

Transnational Online Student Collaboration: Does it Work?

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This article reports findings of a transnational online student collaboration between the Sociology departments at GVSU and the Pedagogical College of Schwaebisch Gmuend in Germany from May to July 2006. A U.S. instructor taught two parallel 14-week Soc Intro and Globalization classes in Germany. A German instructor taught a 6-week Spring section and a 6week Summer section of a Soc Inequality course at GVSU. Each of the eleven teams - consisting of four students (2 Germans +2 Americans) – were asked to write a term paper about a specific research question related to globalization and inequality. Blackboard, Discussion Boards, and Chat rooms were used to post work and exchange information in English as lingua franca. The goal was to experiment with new online collaboration tools that foster transnational exchange and understanding through interaction with students from a different societal and cultural background.

This article will first provide an overview about the set up, technological tools, and requirements of above undergraduate project, its pedagogical objectives and expectations based on the literature. Then the essence of the student feedback as well as conclusions and recommendations for similar future projects are presented.

Background

E-learning has opened up additional opportunities for internationalizing the curriculum in Higher Education, an endeavor that has many dimensions, including those of culture and pedagogy. Students of many disciplines need to operate effectively in multi-cultural societies and global business environments in our times. One way to prepare students is to study abroad, another way is to bring international students on our campuses and classrooms. Both are limited tools for a number of reasons. But a third way to expose students to the outside world is to use the new technological tools provided by the Internet and to have students collaborate with foreign peers in transnational long distance projects as part of regular course load. Transnational online collaboration is a learning mode that offers cross-cultural learning to entirely new student groups that otherwise would never have had this opportunity. Transnational E-learning also requires faculty who are internationally knowledgeable, cross- culturally sensitive, experienced in travel, and able to design curricula, courses and class modules with long distance online components.

A recently established faculty exchange between the GVSU Sociology Department and Pedagogical College Schwaebisch Gmuend (PHSG) in Germany offered the opportunity to experiment with the internationalization of the curriculum through a transnational online student collaboration this Spring/Summer 2006 (May to July). The course set-up was as follows: A U.S. instructor taught two parallel 14-week Soc Intro and Globalization classes in Germany. A German instructor taught a 6-week Spring section and a 6-week Summer section of a Soc Inequality course at GVSU. Each of the eleven teams - consisting of four students (2 Germans +2 Americans) – were asked to write a term paper about a specific research question related to globalization and inequality. Blackboard, Discussion Boards, and Chat rooms were used to post work and exchange information in English as lingua franca.

In the following I will report about the course organization, pedagogical model, guidelines, course design, and outcome of this experiment. The question is what are the opportunities and what are the possible obstacles – and under what circumstances can this teaching model be successfully implemented?

In a nutshell this form of transnational E-learning can work if certain conditions and constraints are carefully taken in consideration.

Course Organization

- German and U.S. students were organized in 11 teams of similar size (about 4 students per team, each consisting of a pair of German and of American students)
- At the beginning of the semester each team was assigned a comparative German-American project topic, such as the following: "What is the largest minority group in the United States and Germany according to the latest Census? How is their minority status related to social inequality and stratification? What is the historical background of minorities in both countries?"
- Online and Internet-based interaction language for all groups was English. This was not a major problem since all German students were fluent in English and were enrolled in PHSG classes taught in English by the visiting GVSU instructor as well as requiring English-language reading and writing skills.
- All students had access to computers, the Internet and personal Email accounts. Each German student received a password to access the GVSU Blackboard course website which was used as the common interaction platform of all classes involved in E-learning.
- At the beginning of the semester, students received instructions about online interaction rules, usage of the GVSU Blackboard (particularly Chat Rooms, Course Documents, Course Information, Discussion Board and Teams LZ functions) for posting outlines, drafts, reports, messages as well as course requirements (due dates of outlines, drafts, final reports). As a matter of fact, students eventually used Blackboard only to post outlines, drafts and final reports. In a few cases they also posted on BB personal introductions or messages. Most personal and course related

student interaction and document exchange occurred de facto via Email because students considered BB as cumbersome and slow, or they wanted to keep the privacy of their interaction. From personal observations and the semester-end student questionnaire it was inferred that about one third of the teams used Email intensively to discuss their assignments and provide mutual feedback while the other students used Email sparsely. The Blackboard Chat room was also not extensively used (15 postings), except for the beginning of classes when students had Blackboard related questions directed at the instructors. Objectives

The main objectives of our unique combination of a faculty exchange program and long distance collaboration project were as follows:

a) student related objectives

- to allow students to widen their horizons, to establish more and deeper international contacts, to learn from the experiences of their peers abroad, to become 'global ambassadors', and to 'travel' without going abroad, and thereby expanding their collaborative and intercultural abilities (teamwork/communication/problem-solving skills), knowledge, tolerance, and friendship.
- to attract, identify, mentor, and advise qualified and motivated students that are interested to deepen and continue long distance exchange, and motivate them to participate in future study abroad opportunities with our partner university

b) faculty related objectives

- to train cross-culturally sensitive faculty who is able to design curricula, courses and class modules with "hybrid" long distance online components and develop appropriate teaching abilities, teaching practices (exercises, test, projects), and assessment methods that promote best practices for inspiring critical higher order and intercultural thinking.

c) future exchange related objectives

- to develop cross-listed and perhaps even jointly-taught "theme courses" at both partner universities that give credits to study abroad students taking classes of visiting faculty of their own institution.
- to learn more about efficient ways to design curricula, courses and class modules with long distance online components that lead to improved student performance and student-centered inquiry-based learning

d) university related objectives

- to establish GVSU's reputation as an American college involved in cutting-edge transnational teaching innovation that helps to ensure that its students, whether at the home campus or elsewhere, become world citizens.
- to diversify GVSU curricula taking advantage of increasing globalization, faculty networks, student demand
- and thereby making sure to respond to the needs of its constituency and secure the college's image and financial health in the future.

Theoretical Review

Paige D. Ware & Claire Kramsch (2005) at the example of learners of German in the U.S. and learners of English in Germany identify a number of issues of intercultural sensitivity and 'semiotic' incompatibilities that may interfere in transnational electronic collaboration and lead to serious misunderstandings or even a breakdown in communication, such as: language limitations, cultural differences in meaning of words, politeness issues, such as how to address others, comments on writing, ethnocentrism, intolerance and impatience, confusing objectives and mixing private and professional conversations.

While all human interactions through language is a semiotic practice that creates misunderstanding and conflict because it includes mechanisms of 'footing,' of 'stance,' and of 'facework', Ware & Kramsch (2005) recommend tact, humbleness, honesty, sensitivity, the suspension of normative discourse schemas or judgment, and instead the adoption of a tell-memore attitude when faced with misunderstanding. Students, they argue, need to develop a de-centered perspective, supplement imagination, attempt to see the others through their eyes, and then discover the logic of their utterances.

Carolin Fuchs (2005) investigated German - American foreign language teachers collaboration in designing a joint website for CMC-based language teaching. She identified institutional, technical, socio-cultural, and linguistic challenges, such as institutional mismatches, different interpretations of syllabi, lack of communication between professors, tight schedules, long wait for partner responses, a lack of shared knowledge in technology and identification of students with their final product. Fuchs recommended a number of solutions, such as the establishment of common goals and procedures, assignment of roles and specific tasks within teams, a clear timetable, and the development of a culture of negotiation

Central is that participants establish personal contacts and knowledge about the project (chat rooms are a good socializing instrument for this purpose); understand the complex nature of a transnational project; set enough time aside for regular communication, and keep logs or diaries to reflect learning and collaboration. Students also need to learn that written language is not equal to intended meaning in foreign language interaction.

Regular involvement of instructors is also crucial to supervise, provide help and clarify issues on-the-go, develop trust and positive rapport, and provide sufficient information about the course goals, requirements, tasks, expectations, and limitations.

Lynn H. Deming (2000) reports about a students perspective of an online course. She identifies a number of 'typical' problems students face when they begin to use this medium, such as unfamiliarity and computer literacy issues (login, password, browsing, content, computer interaction, document retrieval...); anonymity and cumbersome interactions (chat rooms, classmates, time consuming, awkward, disjointed discussions, easiness to drop out of sight and mind). On the other hand, students also recognize advantages, such as asynchronous and self-paced learning, the possibility of one-on-one interactions with instructors, reward of self-reliance, initiative and responsibility. Since the online interaction revolution cannot be retracted, Deming recommends thorough preparation and the development of a set of rules that make this tool easier to digest. For example, to overcome some of the anonymity, she recommends that online participants write brief biographies and inform their partners about themselves and their hobbies.

Findings and Outcome

Our experiment confirms the importance of the recommendations of Fuchs and also reflects the experiences of Deming. Not all course objectives could be accomplished because of structural, pedagogical, and personal obstacles and limitations, including the inexperience of the instructors. The major impediments affecting team cohesion, collaboration, motivation, and morale were uneven course schedules, different course content and course requirements, technological access, and language requirements.

a) Uneven course schedules

-Courses had different beginning and end dates and therefore different due dates: GVSU 6 weeks - PHSG 14 weeks

-Different course breaks: GVSU had no breaks, except July 4th, GVSU had two one week breaks at the end of May and mid-June.

-Different frequency of class meetings: GVSU students were taught twice per week (Tue/Thu) 200 minutes, PHSG students once (Wed) for 90

-Different time zones and considerable time-lag (EST - MET 6 hours) meant that phone calls or even Email were not easy to synchronize

b) Different course content

-Topics and readings of GVSU classes were SOC 385A (Spring) & SOC 385B (Summer) about "Social Class and Inequality". The PHSG classes were "Intro to Sociology" and "Globalization at the Example of the United States", both taught for 14 weeks from mid-April to end of July.

c) Different course requirements

-GVSU classes required several short quizzes, a 15 minutes class presentation of a chapter of the reading, several in-class or take-home exercises, outline, draft, and final paper with specified due dates. PHSG classes only required minutes of one class, a few short quizzes (but mostly not about class and inequality topics), a 15minute class presentation of the assigned project topic turned in at the end of the 14-week semester in form of a short paper. In addition, the format and content of the writing requirements were different. GVSU students had to turn in comparative papers, PHSG students had only to report on the U.S. perspective.

d) Different access to technology

-While most GVSU students were acquainted with Blackboard, German students had never encountered it. The difficulties in learning BB led many Germans to prefer Email for team interaction.

-In addition, only about half of the Germans had access to their own PC. Furthermore, PHSG lab computers and Internet access tended to be overcrowded. This is in stark contrast to GVSU student's access to PC's, the Web, Email accounts, and efficient lab facilities.

e) Different language requirements

-While English was the native language of U.S. students, German students had to interact in a foreign language.

Student Evaluation

At the end of the semester students were asked to provide an open and honest feedback about their experiences with online collaboration as part of class requirement. Three questions were asked:

1. Please describe what you most liked about the teamwork with German/American students?
2. Please describe what you most disliked about the teamwork with German/American students?

3. What could be done to improve the transatlantic online student teamwork in the future?

Most liked:

Except for two cases all students in our German and American classes thought the team project to be worthwhile, interesting, and advantageous in expanding their knowledge about their foreign peers and their life, experiences and attitudes even if not everything worked out as easy as they originally had hoped. Many students commented positively the surprising friendliness, politeness, quick help and good advice they received from abroad. Some students exchanged even photos and promised to stay in contact beyond the class, some remarked they would take a course like this one again and recommended a continuation.

Examples:

A German student wrote: *"For us it was very interesting to collaborate with the Amis* [popular slang for Americans]. *They are very friendly and talk about themselves. I think their dreams do not really fit the cliché we have about Americans"*

An American student remarked: *"I liked being able to get another person's perspective that was possibly very different from my own."* Another wrote: *"I like the idea of first hand communication with students. I really wanted to make regular e-mails to get a feel for what life is like in Germany and how Germans view Americans today."*

Most disliked:

Students in Germany and the U.S. had misgivings about a number of issues:

- Some students never responded or participated in interaction
- Feed back, correspondence, or collaboration being insufficient, superficial, or too slow or too late.
- Different reporting schedules, more, and higher project requirements from American students
- More students disliked BB and the Team sites compared to those who thought it was useful. Critics thought it was tedious to log on, confusingly arranged, and difficult to learn and manage
- Some German students struggled with English and the time it took to read and write in English as a foreign language, and translate responses, sources, or text

-Unclear mutual expectations, lack of structured interaction, of useful questions or feed back was cited while others - in contrast - complained about too high demands and expectations

-The impersonality of a long distance interaction and lack of experience with transnational exchange was also cited as a barrier

Examples:

A German student commented: "*Problematic were different due dates. We started relatively late to work on the question while the Americans at that point were working on their final draft. Also, our email exchange did not really work out. We received very late an answer [to our detailed questions] which was pretty short, i.e. about two sentences long.*"

An American student wrote: "*It was hard communicating with them because they really did not know how to use blackboard and they were not doing the same thing as we were.*" Another commented: "*They [the German students] weren't held responsible for the paper in any real way that I could see. They helped us out, but how we did had little effect on them; it mostly seemed as though they were helping out, not really working as a part of the team.*"

Another American commented in an Email: "*Just so I am not confused, the German students are writing the paper with us and turning in the same copy? I guess I thought that we were discussing the topic and they were providing input, but we were not writing the paper as one group to turn in because they did not have a paper to turn in like we did. Then if their paper is not due until July and ours is due on June 20th, how much do they need to include?*"

Recommendations

Recommendations are a reflection of what students liked or disliked. They concern the use of technology, course format, and collaboration requirements

a) technology

-use individual or group-emails and attachments for personal information and comments instead of postings on BB

-make students at the beginning of class thoroughly acquainted with the use of BB (posting of outlines, draft, and messages, chat room, etc) and the purpose of transnational online collaboration, and rules of interaction

b) course format

-provide a detailed and parallel timetable valid for all classes regarding due dates of outline, draft, in-class presentation, and final paper.

-offer more scheduled times for email, a chat room, or required BB discussion (board) could be useful for developing an 'interaction' stream

-make it a requirement for the German and American students to communicate with each other by having to incorporate the responses into the assignment.

c) collaboration requirements

-elaborate on the expected degree and stepwise progress of collaboration and exchange

-require from students to stick closely to the topic, question, and reading

-start as early as possible to make and maintain intensive contacts and reduce the anonymity of online collaboration

-begin (and end) the collaboration with a videoconference via webcam to establish a group identity, allow personal and team recognition, and resolve or discuss some of the technical and organizational aspects

-give both teams different questions but identical topics and require that the final paper and presentation combines both perspectives

-limit or narrow down team tasks and the division of labor in range, depth, and breadth or divided tasks in several smaller ones. In addition, the directions given need to be very specific but also flexible in their use

-emphasize and require the exchange and sharing of ideas, perspectives etc

Examples:

A German student wrote self-critically: "*Maybe next time we [my German team] should have made earlier contact with our [American] team and focus on the topic. Also, I like the personal contact via email much better [compared to BB] because I am more used to it and because it is easier to add attachments*"

One American student commented: "*Directions need to be clearer. The Germans students had one understanding and the American students another of the tasks that needed to be completed. A lot of*

(mis)communication between classrooms seemed like the biggest difficulty. Using this in a 15 week course makes more sense than in a 6 week course, because then you have time to get to know each other and actually work together."

Another American student wrote: "*Have both groups of students hold equal responsibility for the teamwork, and help guide the students a bit more. We got along just fine, but most of the time we really had no idea what we were supposed to be communicating about; some sort of guidelines or outline would be wonderful.*"

And a third American remarked: "*I think the transatlantic online teamwork would have worked better if the German students had a paper to write too. I know that their class was an entry level course, but the fact that they did not have a concrete assignment besides contacting us didn't give them very much motivation to help us with our research.*"

Summary & Conclusion

Does transnational online student collaboration work? Yes, it can work, if certain conditions and constraints are carefully taken in consideration.

1. Courses need to be carefully coordinated and prepared with regard to schedules, content, collaboration format and requirements, technology, and language.
2. It is important to provide clear instructions with similar and parallel requirements, topics, readings, deadlines, and lectures for both teams.
3. Students need to be prepared in advance and continuously and closely supervised to avoid crises and problems.
4. Surprisingly some of the difficulties and obstacles of transnational collaboration mentioned in the literature (Ware & Kramsch 2005) were not present or relevant in our case. For example, interaction issues (politeness, respect of different attitudes, directness, degree of informality, misunderstandings of terminology, and political attitudes) were not raised as being problematic. Similarly, student status and age did not matter.
5. At the end of the semester an assessment should be taken to find out which objectives (student related, faculty related, exchange related, and university related) have been accomplished.
6. Overall, the student and faculty related learning objectives were impressive. Students were open and curious about this new E-learning tool and recognized the cross-cultural academic and personal benefit of this new kind of transnational exchange.

References

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Appendix A: Rules of Online Collaboration

These rules are provided to students at the beginning of semester.

1. Please be aware of the difficulties of online interaction without knowing your contact face-to-face. Address your partners by name. Always be polite and respect that German students are not as perfect in English as you think you are. Recognize your language limitations and cultural differences in meaning of words. Written language is not equal to intended meaning.

DO NOT SHOUT WITH CAPITAL LETTERS AND EXCLAMATION MARKS!!!

2. Ask your team members and/or the instructors for clarification if you feel there is a misunderstanding or problem. Negotiate instead of demanding.

3. Be professional and focus on your task. Avoid rambling. Be concise, be sincere, be relevant, be clear. If you have questions that may be of interest to others, post it in our chat room under 'Communications'

4. Develop intercultural sensitivity. 1. Recognize that there are no 'final truths' or 'commonalities' in the interpretation of reality, facts & history. All is context and has added 'semiotic load'.

5. For your project, establish at the beginning (a) common goals and procedures; (b) assign roles and specific tasks; (c) accomplish tasks within agreed-upon time frames; (d) establish a sense of community; (e) but also recognize that conflicts are almost unavoidable in teamwork. Stop complaining and instead learn how to manage task- oriented collaboration.

6. Have enough time for communication and be patient and curious. It is a privilege for you to participate in this unique and enriching experiment. If you do it right, it may change the way you see yourself and think about others.

Welcome / Willkommen and good luck /Glueck auf!