

# 31 Illustrating challenges and practicing competencies for global technology-assisted collaboration: lessons from a real-time north-south teaching collaboration

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## Abstract

In this paper, we outline the structure, goals, and lessons from our international teaching and learning collaboration in the spring 2015 semester. We took two public affairs courses with students in a U.S. and a Colombian university and combined them into a single hybrid course with the use of technology. The main goals of the course were to expose students to issues regarding governance in the twenty-first century in a technological, globalized and diverse world, and to recognize and work on their own competencies to be successful public affairs practitioners in such a world. We document four lessons learned from the experience which can help to improve practice and assist others who wish to engage in a virtual teaching and learning collaboration. We encourage other professors to engage in this type of technology-facilitated international exchange if they incorporate these lessons and can align desired competencies and learning objectives.

**Keywords:** telecollaboration, digital fluency, teamwork, public affairs education.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper highlights four broad and transferable lessons learned based on an experience of a fully-integrated synchronous class at two universities in different countries which was designed to achieve three overarching goals: (1) to demonstrate the challenges and opportunities for public governance derived from globalization, collaboration, diversity and technology, (2) to model competencies for students in these areas, and (3) to provide students with opportunities to practice and develop their own competencies in these areas concurrently (see [Rubaii, Capobianco, & Líppez-De Castro, 2016](#)).

The combined course offered in the spring 2015 semester paired first semester pre-service Master of Public Administration (MPA) students at Binghamton University in New York with advanced professional undergraduates of Political Science undertaking a concentration in public management at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (PUJ) in Bogotá, Colombia.

The course consisted of 42 students, 23 in Binghamton and 19 in Bogotá. Among the 31 female and 11 male students, the modal age category was 20-29, with the majority holding citizenship in their country of study, although two Binghamton students were from other countries (Kenya and South Korea).

The language of instruction was English, although all three instructors (one full-time faculty member at each institution and a doctoral student completing his co-teaching experience) were fluent in Spanish as well.

In order to maintain an integrated experience, we developed a common syllabus with identical learning objectives, topics, readings, assignments, the same weights placed on graded components, and a common class schedule. The syllabus and other course materials were available for everyone in a single class website created in [www.coursesites.com](http://www.coursesites.com) by Blackboard. Although the learning objectives and desired competencies for the two classes were congruent, this high level of coordination required considerable time and attention in advance of the class (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Learning outcomes

Learning Outcomes
Be able to distinguish between classic Weberian models of bureaucracy and models of new public management and new public service, identify the fundamental ideas and core values of each school of thought, and apply those theories to specific issues facing local governments in Colombia and the United States.
Understand how the pressures of globalization are affecting public administration in various contexts and influence the role of the contemporary state (broadly defined).
Be able to identify and evaluate the relative effectiveness of various uses of technology and how public service values are reflected in policies and practices regarding technology.
Be able to identify and evaluate the relative effectiveness of various responses to diversity and how public service values are reflected in policies and practices regarding diversity.
Be able to articulate how core values of democracy, participation, accountability, sustainability, and transparency might look different in different contexts.
Develop an understanding of the theory and practice of inter-organizational collaborations and intercultural competence for the individuals and organizations engaged in public service.

The class design was supported by the Binghamton University's Center for Learning and Teaching (CLT) and followed the collaborative online international learning model (Rubin & Guth, 2015; Strickland, Adamson, McNally, Tiittanen, & Metcalfe, 2013). It was scheduled for three hours utilizing CISCO WebEx technology to allow everyone in both classrooms to see and hear each other, as well as to share files in different formats. The three hours were split to allow for initial separate instructional time, longer joint instructional time, and for the students to work on their semester-long team projects. For these projects, we set up a rotating schedule for teams to use eight different free online technologies that not only allowed them to meet and discuss their assignment, but also to expand their digital literacy. All teams were required to research and present a comparative analysis of an issue facing both U.S. and Colombian communities and to place their research in the context of the course material on governance challenges and pressures of globalization. Students also had individual assignments like completing the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES)<sup>4</sup> survey and submitting a written reflective essay on what they learned and how they

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4. <http://www.kozaigroup.com/intercultural-effectiveness-scale-ies/>

intended to use those results. Below we highlight the four most important lessons we learned with the goal of providing useful guidance to other faculty interested in pursuing similar collaborations.

## **2. Lessons learned and reflections**

### **2.1. Lesson 1: select partners carefully and start planning early**

High levels of trust, respect, and openness among the individual instructor partners is critical. Before undertaking this project, the three co-instructors had professional relationships spanning several years and taking many forms which provided a foundation for resolving problems as they arose. As instructors, we held weekly debriefing meetings, using the same WebEx technology used in our classes, to determine how to respond to issues such as team dynamics and assessment of student work.

A full year of planning was necessary to make decisions regarding course objectives, assignments, grading criteria, technology, etc. To emphasize that fully shared instructional approach, we developed a common grading rubric for each assignment and then rotated responsibility for grading. In terms of technology, we had to spend a significant amount of time working with the CLT to settle on WebEx as our collaborative platform, to identify the eight free communication tools we required our students to use, and to identify the single course management system (Coursesites) we used.

### **2.2. Lesson 2: prioritize process and provide time**

In retrospect, we note that one of our biggest mistakes was to add the layer of international collaboration on top of the usual expectations rather than in lieu of some. We did not take into account in our course design how much work would be required for students to engage in the collaboration effectively, to reflect on the experience, and to take advantage of the opportunity to learn more from their international partners than what was required by the class. Even though 34 of

the 42 students (81%) had strong positive or generally positive perceptions of the course as received on their mid-semester course evaluations, we took note of some problems and concerns. The most frequently mentioned impediments to learning were technological difficulties and insufficient time. In response to this, we cut some readings from the last classes and allowed for additional time for team meetings in the two weeks leading to the presentations and made ourselves available during that time to provide advice.

### **2.3. Lesson 3: provide students with more choice**

In response to mid-semester evaluations, we dropped the obligatory rotation of team meeting technologies as students reported it was hindering the progress of some groups. In their course evaluations, students scored making the group presentations and watching other groups' presentation relatively high, with overall average scores greater than 4.0 on a 5-point scale of contributing to learning, but they rated using a variety of technologies for group work and group work during class time lower with average ratings of 3.34 and 3.52, respectively. We would not repeat the requirement that students rotate team meeting technologies because too much time was spent on figuring out the technologies at each meeting rather than addressing substantive issues. In the future, we would give the students more freedom in deciding what technology to use or provide a smaller list of alternatives.

### **2.4. Lesson 4: deliberately model the competencies you want students to develop**

In keeping with our goal of modeling desired competencies, as we encountered problems and challenges during the semester – whether with technology or in making decisions about anything else – we deliberately shared with the students the nature of the problems, the options we had considered, the processes we used to reach a decision, the decision itself, and our rationale. We also had to demonstrate digital fluency in the technological tools and assist students when they encountered difficulties communicating. Of the 10 groups, two had issues that rose to the level of requiring faculty intervention and assistance.

Although we explained it at the beginning of the semester, we found it necessary to repeatedly remind and reinforce that students had three co-equal instructors. We required that all assignments and all email communication be sent to all three of us. It was also important that we regularly remind students that the frustrations they were experiencing with international collaborations or technology were contributing to the course learning objectives and would serve them well in the long term.

### 3. Conclusion

Technology-facilitated international collaborations have the potential to provide learning experiences which model and allow for the practice of skills that will be increasingly important in the future. Our experience illustrates that these collaborative efforts are not without challenges and that they probably are best suited for instances in which the telecollaboration experience directly corresponds to the learning objectives of the course and when the faculty have established relationships of trust upon which to build.

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**New directions in telecollaborative research and practice: selected papers from the second conference on telecollaboration in higher education**  
**Edited by Sake Jager, Malgorzata Kurek, and Breffni O'Rourke**

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