

32 Telecollaboration as a tool for building intercultural and interreligious understanding: the Sousse-Villanova programme

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Abstract

The Paris and San Bernardino attacks in autumn 2015, along with various retaliatory incidents, and Donald Trump's suggestion that Muslims should be banned from entering the US, have reminded us again of the deep misunderstandings and resentments that often exist between the Muslim and Western worlds. In order to improve intercultural and interreligious understanding, students at the University of Sousse, Tunisia, took part in an online exchange programme with students from Villanova University in Pennsylvania, USA. Using student diaries and end of course reflection exercises, this study investigated both the benefits and limits that the exchange had in developing understanding, as well as the impact the process had on the outcomes. The findings showed numerous positive developments in intercultural and interreligious understanding, but also limits to the depth of discussion, particularly concerning conflict situations. The diaries also revealed some cases of limited communication, which undermined some of the benefits of the exchange.

Keywords: interreligious understanding, Muslim-Western dialogue, telecollaborative exchange.

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1. Introduction

In his landmark book, *Orientalism*, Said (2003) documented how the *Occident*'s distorted view of the *Orient* has deep historical roots. Similarly, Holliday (2011) suggested that “there seems to be a wiring, deep in the discourses of Western civilization [...] which makes the Othering of the non-West inescapable” (p. 93). However, in his preface, Said (2003) commented that an “easy anti-Americanism that shows little understanding of what the US is really like as a society” (p. xxi) had also been spreading in the Arab world. Historical misconceptions have been exacerbated by more recent conflicts in Iraq and Palestine, resulting in significant prejudices and misunderstandings among both Tunisian and American students.

It was with these prejudices and misunderstandings in mind that an online ‘intercultural dialogue’ exchange programme was developed between Cultural Studies Masters students at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Sousse, Tunisia, and undergraduate students from Villanova University in Pennsylvania, US, taking a course in ‘US Foreign Relations’. It was hoped that a process of intercultural dialogue, “an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals [...] with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage” (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 10), in which the “other” was transformed from “it” to “you” (Buber, 1983, cited in Phipps, 2014, p. 117), might contribute positively to overcoming misunderstanding. This dialogue was not only intercultural, but also interreligious, given the close association between Muslim culture and religion in the minds of both groups of participants.

Although a growing body of research into intercultural learning from telecollaboration is developing, very little organised telecollaboration has taken place in Tunisia, and the author has been unable to find any other published material about Tunisian projects. Consequently, in the second year of this programme, which took place between February and April 2015, involving ten students at each institute, data was collected to investigate two main research questions:

- How did the telecollaborative exchange improve intercultural/interreligious understanding?
- How did the process of the exchange influence the outcomes?

2. Methodology

2.1. Programme outline

The programme was based on the ‘Cultura’ model of telecollaboration (Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001; Garcia & Crapotta, 2007; c.f. <http://cultura.mit.edu/>). Before starting the exchange, the students were given some instruction on phenomenology and interviewing, and were encouraged to ask questions and seek understanding, rather than to try to win arguments. After pairing the students, they shared short personal biographies with their online partners, and completed an introductory intercultural questionnaire (prepared by the researcher), including word association and sentence completion exercises. Responses to this were then shared with all participants so that students could discuss them. They were then free to explore further cultural, religious and foreign policy issues of their choice with their partners through email, Facebook and Skype. Although the initial interaction followed a standardised format, the development of the online relationship was very open, and deliberately ‘low control’ to give students flexibility.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

Students at both Sousse and Villanova completed an assignment at the end of the exchange, reflecting on their experience. Students in Sousse were also asked to keep a diary during the exchange, as diaries not only help students to reflect on their learning, but also “shed light on the learning process and factors influencing it” (Helm, 2009, p. 93). A thematic content analysis was then undertaken on both the reflection assignments and diaries of the Tunisian students.

3. Findings

Due to limited space, only a very brief selection of findings will be presented.

3.1. Positive outcomes

3.1.1. *Overcoming religious misunderstanding*

All the students discussed perspectives on Islam with their partners, and a number reported specifically on positive outcomes. For example Lilia² wrote:

“I liked this experience because it gave me the opportunity to represent my country, Arabs and my religion i.e. Islam. I’m really happy because I was able to prove wrong some of the preconceived ideas related to Arabs and to Muslims” (Reflection).

Also, Miriam commented how her expectation that her American partner would be ignorant about Islam was unfounded:

“She was familiar with some issues concerning the Middle East, Arabs and Islam. Her ideas are not mere reproduction of common stereotypes” (Diary, 06/03/2015).

3.1.2. *Overcoming anti-American prejudice*

Many students reported on the positive experience of building relationship with their American partners. Mona also commented on how she had reassessed some prejudices she had held:

“I started the program with the assumption that Americans are racist, ignorant and arrogant. This was reinforced by the students’ answers in the questionnaire... However, at the end of the programme, I went back

2. All names are pseudonyms.

to their answers... they're not all the same and I should have taken into consideration all the answers, not the ones that I could use to reinforce my view" (Reflection).

3.1.3. *Showing sympathy concerning the fight against terrorism*

During the program, a terrorist attack, claimed by Islamic State, took place at the Bardo National Museum in Tunis, in which 22 people died. Given the prior expectation that Americans often see Arabs and Muslims as terrorists (Miriam, Reflection), the Tunisian students were encouraged by the messages of sympathy they received from their American partners. For example, Maissa commented:

"Aby also showed compassion towards the terrorist attacks of Bardo and tried to comfort me by explaining that terrorism is spread all over the world and is not only limited to Tunisia" (Reflection).

3.2. Limits to dialogue

Although some students were able to discuss a wide range of controversial issues, some reported 'no-go' areas. For example, Karim commented:

"I disagree with CJ on many points [politics, democracy, capitalism (World Social Forum) and foreign policy] that's why I avoided deeply discussing Middle-East issues like the Palestinian cause and America's war on Iraq under Bush Jr." (Reflection).

Nour remarked "I've learnt that you should not put pressure on the interviewee" (Diary, n.d.), explaining that she felt her partner was just saying "I agree" without thinking (Diary, n.d.), and that when she probed deeper he would avoid the question.

3.3. The negative impact of differing communication expectations

Although students generally commented positively about the overall exchange process, one problem that was mentioned by about half of the Tunisian students

in their diaries was the slow and limited initial response from their partners. Lilia's experience illustrates this:

“Still nothing new about her” (Diary, 26/02/2015).

“I noticed that she had seen my text but ignored it... She shattered all my positive expectations of Americans being hardworkers and as people who keep their promises” (Diary, 12/03/2015).

“She apologized... she always gives me fake promises” (Diary, 01/04/2015).

As can be seen, this issue had a negative impact on intercultural attitudes, although all the students who had problems communicating had at least some fruitful discussion with their assigned partners by the end of the program.

4. Discussion

It is clear from the Tunisian students' feedback that this telecollaboration project played a positive role in developing aspects of intercultural and interreligious understanding. Feedback from the American students was similar. However, as Phipps (2014) argues, there are limits to the effectiveness of 'Intercultural Dialogue', particularly in conflict situations. Although not *in* a conflict situation, some of the students did not feel they could deeply discuss important conflict situations with their partners. Also, the poor telecollaborative experience that some students faced had a negative impact on intercultural attitudes.

5. Conclusion

Findings from this project suggest that developing further projects between Tunisian and American, British or European students could have a positive impact on intercultural and interreligious understanding for both parties.

However, dialogue on more controversial issues may need to be managed more closely in order to go deeper, and expectations for the exchange need to be clear in order to avoid unnecessary disappointments.

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