Bringing Study Abroad into the College Classroom

Let us start at the very beginning: the relationship between technology and excellence in teaching. Technology has no intrinsic value unto itself; technology does not make us excellent teachers, and it does not miraculously transform our classrooms. Instead, technology is a tool that can enhance teaching and enrich students’ learning. Innovation is located in the pedagogies behind the technology. The goals of the project I am going to describe were not centered on integrating technology into the classroom, but were to intellectually connect students to their peers while they studied abroad.

My project was born out of an interest in mobilizing students’ study abroad experiences to enhance learning back on campus. At Beloit College there is strong emphasis on study abroad programming and international studies in general. The first time I offered a course on African Politics, more than half of the enrolled students had studied abroad in a developing country. This created new and interesting opportunities for learning, and I worked hard to connect the experiences of these students into my curriculum. After the course, I assessed my experiments in integrating students’ study abroad experiences into the classroom through surveys and interviews with students. This was a rewarding and interesting experiment, but I wanted to take it further. I wanted to be able to connect students in the field with students in the classroom in real time. Ambitious efforts to co-teach courses across multiple institutions and other innovations have been on the agenda for a few years now. But these have typically mobilized costly and complicated technologies such as Elluminate. Thanks to emerging videoconferencing technologies, what in the past would have been difficult and expensive now promised to be straightforward and free.

The Chronicle of Higher Education recently reported select findings on faculty use of technology from the 2009 Faculty Survey of Student Engagement. Although 72 percent of surveyed faculty reported using course management software “at least some,” only 8 percent reported using videoconferencing or Internet phone chat “at least some.” The primary goal of course management software is as it describes: to help instructors better manage their course. Very few professors are using course management software to enhance their actual teaching. Given the seeming ubiquity of videoconferencing/videochat sources today, I find it somewhat surprising that more professors are not mobilizing this technology in the classroom.

Last year I piloted a program in which I linked students studying abroad with students back in my classroom in real time. I hand-selected three students studying abroad—in Buenos Aires, Dakar, and Quito. These students were offered a half-unit credit for connecting to my Politics of Development course. In return, they were asked to create and maintain a blog that linked their personal experiences to my course, to keep up-to-date on class readings through Moodle, and to Skype into the classroom to talk with students on topics relevant to the course. The students chose their own platform for blogging. I chose to use Skype as the platform for videochat.

The program offered a number of benefits for the individual student abroad, for the classroom students back on campus, and for the institution as a whole. For the individual student abroad, the program allowed for real-time personal and academic reflection on their experiences. Giving the students specific tasks to accomplish directly relevant to the Beloit curriculum allowed for seamless intellectual integration of their experiences abroad and better prepared them for “reentry” into Beloit. For the students in the Beloit classroom, the benefits were also significant. In my teaching, I strive to integrate theory and real life. The students abroad were providing, for the students in the classroom, up-to-date real-world examples colored by personal experiences. Peer-to-peer learning is pedagogically important and can be just as effective when mediated through technology as when in-person. As a bonus, the videochat sessions were a fun, informal way to break up class time. Finally, it became obvious from the beginning that the institutional benefits to this project would be significant as well. First, this activity served as a formidable advertisement for study abroad. Second, there were no startup costs but seemingly high benefits. Third, using videoconferencing technology allowed me to eliminate the geographical borders of Beloit College. I was able to put into practice what I mean when I say “global community” or “internationalizing the campus.” To borrow from Benedict Anderson, Beloit’s “imagined community” was reconfigured through strategic harnessing of technology.

The quality of the blogs, unsurprisingly, varied according to students’ effort and ability. I intended the blogging to be
primarily directed by the students in the field. However, they needed more direction than I had anticipated, so I led students to relevant topics and readings from the course. Over time, a symbiosis between the blogs and the Skype sessions began to develop. The appeal of a videoconferencing technology such as Skype is that it is simple, easy to use, and relatively reliable. I took my laptop and a standalone microphone to class to connect with the classroom projector/Internet. This is a technology that even the most technophobic professors could adopt with ease. Skype audio works on very low bandwidth, and we had no problem connecting all the students using just audio. However, it was only in Buenos Aires that we had fast-enough Internet to regularly utilize the video connection. Video was a substantial enhancement for peer-to-peer learning—actually seeing the face of the student in the field. But even audio could set the scene. My student in Dakar would often Skype in just as the sun was setting in Dakar, and so in the background we would hear the evocative sounds of the call to prayer. We were, for a few moments, all transported to Dakar.

The challenges I faced in this project were not so significant that they nullified the benefits, but they warrant mention nonetheless. Ironically, it was the students on campus who were laziest in following the blogs and interacting with students in the field. I liked the use of separate blogs, but I now wonder if it would be more effective to give the student in the field access to Moodle or Blackboard for a more seamless integration into the course. As mentioned above, the technology was good but not perfect. At times the audio quality was weak, or, as happened in Senegal, there simply was no electricity! Another mundane but critical problem was scheduling the Skype sessions. Our class meeting time was non-negotiable, and this did not always work with the schedule of the students abroad. The more rigidly programmed the study abroad student was, the harder it was to make this work.

From the faculty standpoint, a great deal of flexibility is required. I had to give up control and give myself over to the vicissitudes of West African technology, student-controlled questions and topics, timing challenges, and other factors. In addition, this requires a great investment in time by the instructor. It took an immense amount of advising to prepare this project, to run this project, and to make it meaningful on campus and abroad. This is perhaps where the biggest challenge lies ahead in encouraging adoption by faculty across campus.

As colleges and universities face the pressures of preparing truly global citizens with increasingly fewer resources, I would like to make the case that IT professionals in higher education can be at the forefront of supporting innovation and global interconnections on their campuses. It is the IT professionals who can present ways in which faculty and international educators can use emerging (and free) technologies to link students studying abroad with their peer students studying on campus in real time.

Notes
1. Beloit College (http://www.beloit.edu/oie/) is a selective liberal arts college of 1,300 students in Beloit, Wisconsin. Approximately 45 percent of Beloit students study abroad.
2. See, for example, Derrick Cogburn’s work on linking U.S. and African institutions of higher education at the Center for Research on Collaboratories and Technology Enhanced Learning Communities (Cotelco), a joint center of Syracuse University and American University (http://cotelco.syr.edu/).
4. For an example of one of the student blogs, please see <http://elsurglobal.blogspot.com/>. In this blog, this student also posted a short video in which he talks about his experience with this pilot program.

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