, the education process is guided by key criteria. Clear criteria are essential for creating a constructive learning path for students. The technology and the collaborative nature of creating a photo journal create a context for learning, allowing students to experience the course content as relevant to their lives.

Figure 1 indicates the progression of this assignment from lower to higher order thinking skills. The alignment of the assignment to each level of Bloom's taxonomy is shown for both Human Lifespan Development and First-Year Experience. The pedagogical process we describe uses *italics* to identify action steps in the learning process that coincide with Bloom's taxonomy.

In Human Lifespan Development, one learning outcome *identified* by the photo journal project is describing the progression of motor skill development. *Criteria* for demonstrating this learning outcome include such things as gross or motor, sequencing, and age appropriateness. Working up through Bloom's suggested learning sequence, students work collaboratively in selecting the photos they feel *exemplify* the concept

they are working on. Through *sharing*, discussing, and *analyzing* their ideas according to the established criteria, students choose what they feel are the best photographic examples of, e.g., motor development. Once the group members are comfortable with their selections, the work is shared with the whole class for *critique* and feedback and then *synthesized* into a final product.

Similarly, in First-Year Experience, groups of students *identified* a first-semester college experience that held significant value for them, such as time management. *Criteria* for demonstrating time management include study strategies and balancing academics with athletics, social events, jobs, and family. Progressing through Bloom's suggested learning sequence, students work collaboratively in selecting the photos they feel *exemplify* the concept they are working on. Students then *share* their documented photographs representing various aspects of time management with both their designated groups and the entire class. As students share their stories they are able to assess shortcomings and contribute new ways to address problems. The interactive process also allows for students to work on their peer *critiquing* skills and to identify common struggles and successes. Ultimately, the process of *creating* the photo journal enables students to *synthesize* their experiences and new knowledge into novel ways of thinking about themselves and others. For freshmen in particular, working on such a collaborative project facilitates their integration into the college learning community.

It is not only the nature of the project but the outcome that inspires critical thinking skills. The purpose of the photo journal is to represent concepts effectively without the use of words. To accomplish this task, sequential stages of collaboration are required to reach the pinnacle of Bloom's hierarchy. A concrete, collaborative assignment such as the photo journal supports the constructivist approach to teaching in that the creation of a tangible product allows students to

construct meaning from abstract concepts (Cooperstein & Kocevar-Weidinger, 2004). The instructor's guidance and the established criteria provide the scaffolding necessary for learning to occur in a student-centered context. The process is kept grounded by the learning outcomes that the instructor wishes to explore using this pedagogical tool. The nature of this structure provides a natural yet methodical progression through the higher order thinking skills. The authors believe that a key component of successful implementation of this pedagogical tool is the instructor's guidance through these stages. In this way, the photo journal assignment gives the instructor more traction in leading students through the higher-order thinking skills. Thus, the pitfalls of ending an academic exploration at the exemplifying stage are lessened, and students have the opportunity to engage more fully in the topic through critical thinking.

The photo journal assignment provides opportunities to introduce students to global skills, self-discovery, and consistently scheduled opportunities for collaboration. Students develop confidence in a group work setting while learning to take initiative and accept constructive criticism from peers. Global skills, self-discovery, and group work are necessary professional skills. Students exposed to these skills early in their college years are able to reflect on their strengths and challenges and will ultimately be better rounded and prepared for the workforce. Responses from our students reinforce that these Millennials, born after 1982, place importance on teamwork, positive social interactions, and critical thinking (Howe & Strauss, 2003). Comments gleaned from students' reflections demonstrated this to be true:

> » "[The photo journal] has helped my critical thinking skills because I had to analyze a situation and find a solution."
>
> » "It has taught me you need to learn your entire life and keep an active mind."

> » "Upon completing this photo journal, I feel as if it helped me to take a step back and look at life, past, present, and future. I was too caught up in the moment and what was right for 'now' and I believe a lot of students in college were in the same position as I was."

For many of our students, this was the first large-scale collaborative project completed at the collegiate level. As instructors, it was gratifying to watch the cohesiveness that developed among our students as they figured out how to work together to complete this ambitious project. Initially, students were overwhelmed by the magnitude of the project and struggled to discern where to begin. As time went on and they became more socially comfortable with one another, they were better able to work together on an academic assignment. For students making the transition to college, social engagement is as important for success as academic engagement (Tieu & Pancer, 2009). Smith (2011) correlated the assimilation of academics and social connections with student success and emphasized that instructors should not assume this integration is a given; it must be a foundational and purposeful part of the instruction. Our pedagogical model creates the structure necessary for this integration to occur.

Classroom Implementation

The digital photo journal is a flexible tool that may be adapted for a variety of courses and topics. For the authors' specific courses described in this paper, students were asked to take their own photographs (Lifespan Development students were encouraged to include existing family photos). Students were discouraged from using the Internet to retrieve stock photos. With help from institutional technology, an internal college campus website was created as a venue for students to post and share their work. Ultimately, the photographs from both classes were transitioned into a dynamic photo journal format using Windows

Moviemaker (for PCs) or iMovie (for Macs). Since each institution's technology capabilities are different, it is recommended that instructors consult with their IT departments about available software prior to beginning this project.

In the authors' courses, the work of the entire class was represented in one comprehensive photo journal. It was very gratifying for the students to see their respective group efforts culminate in a single body of work. However, the photo journal may also be used on a much smaller scale; one application might be several group mini-productions as opposed to one large coordinated production. From a teaching perspective, it is important to begin with the end in mind, then a work plan can be created to meet specific learning goals. Since collaborative work is a large part of the project, consideration must be given to the formation of student groups and the nature of the assignments given to each group. For example, in the Lifespan Development course, groups were created to work on different stages of the lifespan. In First Year Experience, student groups worked on specific categories pertaining to the freshmen transition stages, such as moving in day, time management, or homesickness. Depending on student demographics and the topics to be explored in the course, instructors may wish to create heterogeneous groups or allow students to self-select based on topic interest. An advantage of heterogeneous grouping is the multiple perspectives contributed by diverse group members, while a disadvantage is the initial lack of a common shared focus. An advantage of self-selected grouping based on topic of interest is the likelihood that students will be working on a subject they already know they find interesting; a disadvantage is the distinct possibility of students selecting into a group solely based on friendships, an arrangement that can result in distractions. Commuter students' special needs must also be considered when forming groups. In First Year Experience, a cohesive group of commuter students

brought their unique perspective to documenting the transition to college life. Regardless of how the groups are formed, it is advisable to have at least one technologically adept student per group.

Since students often find it difficult to find common blocks of time to meet, class time is given for group meetings; individual assignments are expected to be carried out away from class time. It is important that the project be broken up into manageable parts with regular deadlines to ensure that student productivity during in-class group meetings is maximized. Once the small groups have clarified their topics, criteria must be established to ensure that photos chosen demonstrate the desired learning outcomes. Criteria should be content-specific and selected to align with learning outcomes.

Before students begin taking photos, it is important that group members understand the criteria as they apply to their topic. An important part of the learning process takes place when students analyze photos and discuss why a particular photo may or may not be a good representative of those criteria. In addition to documentation, the photo journal assignment requires the collaborative task of sequencing the photos. By their nature, photo journals lend themselves to depicting a sequence of events. Sequencing is based on standards, which are being learned and applied as part of the overall course content. Other questions to consider are whether to include text and music. In the authors' experiences, the students enjoyed making these types of decisions and worked hard to find appropriate music and captions that were relevant to their topics. Although most students enjoy taking photos and working on the project throughout the semester, not all students are adept at working to edit the final finished work. It is best to have only a few students do the final compilation and editing for cohesiveness and consistency.

Although students spent a significant amount of time throughout the semester working on the project, it was not until the end that it was assembled into one unified photo journal. After viewing it in its entirety, students expressed their surprise about what they discovered about themselves and others by completing this project. Finally, students spent time sharing information in groups, reflecting on their new learning and awareness of life changes and the meaningfulness of significant life events.

For both courses described in this paper, the digital photo journal was a semester-long project and was weighted at 20% of the course grade. However, the project was not a stand-alone assignment; it was integrated with and supported by writing assignments such as descriptive essays, process journals and reflective writing. In particular, students expressed metacognitive gains, which were expressed in their reflective writing, represented by the comments cited in the previous section of this paper.

Although we reflect here on the use of digital photo journals in a psychology and a freshman seminar course, there is tremendous potential for the application of this pedagogical tool to many different disciplines (Bagno, Eylon, & Levy, 2007; Tsou, Wang, & Tzeng, 2006). To use an example other than our own, a photo journal could depict seasonal changes in the cycle of plant life native to a particular area. Alternatively, engineering students could document different types of local bridge design used over various decades and discuss the pros and cons of each.

Various disciplines and academic programs can embed this assignment into curricular plans by mapping it to a specific learning goal or objective. Instructors are encouraged to reflect on the concepts they teach, methods of teaching, and methods of assessment. The adaptive nature of the digital photo assignment lends itself to the development of creative learning and assessment opportunities for students and faculty. The authors sug-gest keeping three simple components in mind when adopting this pedagogical methodology:

1. Ground the assignment in a key course outcome.

2. Establish criteria as a measure of validity.

3. Use the project to guide students through the progression of higher-order thinking skills.

In addition, establishing a time line for the progression of the tasks keeps both students and instructors on track. The implementation of deadlines and designated class time for group work and collaboration necessitates student preparedness for class and creates impromptu assessment opportunities. Keeping goals simple and attainable with frequent check-ins along the way helps students see their way toward the end product.

Collaboration and group work are important to Millennial students. Yet, as a whole, they often lack the small-group skills necessary to accomplish goals and tasks. They have come from an educational system that relies on test taking; thus, they often have difficulty when invited to think on their own. For young adults, learning to think autonomously facilitates the development of critical thinking (Mezirow, 1997). The pedagogical model described here can be used to support small-group work and can provide a transformative experience for students as they learn to take on roles and accomplish tasks, something they may not be accustomed to given their traditional notions of "hanging out" with their friends. Moreover, this pedagogical framework familiarizes students with an ongoing feedback loop between instructor expectations and their understanding of what is expected of them. It also creates a student-centered opportunity to improve critical thinking and social skills.

Conclusions

As instructors, we are in a unique position to influence the level of engagement our students experience in the classroom. Dunleavy and Milton (2008) emphasize

that engagement is not just academic but is also social and intellectual. Being mindful of this definition is critical in planning not only course curricula but also in identifying specific elements of course design that help to create the conditions for engagement to flourish. In turn, student engagement sets the stage for deep learning to occur. There is considerable research to support the notion that students learn best when actively engaged in meaningful tasks created to support their learning (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006). In response to this, it is critical that colleges support the design of a more learner-centered curriculum (Weimer, 2002).

Student-centered learning taps into the self-reinforcing nature of intrinsic motivation. Incorporating a digital photo journal into curricula empowers 21st century students to use and expand on technology with which they are already familiar. In addition, it enables them to assemble concepts in new ways not available before digital technology was introduced (Trilling & Hood, 1999). We found that utilizing a digital photo journal increased student engagement, encouraged active and collaborative learning, intrinsically motivated students, and fostered creativity. This is supported by Barrett (2006), who identified digital storytelling as central to aspects of four learner-centered methodologies: effectively integrating technology into the classroom, fostering student engagement in meaningful ways, encouraging project-based learning, and inspiring the type of reflection that leads to deeper learning.

Sadik (2008) found that when students developed digital stories, in addition to reporting facts and concepts, they related to the subject, and reflected on their own thoughts and engagement. Sadik's findings underscore an important aspect of our experience: it is important not to dismiss the photo journal as "just another PowerPoint assignment." Indeed, most PowerPoint assignments never move beyond the first two or three levels of Bloom's taxonomy.

The implementation of this pedagogical tool will challenge many instructors to move beyond their instructional comfort zones. It is evident that traditional lecture to passive listeners is no longer an effective teaching methodology (Bok, 2006; Tagg, 2004). It is critical, now more than ever, that we employ 21st century educational methodology to meet the learning needs of 21st century students. ▪▪

The authors invite interested readers to contact us for more information.

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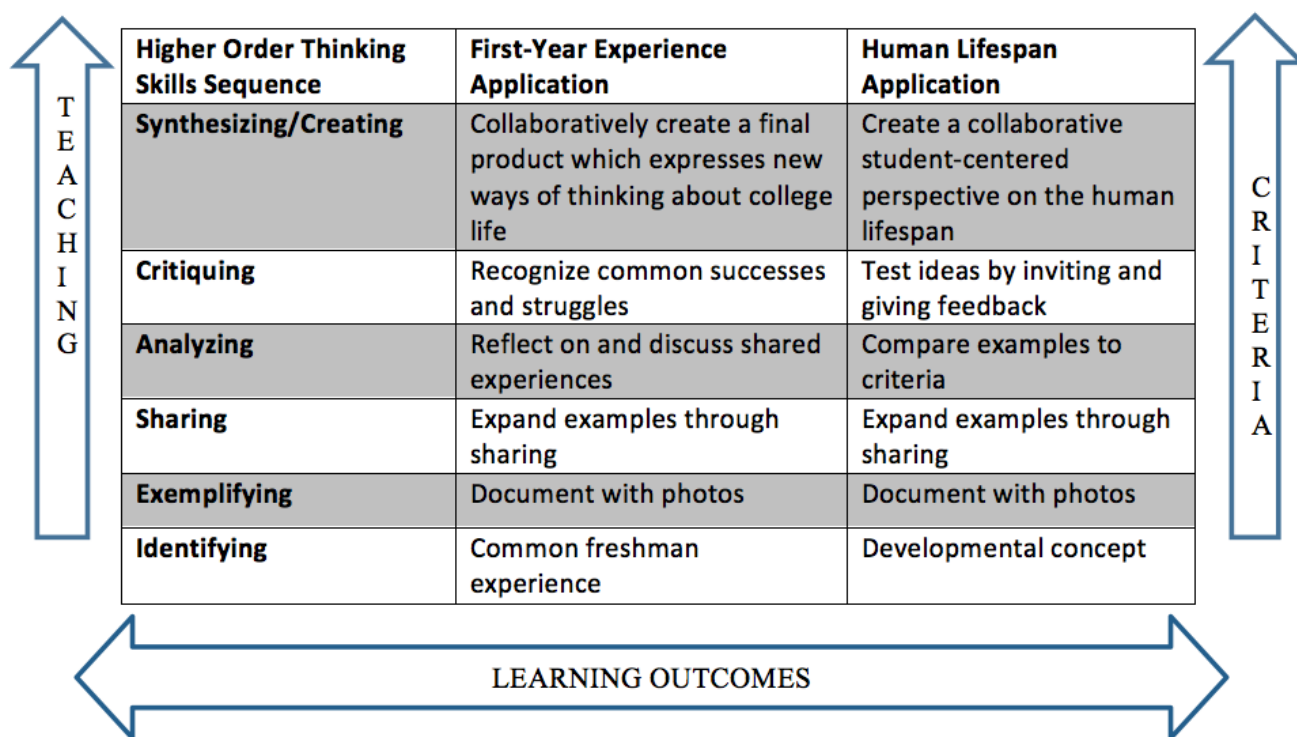
Higher Order Thinking Skills Sequence	First-Year Experience Application	Human Lifespan Application
Synthesizing/Creating	Collaboratively create a final product which expresses new ways of thinking about college life	Create a collaborative student-centered perspective on the human lifespan
Critiquing	Recognize common successes and struggles	Test ideas by inviting and giving feedback
Analyzing	Reflect on and discuss shared experiences	Compare examples to criteria
Sharing	Expand examples through sharing	Expand examples through sharing
Exemplifying	Document with photos	Document with photos
Identifying	Common freshman experience	Developmental concept

TEACHING (left arrow, pointing up)

CRITERIA (right arrow, pointing up)

LEARNING OUTCOMES (bottom arrow, pointing both directions)

Figure 1. Alignment of photo journal assignment to Bloom's taxonomy. This figure illustrates the pedagogical model embraced by this assignment, demonstrating the progression from lower order to higher order thinking skills.

Current Clips and Links

"Current Clips and Links" is a list of links to interesting, non-commercial websites related to teaching and learning, complied by Shannon Curran. Currents invites reader recommendations of similar sites that they've found useful.

The Harriet W. Sheridan Center provides a wealth of resources for students and faculty (from teaching assistants to full professors) affiliated with its host institution, Brown University. However, anyone can access excellent material through the links, "teaching and learning resources" and "resources for students." Practical and clearly written, the material for faculty members is both general, covering everything from syllabus design to end-of-semester assessment, and discipline-specific. The link for students connects to a site at Princeton University and it can also help faculty plan their own lectures and handouts on how to succeed in higher-education classrooms.
http://brown.edu/about/administration/sheridan-center/about

LearnHigher identifies its intended audience as "staff involved in UK higher education," but its resources are accessible and most are useful to an international readership. Links to books, reviews, and articles about teaching and learning are helpful, as are the resources developed by the organization. Online resources include a wealth of podcasts, documents, and workshops on academic writing; a few on mathematics; and many on study skills. Some have downloadable worksheets for students. Free and modifiable, they are well designed and worth exploring.
http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/

Educational Technology and Mobile Learning is an eye-catching site developed by Med Kharbach and features resources for educators on web tools and mobile applications. While the site may at first be overwhelming to faculty members who are just starting to explore the intersections between technology and teaching, the site is clearly designed to have something for everyone, from neophyte to expert. In fact, the link to "teacher guides" is an excellent starting point for the curious but easily discouraged, with clear, basic introductions to the use of such innovations in teaching as blogs, social media, gaming, apps, and iPads. Each guide ends with a list of links to sites that will help readers explore its subject further.
http://www.educatorstechnology.com

The Center for Research on Learning and Teaching is based out of the University of Michigan and some of the resources at this site are available only to faculty at its host institution. However, newcomers to teaching may find the content open to the public very useful, with titles like "Preparing to Teach," "Teaching Philosophies & Statements," and "Lesson Plans." Faculty at all levels may be interested in the resources listed under "Teaching Strategies," or in topic areas such as "Multicultural Teaching" or "Teaching & Technology," listed on the right-hand menu.
http://www.crlt.umich.edu/tstrategies/disciplinaryresources

The Equity and Excellence in Higher Education's Universal Course Design (UCD). UCD's Website focuses on helping faculty design courses that recognize the needs of nontraditional students, English language learners, students with disabilities, and others whose chances of success will be increased by modifications to syllabi and pedagogy. Clicking on "UCD Tutorials" brings visitors to a list of visual resources on many different topics, such as learning styles, culturally diverse texts, or creating podcast. Other top menu links offer sample syllabi, and tips and strategies on course curriculum, instruction, assessment, or environment.
http://www.eeonline.org/

Stephen P. Brookfield's *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*
Roben Torosyan

Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher. By Stephen P. Brookfield. Jossey-Bass, 1995. 320 pp., ISBN-13: 978-0787901318.

There is a classic Calvin & Hobbes cartoon where Calvin says to his mother, "I read this library book you got me." His mother asks, "What did you think of it?" Calvin replies, "It really made me see things differently. It's given me a lot to think about." His mother says, "I'm glad you enjoyed it." In the last frame, walking away, Calvin remarks, "It's complicating my life. Don't get me any more." That is how I have often felt about the most paradigm-changing ideas or experiences I have gone through: now I am more aware, but with that I am self-aware of my limitations, aware of the limitations of others, aware of the complexity of the world, and it makes thinking more challenging.

Nevertheless, some awareness can cause pain and relief too. In the nearly twenty years since its publication, Stephen Brookfield's book *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* has continued to be my single favorite read of all time on teaching (although he breaks new ground in his more recent *Teaching for Critical Thinking*). It took me ten years to finish. But that was because it was so useful. When I first began teaching college, my doctoral mentor at Teachers College Columbia, John Broughton, recommended the book, mentioning that Brookfield had been a protege of his when new to academe. Every few pages I had to stop and try something--use a questionnaire to find out what students found "engaging," "distancing" or "surprising," or ask myself whether making students feel exposed by sitting them in a circle (pp. 9-10), avoid assuming I can be "an unobtrusive observer" (p. 11) and instead reveal my thoughts but judiciously, or rephrase instructions to avoid inadvertently forcing "the mandated confessional" (p. 13) out of students and instead reward their dissent with my very approach. His tools continued to help me for years, whether I taught the psychology of decision making, modern philosophy or the philosophy of education.

"We teach to change the world," as Brookfield opens the book (p. 1). But his point is not that we must invoke massive transformation in students or anywhere else. In fact, he implicitly questions any overly grandiose conceptions when he warns against "assuming the meanings and significance we place on our actions are the ones that students take from them" (p. 1).

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Similar to Calvin feeling that having a lot to think about is complicating his life, all my associations with the term "critically reflective" often made me feel either that I was supposed to find flaws gleefully in others' reasoning, or else feel horribly flawed myself, or both. I also felt I was the dupe if I was caught unaware. Surprisingly, however, Brookfield shows a kinder, gentler side of critical thinking; he argues, "...the habit of critical reflection is crucial for teachers' survival. Without a critically reflective stance toward what we do, we tend to accept the blame for problems that are not of our own making...A critically reflective stance toward our teaching helps us avoid these traps of demoralization and self-laceration" (pp. 1-2). In fact, he empathizes with the impulse to engage in an "enthusiastic bout of self-flagellation" (p. 234), but suggests instead that what we need to examine critically is less our flaws or even those of others than all manner of assumptions--including those that harm us, the teachers.

Among the tools I reuse every year or so, I have had students complete a version of Brookfield's "Classroom Critical Incident" (CCI) questionnaire, anonymously, in the last 5-10 minutes of a session:

1. At what moment in the class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
2. At what moment in the class this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening?
3. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most affirming and helpful?
4. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?
5. What about the class this week surprised you the most? (This could be something about your own reactions to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that occurs to you.) (p. 115)

In addressing how students complained about class in such questionnaires, Brookfield forces himself to be an example, modeling what he aims for others to do by using his own assumptions and oversights as fodder (this includes when he teaches or facilitates workshops in person). It inspired me. When I first used the CCI, students wrote about one student's loud disruptions. We related the problem to the class topic of self-direction, captured by concentration camp survivor Victor Frankl's insight, "between the stimulus and response is...our power to choose our response" (Frankl, 1946/1996, p. 104). I shared my own past trouble controlling my responses and even my own rage, which led me to pursue psychotherapy. Regarding the student complaints, I asked "What should we do?" and when students only referred to what I could do, I kept redirecting attention back to what the group as a whole could do and say. While not much changed in what most students did, the "disruptive" student did communicate dissent more productively, if still awkwardly.

Throughout the book there is a balance of *empathy* and *challenge*. We can critique our "self-lacerating" assumptions, but we also need to work on ourselves for, as he writes, "If we teach what we're good at and love, it is almost impossible for us to understand, much less empathize with, students who find our subject boring or intimidating. The more we teach something, and the farther we travel from our first experiences of learning it, the easier it is to forget the fears and terrors new learning can provoke" (p. 50). The longer I teach, the harder I find it to remember what it is like not to know what it is that I know (to paraphrase the brilliant Stephen Pinker).

To that end, a tool equally powerful in teaching any "new prep" (first time teaching a particular topic, entire course, redesigned course, etc.) is Brookfield's "teaching log," which I completed every week immediately after class my first time teaching. "I suggest you jot down some brief responses to any of the following

questions that seem appropriate" (p. 73), Brookfield recommends, admirably freeing the reader from feeling "I should answer every one of them." His prompts are:

1. What moment (or moments) this week did I feel most connected, engaged or affirmed as a teacher--when I said to myself "This is what being a teacher is really all about"?

2. What moment (or moments) this week did I feel most disconnected, disengaged, or bored as a teacher--when I said to myself "I'm just going through the motions here"?

3. What was the situation that caused me the greatest anxiety or distress--...[one] I kept replaying in my mind as I was dropping off to sleep, or that caused me to say to myself "I don't want to go through this again for a while"?

4. What was the event that most took me by surprise--where I saw or did something that shook me up, caught me off guard, knocked me off my stride, gave me a jolt, or made me unexpectedly happy?

5. Of everything I did this week in my teaching, what would I do differently if I had the chance to do it again?

6. What do I feel proudest of in my teaching activities this week? Why? (pp. 73-74)

Most useful to this day has been the fourth question on "What took me by surprise?" Perhaps it's because the question can make us delve into our learning edge, triggers, hidden confidence needing to be tapped ("Oh, wow, I rolled with that complete change of activity plan"), or sometimes, in Jungian terms, our shadow side or those unconscious assumptions that may only come to awareness subtly or indirectly ("Huh, when I saw that disturbed student's post I realized I really need to make time even just to skim their pass-fail discussion posts more promptly"). One event that most surprised me was when I asked students debating

each other to "first say back the other's point to their satisfaction," but some students ended up hating it. As Brookfield's book prompted me to reflect on my practice, I realized years later that this listening exercise has often been most effective when I am willing to shift my own teaching plan as events unfolded "live" during discussion, sometimes admitting my own struggles as they arose. For instance, when a student objects to the class activity, I need to remember to stop and ask, "Okay, how many others felt similarly?" And even if only a few share the complaint, I need to ask, "Can someone say back that complaint to that student's satisfaction?" and, further, I need to say it back myself to prove that I can hold myself to what I'm holding them. A close second in value is the sixth question on "What do I feel proudest of," which sustains me when I am tired.

Remarkably, Brookfield helps us avoid the "Perfect Ten" syndrome, whereby we assume we are supposed to receive a 10 out of 10 rating of positive feedback. We then focus on the one out of ten students or colleagues who might be dissatisfied with our work. Framed in terms of the way some "ideas...come to be seen by the majority of people as wholly natural...and working for their own good, when in fact they are constructed and transmitted by powerful minority interests to protect the status quo that serves those interests" (p. 15), Brookfield reminds us to ask, "Whose interests does the 'perfect ten' assumption serve, if not those of students and teachers?" (p. 18). He answers, "Primarily, it serves individuals… who believe...teaching can be reduced to a linear, quantifiable rating system… Believing that learning and teaching are unidimensional…In their minds, teaching becomes the simple implementation of centrally produced curricula and objectives" (p. 18). Yet Brookfield says this not to force us to risk our jobs, but rather to help us alleviate the self-blame we may feel in the face of such norms. I have reminded countless colleagues, distracted by a vociferous student complaint or an angry colleague's email, to be, if you would, statis-

tically valid and reliable in their self-analysis and attend less to outlier feedback and instead to a fairer analysis.

Implications for our practice abound, as Brookfield shows how even boring or painful experiences can bring great learning. Taking on experiences in graduate education, professional development workshops, and academic conferences, he urges us to not simply judge experiences good or bad, but instead consider, "What made it so positive," and then has us note "those things that you do in your own teaching that you think might induce the same reaction in your students" (p. 56). And for a negative experience, we can use our own empathy for ourselves to then empathize with our students, as when he suggests we note "what was it that so depressed, annoyed, demeaned, or bored you" and "those things that you do in your own teaching that you think might induce the same reactions in your students" (p. 56). The point of course is to ultimately jot down what people could have done differently and any lessons for your own practice.

The book's spirit of democracy pervades throughout. For instance, Brookfield recommends putting a "rationale" or "truth-in-advertising statement" in one's syllabus up front. His takes up two pages of the book (I've cut mine over the years to a few sentences), as he makes statements like "the chief class activity… will be a small group analysis of experience," "a course like this will focus on experience rather than academic theories," and "evaluation in an experiential seminar like this should focus on the documentation and probing of experience, and should be pass/fail" (pp. 110-111).

Surprisingly, at least in this book, Brookfield leaves unquestioned two major assumptions of his regarding grading and the syllabus schedule. In his rationale, he states, "This syllabus can be changed at a moment's notice to take account of both your responses to course activities and mine" (p. 111), something I stated for a time in my own. But as I learned from feedback from colleagues and students, this failed to accommodate students with a strong preference for planning ahead and possible real world challenges that would demand they know of major deadlines and even numbers of pages of reading assigned many weeks ahead of time. Likewise, his rationale states, "If you need a letter grade and don't feel comfortable receiving a pass or fail grade… you should probably drop this course ASAP. … I am prepared to write a letter to your employer declaring that a pass grade in this class is equivalent to a letter grade of at least B+, but… I believe that letter grading destroys the collaborative spirit so necessary to the kind of group work you will be doing in this course" (p. 111). I actually share Brookfield's skepticism of the entire letter grading enterprise, and yet I feel a tension too with the responsibility to be gatekeepers, not simply giving away course credits but actually credentialing our students, and perhaps using letter grades to give some (admittedly rough) sense of what the "real world" reception for their writing, speaking, creative work or other work they produce might be. While this review's brevity demands I can not articulate the nuances here, I was surprised that Brookfield's book largely sidestepped any tackling of how faculty whose institutions require that they assign letter grades go about handling the *grading* aspect of evaluation and assessment of learning (for that, I loved Walvoord's slim and useful book *Effective Grading*, now in its second edition).

As if ordained by Brookfield's focus in latter chapters on learning from peers, I was actually only able to finish his rich book thanks to a Faculty Learning Community at Fairfield University in 2005-2006 in which we methodically worked through the entirety (some sections for my second, third or fourth time). To help balance the voices in meetings with colleagues, he proposes ideas like the "circular response discussion," in which a volunteer starts discussion with a two-minute comment, and the person to their left "must begin her remarks by paraphrasing the comments of the first discussant, and then she must show in her contribution

how what she is saying spring from, and is grounded in, the comments of the direst discussant" (p. 150). Ground rules include no interrupting, no speaking out of turn in the circle, a strict two-minute limit on speaking, each must begin by paraphrasing until every discussant has had a turn, at which point the rules are "no longer in force" (p. 150).

Another powerful tool Brookfield demonstrates, and which I have used numerous times, comes in another such latter chapter entitled, "Solving Problems Collaboratively: The Good Practices Audit." In brief, each person writes about their best and worst experiences as a learner, as a colleague and then as a teacher yourself. The power comes when the group assembles those experiences in two columns, of best vs. worst items, from each lens. I remember this exercise because it helped my team at Fairfield get to know each other so well, personally. One of us, for example, clearly valued talking things out and the other preferred to not have to talk everything out, and we shared what in our experiences led to such preferences.

Like the effect of the entire book, the point of all this critical reflection is that it keeps you questioning your own assumptions, while also questioning those around you lest you only feel targeted or demeaned--to instead work towards fulfillment in one's practice. I hope others find it as essential as I have. ■■

Frankl, V.E. (1946/1992). Man 's search for meaning: An introduction to logotherapy. (4th ed.). Boston: Beacon Press. (Originally published in 1946 as Ein Psycholog erlebt das Konzentrationslager.)

THE BACK PAGE

Currents in Teaching and Learning is a peer-reviewed electronic journal that fosters exchanges among reflective teacher-scholars across the disciplines. Published twice a year, *Currents* seeks to improve teaching and learning in higher education with short reports on classroom practices as well as longer research, theoretical, or conceptual articles and explorations of issues and challenges facing teachers today. Non-specialist and jargon-free, *Currents* is addressed to both faculty and graduate students in higher education, teaching in all academic disciplines.

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