

Collaborative Compositions Link Students in Comparative Politics Classes

Erik Herron, Political Science

Collaborative compositions by students in an international virtual classroom lead to improved student writing.

BACKGROUND

In Fall 2004, I taught an interactive class with students from the University of Kansas (KU) and three Asian countries. Because the course had students with varying English skills, I needed to find a way to help improve the writing skills of my KU students while still making the coursework achievable for the other students. I decided a writing-intensive course that featured collaborative compositions would offer the best chance to improve learning for all students involved.

Rationale:

- The course was a good fit for the U.S. State Department's Virtual Classroom Program. The State Department has an interest in making connections with Islamic countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan; it also has a high interest in Mongolia. Furthermore, the State Department encourages building relationships at the human level, which has a positive cascading effect outside the classroom. The Virtual Classroom Program helps students see the positive nature of Islamic peoples and facilitates person to person connections/communication.
- The Center for Russian, Eastern European and Eurasian Studies has an interest in promoting the study of post-communist states.
- The virtual classroom strengthened ties between institutions.
- This project helped us stake claims on countries for future funding: The Center for Russian, Eastern European and Eurasian Studies receives federal support, with three-year funding appropriations. Contact between the countries will help out both groups.
- The project also garnered commitments from different levels, including the State Department and several KU offices: the Eral Garinger Academic Resource Center (EGARC), OIRP, the Graduate School, and the enrolled students.

Course framework:

1. Four-week segments during which time students interacted with students from three other universities (post-communist Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, and Mongolia). These are elite schools, one in a regional capital and two in national capitols.
2. Student interaction via online Internet feed, chat sessions, and email.
3. Collaborative papers developed through in-class and out-of-class interactions.
4. Team-teaching that was collaborative and international

Expectations for student writing:

1. Answer the question.
2. Show that you are doing collaborative work through the inclusion of emails, chat room materials, etc. Although not easy to do, you will need to have more than just your ideas—you will need to bring in the ideas of others.
3. No extraneous words: every word should be a gem.
4. Strong organization. Not free-flowing, stream of consciousness nor journal-type writing.

Expanded goals

1. General:
 - Introduce students to comparative politics and how it relates to the other sub-studies in the field. Students generally have been limited to civic classes and aren't aware of this area of study.
2. Content:
 - Introduce students to political practices of other world countries.
3. Professional acculturation:
 - Learn basic disciplinary skills such as research and test taking in a structured class with expectations.
4. Specific to this class:
 - Make friendships with people in other parts of the world that continue beyond the class borders.
 - Use writing and intellectual activities to address real world issues.
 - Gain exposure to how people in other cultures think about ideas.
 - Increase student awareness about the challenges involved in governing new countries.
5. Course goals:
 - Expose students to additional ways of thinking. The Internet interaction with the three other countries sends this message home in a way that is not accomplished in a traditional lecture and discussion format.
 - Expand students' viewpoints in immeasurable ways as their learning goes beyond an insular outlook.
 - Sensitize and increase awareness of English language abilities, a value added beyond content components.
 - Provide a chance to break stereotypes.
6. Long term goals:
 - Expand the number of countries involved.
 - Review and refine class.

Collaborative teaching

Before the semester started, I had to address the following issues.

- Who will be in charge of what aspects of teaching? At this point, I haven't met the other teachers, although I am familiar with some of them who have done graduate work at KU.
- I don't know what the other colleges' expectations are for their students at this time, and I wonder if we'll all have the same educational goals. Other countries may focus on the development of their students' English skills and not on

comparative politics. If so, what subjects will those teachers want to introduce and emphasize?

- I have plans for the basic daily schedules, but I've not yet had a chance to finalize that idea with the other teachers. My plan includes a short introductory lecture, electronic discussions between the students, and a short written assignment. Essentially, students will have information-gathering time followed by writing, which will be the heart of their cognitive experience. If we don't find agreement for the use of our time, how will that affect the learning that I see developing from written work?

Technology issues

Before the semester started, I had to address these technology issues:

- Electronic capabilities will have a major impact on the course. They'll affect writing prompts, assignments, and the collaborative possibilities. We may have to adjust time in class spent on writing.
- Each country will probably have different technology capabilities. This means that how we are able to interact with one country will need to be readjusted when we want to interact with the next country. We'll have to be ready to adapt three different times.
- Because some countries may have old equipment, we'll have to use low bandwidth connections. The slow nature of this will affect what can be done in each class session. In general, I'm going to assume that we'll have old technology with few extras.
- The equipment may be available only part of the time or for some of the students. The KU students will use EGARC resources during each class, so they will have reliable, consistent access to electronic equipment.
- Security in other countries may become an issue. Will this new equipment be stolen? Video chats can be done without all the technology, so some communication will still be possible.

Early concerns about curriculum development

- Create writings that are web accessible for all countries.
- Brief articles need to be posted so that if other countries don't get textbooks, they will have some texts in common.
- Technical matters.
- Find material written in a level of English is challenging for American students, but not too challenging for students in other countries.
- Timing is an issue because of the late notification about the course.
- Find issues that each country is capable of addressing; avoid sensitive topics.
- Resources or lack of resources relative to the circumstances.

IMPLEMENTATION

Each class had access to electronic means of communication that we utilized for our meetings. We had short lectures followed by interactive video chats, then culminated the

day's work with email exchanges used as the basis for daily in-class writing assignments between the students.

- Collaborative elements. The course used chat rooms, one-on-one interaction, and group interactions, plus instant messaging to engage collaborative learning scenarios.
- Large group meetings. Each class session began with a short professor lecture (10-15 minutes).
- Basic daily schedule:
 - 1) Students jointly heard a lecture.
 - 2) Students used electronic discussions to address questions from a list provided by the teachers.
 - 3) Students conducted conversations that took their ideas beyond their own two countries.
 - 4) Students produced short, in-class written documents based on their discussions; the KU students further developed these written ideas outside of class time.
- Papers. Instead of one large paper, students had two writing assignments during each four-week segment. There were three segments, hence a total of six papers. The final examination was composed of essay questions, thus providing another opportunity to demonstrate learning through writing. For student papers, I insisted on four base components—answer the question, show collaborative work, no extraneous words, and strong organization—that I believe are appropriate for the students at this level and that will lead to advanced writing in upper-level undergraduate coursework.

Thursday, November 4, 2004 class meeting, *Ann Volin*

I attended Erik Herron's Comparative Politics class in 4070A Wescoe Hall, an electronic classroom in the Ermal Garinger Resource Center (EGARC). When I arrived, the students were just finishing a video conversation with their fellow students at Mongolia University. The conference room had a central table with 12 to 14 chairs seated around it. At one end of the room was a large video screen with a live picture of the Mongolian classroom; hanging from the ceiling was a television monitor showing the picture of the KU classroom that was being transmitted to them. Behind it, a large computer screen showed the chat room match-ups.

At the moment, no chat was occurring. Prof. Herron was talking to the Mongolian professor, who was trying to get her students' Internet connections hooked up to the KU students' connections. There was a slight delay in sound—about two seconds—but no more. The action on the video screen was slightly warped, but the picture was still viewable. It showed the Mongolian participants and their classroom. I was surprised how modern their classroom and equipment looked—and the dress patterns of the people, too. The classroom had individual tables for each student, each with a flat screen

computer. Their instructor, a young woman, communicated with Prof. Herron in English. She was dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt. The female student at the first table had long hair, a hooded sweatshirt, and jeans. Her casual, western dress was the norm for the students who walked back and forth in the video.

The two professors continued to work out the Internet connections for the Mongolian students. In the meantime, the KU students had moved into an adjacent computer lab where each had a computer hooked up to his or her chat room. While waiting for the Mongolian students to log on, they sent amusing little messages back and forth amongst themselves.

The day's chat, while ostensibly set up to discuss the election procedures in each country, was also a time for the students to become acquainted with each other, according to Prof. Herron. He stated that they had started the class with a brief (15-20 minute) lecture on elections in each country, followed by the student video discussion. On the following Tuesday, he would give a 20 minute lecture on the US political process, and on Thursday the Mongolian instructor would lecture on her countries' political process. This information served as a basis for the discussions between the students and would further serve as a knowledge source when they began their writing work.

Writing challenges

1. The level of English usage is a primary concern. None of the other countries have English as their first language; hence understanding, content, and grammar may become issues for the language-specific portion of the writing.
2. American students will have to be more attentive to technical elements in order to develop optimal collaborative writing works.
3. The teachers aren't looking for a "final polished" paper from these written works.
4. As co-authors of the papers, the students will get content and formative feedback from each other in lieu of multiple drafts and peer editing.
5. I will give feedback primarily on content and to a lesser extent on technical aspects. Because the KU students are Honors students, they will be high performers with higher abilities. However, it's still critical to move up to a standard writing level appropriate for college courses. What type of prompts will be most helpful to engage this type of writing/what kind of thinking goes along with that interest?
6. Who will get what prompt? What is the intent of each country's class? These concerns will impact the writing that students from each country do. Some students will be interested in English usage and American culture more so than political issues.
7. The other three countries may not be concerned about learning from each other, as they have recently severed political ties to the USSR and Russia. Their new political status also might make them more sensitive to certain issues, such as free speech or free elections, and those sensitivities will impact the writing prompts.

STUDENT PERFORMANCE

The electronic systems were adequate, although some difficulties meant that the daily interchanges were not as rich and thorough as I had anticipated. Our highly interactive

format allowed the students to compare their cultures, and sometimes this was a surprise both on a personal and a political level.

Writing

Students' writing improved over time. The KU Honors students expected to get A's on their papers, an outcome that didn't always happen. I also challenged the students to write collaboratively, a process that didn't go as well as I had anticipated. Finally, I wanted to develop writing that was clear and professional in tone and style.

Overall, the students who were in the middle made the most movement. Students who started off with unrefined writing skills improved those skills. One problem with the writing was that I gave extensions on the last two papers. Because of this late turn-in date, students didn't get them back before they had to write their final papers. This limited the feedback that they received.

During the semester, I reiterated that I didn't want a journal entry nor was this to be a high-tech research paper, but instead students needed to write in-between "think" pieces. It was hard for some students not to write "I, I, I" papers, one of two main problems that I saw with the writing. One student, a smart, high-achiever, was frustrated early in the semester because she was not getting the grades that she was used to. I suggested that she needed to work on organization in order to clear up her problems. She did this for a while, but then fell back into her old ways of journal-type writing.

Another problem was students' terrible habit of using an overload of quotations. Students avoided plagiarizing by quoting everything, but I wanted them to realize it's okay to paraphrase. I encouraged them to use quotations when they added value to the paper. Some papers had material that showed up on turnitin.com, but that was because of all the quotations used: students still needed to learn how to integrate other ideas into their own ideas. They were giving credit to the original source, but their writing read as a string of quotations.

Course Content

Students were often surprised about what they learned regarding others in the world. For example, one student's overseas partner quoted Snoop Dog. Common American cultural references such as this were unexpected, and it was amazing to the class that a person abroad would be able to make such a reference. Along with the surprise of similarities came the surprise of differences. The KU students didn't see eye-to-eye on issues with the other students, a learning experience that revealed other people in the world think differently.

Assessment notes

In my instructions to students, I told them that I would be looking for three points in their writing:

1. Incorporate multiple viewpoints, their own and their partners. I let the students know that there is no single way to accomplish this. They may want to use a

point-counterpoint presentation; they may want to use an essay format. The style was open, but the inclusion of two points was essential. I believed that it was important to let them know that they had freedom to determine the stylistic format because they had such different experiences with their partners. If I offered only one way to develop this section, difficulties would have ensued for those who hadn't developed overseas partners due to technology issues, inconsistent writing requirements from country to country, etc. Some students relied on chat room information for partner viewpoints, while others had more extensive one-on-one interactions via email. That is, the problems with partner consistency made it important that I allowed stylistic freedom.

2. Explore the issue from multiple views
 - A. Answer the required sections of the think pieces prompt
 - B. Incorporate information and ideas from their own thoughts, from their interactions in class, both the discussion and the partner countries, and from their peers in the KU classroom.
3. Answers to questions had to be supported by evidence. The students needed to use readings, etc. as proof for their arguments.

What distinguished the papers into different grade rankings was not only their adherence to these three points, but also students' writing ability. A student paper that was written in a journalistic or casual style was given a lower grade. The expert papers used a more formal, academic style of writing. In the middle was a writing style that was more open in nature.

The issue of formality meant that students could retain their style and voice, but tighten it. For instance, one student wrote in almost a stream of consciousness style. I had to teach this student and the others that "I" could be used in these essays, but that they also needed to distinguish that "I" and to leave room to add the voices of other's writing. That is, they needed to provide evidence as a structural basis for their essays.

One paper received a B due to the style, structure, and tone of the writing. In style, this paper was too informal; in structure, it had a lack of evidence; and in tone, it used a breezy, journal entry type writing. The student who wrote this paper was very upset, for she was used to getting "A's" on all of her work. I met with her and we discussed her writing several times, but the results were mixed. I wondered if she was used to sitting down the night before and typing up her thoughts, and she not yet changed to a more reflective process of writing that formal academic papers require.

Almost all of these students were very upset if they received a B, for very few had ever received one before. What concerned me was that they reacted to the grade, not to the work that I indicated they needed to do in order to improve their writing. I speculated that in past classes, they received feedback telling them their work was the exception, so they weren't used to adjusting it. When confronted with my notes, they had negative reactions to feedback as opposed to looking at ways to make changes in their work.

I wanted to show students examples of excellent papers, but I found that problematic. Because I encouraged them to develop their paper suited to their partner situations, I didn't want to undermine that freedom by encouraging a cookie-cutter format. I worried that they would see examples as "the answer" to creating a highly rated paper. Conformity was not going to increase their ability to understand the issues or materials in a thoughtful manner. Instead of "dumping" their ideas in one example and mimicking it, I wanted them to choose carefully and to be challenged to write an essay incorporating their thoughts and materials.

This small Honors section had 15 students. Here's the breakdown of grades for their first think piece:

A = 5 students
 B = 9 students
 C = 1 student

Here's the breakdown of their grades for the second think piece:

A = 8 students
 B = 6 students
 C = 1 student

The typical grade for the think pieces was an A or a B, and I did use plusses and minuses.

I had mixed feelings about grading work from this class. I gave a lot of "A's" for the final grades. I took into consideration what their work would be like compared to students who were taking the class in the general Political Science 150 course that they could have signed up for. They had to do more writing and interaction in this class, and I believed that needed to be taken into account when determining their final grade. It was different to grade Honors students, because I was measuring them against each other, and not against the general introduction course students. Although officially they could receive from an A to an F, I think grading an Honors course is more like grading a graduate course. The norm for that is an A or a B, and a C indicates trouble. I think this range holds true for both Honors classes and graduate classes. Honors students do the work, they do the readings, and they participate in class. The dialogue was elevated in this section because of that commitment. They did present a range of work, but these were strong students who studied hard.

Because they were fine-tuning their writing at a higher level than they would in the general undergraduate class, I was reluctant to use a rubric. I thought it wouldn't be as useful for the writing of these Honors students who were doing such things as distinguishing the use of "I" in their writing as opposed to more gross problems seen in the overall undergraduate writing.

These students, compared to their peers, were definitely more advanced in writing skills and classroom participation. They were still first and second year students and they stumbled because of that, but the extra work they did meant that they were able to take

advantage of the learning opportunities that this section offered. It all added up when I considered the final grade. I don't know if this was the right thing to do, but we are part of a university system that looks at overall GPAs when applying to graduate schools, and I didn't want to penalize these students for committing to and doing extra work that came from joining the Honors section.

REFLECTIONS

Writing

Overall, the collaborative writing didn't go so well. The other schools did not have a built-in incentive for their students. This meant that the KU students weren't really getting as much source information as I had hoped for: although they were still writing the papers, the loss of international perspectives was unfortunate. I was aware of the limited incentives initially, when it was decided that each teacher would grade his or her own students' papers. However, the other classes had a "club" mentality more than a formalized academic experience. They met in the evenings to discuss the issues via the electronic network, they got to practice their English, but when their month of interaction was finished, they considered their work done. Also, this course was not part of their regular schedule and hence did not have the same level of academic importance. Many of these students had more demands on their lives, such as working for a basic living, and therefore they directed their energy elsewhere when the class meetings were finished. However, some of the American students have continued corresponding with the students abroad, an outcome I label as great.

Without incentives for the other three schools, the structure was not adequately developed. When I teach this course again, I will restructure it in an attempt to solve this problem. I believe the other instructors must be more involved, but I realize that they have obligations that limit their effort. For instance, the teacher in Azerbaijan is also an assistant to a government minister. Therefore, he can put in only so much time on the course.

Course content

It was a challenge to make sure that students got the core political science basics that I would have provided in a different format. The students came out of the class with ideas and interests about the rest of the world, and they expressed desire to go visit the other three countries. So, they went from not caring—sometimes not even knowing that a place was a country—to wanting to know about more of the world. I believe that engaging students in this way can spark an interest that won't develop in a traditional class. As one student said, it "made it more real to me," a typical reaction that created more interest in doing the work of the shared experience.

Suggested changes

I asked students for their feedback on how to improve the course. They had concerns about the collaboration—or lack thereof. They suggested that the course have a built-in

debriefing day. If the course met on MWF, the first two days (Monday and Wednesday) would be used for collaborative interactions with the other students, and Friday's class time would be available for debriefing and going over ideas.

Additionally, students suggested changes in the calendar cycle of interactions. That fall, each different university had only one month when they interacted with the KU students. Another model that might be more useful, according to the students, would be work with all three universities throughout the semester. This structure would provide more time for building groups. Initially, I thought that this type of interaction would get really confusing. Although I still believe it could be confusing, it could provide an option that would make sure all the students are interacting with each other. I could set up some activities to engage all four countries, a move that would eliminate the "my month is done so now I am too" mentality. For instance, on U.S. election night, my students and I met to monitor the state-by-state results. They participated with the Kyrgyzstan students, and they thought the experience was wonderful. However, they had not yet made the electronic connections with the Mongolia students who were just beginning their month of interaction, and the Azerbaijan students, their month done, had disappeared. This challenge—to get all students involved throughout the semester—is a goal for the next offering.

Final remarks

I look forward to teaching this course one more time, a commitment that I have made to the State Department. Because I'm now the director of the Center for Russian Studies, my departmental teaching load is one-one, plus I have other teaching commitments for the department, two conditions that will hinder my ability to teach this course beyond Fall 2005. I would like to see this class process used in other units of the University. I would be happy to help other classes or special projects become engaged with this type of format, which include the technology, the contacts with other countries, and the EGARC set-up. For instance, a Communication Studies class on intercultural communication would fit into the possibilities that this process offers.

It would be a waste if the technology sites and international contacts go unused. If they are not kept up, they will fade out and the opportunity for interaction will end. Other departments and classes can get involved as a one-time occurrence or as a regular offering. I'd like to see these resources used for the benefits that they will bring to students and faculty, both here and in the other countries.