Enhancing global citizenship through critical self-reflection in on- and off-campus learning

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Abstract

Most students who express an interest in going abroad are given very few opportunities to critically reflect on their experience, and to analyze the long-term effect this learning experience will have on their professional and personal lives. In order to create more reflective learning communities and to enhance intercultural communication competence, two unique undergraduate courses were developed at Drexel University. These courses address the often-overlooked emotional, psychological, and intellectual needs of students who aim to become global citizens and to apply these lessons at the local or international level. Both courses employ critical self-reflection, online learning pedagogies and ethnographic methods in order to encourage students to explore issues of diversity.

Introduction

In the past year, Drexel University has clearly defined global competence and responsible citizenship as two of its core learning priorities. Although many classes engage students in learning environments that teach about global, political, social and economic relationships, little attention is given to preparing students for their study abroad or internship experience (Teichler & Steube, 1991) or to assessing students in terms of intercultural communication competence. In order to address this omission in the rapidly globalizing curriculum, two courses were developed to aid students in confronting cultural difference.

The first course, called Crossing the Bridge, enables Drexel students to maintain a connection with the “home turf” by participating in targeted learning activities while working or studying abroad. The course is intended to help students enhance their intercultural competence by developing a different lens through which to view the world. The course also generates a project which will tie the intercultural experience to a present or future goal (a tangible project which can be shared with family, friends or future employers).
The second course, *Writing on Work Identity*, aims to help students understand how workplace relations are interpreted and negotiated through filters of race, culture and gender. Through critical self-analysis, students are encouraged to reflect on the self in a particular work environment and to examine how they deal with differences in beliefs, behaviors and values at the workplace (Bennett, 1986). Although the course was originally intended for local Drexel students, it was also taught to graduate students from China and Germany in an online setting.

**A two-way street**

The original goals of both courses were to support Drexel students traveling and learning abroad, and to further the international-minded curriculum favored by the new University strategy. However, due to demographic changes in the student body (the University saw a 30% increase in admission of international students in a single year), the *Crossing the Bridge* course was expanded to address the needs of international students living and learning on Drexel's campus.

Just as Drexel students traveling abroad often struggle to make sense of their experiences and maximize their learning opportunity while in a foreign country, many of the international students hosted by Drexel also feel ill-equipped to engage with their instructors and peers in an effective manner. This communication gap is typically not caused merely by a language barrier, but rather by fundamentally different learning styles, which are usually highly socialized and therefore difficult to identify, let alone change.

Given that the currently predominant pedagogical style in the U.S. encourages students to think critically, to deconstruct existing ideas, and sometimes even to question authority (Schlichting-Artur, 2009), it is not perceived as disrespectful if a student requests clarification from the instructor; rather, it is usually considered a sign of strong engagement, and therefore sound educational practice, when students feel comfortable asking questions in the classroom. When these same students visit a country like Taiwan, however, they are sometimes surprised at the expectation that they remain silent throughout class and do not challenge the instructor's knowledge by asking questions.

International students on Drexel's campus encounter these same problems. When they try to behave respectfully in class, they are sometimes perceived as insecure or aloof. Therefore, the goal of *Crossing the Bridge* became to deliver not just practical advice for students encountering difference, but real strategies for community-building within the context of the University campus (Collier & Thomas, 1988). The first run of the course serving international students in the U.S. will take place in Spring 2013, with a report to follow. Even if the course cannot address all of the psychological and emotional needs of international students, the University hopes to provide a more welcome, supportive, and therefore effectively educational environment for these students.

Similarly, the *Writing on Work Identity* course was originally designed to serve local, on-
campus Drexel students, but also proved valuable to international graduate students. Once again, the topics and methods discussed in the course aided students on both sides of the cultural divide, given that the focus of the course was to call attention to issues of diversity and identity negotiation.

**Structure of the courses**

**Crossing the Bridge**

Much of the coursework in *Crossing the Bridge* encourages students to maintain a connection with their home culture, in the form of interviews, cultural autobiographies, and critical self-reflective exercises. This approach was somewhat unorthodox, as international education experiences are often expected to celebrate immersion-based learning. This learning method typically seeks to minimize contact with the home culture in hopes of maximizing student contact with the host culture, thereby increasing cultural and linguistic competence. In contrast, the *Crossing the Bridge* course rejected this paradigm, seeking instead to connect students with research material that was relevant to their situation in order to maximize the learning potential of lived experiences abroad.

The justification for rejecting this oft-celebrated characteristic of international education experiences is the belief that guided learning better meets the needs of students confronting cultural difference, during what is frequently an emotionally vulnerable time (Ford, 1993). Methodologically competent guidance from an instructor can enable students to target finer learning goals, and take advantage of limited exposure to the host culture. Prior to the development of this course, a review of student responses to international education experiences too often indicated that the role of emotion in the exposure to cultural difference was not adequately addressed. Students felt a wide range of emotions, from confidence and elation to frustration, and even resentment. But some of the most important questions were never asked: Why did students feel the way they did? What triggered the evocation of these ideas and emotions?

An additional constraint on student learning in a course of this nature is the limited time during which students had access to the host culture. In many other university courses, students can return to presented material at a later date to make revisions or reread texts. Given the ethnographic nature of assignments in *Crossing the Bridge* coursework demanded that students make the most of their time while abroad. As a result, reconsiderations were difficult to implement, and students frequently discussed new methods or questions they would employ if they had the chance to repeat an assignment with access to the host culture.

Despite some of the limitations of the course, student feedback was positive, as the connection to the home turf and constant reflection enriched their time spent abroad. As a result,
a similar course was developed for students at home who were leaving campus for a while in order to work. Again, the intent was to enrich the off-campus experience through the creation of a virtual classroom, which helped students to stay engaged and reflective.

Writing on Work Identity

Writing on Work Identity is an online course developed for students to take during an internship cycle or thereafter. The first phase of the course focuses on the “self”; the students participate in self-categorization and evaluation of personal expectations in regard to their co-op and future professional life. The second phase consists of an analysis of power dynamics at the workplace, focusing on the other rather than the self (Ford & Dillard, 1996). The final phase is a synthesis of the self and the other, in which students combine knowledge acquired from the readings and personal experiences in order to address issues facing the modern workplace, as well as reflect on their individual work identity.

As in Crossing the Bridge, students are asked to observe their surroundings and use assigned readings to better understand how workplace relations are interpreted and function through the lenses of race, culture, and gender. As the course takes place completely online, students are expected to participate in online class discussions in order to develop a dialogue about their experience and to learn from the experiences of their peers. All readings for this course are digitized excerpts made available via the University’s online learning platform. Students are expected to complete all required readings in preparation for the journal entry of the following week.

Challenges to implementation

University policy and logistics

The running of any structurally unorthodox course will understandably pose several problems for the instructor (Teichler & Steube, 1991). On the surface there are logistical problems such as accommodating for time zone differences. This course was run several times with partner universities in Asia, Europe, and the United States, resulting in time differences of 6 to 13 hours between instructor and students. Any attempt to schedule a mutually convenient time for real-time discussion, such as voice- or video chatting, often had to strike a balance between social or academic obligations to both the host and home cultures.

There was also the challenge that every online course faces: the lack of regular face-to-face interaction in the classroom. As e-learning gains traction in higher education, pedagogy has often struggled to keep up with the demands of the online learning environment. Given the unique situation of students in these courses living and learning in a host culture, careful attention was given to ensure reliable participation. In order to encourage student engagement, assignments
were designed to be immediately applicable, to aid the students in making the most of the limited time they have in this virtual classroom.

Both courses placed a demand on students to engage with one another in a critical discussion, building on each other’s understandings in application of the readings. Some students took to this style of communication better than others. In particular, sharing responses with peers on a discussion board, rather than submitting written essays directly to the instructor, presented a challenge for several students. Students from Western cultures demonstrated greater involvement in critical online discussions, whereas students from Southeast Asian cultures tended to agree more readily, and avoided contradicting the points presented by others. While no quantitative analysis was conducted about these tendencies, it appeared that cultural differences contributed greatly to how students negotiated their identity, particularly by means of conflict avoidance (Ting-Toomey, 1999).

**Technology issues**

It also appeared that many students were unfamiliar with online learning tools used in the context of higher education. The Blackboard platform was used for the online parts of these classes, and foreign students often had trouble finding course materials such as reading assignments or the discussion board. While not all of these concerns are attributable to cultural differences, the expectation to brainstorm ideas openly, in full view of both peers and instructor, posed a problem for several students. Thus, the design of the online learning platform itself presented yet another opportunity for these students to confront difference.

**Creating the universal classroom**

In support of the University’s strategy to internationalize its curriculum, the *Crossing the Bridge* course was developed to support a segment of the student body that lacked guidance during crucial educational opportunities, specifically those studying or working abroad. The *Writing on Work Identity* course was similarly designed to enhance the curriculum for mostly domestic students, specifically those participating in Drexel’s vocational co-op program. Due to the success of the first course, however, the second course was later restructured to target a third category of students, namely those pursuing an international MBA.

The first offering of this course included student populations in Germany and China, and addressed cross-cultural challenges encountered in professional contexts. These graduate students, who were in leadership positions in international companies in Europe and Asia, were asked to conceptualize their professional identity in the context of communication, power and leadership. *Writing on Work Identity* appealed to students as it created a virtual classroom community, thereby expanding learning beyond any one campus, and helped to identify the
challenges of learning and working in culturally diversified communities. In addition, this course allowed the cohort of students to establish more intimate relationships with each other, which the intense in-person meetings on campus, typical of the quarter-based schedule, did not foster. The outcome of the course was regarded as a success as it promoted and encouraged intercultural learning through online class discussions but also through the practice of mindfulness in everyday personal and professional relations.

**Structure of the courses**
The *Crossing the Bridge* course was implemented at the undergraduate level, providing three credits in a quarter-based system. The quarter system at the University presented an obstacle to running the course, as the academic calendar did not allow for much face time with students before their departure abroad, and most candidates work before their departure and cannot be on campus prior to the start of the quarter. Thus, it was necessary to find a way for the instructor to communicate with students before, during, and after the experience abroad, despite the lack of physical interaction. The *Writing on Work Identity* course was also implemented at the undergraduate level during the fall and spring terms, when many students are on co-op. Hence, students were given the opportunity to reflect on critical issues as they were working their way through their co-op experience.

E-learning technologies were used extensively in both courses, in the form of email, instant messaging, and an online learning platform, which included a message board. These forms of communication enabled the instructor to maintain contact with students throughout all phases of their stay abroad, and also provided students with a place to share their experiences in a discussion community (Ross & Conway, 1986). In addition to this ongoing online communication, the instructor was also given the opportunity to join the students for their final week in the host country to engage the students in intense reflection and discussion activities (Raschio, 2001) during the final week of the course, before returning home to work on the final capstone project.

**Recommendations for future research and action**
While feedback from students, instructors, and program administrators about these courses has been extremely positive, there are nonetheless several logistical and pedagogical aspects of the curriculum that deserve closer attention. These challenges include organizing real-time participation across different time zones, improving students’ willingness to engage with peers, and general familiarity with online learning technologies. Whereas the first challenge is very difficult to overcome, changes to the curriculum have since been made for subsequent runs of the course in order to increase online participation and collaboration. However, if the University is
truly committed to educating global citizens and stretching learning beyond the limits of local campus life, it must invest more effort in the realization of these goals (Dillard, 1994). By allocating resources to faculty and students alike in support of work and study abroad programs, these goals can be more easily and effectively achieved.

One proposal is to create a *Learning Center for Intercultural Communication*. The goals of this center are:

- to engage national and international students in learning environments which will challenge them through coursework to become mindful and more interculturally competent learners;
- to develop a curriculum which focuses on teaching and assessing intercultural competence;
- to develop intercultural competence assessment tools; and
- to coordinate University-wide efforts in order to increase intercultural competence learning which move beyond the borders of campus life.

As higher education responds to the rising demand for cultural competence training, any University cultivating global appeal should design and implement a more effective international curriculum if this institution is to meet the growing needs of students (Brislin, 1983). Traditionally, programs of this nature have failed to provide students with meaningful guidance before, during, and after international, national and local learning experiences, but the adoption of new technologies in academic contexts has opened doors for new processes of learning. In particular, the creation of online learning environments offers instructors a powerful method of engaging students and encouraging them to learn from one another. With a well-structured program, Drexel University can provide new intercultural learning opportunities to a wider group of students, rather than the current selective few, by increasing its offering of online courses. The structure of such courses facilitates critical self-reflection, while at the same time offers students an opportunity to interact with their peers in a genuine exchange of ideas and understandings.

The courses put forth for consideration in this paper exemplify how student awareness toward difference in values, beliefs, and behaviors can be elevated, and can aid in the adjustment to foreign learning environments. However, the University also offers other courses that lend themselves to teaching intercultural competence to a larger community of Drexel students, especially those who are in need of education about culturally diverse practices (e.g. *Approaches to Intercultural Behavior*). More targeted efforts, such as identifying the needs of international and outgoing Drexel students, should constitute the first steps in the process of enhancing students’ cultural awareness. New curriculum refinements should target these student groups to
ensure that intercultural understanding is presented to both local and international students (Beamer, 1992). The proposed Learning Center for Intercultural Competence could aid in this process and act as a catalyst for this specific learning process. The center would host offerings of courses such as Crossing the Bridge, and organize working groups to discuss cultural difference and the practice of acceptance. It should facilitate communication between the entities in the University most closely involved in the education of international students such as the ESL (English as a Second Language) Program, Study Abroad, and the Co-op (vocational education) Program. In addition, the Center stands to help establish ties to business and neighborhood communities, thereby creating service learning opportunities for students, which in turn will engage them in off-campus education.

**Conclusion**

Whether travelling abroad or staying local, students in these courses have attested that the practice of critical self-reflection utilized in these courses has encouraged them to confront emotional upheaval, to deconstruct learning in meaningful ways in order to make sense of their experience, and to develop an understanding for different sets of values, beliefs and behaviors. Many students shared their assessment of the course and provided the following statements. One student from the Crossing the Bridge Course commented:

“The most important way the course made sense of the study abroad experience was that it forced me to sit down and actually write out, flesh out, reflect on what actually occurred (the events) and my response (the reflection) to it. Too often we experience events and feel we won't ever forget the swell of emotions, the thrills of exciting times, the sadness of feeling lonely without our familiar friends and family. But until we capture those emotions on paper, they will be long forgotten. Just like taking a photo captures the sight, writing ink on paper captures those emotions.”

The student’s comments clearly show a high regard for the course, as it forced the student to face an emotional journey by using verbal output, which helped to build coping mechanisms. Another student expressed the value of learning to practice more mindfulness, which had a long-term impact by affecting ways of thinking and behaviors, even when back on the home turf:

“Throughout my time abroad, I often felt worried or insecure, unsure of my abilities to interact with the culture I was living in. The Crossing the Bridge course provided me with immediately applicable tools that helped me make sense of what
I was experiencing, while I was experiencing it, and use that understanding to further my learning in a meaningful way. Beyond that, years later, I still find myself practicing mindfulness when encountering difference. Sometimes, one's own culture can feel foreign or strange. The ability to reflect on that feeling and piece together new understandings out of it has made a profound difference in my life.”

However, the courses were not only beneficial to American students who travelled abroad but also to international and local students who studied at Drexel’s campus in the U.S. A student from Germany stated that the course was helpful as it encouraged interaction with local people, and to integrate the course lessons into daily life:

“I consider it one of the most valuable courses I have taken during my entire time at university so far. […] On the one hand, the psychological and sociological education I received in the course made me more aware of the differences among cultures in any encounter I made during my time in [host city]. On the other hand, the course motivated me to actively seek contact with natives even more, because most of the weekly deliverables asked to write about particular behaviors I recognized in Americans. This – in turn – contributed a lot to the ‘success’ of my semester abroad in regard to my personal goal of making American friends and getting to know the culture ‘first hand.’”

A student from Drexel enrolled in Writing on Work Identity stated:

“As the weeks progressed, I learned more and more about myself and how I act in my work environment. The journal entries made me think a lot about aspects of my work life that I had never thought about before. In week three, I discussed how I describe myself and the difference between my private self and my workplace self. I learned a great deal about myself in this journal entry, realizing that there is a clear distinction between each of my ‘selves.’ I also learned that I work both independently and interdependently in my workplace; something that I now notice every day.”

Students who have participated in these courses seem grateful to have made the most of their time off-campus, whether studying or working, and further assert that the courses provided them with the tools necessary to do so. As higher education responds to the rising demand for cultural
competence training, effective international education experiences must be designed and implemented if academic institutions are to meet the growing needs of students. It is essential to cross the boundaries set by on-campus education and provide students with a curriculum, which enhances experiential learning opportunities. In particular, the creation of online learning environments offers instructors a powerful method of engaging students and encouraging them to learn from one another. In the context of ethnographic research, this pedagogical style provides unique perspectives and substantially improves group-based learning. While the long-term effects of such methodologies are as yet unexamined, early indications gathered from courses such as Crossing the Bridge and Writing on Work Identity are extremely positive.

References


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