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Global Videoconferencing as a Tool for Internationalizing Our Classrooms

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We are sitting in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and they are sitting in Cumbayá, Ecuador, and we are discussing the inequalities of globalization. In Quito, over 150,000 people are protesting in front of the Presidential Palace with signs reading, "*Basta con la dictadura!*" (Enough with the dictatorship!), furious over then-President Lucio Gutierrez's controversial dismissal of the country's Supreme Court. Meanwhile, back in Myrtle Beach, we're witnessing events live through video footage my students shot while in Quito participating in the protests. Political demonstrations like this are common in the less developed world, but they seldom translate this vividly into a globalization classroom. At Coastal Carolina University and La Universidad San Francisco de Quito, however, images like this and conversations about such dramatic daily events are made possible by a videoconference link between the two universities that facilitates a semester-long class on globalization.[1]

Douglas McGray (2006) notes that new immigrants to the U.S. are more likely to settle in suburbs than cities. This is a significant finding from the census data for places like Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, which has experienced high immigrant population growth in the past 10 years. It means that even places on the coast of South Carolina, not immediately thought of as particularly cosmopolitan, are touched by global migration and its associated issues.

Unlike the traditional classroom in which internalized thoughts and ideas may transform a student, the videoconference environment creates a "place," not just a "space," for learning about globalization and the international system.[2] To that extent then, students, via the nature of the embedded experience, will likely experience personal impacts from the learning environment. These impacts in the form of empathy, defined as the level of understanding of other countries, peoples, and cultures, are also analyzed in the survey data presented later in this paper.

What's New?

While small- and medium-sized videoconference classes may have no direct consequence on policy outcomes, they do facilitate the exchange of knowledge within learning (or, epistemic) communities and the development, transferal, and/or realignment of norms, views, and values. This process is a small cog in the wheel of a larger global civil society. Given the lowering of barriers to technology and the over 100 million students in higher education programs around the world (a 40% increase in the five years from 1999 to 2004), the growth of global learning communities is inevitable.[3] Furthermore, much of the demand for higher education will come from the lesser developed world. Global videoconferencing may not just be a means of collaboration across borders, but a planetary necessity to prepare students for a global knowledge economy.

The ability for a lesser developed country, such as Ecuador, to form global learning communities with other institutions in the U.S., Mexico, and Chile creates a component of education and civil society. While academic exchanges have been prevalent among elites in lesser developed countries for decades, such mass communication creates a great educational equalizer for its future generations. Thus, learning will not be defined solely by national and state governed requirements, but also by networks and ideas from a myriad of planetary cultures and peoples.

Assessing the Findings[4]

The majority of outside class communication (notes, email, and discussion/chat conversations) was conducted through WebCT software. Through an open-ended question (n=19) on how effective this tool was for their learning and communication, 18 students replied that WebCT was a positive and effective tool for the course. Fifty percent of the respondents noted that the positive features of WebCT were related to the chat line, discussion board, and email communication features.

With regard to the videoconference environment and technology, 17 of 18 students responded that they thought it facilitated an exchange of ideas and 14 rated their enthusiasm for a course with such technology as high. In an open-ended question about the effectiveness of videoconferencing, all but one student rated the technology as an effective means of teaching and learning. Reasons for effectiveness included, "increased interest in the class," "two classes from two different parts of the world interacting for true globalization to be discussed," "it is nice to get a different perspective than the American one," and "it brings people together who might not otherwise be able to learn and communicate together." In terms of impact on learning, all students noted that the "exchange of other peoples' opinions" and a "diverse class" were their most significant factors.

During the fall 2004, the instructor compared two Introduction to World Politics courses: one taught exclusively online with WebCT software with only Coastal Carolina University students (n=29), and one taught via videoconference between Coastal Carolina University and La Universidad San Francisco de Quito (n=31). In addition to evaluating teaching and learning effectiveness, this survey also measured any changes in student understanding of other countries, peoples, and cultures, and their increase or decrease in knowledge of world events.

With regard specifically to videoconference technology and whether it facilitated an exchange of ideas, 29 of 31 students

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responded that it had. When asked about their level of enthusiasm for the course, only 24% of online students (n=29) responded with a high level of enthusiasm, whereas 38% of videoconference students (n=31) responded with a high level of enthusiasm. Nine percent of videoconference students responded with low levels of enthusiasm for the course, as compared with nearly 14% of the online students. Average levels of enthusiasm were higher for online students (68%) and lower for videoconference students (52%). Clearly, course design and other intervening variables may account for differences in enthusiasm for the course.

In response to an open-ended question about the effectiveness of videoconferencing technology, 26 positive responses were noted, as were five negative responses. The majority of positive responses noted "connection to another country," "views from other areas besides that of the teacher," and "different views from other countries." One student also noted "experiencing a different kind of learning and a different environment."

Students responded to an open-ended question about the impacts on their learning within the class as a result of a global videoconference. Again, there were 26 positive responses all related to an exchange of ideas and cultures and five negative experiences. In comparison with 86% of online students (n=29), 94% of videoconference students (n=31) responded that the course increased their understanding of other countries, peoples, and cultures.

Videoconference Creating the Global Graduate

Global issues are coupled with rapid technological advances in the case of the videoconference environment. We should also consider that the average U.S. college student today spends over 3.5 hours per day on multiple digital media, which far exceeds the 39 minutes per day that they spend reading (Oblinger and Oblinger 2005). While clearly nothing replaces the benefits of going on exchange for students and faculty, global videoconference is one tool to enhance the everyday classroom, particularly for students of global and international studies.

Students are bombarded through television, pod casts, and the Internet with issues that transcend their campuses and their states. In International Relations and Political Science, we have the tools to help our students not only navigate the muddied waters of international and global affairs, but to also create a sense of civic-mindedness that extends beyond their campus and country to the global level. Global videoconference embeds both the instructor and the student in the process of globalization, highlighting all of our roles as global citizens in an ever-changing world landscape.

Notes

1. This connection is free and is provided by an internet protocol (IP) connection. Similar to a phone number, each school can dial the other's IP address and connect in real time with television-quality images.

2. This paper analyzes three years of class surveys, including one year that compared the results of the same class taught online with only Coastal students and one via videoconference between South Carolina and Ecuador, to shed light on theories of globalization and transnational networks taught in our classes every semester. These surveys were distributed confidentially through WebCT software to students outside of class time.

3. The number of mobile students worldwide, meaning those who study outside of their home countries, increased by 41% in the same five-year time period, signaling a major growth in global higher education. (www.uis.unesco.org/ev_en.php?ID=6513_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC)

4. The spring 2004 Globalization class was composed of 18 students, nine from each campus. All students, with the exception of one, were either Political Science or International Relations majors. Although the teacher was bilingual, none of the students at Coastal spoke Spanish. Therefore, all class communication was conducted in English.

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Global APSA: An Institutional Perspective

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As the University of Washington prepared for the arrival of Dr. Paul Farmer, a global health doctor and the subject of the campus common book, *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (New York: Random House, 2003), a team of faculty, administrators, and community leaders promoted ideas of global citizenship both on and off the territorial boundaries of the campus.[1] The book, selected for its resonance with issues of general interest to the campus (interdisciplinary approaches, student engagement, a new global health initiative, the power of ideas, the role of entrepreneurship, and the capacity for non-state actors in world politics to shape agendas), had acquired a following more like a social movement than an administrative initiative. Coffee shops adjoining the campus featured copies of the book, and honors students coordinated and invited faculty members to come to evening discussion sessions. As University of Washington Professor Jonathan Mayer commented, "I have seen this book change careers and change lives."[2]

Five years following the events of September 11th, the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill popularized the assigning of a common reading to a large undergraduate population. However, as their campus discovered, discussing contentious issues without fragmenting the campus community can be difficult. Even popular non-fiction books can draw controversy, yet this can be accommodated by assigning a critical reader to accompany the volume, and encouraging student discussions in peer-led reading groups such as FIGs (Freshman Interest Groups) and TRIGs (Transfer Interest Groups).

As the sustainability movement celebrates the 20th anniversary of *Our Common Future,* many campuses will bring together scholars, political leaders, and scientists to discuss the implementation of a global agenda, a discussion initiated by the UN Commission on the environment. Gro Harlem Brundtland's leadership and the committee's work led to the institutionalization of the norm of "sustainable development." Elizabeth Kolbert's *Field Notes from a Catastrophe* (US: Bloomsbury, 2006) provides vignettes documenting how different sites experience climactic change. Assigning the book as a common reading is a promising way to engage a campus-wide conversation around the issue(s) of global warming and climate change; such an assignment is also appropriate for all institutions interested in engaging in a multidisciplinary discussion on how to manage the commons.

Such projects force universities to re-examine their curricula. How and why do institutions of higher education pursue a global agenda? What are the possibilities for other campus communities? Whether "globalization" or "globalism" is new, or old, increasing or decreasing, it has become a part of the institutional agenda of higher education. The pursuit of global studies, incentives provided for faculty to

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