

Intercultural Learning Online – Students on the Thai/Burma Border and at York University Share Their Learning

Opportunity

Through the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University in Toronto, Dr. Robin Roth, a Geography professor, was asked to deliver a course as part of a Liberal Arts Diploma offered to refugees on the Thai/Burma border by the Australian Catholic University. The course would focus on Global Environmental Change and was to be designed so that the students in Thailand could take it online, while the York students would be on campus.

Three goals were outlined for the development of the course:

- Create opportunities for cross-cultural interactions for York students.
- Develop and strengthen faculty and student expertise with online technologies.
- Provide access to higher education for marginalized student groups, such as refugees.

Innovation

The first time the course was offered, in 2011, online lectures were provided for the Thai students, with voice-over PowerPoint slides. The York students could also access the online lectures, as a supplement to attending face-to-face classes. Weekly tutorials were provided face-to-face for York students and through Skype for those in Thailand. Access to the professor and teaching assistant was facilitated through Moodle, the learning management system (LMS), and e-mail.

Interaction between the two students groups was approached rather tentatively, due to concerns about language abilities and technological capacity of the Thailand-based students. As well, the students might not be able to participate regularly due to their security situation. During the program, they were living in a building outside of the refugee camps but they might make prolonged trips back to the camps, during which time they would be offline.

Nevertheless, a discussion forum was set up on environmental changes the students had experienced in their lifetimes and on other aspects of course material, with participation optional. The refugee students in this first-time offering of the course were already part way through the Diploma program and so their English language skills were quite advanced, as well as their understandings of the expectations of western university

courses and the online learning environment. These were important factors in their success.

The evaluation of this first course revealed that while international and cross-cultural exchanges were not high priority activities for students in either location, students responded favourably to the opportunity to incorporate the perspectives of those in the other country into their work.

The course was offered again in Fall 2012 in blended format, with all lectures online for students, both at York or in Thailand, featuring 20-35 minute mini lectures, with voice-over PowerPoint slides. The tutorial was extended to 1 ½ hours weekly. Dr. Roth would often attend the first portion of the face-to-face tutorials at York to respond to questions, highlight issues in the news, and make links to the course material. Because of the twelve-hour time difference, the refugee students had separate tutorials led by a teaching assistant (TA) via Skype. Dr. Roth offered online office hours, as well as individual links through the LMS and e-mail.

Collaborative learning between the students at York and those in Thailand was integrated into the course design, particularly through a series of assignments. As the class focused on the politics of climate change, the exchanges between students in Canada and Thailand in the course provided a living laboratory for students to reflect on the difficulties and benefits of the inter-cultural communication necessary to address climate change. The students were divided into groups of four to six, with two refugee students in each. There was a series of five assignments:

- For the first assignment, each group used chat rooms, discussion forums, and/or Skype to determine the process they would use to work together.
- For the next three assignments, the students worked individually to describe issues and responses to climate change in his/her assigned country – looking at sources of environmental change, policies and programs in place, and possible impacts. The assignments were shared for peer review prior to being handed in for grading.
- The final assignment required each group to work together to document similarities and difference between the various countries. This required intercultural interaction and negotiation and brought forward the different perspectives and understandings.

Each of these assignments was included in the calculation of the final mark, as was participation in the tutorials and in the online forum, as well as the preparation of an online introductory essay describing an environmental change that students had witnessed. A final exam, selected from questions supplied one month in advance, was worth 35% of the final mark

Outcomes and Benefits

Ninety students at York and forty on the Thai/Burma border took part in the Fall 2012 offering of the course. Both groups of students gained a wider understanding of the different values and perspectives in their own and, more importantly, the other country, related to climate change as well as inequities, power politics, and life experiences.

The social justice component of the project was accomplished in that refugees received access to high quality post-secondary education from an accredited university. All of the students from the Diploma program are either employed or pursuing further studies in universities in Thailand, Germany and Australia, something they would not have been able to do without transcripts from established universities.

All of the refugee students completed all of the assignments, although many struggled with the language level and critical thinking required, as, for this group of students, this was the first course in the Diploma program. Their language skills improved during the course and York students gained skills in collaborating with those less fluent in English.

A preliminary look at the evaluations for the course indicates that many of the students enjoyed and benefitted from the blended model and the international interaction; others experienced difficulties with the language and the time difference proved challenging. The future use of Skype or teleconferencing for a more immediate experience between the two groups is being considered, although the time difference inhibits this.

Some of the students in the course developed a greater interest in the issues of refugees and the certificate program available through the Centre for Refugee Studies. The new skills from participating in a cross-cultural course at a distance can provide long-term benefits for the individuals and in the job market.

Although Dr. Roth is only ten years out of the PhD program, she was most comfortable with lecture format. Working through the development, delivery, and revision of this course has helped her to recognize the usefulness of technology, particularly in bringing people together and in facilitating a learning experience that wouldn't otherwise be possible.

Challenges and Enhancements

Some of the students, particularly at York, did not keep up with the online course material and this was often reflected in their final results. In future applications of the course design, more emphasis would be given to the online discussion portion of the course to

encourage students to participate regularly and to provide more incentive to keep up with lecture material. As well, a mid-term exam would be included in the assessment mix.

Creating and offering a blended course demanded more work in terms of preparation and delivery than an in-class offering. Support from the Teaching Commons, the International Office, the E-services Office, the Centre for Refugee Studies, and other groups at York was essential.

The twelve-hour time difference created some challenges for instructional staff and students, as there was always a time gap in communications. The on-site staff in Thailand could support the students in many ways, but interaction with the professor, TA, and students at York was also essential. Despite the frustrations this caused, it also provided an aspect of the learning about international collaboration.

Most groups functioned quite well in the preparation of the group assignments; some were seen as having only a couple of contributing members. Consideration will be given to restructuring the assignments to address this.

Potential

The 2012 provision of this course was funded through the Academic Innovation Fund at York. More information on this fund is available in [Accessibility, Engagement, and Learning: Moving Ahead with Blended Learning at York University](#). The project received funding for 2013-2014 to create templates and prototypes for two pedagogical models for technology-enabled inter-cultural learning which could be used throughout the university.

The first is the revision of the course model used for the delivery of the course to the refugees to create a template for wider use, as its applicability is not limited to this situation. The template could be adapted in other courses, whether linking with international students or perhaps Aboriginal students in Canada's north. This course could also continue to be offered in partnership with an international university partner.

The second model focuses on sharing a single assignment of units in similar courses being taught at York and an international partner university. A pilot of this model is taking place in the Winter 2013 term, with Chiang Mai University in Thailand as the partner. Integrated into separate face-to-face classes is a shared online lecture on Nationalism followed by a shared assignment in which the students find and document everyday appearances of nationalism in their respective countries and reflect on the differences and similarities. Student participation in the assignment is assessed independently at each institution. A further piloting of this single component approach would take place in five additional courses, one of which would make extensive use of online face-to-face tools.

For Further Information

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[Interview on CBC Radio](#)