

## Journalism Education for Contemporary Challenges: Global Understanding through Virtual Classroom

Manisha Pathak-Shelat

Niti Desai-Chopra

Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, India

### Abstract

This article shares the success story of our participation in East Carolina University's **Global Understanding through Virtual Classroom (GUVC)** Project and reflects upon some key issues emerging out of this experience. We were part of the initiative for three years (2006-2008) and linked with seven different universities during the period. The presentation is from a Journalism Education perspective, based on our experience as lead teachers in the project, combined with students' feedback through a focus group discussion held with them. The article shares the same spirit with which we participated in the project. Our belief that journalism educators need to break away from the conventional approach and focus on critical self-reflection and cultural sensitivity that can improve understanding of transnational social and cultural issues, stood reinforced after participation in this project. The article seeks to answer the following research questions: What are student perceptions of the project with reference to educational gains? Does participation in the project have any influence on the cultural sensitivity and participants' attitude about other cultures? Has participation enhanced their understanding of other cultures? What are the insights from the project with reference to future directions of journalism education? We found that despite many challenges and some critical issues, 'Global Understanding through Virtual Classroom' helped future journalists develop cultural sensitivity and a comprehensive perspective that are now essential qualities of meaningful journalism. We thus remain convinced of the relevance of the GUVC Project in today's constantly evolving global education scenario.

**Note:** *The authors wish to thank Prof. Lewis Friedland, Prof. Hemant Shah and the Qualitative Research Group at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin-Madison for their valuable suggestions during the process of writing this paper. Both the authors have contributed equally in project management and writing of this paper.*

### Introduction

Journalists and journalism education programs cannot exist in a vacuum. They are products of their time and are shaped by the worlds in which they grow and function. Journalism education today has to respond to the changing world scenario dominated by globalization, multiculturalism, and exciting new technologies on one

side and growing ethnic conflicts, economic inequalities, an endangered environment and threats to world peace on the other. Globalization, super efficient transportation, and new media technologies like the Internet make the world appear smaller and without boundaries. The new generation, especially in Asia, look at themselves more as 'global citizens' and are ready to navigate territories beyond the familiar. There are, however, harsh questions and harsher realities lurking behind the glowing façade of globalization and the promises offered by the new media technologies. Human dignity, freedom and diversity of expression accompanied by responsibility and mutuality between cultures are some of the signs of a healthy global society.

It has been more than three decades since the MacBride commission report (1980), *Many voices, one world*, about imbalances in international communication flows but some of the issues addressed there have still remained unresolved. In fact, the pun on the original title, *Many worlds, one voice*, aptly summarizes the current world scenario. "Signatories of People's Communication Charter are mindful that in spite of the so called 'information revolution,' today's reality shows an increasing gap between the world's information-rich and information-poor countries, and between the information-rich and information-poor sector within the societies" (Hamelink, 1994, p.152). Sean O'Siochru, Director General and Treasurer of the MacBride roundtable on Communication has pointed out the concerns regarding threats to diversity of expression in today's global society:

The commercialization of media and concentration of media ownership erode the public sphere and fail to provide for cultural and information needs, including the plurality of opinions and the diversity of cultural expressions and languages necessary for democracy. This occurs not only in the conventional media business, but is beginning also to affect the Internet. (O'Siochru, 1999, Theme 3: Diversity of expressions).

What is important then to be true citizens of a truly global society is the understanding of the world as a mosaic of many different cultures and yet the same human concerns; and making the commitment to uphold freedom, dignity and equity of citizens. Today we all need to understand how the world is interconnected and to appreciate its diversity and complexity. We also have to ensure that the new media technologies are used in responsible ways and contribute to democratization of communication upholding the "Right to Communicate" mission of The New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). To a great extent, this applies to journalism education and working journalists as well.

### **Background-Participation by the Faculty of Journalism and Communication in the Virtual Classroom Project**

Journalism education in India saw its beginning more than half a century back. "The first training effort in the Indian sub-continent was by Prof. P. P. Singh at the University of Punjab, Lahore (now in Pakistan) during 1941-42" (Eapen, 1991, para. 2). "In free India it was at Hislop Christian College, Nagpur University that a full-fledged Journalism Department was organized in 1952-53" (Eapen, 1991, para. 4). Today every major University in India boasts of at least one Journalism program, a degree or a diploma, and at several prime institutions programs are available up to doctoral level. The quality and relevance of these programs, however, have been questioned again and again over the years. As Eapen (1991) rightly comments:

India has strongly articulated during the 1970s for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), but had taken little follow-up action in the academic aspects of education in communication. Arguments for a new order had to be accompanied by efforts at the grassroots level of professional instruction. University approaches still remain rather frozen at the pre-NWICO stage. Course contents have not substantially changed, nor the books used in support of undergraduate and graduate courses. This is not a specifically Indian lacuna. The SAARC [South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation] region, of which India is an important component, suffers from the same maladies. (Eapen, 1991, para. 6)

The Faculty of Journalism and Communication (FJC), the youngest Faculty in the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Vadodara, in India was established in 1992. It is one of the youngest journalism education programs in India. In a way this late beginning proved to be a blessing in disguise. Right from the beginning the Faculty could formulate a curriculum relevant to the contemporary demands and developed a cross-media convergent approach to communication education. The Global Understanding through Virtual Classroom (GUVVC) Project added an interesting dimension to the curriculum by introducing a new teaching methodology and enhanced international interaction. The one year post-graduate Bachelor's program offered earlier was later in 1997 updated to a full time four semester Master's program. Admission to the limited twenty seats for students is through a competitive entrance procedure. Students, most of who are usually fresh graduates, have a diverse background. They belong to different states of India, speak different languages at home and have their first degree in any of the following subjects: sciences, commerce, humanities, fine arts, performing arts, home science, languages, or even engineering.

Preparing professional media persons, journalists, communication practitioners or researchers is a challenging task today when "change" is the buzzword. It is all the more challenging for institutions in developing countries because globalization and their own home-scenario often impose contradictory demands. Asian professionals today are expected to be successful in the global context and at the same time be faithful to their roots, values, culture and socio-economic needs. The aim of the Faculty is to produce competent and confident media professionals who are familiar with the state of the art information and communication technologies and are also adept at technical skills. At the same time, they should also have grounding in finer areas like culture, philosophy and ethics. Today's media professionals need to be aware of the local grass root realities but not without an international perspective and global world view.

Though students today live in a global society of diverse cultures and customs, their understanding of these cultures is often limited to 30-second news clips they see on television. The experience of living and studying in other countries is a valuable one but due to financial and other limitations it is not possible for most students to do that. Under the circumstances it became very interesting for the students as well as teachers to participate in the Global Understanding through Virtual Classroom Project.

## India-Peru-Gambia-USA Partnership 2006: A Case Study

The GUVVC project is designed in such a way that a world cultures course at East Carolina University (ECU) gets partnered with three other cultures. While ECU is meeting with one culture, the other two cultures are meeting so that students from all four countries develop a broad view of the world. Ideally four consecutive weeks are devoted to each of three cultures; with three weeks of video link. The warm-up process, though, starts much before the actual classes begin. Lead teachers from each University play an important role in carrying out the course. The lead teachers constantly keep in touch and jointly make decisions about how they would like to conduct the course within the broad framework of the project. The course is designed in such a way that the lead teachers have flexibility to tailor it to suit the needs and resources of their own institutions. The technology support person from each university maintains a close link with the partnering university's tech person.

The FJC, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda (MSUB), Vadodara, India joined the project in 2005. The global understanding curriculum was found highly relevant for the students of FJC and it became the first Faculty in the University to join the GUVVC project. Eighteen students in the first year of the two year Master's degree program in Communication Studies participated in the program. The GUVVC project was made a part of the core paper on 'Orientation to Contemporary Society'. In the 2005-2006 round, FJC-MSUB, was partnered with East Carolina University (ECU), USA, and a university each in Peru (San Ignacio de Loyola University) and The Gambia (University of The Gambia). The ECU team visited MSUB to facilitate establishment of the infrastructure and plan the logistics and academic aspects with university administrators and the lead teachers. The India-USA-Peru-Gambia linking was slotted for the spring semester (January to April) 2006.

A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted with students after the entire round of linking, closing ceremony and assessment were over. This gave interesting insights into how these students evaluated their experience of their participation in the project. Out of 18 Journalism and Communication students who participated in the GUVVC project, 14 students took part in the focus group discussion.

The following three key findings emerged from the discussion that lasted for about two hours:

- 1.) **All the 14 participants agreed that the Global Understanding through Virtual Classroom project was highly relevant as part of the Journalism/Communication degree program.** They also said that given an opportunity they would participate in such a program again. ("But without tests and logs!!")

Following are some statements made by students during the FGD, quoted verbatim:

"Journalists create reality for people. Deeper understanding of different cultural realities and the process of socio-cultural phenomena are important for effective journalism."

"Journalists need information, perspective, objectivity and open minds. The course helps in developing all the four aspects."

"I learned to become less judgmental and realized that there could be different points of view on any issue."

"This experience has helped me become a better, more authentic reporter".

"The course builds communication skills and confidence level crucial for professional journalism."

On the whole all the students felt that technology in communication was more freeing than inhibiting.

- 2.) **All the students described the experience in positive terms.** The frequently used phrases were: "...a complete learning experience, new experience, unique, enriching, interesting, thought provoking, and eye opening...", etc." Students expressed that the course contributed in several different ways, viz. providing interesting exposure; increase their knowledge and information about Peru, USA and Gambia; increase in their knowledge about India; building a good world perspective as the countries represented different continents; breaking certain myths and stereotypes; building confidence as communicators, especially communication with foreigners; building very good friendships; developing a more accepting (non-judgmental) mindset by appreciating the role of social background of a person; improving their skills in handling new technologies; and ultimately building their own self-esteem.

Represented below are a few more quotes of participating students expressing their thoughts:

"Knowing about other cultures was very enriching. Earlier we thought ours is the only culturally rich country but Peruvian culture impressed me a lot."

"I have started questioning many of our practices. I am experiencing a kind of inner conflict since I participated in the program."

"It was shocking for me initially when my Gambian partner talked about polygamy but then I realized that one could also be happy that way."

"We realized that young people everywhere are different and yet so similar!"

"The interaction helped us know our own country better. Indian diversity was very fascinating to our partners and the most difficult for us to explain."

"The best part was that everything was one-to-one. It was so much better than just reading a book."

- 3.) **There were three limiting factors mentioned by participants which in their opinion marred the experience to some extent.** They were: (a) lack of enthusiasm and response of some participants from partner countries, (b) technology failure on some occasions, and (c) inadequate time to explore certain complex themes to their logical end. Discussions only at the superficial level, technological problems, and difficulty in understanding strange accents were cited as some limitations of video conferencing. On the contrary, some students appreciated the directness of the one to one conversation and the spontaneity and holistic discussion made possible by the video conferencing. An element of trust, credibility and instant rapport were other benefits of video conference. ("It wouldn't have been the same project sans video conferencing.")

Students who rated “chat” high appreciated the depth of information shared. (“Sometimes even drifting away from the main discussion provided new information.”) Students who rated emails high liked the option of being able to write at leisure and at length, taking one’s own time and scope for editing. They felt that emails provided a better method for systematic information sharing.

The emphasis on the one-to-one partnering and correspondence between students is indeed a unique concept which worked very well. Eleven out of 14 students are still in touch with their partners from other countries. All of them expect to remain in touch in the future. Five students have acknowledged close friendship with at least one partner.

### Reflections and Key Issues Emerging Out of the Experience

Our experience of the program clearly supports the observation that the GUVVC project has successfully provided universities across the world a virtual collaborative environment where they can discover, explore and engage between cultures. We also found that with globalization and increasing commercialization of media, such global projects provide an excellent alternative to hear citizen voices directly with an option to discuss, challenge and debate.

Much of the information we receive about the world around us is either influenced or controlled by the media, including television, newspapers, and radio. Other than information we personally take in, our view of the world is largely shaped by the way in which information is presented by these media outlets. (Barker, 2005, para. 2)

We look at our students as future media professionals who would consciously or subconsciously contribute to the ‘pictures in the head’ of the people about the world they have not experienced. If, as media professionals, their own world view is limited and hazy, the pictures they paint will also suffer from these limitations. The GUVVC project has shown a direction towards widening the world view of our future media persons. The project not only provided an opportunity for students to learn firsthand about three world cultures, but it also gave an excellent opportunity to showcase and discuss Indian culture with young citizens from three different countries.

Our 16 years of experience in journalism and communication education has shown us that students have always found “hands-on” learning experiences more meaningful than only theoretical inputs. Being able to access the latest state of the art equipment and understand the entire process of video conferencing, networking, use of high-tech cameras and other equipment was of immense benefit to the Faculty teachers and students. It was very interesting to observe the students struggling to establish their ‘Indian’ identity and in the process discovering fresh facets of their own country and culture. Each student in the class was a unique combination of several different aspects: a different language, background, socio-economic stratum, gender, and religion. In that sense, each had a different voice. But in global context, each of them was labeled ‘Indian’ and the expectation was of hearing one voice, the *Indian* voice. As one of the students expressed during the discussion, “...as a future journalist it was a very valuable training to arrive at some

understanding of an issue in the midst of conflicting arguments, each genuine in its own right. One could appreciate a situation from many different angles rather than gulping down information as simplistic pre-packaged capsules.”

As an offshoot of the GUVVC experience, the lead teachers also initiated valuable discussion on ‘cultural sensitivity vs. upholding universal human rights and human dignity.’ We have realized that while the ‘virtual experience’ is new and has its own attraction, very soon virtual classrooms and video conferencing will be common learning formats. Theorization, value orientation, acquiring knowledge and the application of it all will have to remain the central focus of any academic course. As journalism educators we will have to be vigilant about this.

According to a journalism researcher, mass communication educators generally adopt one of two distinct approaches to new technologies: incorporation or experimentation. Some educators try to incorporate new technologies into existing journalistic norms and practices. Brynildssen (2002) quotes Huesca (2000) advocating “against ‘mere incorporation.’ Instead, he argues that the academy must be willing to reinvent journalism education and experiment with ‘practices that are congruent with the imputed properties of cyberspace’.” “Huesca encourages educators to be ‘flexible, creative, and open-minded experimenters who are not wedded to given conventions of journalism’.” (Brynildssen, 2002, Economic and Technological Challenges, para. 3).

### **Economic and Technological Challenges**

In keeping with the idea, we have already experimented with ECU to use the same technology in conducting an International Lecture Exchange Program. We coordinated for a lecture session with ECU in a way that there were subject experts delivering lectures, and a number of approximately 20 students as recipients on both ends. The title of the talk we delivered was *Development Support Communication in India: The Role and Relevance of Traditional and Folk Media*.

The first part of the lecture explained the conceptual framework of Development Support Communication, elaborating its relevance for India and also for any country dealing with issues of socio-cultural-economic-political change. The second part of the lecture gave an overview of traditional and folk media from different regions of India and discussed some of the more evolved and popular folk theatre forms. The lecture was accompanied by a multi-media presentation including clips of *Bhavai* (a local folk form) performed by students of the FJC. Another lecture delivered in the second segment of the session by a Media Law expert traced the history of journalism and media laws in India including the new laws and changes made over time to suit the changing media scenario and new media technologies. At the ECU end, an expert delivered a lecture on *The First Amendment and Freedom of Expression*. Following the lectures there was an interactive session between the groups on both sides. This experience turned out to be truly interesting and beneficial for everyone involved. Through similar lecture exchanges on varied themes, students in different universities can benefit from inputs by teachers from different institutions of the world.

Journalism educators have to give a serious thought to the role of journalists in the times to come. Do we want journalists to merely report the events or also participate in creating conducive environments for internal and international conflict resolution? If journalists are supposed to play a proactive role in world peace and international understanding, courses like Global Understanding become an essential part of the journalism education.

Howard (2005) pleads a case for conflict-sensitive journalism:

One doesn't have to be a war correspondent to recognize that journalism and news media can incite violent conflict. ... Less recognized, however, is the potential for journalism to influence conflict resolution. And less resolved is whether it should play that role. Is there such a thing as conflict-sensitive journalism? (To be clear, journalism here means reporting that seeks international standards of media reliability such as accuracy, impartiality or fair balance, and social responsibility.) Although [not significantly recognized] in the daily grind of news and in journalism education, the reality is that reliable journalism contributes to conflict reduction. It is, indeed, automatic or innate." (Howard, 2005, *The Case for Conflict Sensitive Journalism*, para. 1 & 2)

"Reliable reporting, and responsibly written editorials and opinion, do things such as establish communication among disputant parties, correct misperceptions, identify underlying interests and offer solutions. The media provides an emotional outlet. It can offer solutions, and build confidence." (Howard, 2005, *The Case for Conflict Sensitive Journalism*, para. 4) In our opinion journalism education programs have to expand their vision to incorporate conflict sensitive journalism in the near future. The Global Understanding through Virtual Classroom project can serve as a basis for the technology and course format to facilitate this expansion.

After all, Education and technology have to strive toward the same end goal; that of making our world a better place for all.

### References

- Barker, P. (2005). *Large-scale communication*. In G. Burgess & H. Burgess (Eds.), *Beyond intractability*. Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. Retrieved from [http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/large\\_scale\\_communication/](http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/large_scale_communication/)
- Brynildssen, S. (2002). *A review of trends in journalism education* (ERIC Digest #178, EDO-CS-02-09 December 2002). Retrieved from ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication website: <http://www.indiana.edu/~reading/ieo/digests/d178.html>
- Eapen, K. E. (1991) *Journalism education and textbooks in SAARC countries*. Retrieved from [http://www.uta.fi/textbooks/india\\_saarc.html](http://www.uta.fi/textbooks/india_saarc.html) [The basis of this paper is an IPDC-supported survey conducted by Prof. K.E. Eapen, Prof. B.S. Thakur and Dr. B.P. Sanjay during 1989-90 under the auspices of the Professional Section of the IAMCR.]

- Hamelink, C. (1994). *Trends in world communication: On disempowerment and self-empowerment*. Penang, Malaysia: Southbound and Third World Network.
- Howard, R. (2005). *Global journalism ethics: Conflict sensitive journalism in practice*. Retrieved from Center for Journalism Ethics, School of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin-Madison website: [http://www.journalismethics.ca/global\\_journalism\\_ethics/conflict\\_sensitivity\\_in\\_practice.htm](http://www.journalismethics.ca/global_journalism_ethics/conflict_sensitivity_in_practice.htm)
- Huesca, R. (2000). Reinventing journalism curricula for the electronic environment. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 55(2), 4-15.
- MacBride Commission (International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems). (1980). *Many voices, one world: Towards a new, more just, and more efficient world information and communication order*. Paris, France: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).
- O'Siochru, S. (1999). *Voices 21: A global movement for people's media and communications in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Transnational Broadcasting Studies, Issue 2). Retrieved from the Adham Center for Television Journalism (American University in Cairo) website: <http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring99/Documents/Congress/congress.html>

---

## About the Authors

**Manisha Pathak-Shelat** has experience in communication practice, education and research, with special interest in civic engagement, development support communication, youth media cultures, media education, and gender. Currently she is pursuing her second doctorate at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is also involved in a multi country youth media participation project sponsored by the Academy of Finland. She has taught at universities in India and Thailand. Awards include Shastri Indo-Canadian Faculty Research Award, Salzburg Seminar fellowship and TATA fellowship for research on contemporary India. She can be reached at [shelat@wisc.edu](mailto:shelat@wisc.edu) and [manishashelat@gmail.com](mailto:manishashelat@gmail.com).

**Niti Desai-Chopra** is Senior Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Journalism and Communication, The M.S.University of Baroda, Vadodara, India. She completed her doctorate in 2003, and has over 18 years of experience in teaching and evolving Media Education curriculum at the post-graduate level. Her areas of interest include Communication Theorization, Development Communication, Information Communication Technologies, and contemporary media trends and phenomenon in context of Globalization and Cross-Cultural Communication. Recent awards include Salzburg Global Seminar Fellowship (2007) and NUFFIC - Netherlands Organization for International Cooperation in Higher Education Fellowship (2010). She can be reached at [n\\_chopra1@yahoo.co.in](mailto:n_chopra1@yahoo.co.in).