TEAM TEACHING IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD: MONTREAL AND SEPT-ÎLES

Sophie JACMIN, professor in the Humanities Department — Vanier College ; **Sharon COYLE,** professeure en Sciences humaines — Cégep de Sept-Îles

OVERVIEW

For the last two sessions, a group from Vanier College in Montreal and a group from Cégep de Sept-Îles worked together in the context of their Humanities courses in a virtual team-teaching experiment.

1. COURSE STRUCTURE

For the Knowledge course last autumn, Sophie Jacmin and Sharon Coyle talked a few times by telephone over the summer. They shared course outlines and found some possibilities for activities they could do together using *Skype*, *DECclic II* (forums), and Sophie's visit to Sept-Îles.

The second semester of the project saw the two teachers, Sharon Coyle and Sophie Jacmin, create a common course outline, entitled 'Worldviews of Town and City: Montreal, Sept-Îles and Beyond. For the winter Worldviews course, they used similar tools, a shared course outline (with a few exceptions), shared evaluations, the same textbook, more *DECclic II* with added structure (schedules, content, teams (they plan to improve usage of the platform with what they have learned: less posts, more multi-media, more in-class exercises with specific time limits and support at the beginning of the term), *Skype*, *Google* docs and spreadsheets, virtual windows, Sharon's visit to Montreal, and Learning Objects (Serca 3, IAT, Tickle Tests–Emotional IQ).

Three blocks: The course was divided into three major sections: discovering each other's worldviews, discovering worldviews from around the world, and the issue of clashing worldviews.

The two Cegeps scheduled the course on Tuesdays (1–3 pm) in computer labs, so as to allow both groups to communicate as easily as possible.

2. COMMUNICATION TOOLS

With communication tools such as the *Skype* Internet phone system, *DECclic II*, *Google*'s docs and spreadsheets, and later in the semester, the *Virtual Window* teleconferencing system, students worked on their in-class assignments connecting with each other through text messaging, email, web cams and/or videoconferencing. Groups were created comprising of 2 Sept-Îles students and 6 Vanier students. Each group was assigned a continent and within that continent, they studied the worldview of a particular town, city, village, or area they were interested in. Once the place under study had been well researched, they were asked to create a short fictional dialogue that would reveal the worldview they had discovered. Each student developed a character and each character participated in the fictional dialogue. Simultaneous readings of the short plays were organized using the Virtual Window, to the delight of students and teachers alike. Other projects included input into Discussion Groups on *DECclic II*, commenting on class activities as well as on readings from the textbook entitled *Pens of Many Colours*. Also, frequent short in-class assignments were designed to evaluate students' response

to films, documentaries, class discussions or in-class guest speakers. Finally, an open book, open computer exam was designed to evaluate students' ability to explain, analyze, summarize or critique worldviews in general.

3. SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

The pilot project was an outstanding success. Class time was always extremely active, with students busily involved in talking to each other, doing research, writing text messages, producing written group work online, etc. Some tension arose at points in a couple of groups, and technology, in that context, made communication a bit more difficult. But with teacher intervention and student good will, things worked out and good feelings came back. Also, technology, ideally, should take a back seat to pedagogy. This was not always the case because of the teachers' own lack of experience.

4. STUDENT AND TEACHER IMPRESSIONS

-   Attendance was high, students themselves admitted to never wanting to miss this course.

-   Stronger participation and involvement (the affective side of learning).

-   More active — interaction with the technologies (constructivism: reformulated knowledge to understand and remember more).

-   Not perfect: students found *DECclic II* frustrating, but that was partly because of teacher inexperience with the tools and the fact that it was just coming on line and there were many bugs to be worked out.

5. STUDENT COMMENTS

(Quotes taken from the final exams)

Stephanie   "Using on-line discussion groups and telecommunications helps you learn information about people from different ethnic backgrounds… learning where and how they grew up, using a personal approach. I think you learn much more from someone when they are directly telling you their story than when a book has been written about them."

Kimberly   "I enjoyed the Vanier experience because I think that interaction with others is the best way to learn new things"

Sacha-Kim   "Our project with Vanier made me discover a lot of new technology that I had never used… I learned a lot from others by their opinions. I really liked working with such a diverse group!"

Simon   "The next generation will probably have computers in their pockets everyday."

Michelle   "The Vanier experiment also highlighted our ability to be in contact with others and learn from their experiences and beliefs in order to enrich our lives and enhance our current sources of knowledge."

Stacey   "A computer is like a 500 lb book. It has everything on it."

Ashley	"The experiment with Vanier helped me to accept others' opinions… being from such a small town (Mutton Bay) where everyone basically has the same mentality, it was nice to see different views, to see how personalities were the same and to see how some of them clashed."
Duane	"This is a class where you can actually learn things that will stay in your mind and in your way you act for the rest of your life. It is trying to break slowly barriers through the new generations."
Zoë	"When confronted with world views that are in conflict with my own, I start by being mad, honestly. Then I take a second to think and listen. I believe that when there is a conflict the best way is to calm down then talk."
Caroline	"The world view course helps us to understand the way different cultures or generations see the world… It helps us understand the rest of the world by their thoughts and their visions of things… If we can understand [that]… the world could be far better than it is now."

6. TEACHERS' IMPRESSIONS OF THE COURSE, AND OF THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR THEMSELVES

- Learning curve very steep for both teachers in terms of technology.

- Both learned a lot from each other: creative input, ways of dealing with challenges, use of technology, problem solving, etc.

- Got acquainted with how things are done in another Cegep.

- Building an entirely new course and dealing with new technology was at points very time-consuming.

- The success of the course was obvious to both teachers right from the beginning: the groups were closely knit, all activities worked very well despite technological glitches, and students responded very positively.

7. MAGIC MOMENTS

- During class group work, watching students handle three or four windows (*Skype* for communication, *DECclic* for assignment and posting answers, *Google* docs for team writing, and often web searches to gather information).

- "I could hear a pin drop" (Sophie in chat) — the students were so focused.

- Trouble shooting when things didn't work (*Skype* — voice or chat).

- Australia group, communication difficulties "Would you like me to talk to Sophie so she can talk to them?" "No, I guess I shouldn't go behind their backs, I should talk to them myself and tell them how we feel" (script writing, feeling out of control) — considering the course is called "World Views", an important concept explored is the importance of communication, especially in conflicts, and we were living it.

- The technology and the exercises where not just a vehicle for passing content, but an integral part of the learning experience.

8.   RECOMMENDATIONS

-    Lowering exposure to technology to a portion of class time. Students, halfway through the semester, found that there was a bit of a technology overload.

-    Therefore, increasing time apart to better use our time together.

-    Reworking the guidelines to the Discussion Groups assignment: discussions should be less frequent, involve less reading but be better supervised.

-    The *Worldviews course* works very well in the context of in-class activities and mixed group work. The *Knowledge course* will use this format as well, but should also include more actual content.

9.   IT LEAVING SKILLS

Post-secondary institutions are focusing more and more on the idea that all students should graduate with a set of specific information technology skills (IT Leaving Skills). What should all college graduates (not just those in computer science programs) leave college with when it comes to computer savvy?

They should be experienced in: keyboarding, conducting effective internet research, navigating learning platforms, producing multi-facetted *PowerPoint* presentations, desktop publishing, video editing, web-site creating, multi-media presentations, and even e-mail etiquette!

Go back ten years — who owned a cell phone? Go back 5 years — who owned an *ipod*? What will the working world look like for today's students? We cannot even imagine, but we do know that it will look different than today, and our classrooms need to look different than yesterday. Second language and history teachers are using pod casts, *ipods* and communication programs with great success in their classrooms. This is the planet of our students. Land on it before you start teaching or risk finding yourself in a vacuum!

10.   TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNICATION

Technology

If a teacher wanted to try something like this with one of their courses, what would be easy and not too time consuming to try? What do they need to consider?

Golden Rule   You don't have to know everything. It is okay to explore together with your students. If you wait until you know more than them it is never going to happen — technology is their planet, remember! An example; I asked my students to work in teams to create a multi-media document on a section of our Knowledge course. I did not specify the format; just that they needed images, sound, and it could not simply be a paper. One of the groups created a wonderful document with windows movie maker using avatars from the Logitech camera software they found on one of the computers in the lab. They wrote a script with a dialogue between Mary Shelly (the eighteenth century author, *Frankenstein* (the main character and creator of…) and the monster (who we usually incorrectly call *Frankenstein*). They discussed the philosophical ramifications of playing god and what it means to be human (absurdity and the human condition) in a profound way, yet they also acquired information technology skills none of us had

previous to the assignment. They had not used and recorded avatars nor used windows movie maker (they recorded multiple speeches for each character then spliced them together in the correct order after the fact). This was a wonderful example of learning new technologies together, on the fly so to speak. You need to have a high tolerance for risk, but the payoffs can be phenomenal. Good technical support is important, but often someone in the class already has some possible solutions to problems that may arise. Do expect things to bug. Think of it as part of the learning experience for you and the students. Finding solutions is part of the process. My hierarchy of solutions: try to figure it out myself, check the plugs, re-boot, ask students, and last of all, go for help.

Silver Rule   There are usually many ways to do the same thing.

Bronze Rule   Start small, make mistakes, learn from them.

11. COMMUNICATION: REAL PEOLPE CONNECTING IN AN UNREAL WORLD

Why is this useful? Can it work with the class down the hall? Another city, province, country?

Students:

- Learn about others, makes them more aware of themselves
- Learn to use tools, increased comfort level, savvy, on-the-cutting-edge awareness
- Interest, appeals to the affective component of learning

Teachers:

- Research shows we learn most from fellow teachers (more than books or courses)
- Sharing ideas, materials, strategies, collaborating, problem solving
- Affective, more fun working together!

12. WHAT KINDS OF COURSES LEND THEMSELVES WELL TO THIS KIND OF LEARNING EXPERIENCE?

A course of ideas and skills. Humanities courses could be thought of as low content, or more correctly, the content is a vehicle for skills, attitudes, concepts, and practices — ways of being that will help our students be more reflective, effective writers, enthusiastic readers, more tolerant, stronger communicators, and well organized. Students can grasp these concepts whether we teach them *The Davinci Code* or *Frankenstein*.

Innovative practices help us reach students because they are more actively involved (socio-constructivism), innovative practices reach students on an affective plan (they enjoy it and want to do more) and innovative practices keep teachers evolving in their relation to the course content and teaching methods.

13. THREE SANITY SAVERS

(Parallel to the Gold, Silver and Bronze Rules, but worth being reminded of!)

1. **Expect things to go wrong.** (Advise students and yourself that this is part of the learning process.)

2. **Plan B.** Have a back-up plan on hand: a film, exercise, reading, etc. that can be used when technology fails and there will be less time lost.

3. **Go with the flow.** Sophie and Sharon often found the technology taking us someplace different than we had foreseen. Be ready to capitalize on it the learning outcomes are still on track. Over plan and let communication sessions run longer if good things are happening. Or switch to a new activity earlier if the technology doesn't pan out.

14. **MORE IMPORTANT THAN COMPUTER KNOW-HOW IS YOUR TOLERANCE FOR UNPREDICTABLE LEARNING SITUATIONS (connected to the 3 sanity savers)**

Top Ten Worries...

1. Will the technology work?
2. Will the students understand it? ... Be able to do it?
3. Do I know it well enough to explain it?
4. How long will it take?
5. Will the server crash if everyone goes on-line at the same time?
6. Will everyone be able to see/hear?
7. Do we have enough computers/webcams/headsets?
8. Will they learn what I want them to?
9. Will they cheat?
10. Will they get sidetracked by *MSN*?

15. **CONSOLE YOURSELF**

Most Cegep students have spent hundreds of hours of classes that function on the "read and write about it" mode (RAWAI). Using alternative ways of exploring concepts isn't necessarily better, but most students are happy just to do something different. That added novelty stirs up a little enthusiasm, that interest helps attendance, and that participation helps lodge concepts and information more firmly in our students' memories, so five years from now, things they learned in our classrooms may still hold some weight in their gray matter!