

International student collaboration in Geography: Learning by doing together

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Abstract

Cet article explore comment la collaboration entre les départements de géographie des universités peut renforcer les compétences pratiques, les compétences de réflexion et les approches innovantes des futurs enseignants dans les domaines de l'interculturalisme, la mondialisation et le civisme, et également faciliter la déconstruction des stéréotypes négatifs à l'égard des personnes, des lieux, des paysages et des enjeux. Ceci a été facilité par un module de géographie américano-européen commun qui a eu lieu en 2012-13 entre la University of Northern Colorado (UNCO), et SPD-Dublin City University. Ils ont collaboré sur de cours basé sur Moodle pour les étudiants facilitées par le AAG (Association des géographes américains) - Centre for Global Geography Education. Le module d'identité nationale CGGE examine les caractéristiques géographiques de l'identité nationale et de l'interaction de la culture, la politique, et le lieu. Étudiants UNC et SPD-DCU ont été rejoints dans la dernière partie de ce projet pilote par les étudiants grecs de l'Université de la mer Egée. La méthodologie utilisée dans ce cours pilote est facilement transférable. Dans ce document, les points de vue des étudiants irlandais au module sont analysés.

This paper explores how collaboration between Geography Departments in universities can enhance the practical competencies, skills and innovative approaches of future teachers in the areas of inter-culturalism, globalization, and good citizenship, and also facilitate the deconstruction of negative stereotyping in relation to people, places, landscapes and issues. This was facilitated by a shared US-European Geography module that took place in 2012-13 between the University of Northern Colorado, and SPD-Dublin City University. They collaborated on a Moodle-based course for students facilitated by the AAG's (Association of American Geographers) Centre for Global Geography Education. The CGGE *National Identity* module examines geographic characteristics of national identity and interplay of culture, politics, and place. UNCO and SPD-DCU students were joined in the latter part of this pilot project by Greek students from the University of the Aegean. The methodology used in this pilot course is easily transferable. In this paper the viewpoints of the Irish students to the module are analysed.

Key words: inter-university collaboration, teaching, learning, geography.

Introduction

The concepts of identity, place(s), citizenship, positive and negative stereotyping are central themes in education that pose challenges in the teaching and learning processes. Crucial elements in learning are student interest and empathy in the material being taught and the

supports being used. The current generation of students are now being classified as ‘digital natives’ that have grown up with all types of digital media at their disposal and to which they have so called natural and instinctive reactions, unlike previous generations. Hence the themes used concerning places and people through the medium of digital media provided the ideal environment for student self and group discovery learning going beyond simplistic ‘us and them’ categorisations.

This was made possible by a shared Geography module that took place in 2012-13 between the University of Northern Colorado (UNCO), and SPD-Dublin City University who collaborated on a Moodle-based course for students facilitated by the AAG’s (Association of American Geographers) Centre for Global Geography Education (<http://www.aag.org/cgge>). The CGGE *National Identity* module examines geographic characteristics of national identity and interplay of culture, politics, and place. UNCO and SPD-DCU students were joined in the latter part of this pilot project by Greek students from the University of the Aegean. Below the viewpoints of the Irish students are analysed mostly in their own words often reflecting the style, language and approach of communications fostered by the evolving digital media including facebook, twitter and so forth.

Theoretical Background: How are people's national identities connected to places?

As developed by the Centre for Global Geography Education the theoretical background falls into the three categories of conceptual framework, regional case studies and collaborative projects.

The conceptual framework introduces students to some of the key concepts, theories, and analytical approaches in geography. This framework provides students with the background they need to think geographically about global issues. The theoretical and thematic aspects are followed by the *regional case studies* illustrating how geographic concepts, methods, and technologies can be used to investigate and solve problems in different places and countries. The case studies feature a variety of “spatial thinking” activities and other resources for teaching students how to analyse issues from a geographic perspective. This is enhanced by *collaborative projects* that use e-learning technologies to connect geography classes in different countries for online learning collaborations and discussions. This CGGE module was developed collaboratively by geographers from different countries (Solem, M., Klein, P., Muñoz-Solari, O., and Ray, W., eds., <http://globalgeography.aag.org>).

Work Focus

- How is nationalism symbolized? The focus here is on Europe.
- How do landscapes represent national identity? The focus here is on Ireland.
- Why are public spaces sometimes contested? The focus here is on the United States.
- How is globalization transforming the borders of national identity?
- Student collaboration: Students collect, compare, and discuss attitudes and data representing national and regional cultural identities.

Practical arrangements

The Moodle-based course hosted by the AAG's Centre for Global Geography Education, facilitated the collaboration between the three Universities. Despite practical issues including differences in class sizes, such as 60 Irish and 20 US students, small peer groups were created. Their work was monitored with light touch input from the moderators.

The Irish students were broken down into subgroups and then twinned with their American counterparts. This facilitated inter and intra group learning within both large groups in their home university, and between students in Ireland and the USA. Online forums, common material and prompt questions were central to the teaching and learning process.

National Identity Concepts

The module examines the geographic characteristics of national identity and the interplay of culture, politics, and place. The conceptual framework introduces some of the theories and ideas used by geographers to analyze national identity, emphasizing concepts such as nationalism, landscape, and public space. Each case study explores a geographic question about migration in the context of a particular region or country. The module's collaborative projects offered opportunities for students to discuss the case studies and engage in geographic learning with students at home and abroad.

How did the students find the teaching and learning experience?

Roslyn Arnold (2005) posits what makes outstanding teachers and leaders so effective, and suggests that empathetic intelligence may be the answer. "Empathetic intelligence is a theory of relatedness. It is relevant to person-centred situations and professional contexts such as teaching and learning. It explains some of the salient skills, abilities and attitudes which underpin effectiveness in these contexts - things such as enthusiasm, expertise, capacity to engage, and empathy itself" (pp. 11-12). In this context Arnold explores empathy as a function of mind, brain and feeling, and its relatedness to narrative and imagination. She emphasizes the social usefulness of empathy and organization, especially in developing cultures of learning. This approach encourages teachers and students to reflect in groups or individually on practice and professional relationships. Empathetic intelligence is not the same as emotional intelligence or cognitive intelligence, because it is essentially concerned with the dynamic between thinking and feeling and the ways in which each contributes to the making of meaning. (Arnold, 2005, p. 20)

Keeping Arnold's perspectives in mind, at the end of the module the Irish students were asked to write about their experience of the module in order to evaluate it and explore enhanced collaboration in this project in future years. Based on quotes from their responses, their answers fell largely into the categories of expectations and experience.

Concerning their expectations, recurring collocations the students used were: apprehensive, nervous, daunted, uncertain, excited and intrigued. Attitudes evident in the first four categories were due to the innovative approaches to student based blended learning where the onus to engage was on the students themselves, and to be actively involved and responsible individually, and in group work with their fellow Irish students, but also with their American

counterparts whom they did not personally know. Most of the students were familiar with the digital media used in the module, including uploading documents, photos and so forth, but in other contexts often of a non-formal educational environment. Nonetheless, many found the prospect of meeting and working with other students virtually in another country exciting and intriguing.

Concerning their learning experience, the results were most satisfying. Unusually, the students were 100% positive about the experience, and repeatedly indicated the 'enjoyable' nature of the work. This was enhanced by the fact that they learned a lot and gained insights:

...about own sense of national identity

...about transcending stereotypes

...about local landscapes

...about different modes of learning

The level of overall student positivity – is reflected here in their own words:

'Rewarding and insightful experience'

'A wonderful opportunity'

'Overall ... happy to have engaged with this activity despite my initial fears'

'Very meaningful and worthwhile experience'

'Very stimulating and enjoyable'

'Overall ... very new and exciting project to be part of ...'

'An experience I will never forget'

'I was surprised that I enjoyed the process so much, as at the beginning I hated the thought of undergoing this project'

Concerning the nature of the activity, the students stated:

'Completely different to anything I had ever done before'

'A positive diverse experience'

'Something completely different to conventional assignments'

'Its educational value was extensive'

'I felt that the case studies did a lot to help me with preparing for this task and it was good that they were an interesting read.'

'I was surprised at the high level of engagement in the collaboration and the interest my own posts generated'

Specific Module Structure Components

The specific module structure components included the icebreaker virtual tour, online readings, and forums.

With reference to the icebreaker - Virtual Tour activity at the beginning of the module, significantly the students commented:

‘The opening activity of composing a virtual tour of our locality was a lovely way for all members of the forum groups to get to know each other’s locality and to see what aspects of their locality are most important to them’

‘The virtual tour was very insightful; they showed us their landscapes, cultures and norms. It helped us relate to these students and knowing why things are important to them was essential in our cyber relationships...

Concerning the online readings, here student responses were more reserved, with several stating that the material was good but that it could be enhanced by podcasts and live news material. Of course the challenge here for teaching and learning, and time management, especially in the virtual environment, is for the module proprietors and group moderators to add material with an almost ‘live’ approach which the digital native student generation have come to expect.

Student attitudes to the forums and online environment were very positive as reflected in their own words:

‘I loved the way we could express our opinions in a non-judgemental environment’

‘The thing that surprised me most is how involved I got. In the evening time I loved reading the various posts’

‘I really enjoyed working with our correspondents in Colorado which was something I was nervous about beforehand. I thought that there wouldn’t be a lot of engagement because we didn’t know each other and I didn’t think we would have much to say to each other. I was delighted to be proven wrong and found that as we got into it, we had a lot to talk about and their identities mean just as much to them as ours did to us’

‘I have never taken part in an online task like this before.... I was doubtful about how talking to students half way across the world_would help with our understanding of geography, however having completed the task I fully understand why it was so worthwhile’

‘the experience was very personal, and I liked how it was an informal way of learning about the topic’

‘... it encouraged us to interact with one another’

‘I really enjoyed the experience of participating in forums by asking and answering questions from others and ... the fact that they seemed to be interested in our contributions’

‘I was surprised by how well it worked, as everybody got really involved, participated well, and communicated with the international students and each other. The forum allowed for an informal means of learning from peers in an enjoyable, pressure free zone’

‘... one thing that definitely surprised me in this experience was how different the American students were to us. They had no qualms or reservations about starting the forums, whereas I was more reserved in the beginning... (but later) I began to enjoy posting my points and discussing different topics’

‘The informal style of this assignment made it easier to talk to them, and it became more like talking with old friends than a group of people who had to talk to each other for marks for a course’

‘There was a relaxed atmosphere which allowed me to be honest and open in the forum’

‘Once people became active I was taken aback by the engagement levels of both groups of students’

‘We were open to share all of our beliefs and opinions. The structure of the forum was excellent... that people doing different courses were very open to interaction with us, and people were very enthusiastic about the whole experience... There was a very open atmosphere where everyone appreciated learning from people’s different experiences and viewpoints.

(Forums) ‘allowed for better learning as it gave us an alternative way of learning, away from lectures and normal group work as it was not as formal and it was more enjoyable. It was a unique experience, to be communicating with students on the other side of the world...’

‘I really liked that every post in this project was like a conversation with the whole group. It made the entire experience more comfortable and appealing. It felt like we were learning without knowing it’

Learning about National Identity

The conceptual issues and recommended readings related to the study of national identity, including full bibliographical references were provided online (see Solem, M., Klein, P., Muñiz-Solari, O., and Ray, W., eds., <http://globalgeography.aag.org>). Student attitudes are reflected in the following statements.

‘I really enjoyed looking at Ireland in different ways’

‘Before taking part in this project, I hadn’t thought much about how I feel about my national identity. Now I can talk more clearly about it’

‘I learned a great deal about my own identity and other countries’

‘... an opportunity to see the American’s perspective on the Irish nation state and to discuss relevant topics such as migration and national identity’

‘... helped me to greatly enhance my understanding and appreciation of national identities in the wider world’

‘When I looked at the posts that the international students made, I realised how although they live on the other side of the world, they are similar to us’

‘To be honest, I was surprised at how much I enjoyed the whole experience and how interesting it became to read about the views that international students hold on the same issues that we were looking at’

‘What most appealed to me was that we were working in collaboration with students like ourselves from different backgrounds and different places, far away from our homes in Ireland. Listening to other people’s opinions and stances on things are important, but being able to get the viewpoints of people who aren’t even from the same country, let alone college, had me engaged and interested from the beginning’

Challenging Stereotypes

A basic challenge in teaching and learning is to encourage students to reflect on their commonly held notions and images of places, people and groups in order to avoid oversimplification of some observed or more negatively imagined traits of behaviour or appearance which reinforces negative stereotyping that blocks openness to the acquisition of knowledge and empathy. Recognizing one’s own stereotyping parameters is a major step in the process of making the unconscious conscious.

Education should empower students to be aware of the beliefs they hold and why they hold them, making it possible for them to decide the relationship they wish to have with their own stereotypes. The issue here is one of choice - whether the individual actually believes in the stereotype, if they wish to modify it, questioning why they hold it, and becoming cognoscente of what makes them believe it; what are the facts or evidence to support such beliefs, and if no logical answer is found then deciding whether to keep the same stereotyping filtering parameters or not, and what the individual can gain or lose by changing these parameters. The essential point here is the individual’s necessary higher order questioning and reflection, and responsibility in any societal system as explored in the works of educational philosophers such as Hannah Arendt (Villa, 2000).

In the process of learning by doing and challenging stereotypes, the students had the following comments:

‘The project went a long way to dispel my stereotypes’

‘It enabled students in Ireland and America to talk to one another and discover each other’s culture and identity’

‘intriguing to see what people from Greece and America thought defined their national identity, and how it compared to the stereotype I had of people from these countries’

‘What surprised me ... was how narrow-minded I was when it came to other countries (before this project)’

‘I now know ... understand that national identity is more complex than I had previously assumed, with both good and bad aspects’

‘It showed me that issues, such as racism and judgement when it comes to migration matters, are the same throughout the world, regardless of the country’

‘... helped me to address some of my misconceptions about America and gain a deeper understanding into everyday life ...’

‘I felt this project opened my eyes, to realise how much my life is affected by globalisation’

‘... helped me to gain a deeper appreciation for other cultures that I never had before, until I realised how interconnected we were ...’

‘I feel it broadened the horizons of all nationalities involved in the project and gave us the opportunity to understand how people feel about their respective countries...

Empathy: Learning about ourselves via others

In their learning process the students commented:

‘Being able to see other people’s opinion on national identity, rather than just my own, really enforced the idea of the topic for me. It was also great to be able to interact with people and ask them why they composed their answer and what influenced them to do it.

‘The most surprising part... was how much it taught me about Ireland’

‘It made me really think about what our national identity is in Ireland’

‘The most important aspect... was where I had to educate myself on what I personally identified with in Ireland. The understanding ... was really beneficial to me, as I had never actually thought about these prior to this project. This is important, because in order to understand the identities of other nation states, we must first understand our own...’

‘It made me look at my national identity from a new analytical viewpoint. It was the first time I ever challenged my national identity and took it apart to see what it was comprised of and why’

‘I gained a lot from this experience... I never before thought of what made me Irish and having to articulate that to people from another country was both challenging and rewarding ...’

‘I don’t think this project would have worked as well as it did had it not been an international collaborative project. This is due to the fact that it was discussing the features of our national identities with people from other identities which enabled us to learn during the process. It also helped widen my perspective...

‘The main thing that I will take from this experience is not that I learned an awful lot about the life of the students living in Colorado, but rather that this project made me realise and look at my own environment in a closer way, a way that I had not previously seen it’

Personal Development / Insight

Core to teaching and learning is personal development and the enhancement of insights. According to the student responses:

‘Before my participation in this programme I had a narrow-minded approach to Ireland only looking at the faults and not seeing the benefits of being Irish. Now I have a greater understanding of my national identity and I’m now truly able to answer the question: what does it mean to be Irish?’

‘As a BEd (Bachelor of Education) student, I now have the understanding of how important it is to gain knowledge of how others view their state and environments, not only for myself but also for my future pupils’

‘From taking part in this experience, I feel that I will have a more open attitude towards new people that I meet and I will take more of an interest in their culture and their upbringing’

‘Since this course started I have opened my eyes and every journey I take makes me look at things on numerous levels, from a personal, historical, political and geographical point of view’

‘Recently I visited Kilmainham Gaol (associated with the national liberation struggle in Ireland) for the first time, something I would never be interested in before this course started’

‘I hope that I can take what I learned from it and apply it to my own life and my studies of geography in the future’

Conclusions and recommendations for the future

The main recommendations made by the students were that there should be more equal numbers of nationals in each work group – ‘with too many Irish participants in comparison to the American students’ leading to some imbalances in the communications; that the Greek partner students should be better integrated from the start date of the module, rather than joining at the mid to later stage as happened due to timetabling issues between the three universities; and that more ‘live’ common materials be integrated such as that on emigrants.

The major recommendations made by the module moderator in Ireland were that on the technical side there could be a separation of the course site and the Moodle platform, as the

Irish students were more at ease with Moodle; and greater access given by the Moodle Administrator would facilitate the module moderator. The moderator suggested that more ‘time-relevant’ data for students would enhance the teaching and learning experience, for instance, greater use of news items and newspaper articles with similar and contrasting stories in the different places and countries.

The module moderator commented on the excellent peer experiences: between the Irish students (inter and intra group(s), and between them and their American cohorts, and also the opening up between them and the Greek students despite the limited time spent communicating with the latter group.

Both students and the moderator commented very positively on the icebreaker exercises and the value of them for everyone, as one commented: ‘My own story, so to speak’ – encompassing both rural and urban narratives, with more urban narratives and perceptions being projected by the American students.

The central theme of identities and stereotyping were explored with much success in a very open manner going beyond the stimulus material offered on the CGGE website. For instance, progressing from the cultural and identity transivities within and between them, this facilitated empathetic intelligence especially in relation to migration, emigration and economic recession issues in Colorado and USA, in Dublin and Ireland and also in Greece. Here students’ perceptions of places and scaling of spaces became evident; for instance, the spatial perceptions of the Irish students reflected small scales emphasizing local areas, while their perceptions of Colorado and the USA were composed of huge amorphous areas, leading to overgeneralisations about people. Similarly, the Irish students’ illustrations of lifestyles were significant reflecting the local more so than the national or international. Linked to this was a salient difference in the Irish students’ feelings and concepts of their cultural and identity embeddedness in Ireland, in contrast to their attitudes to some American students who had defined themselves as being Irish American, and other students in the American group in general.

Positive progress in teaching and learning on all levels was made and most surprisingly all of the Irish students commented favourably on this which was most surprising in any form of module evaluation. Hence this raises the question why this was so. Despite the very slow beginning and reticence in the international dialogues on the online forum, especially on the part of the Irish students, and the later arrival of the Greek students, a threshold was reached and then the meaningful communications ‘really took off’ as the students commented. Hence national cultural difference came into play here where some cultural groups or individuals may be slower in taking the initiative in introducing themselves and initiating dialogue possibly perceiving this as not being an acceptable cultural norm. Here the Irish students greatly benefitted from the intercultural dialogue socializing processes.

The project was facilitated not only by the group and peer work, but student learning was especially successful due to the non-hierarchical learning processes generated in the open flows of communications. This is also reflected in the confidence building which occurred

enhancing the student teacher skills in relation to communicating and writing, and their cognisance of the positive educational uses of social media. Based on the positive attitudes and data gathered from students and modulator, the teaching and learning objectives were achieved.

In assessing the future sustainability of this inter-university geography module work, and related research in the future, joint university student evaluation criteria and forms have to be developed, which will facilitate correlation of data between the institutions. However, here cultural factors will also come into play. With the greater integration of the Greek partners into the project, in future years other European and non-European partners could be integrated.

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