

GLOBAL CLASSROOMS Student Focus Groups: Lessons Learned ¹

Jennifer Harris & Laura Collins
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BACKGROUND

As part of the evaluation of the University of Washington (UW) Global Classrooms Program, the Office of Educational Assessment (OEA) conducted focus groups with students enrolled in each of the three projects: Political Science (POL S) 398: Global Citizen course; HUM 498/C LIT 496: Writing Multi-Cultural Life Histories in Communities in Transition; and the International Design Project. The purpose of these student focus group conversations was to chronicle program development and to learn from students' experiences in the Global Classrooms Program. Focus group data will become part of a larger case study of the Global Classrooms course/program design and development.

The purpose of this report is to look at common themes that emerged from the three focus groups. OEA staff looked across the three individual focus group reports produced earlier to draw out essential lessons that may be passed on to improve current projects and aid the development of future global partnerships.

LESSONS LEARNED

All of the Global Classrooms courses were unique in style and diverse in disciplinary emphasis. However, as the focus group data emerged, it became clear that these distinct programs shared more than anticipated at first glance. A number of student concerns, benefits, and challenges seemed to echo through the focus groups, assuring researchers that there are shared lessons to be learned from Global Classrooms experiences that can benefit future partnerships.

The comments that follow reflect the experiences that the UW Global Classrooms students shared with OEA staff. These student perspectives were communicated before the end of the program, in advance of their involvement in a culminating project and/or trip to the partner institution.

A Change in Plans

- ***In each of the three Global Classrooms projects, circumstances beyond UW faculty control spurred adjustments to course design that would in turn affect student experience.***

Professor Chait's course, HUM 498/C LIT 496: Writing Multi-Cultural Life Histories in Communities in Transition, was originally designed to partner with two institutions—one in Eritrea and one in Cape Town, South Africa. However, when the South Africa connection did not work out, the course had to rely on the Eritrean students as their exclusive partners. Communication proved difficult with Eritrea due to their lack of access to computers and limited access to technology. Where Eritrean students did have access to computers—in political party headquarters—it was unclear how free they were to communicate with UW

¹ Submitted as part of the evaluation of the Global Classrooms Program.

students. One adjustment that Dr. Chait made in response to this problem was to involve Eritreans who live in Seattle in the course to talk with UW students about their experiences.

Professor Levy's POL S 398: Global Citizen course had to change focus as a result of their Argentinean partner country's financial crisis. Students explained that while the UW students were divided among three core projects—World Trade Organization (WTO), Fair Trade Coffee, and neighborhood associations—the Argentineans were now only focusing on neighborhood associations. This led one student to comment, "There is not interaction on the WTO and Fair Trade Coffee issues and little interaction on the final projects."

Early on, Design Program faculty, Professors Wadden and Ozubko, learned that transmitting project images over the Internet to their Chinese partners would not be feasible due to limited access to technology by their Chinese partner institution. Cultural norms also came into play as UW faculty acknowledged the importance of face-to-face communication and set off at the beginning of the International Design program to meet in-person with their partners at Tsinghua University in Beijing. The International Design program had to rely on the visits and mailing materials rather than electronic exchange with their partners. After some initial attempts, UW students would not connect with partner students until their end-of-year visit to China.

Faculty & Student Incentives

- ***While faculty may have clear purpose behind getting involved in the Global Classrooms (GC) project, students come into the partnerships with diverse backgrounds, multifaceted goals, and varying degrees of understanding of the GC mission.***

Students in the Multi-Cultural Life Histories course had diverse backgrounds and reasons for taking the course. One student commented that he was not interested in the program or multicultural aspect per say but was attracted to the online description as he was reviewing spring course offerings. Another student was interested in courses with an international perspective and plans to minor in Comparative Literature and South African Studies. An Eritrean undergraduate felt that he could not pass up a course that focused on his cultural background and was later pleased to learn that it also satisfied a requirement. An ethnomusicology graduate student who heard about the course through his department secretary enrolled to aid in his understanding of the social and cultural context of music and help with ethnography writing. Another student frankly told researchers that it was the final day of class registration and many things were closed. The course simply looked interesting and fit a convenient time slot.

Students were assigned the Global Citizen course as part of their required Honors program sequence. When OEA staff spoke with students they found a cohesive group that had been taking core Honors courses together for the past year. While students appreciated the global perspective and the course faculty, they may not have had the same level of commitment to the GC program had they selected the course of their own accord.

Students explained that the International Design Project was announced in class and they were invited to attend an informational meeting. One student mentioned that one of the professors told her about it and she "thought it would be super cool." Another student commented that the project provided a unique opportunity for seniors and graduate students to work together, and to connect with students in China.

Students added that the Design Program's method of choosing certain UW students to participate had the effect of making them feel like a select group.

Workload, Grading, & Course Structure

- ***While students voiced appreciation for the unique concept of GC courses, they generally expressed feeling overburdened at times by their workload, communicated a desire that grading rubrics be adjusted to account for online interaction, and felt some confusion over course expectations and requirements.***

Students in the Multi-Cultural Life Histories course said that they felt the scoring rubric for the course needed to be adjusted to reflect the interviewing and personal contacts that needed to take place. Students felt that this adjustment would be helpful because the class was "labor intensive" and they believed that priorities needed to be shifted a bit. Some students wanted more direction on their papers but also expressed appreciation that the professor made it a point to be flexible and leave room for initiative.

Students in the Global Citizen course found dividing their time among group projects, reading, online communication, and papers to be a challenge. Some students felt the course was more demanding than other Honors courses they had taken. Since students felt that online communication did not necessarily directly relate to their graded course projects, several stated that they were unable to put as much energy into this aspect of the course as their instructors had encouraged them to do. Students felt that there needed to be a closer integration between assignments, time spent on course responsibilities, and graded coursework. They pointed out that online chat time only counted as part of their course participation grade, which they stated was 10% of their total grade. Students did appreciate improvements that were made during the course. The majority responded favorably to the scheduled online chats over the previous unstructured exchange, but made additional suggestions for more focused communication.

International Design students worked on their projects as an extracurricular activity throughout the academic year and explained that the project differed markedly from their regular Design coursework. Students were unaccustomed to group work and explained that they are usually given a clearer statement of purpose for their work. However, they also acknowledged an awareness of their professors' intentions that they learn to negotiate meaning through a more open, organic, group process. Moreover, although the students wanted more clarity of decision-making at times, they did appreciate the diversity of experiences that the group members represented. The students conveyed that it was a challenge to work outside their comfort zones and beyond the boundaries of their normal coursework. Design students also commented that it was difficult to maintain momentum during the academic yearlong project and felt that it was stressful at times to integrate the project with the flow of other academic responsibilities. Some students suggested that it would have been helpful if the course had more definition and a clearer time limit before the end of the academic year when other responsibilities loomed.

Communication & Personal Connections

- ***Throughout the Global Classrooms experience, students were concerned with establishing meaningful communication with partners, with shared benefits between UW and international partners, and with integrating courses and materials with partners.***

Multi-Cultural Life Histories students expressed frustration with the limited interactions that they were able to establish with Eritrean partners due to lack of access to technology and possible restrictive or monitored student access to computers at party headquarters. Two students who did communicate with Eritrean students thought that they had access to computers in some other location. The inability to carry out real-time conversation was also brought up as a barrier to collaboration by a UW student who did not see any lack of willingness to converse on the part of Eritrean students. Another student commented that although there is access to functioning technology in Seattle, problems occurred in trying to maintain communication with Seattle Eritreans. Meeting with one Eritrean Seattleite also led one student to ponder the difference between online and in-person communication. He felt that he would never had been able to engage in such sensitive issues as war and incarceration if the conversation had occurred online. UW students also expressed concern that Eritreans benefit from the Global Classrooms exchange. One noted, "Just because they correspond with us doesn't mean it brings value to their life." He felt that there must be "value for them and for us."

Several Global Citizen students reported that they appreciated the global perspective of the course. Comments included: "The global part is very good—just the reading alone wouldn't be comprehensive." "We're talking to people and getting real perspective." However, one student expressed concern that the Argentinean students were not getting as much out of the communication as they were: "I feel like we're exploiting them. We get more out of it than they do." Another student concurred: "It's one-sided. Not a global exchange." She was not sure that the UW students were contributing to the learning experience of the Argentineans and added, "I don't know what their requirements are." Students were also concerned that they were not all working on the same projects as their Argentinean partners or reading the same materials most of the time. The fact that courses at the partner institutions start and end at different times was brought up as a further barrier to collaboration. UW students were also concerned that not all Argentinean students were as comfortable as others communicating in English and noted a distinction between speaking and typing—believing that typing online is a more difficult means of communication where language barriers exist. Students did however share that they were pleased that their professor visited the partner institution before the start of the course and were also looking forward to the Argentinean faculty member's visit to UW.

Students in the International Design program were disappointed that they did not establish contact with the Chinese students or have personal knowledge of them. The UW students took care to place their individual biographies on the web but received no exchange of information from the Chinese students. The students were very excited that they would be traveling to China and would get to interact with students in-person but would have liked more connection to partner students early on. Along with technology constraints, language support was brought up as a critical need to facilitate information exchange. Students wanted to have access to information on Chinese characters as well as some sort of translator. They did not wish to be so dependent on other Mandarin speaking UW students to translate.

Increased Awareness

- ***Students in all of the Global Classrooms projects clearly articulated a growing awareness of cultural differences with their partners along with an enhanced understanding of technological disparities.***

Students in the Multi-Cultural Life Histories course demonstrated varying degrees of growing awareness of their global partner's cultural perspective and political condition. One student commented, "We've done some rotten things as a country." He added that reading about how the war unfolded and funding for it (that only Norway supplied Eritrea with unqualified aid), along with class discussions, provided him with yet another negative example of U.S. foreign policy. Another student was surprised by the high intellectual caliber of the Eritrean students and felt that they were more advanced than UW students. She noted that, "It is easy to get education here but there they are the best and brightest." She went on to state that she "gained respect for Eritrea as a country" and that the experience "opened her eyes to the success that a Third World nation has."

Several students reported that they appreciated the global perspective of the Global Citizen course. They commented that they were getting a perspective from communicating with people that they would not get from simply reading. Several students reported that they felt hopeful and excited about the course, that gaining different perspectives was a benefit, and that the "idea" of the class was interesting. One student brought up information about the geography of Argentina and a few ideas from the readings as examples of what was learned. Several students expressed appreciation for the course faculty. One student noted that "Levi is outstanding" and felt that "her stories and knowledge are the best part of the course." Students also felt that having Marcello [Argentinean partner instructor] visit the UW in May will benefit the course. Students appeared to think about the cultural perspective they were gaining on Argentinean life, as they expressed concern over the fact that the Argentinean partner institution is private and thus is probably not representative of the general Argentinean population who attend public institutions. Students mentioned that they were unsure if they were getting a "true Argentinean perspective" and not clear on how much these students represent the life experiences that they are reading about.

International Design students commented that the project provided the opportunity to work with bilingual information design using Chinese characters, that it was a totally new experience, and that gearing projects to an international audience was a challenge. Some students discussed broadening their cultural horizons and finding out about the meanings behind the forms of Chinese characters. Others added that they are learning a lot about the Chinese educational system and how it differs from the US. Examples cited by UW students included that the Chinese have intensive three-week long courses, with consistency of instruction varying greatly among different professors. The students also explained that the Chinese work they had seen thus far is more illustrative than information driven. Most notably, students' willingness to explore another culture was evidenced by the excitement that they shared to be taking a trip to China at the end of the quarter. One student described the trip as a "great opportunity to actually take design into the context and see how it works."

CONCLUSIONS

While on the surface it may appear that these three inaugural Global Classrooms projects are strikingly different—that they partner with different countries, represent diverse academic departments, and employ unique methods of inquiry—a closer look reveals shared concerns, challenges, and benefits. Some of the lessons gleaned from student conversations should aid future GC development, reminding us to keep several ideas in mind:

- Because these course partnerships engage larger environments and external factors, unanticipated change is likely. Do not expect things to proceed as planned. However, students can benefit from these experiences.
- Flexibility, creativity, and adaptability will help instructors and students negotiate these experiences.
- Since participation in these global partnerships will be a new experience for many students, provide them with as much information as possible so they can understand and expand your vision of GC goals.
- Students lead busy lives and often have conflicting academic responsibilities that may demand their attention at different points during the quarter. It may be beneficial to keep these busy periods in mind when planning GC activities and assignments so that they do not interfere with other student academic commitments during crunch times.
- Since programs can benefit from gaining timely feedback on the challenges and benefits of the GC program, consider asking students for weekly updates on their GC experience.
- It may help students if GC faculty seek to provide structure where possible within this fluid, dynamic experience. For example, students may benefit from arranged online chat times that are assigned to small groups.
- Since GC courses are structured differently than non-GC courses, it would be helpful to build online communication and other responsibilities unique to the GC experience into the course grading rubric. It may also be helpful to consider lightening other course duties (i.e., readings and assignments) to allow for online time.
- Since challenges will invariably arise during the GC experience, you may wish to discuss tough issues with students, such as that of mutual benefits for partners, and frustration over barriers to planning and communication. Students may provide good ideas to try.
- Students want meaningful communication, strong connections, and collaboration with partner students. Do whatever possible to make this happen—such as providing language assistance and facilitating the exchange of personal information among partners.