

Learning Experiences of the Global Understanding Class

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Abstract

This paper aims to share the experience of the global partner education and learning environment of distance learning. The Global Understanding course is a very innovative and excellent addition to the curriculum at Fatima Jinnah Women University. The idea of interacting with students around the world is an initiative by East Carolina University, USA. It not only provides the opportunity to interact with global students but also provides intercultural learning and sharing of each other's experiences as a student. Overall, the interaction of students from two different countries (i.e., USA and Algeria) was very productive in terms of learning each other's culture, education system, family, religion, and other social issues. Through online video conferencing, it was a unique experience and contributed a creative dimension to our education based learning.

Introduction

East Carolina University (ECU) approved a new learning service to the students of Fatima Jinnah Women University which began in fall of 2007. It is a public sector university which is located in North Carolina, United States, and this is the first institution in the US which offers students from around the world an online medium to share their experiences. Students nowadays are living in a global society and have much more knowledge about different cultures around the world. Their understanding of these cultures is often shaped by what they watch on television, movies and the media as it is the fastest medium of distributing information about other cultures. Although students know the importance of understanding their culture and the culture of others while living in their home town, only a few of them travel abroad in order to understanding cultural diversity. They study in their own country because they are provided with a diversified setup of learning along with the basic necessities in their own institutions.

The Global Understanding Course

The Global Understanding course provides a good platform for students to learn about other cultures without travelling from one place to another. Currently, there are more than 50 international institutions that are participating in the Global Understanding course from more than 30 countries around the world and Fatima Jinnah Women University Rawalpindi Pakistan is one of them. From across the globe, diverse cultures are included in Global understanding course. Students from different cultures meet up in pairs via

videoconference links and in online chat sessions. One session is conducted at a time while the students meet during a specific time. Internet connections along with a PC and headset and microphone are the main tools for this class. Students with the help of these communication tools are connected globally with other the partner institutions for videoconference calls and chatting.

During the class, students discuss various topics such as college life, culture and tradition, family, religion, education, meaning of life, stereotypes and prejudices etc. With the help of a videoconference call, the students discuss different topics and conduct a question and answer session too. This session is a subject in universities nowadays for both graduate and undergraduate programs which is a positive approach for understanding ‘Globalization’ and ‘Cultural Diversity’ around the world.

ECU links institutions for three to four weeks during which they create a positive atmosphere for one another and build an environment of trust and mutual respect. These pleasant atmospheres engage different students to share their information with each other and also sharing of opinions, values, attitudes and emotions. Both of the university student’s use various tools for their daily class discussion for instance, email etc. The one-to-one discussions lead the students to better explore similarities, learn and accept the differences amongst cultures. Before each class the students read national, international newspapers and weekly papers and magazines to learn the current cultural events in each country which also helps build knowledge and curiosity for each student.

In addition, the partners develop a joint project with each other through which they gain much more knowledge about the culture and traditions. Due to this cross cultural communication, both the university students learn to express themselves effectively. Students enhance their listening ability and master the difficult words in their language and pronunciations. This course which the students take in one semester is not an extra course which the student must attend but this is an optional course which the faculty and also the students think is very beneficial for them for learning about the social issues which is existing in various societies. Students take this course by their own will; they may have experiences in general knowledge, education, major class and elective courses but because of modernization, they are far away from cultural issues which exist in societies.

Distance Learning

According to Verduin and Clark (1991) ‘the modern world distance of education exist around the world today and this is available in a large number which reduce the time and space issues in a traditional class room. This education is very advantageous because it makes the learning easy, accessible for all the students in everyday life by giving them huge control over the schedule of learning. Within this modern educational system, the institution provides the students a supportive environment which allows them to gain and access to the information in a very easy way. In Perez’s (2001) research, he said that many students claim that this distance education is not good and the disadvantages of distance education is lack of personal interaction with each other and also with the teachers. There must be an opportunity for the students to meet their instructor by face-to-face interaction where they get a chance to know each other in an environment of face-

to-to face interaction. If we look at the student performance and satisfaction most of them have considered different variable, changes and some of them have examined the relationship between populations, the usefulness of technology, which is used in distance education. In every educational setting, interaction through communication and collaboration with other institution is a main source to educate and encourage the student to become an active learner of the institution.

One of the most important opportunities of distance learning is the online education environment. Because of the lack of interaction, the educator should know the current status of education and also the field study program which influence the design and content of distance education. In a modern world, technologies are developing day by day in a various method and these methods bring changes in educational facilities. The internet is a main source of modern education and useful asset that allows students to learn by the process of technologies, such as video and computer communication. This creates a good environment and makes them able to play an active role in the process of learning and a way of convenience for the other learners. These increase in the interaction between two peoples and two way communication and huge impact on distance education.

White (2005) says that online educators should focus on the developing learner and understanding their point of view about modern education. Students in online classrooms know how to get higher quality course project making and presentation skills. This is a different method of education from the traditional education and teaching method (Miller, 2007). Satisfaction from the course is important element for the improvement of learning achievement in any traditional classroom and the distance educational environment. With the development of internet and other useful source of education student have much more opportunities for gaining knowledge and information which promote the students toward education by the process of communication and interaction. In the modern era, educators must know about the use and understanding of modern technology which is helpful for the students to reduce the communication gaps. But in this process, the instructors have more work for fulfilling the needs and requirement of the students and they have to make them able to know about the current situation and develop the skill of interactive online courses.

One of the main problems which Asian students face at most institutions is that they cannot contribute in class properly or participate in the classroom discussions due to lack of confidence. There is large number of explanation for Pakistani students that they cannot discuss with their peers and teachers in an efficient way so they face this problem. During the class, since we have our own national language of Urdu in Pakistan, a student faces problems with English-speaking as they have less command of vocabulary. A common communicative element is for speakers to adjust their conversational style to suit each other in terms of comprehension and they are supposed to lower their level of language used in the hope of making their teaching methodology more successful and beneficial for those who have low level of speaking the English language (Jones, 2001).

There is a useful resource for the critical examination of teaching modes and practices which is found in a large number of developmental and professional initiatives. General

teaching practices are mostly relevant. The conditions of this class were clear and workable for all those who are involved in this class and their proper assessment and guideline is also very important for their further studies. In everyday conduct, educational practices are largely related with the values and attribute actions. Those students who have knowledge are acknowledged in the institution as they are well informed and knowledgeable. Different cultural practices have their own publications and nationalities. For instance, Russian students speak Russian with one another and hold totally different cultural practices from that of a student fluent in Urdu holding Pakistani nationality.

Topics of discussion like religion, educational background and methods, family systems and other social issues remain effective if the medium of communication is similar and understandable to both parties during the global interaction. Hence, there are both advantages and obstacles in understanding the global beings which remain side by side in each class. Moreover, The quality teaching method and modern education by technology bring changes in the students like having knowledge about different cultural and tradition while attending classes in the same institution, national and international institutions and students interact with each other and know the critical evaluation of current discourse and practices of academic institutions.

Experiences of Global Understanding Classes

Here I am going to share my own personal experiences. Fatima Jinnah Women University is a public university which is educating many young women on this campus. This university is known as one of the highly ranked universities in Pakistan. It has more than 16 fields of study and includes the department of Gender Studies where I am conducting my studies. This is a social science department and they have much collaboration with foreign universities in order to educate the student globally.

The class started in October of 2014 and ended in December. Our class collaborated with students at East Carolina University (ECU), USA and the University of Abu-Bakr Belkaid Tlemcen (UABT) of Algeria. We attended 10 classes with each university and discussed much cultural diversity about each country which was very informative. The class timing was from 5pm to 6pm as per the standard time of Pakistan and twice in a week on Monday and Wednesday. The offered course was optional for us in the last semester, which I benefitted from by having networking with international students.

In the first class, we were introduced to our partners by videoconference calls. In order to work on the class tasks assigned, we exchanged our email addresses with one another and started talking to each other via email. Twice a week, we interacted with our partners. One day we would have discussions by a videoconference call and in the next class through chatting on computers regarding the topic given to us. While talking with our partners, we obtained more knowledge about their norms, values, culture and traditions.

The first set of videoconference sessions was with ECU and the topic of discussion was culture and tradition, which I found is totally different from us. Before this course, we were unaware of their cultural practices but now I have a new friend and know a lot about their country including the norm and festivals, religious beliefs etc. The second set of

videoconference sessions we attended were with the University of Abu-Bakr Belkaid Tlemcen (UABT) Algeria. The University is in the Islamic country named Algeria and has many similarities with Pakistan such as religious practices, marriage, death and birth ceremonies, etc. Being a Muslim country, our culture and traditions are similar but some have negative thoughts about us. As they consider we have more stereotypical issues regarding men and women. Overall my experience was good and from the classes we mastered some useful communication skills from our fellow classmates, from the partner university students and as well as knowledge about different things such as their education system, their lifestyles, and cultural events.

Teaching Methodology

In this course, the teaching methodology was different from that of our institution. Students had a face to face interaction with each other in the class through videoconference calls. Every issue we discussed with each other in class and also with our partners via chatting. Our Instructor or lecturer did not deliver any lecture. Instead, she facilitated us in communicating well with our fellow students on the videoconference call and helped us find more information on the web about the other fellow student in the class from across the globe. Through this face to face communication with the other university students, I improved my English fluency and interaction with others by video calls. This was a great opportunity for us to make friends, learn about the other cultures across the globe, promote peace, respect differences and encourage the similarities in life from diversified cultures, religion and continents. In order to create a peaceful world to live in, we need to keep up with interactions and courses of such types. On the one hand, this is beneficial for personal growth and on the other hand a factor in encouraging global understanding, harmony and peace. The ECU and UABT classes consisted of students from different departments like, Biology, Media sciences, English literature so we had the opportunity to learn about different fields and countries as well.

Curriculum

Gaining knowledge and learning from others is a part of life. Those who have knowledge also have power. While studying in this university, we have different courses and the Global Understanding is one. The main topics we discussed in this class included Family, Education, Religion, Stereotypes and prejudice. Regarding family system, there was some differences between USA and Pakistan, as we prefer a joint family system and mostly we lived in joint family systems, but in USA, most of the students mentioned that they have a nuclear family system. There were also the differences of religion with USA, but less with Algeria. In the USA and Pakistan, these topics of social institutions are totally different from each other as they have different socio-cultural practices of daily life activities as well as their religion is different. However, I came to learn that in Algerian society, these systems are much more similar to each other because Algeria is also an Islamic country which has many things in common with Pakistan such as religious practices. In the class, I learned about the cultural diversity of both the Americans and Algerians.

Technology

Technology has brought many changes in everyone's life and it has changed the life of every individual living in this era. With the help of these technologies we are better able to communicate with others in many different ways. Whatever we gained in this class is just because of the development of technology. In our first class with ECU, the system of technology was faultless as the sound was clear; we did not face any issue during the class time.

Collaborative Projects

With each university (ECU) and (UABT), we had different partners. Both of my partners were female. Kaite was my partner of East Carolina University and Nezha from University Abu-Bakr Belkaid Tlemcen (UABT) of Algeria and both of them were very co-operative with me in the class. They also were helpful while doing my projects and slides for the presentation. My topics that I worked on were; 'Child rearing and child bearing practices' and similarities and differences between both cultures. I informed my colleagues about my Pakistani culture and shared much useful information regarding the lifestyle, rituals and education system in Pakistan. We gained much knowledge about American and Algerian culture and traditions. Both the classes were enjoyed and I fully participated. I submitted my project slides on time and delivered my presentations in both classes because my partners were present in there via video calls.

Strengths of the Class

- This class was a useful learning experience which used a new method of educating the students by videoconference calls and chatting.
- The students were from different cultures and they got together to learn and share ideas about diversified cultures.
- Interaction and communication with a foreign university with discussions about our culture and societal problems builds confidence.
- Communication skills increase in students by using such platforms and interactions with the international students.
- Students gain skills such as cooperation, communication, setting and achieving goals.
- Students have a better understanding of classroom materials and practice of what they are learning
- Students become aware of the needs of the community

Weaknesses of the Class

- Some of the day scholar's (who lived at home) faced problems with class timing as it is late in evening in Pakistan and it was difficult for them to attend class as their private vans were not available.
- The issue of technology and Internet connections was problematic in the second class with Algerians students.

- A few students were not serious and they were not contacting their partners in time when one wants to work on mutual projects.

Conclusion

The interaction among the students of East Carolina University (ECU), Algerian University Abu-Bakr Belkaid Tlemcen (UABT) and Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi had interactions during the course that went quite well and it was a great opportunity for the students of higher education. Overall, the class was very well mannered and the knowledge and information we gained from them was valuable. I suggest further continuing this class for every session because it is beneficial in every student's career and their professional development, as the certificates were provided to the students which they can use for their future career progression. And as it is an international course, it increases the worth of the curriculum Vitae (CV). This is a new method of gaining knowledge with other University students. Because of modernization and new methods of technology, the life of every individual and even student's life is changed in a positive way. Sitting back home and in our own country one learns about the other living on the other continent, chats with them via Skype, video calling and learning through the world wide web.

References

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