The Role of Undergraduate Students in Internationalizing the Curriculum

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This paper describes a collaborative project conducted in a senior-level technical communication course to involve undergraduate students in the process of internationalizing the curriculum at the University of Central Florida (UCF). The students in the class were all majoring in English/technical communication. For their course project, they researched, wrote, edited, designed, and produced a Research Guide to help undergraduate students add international elements to their research and to heighten their awareness and understanding of intercultural communication and global issues. The project was created for UCF’s Office of International Studies (OIS) and the assistant director of the office served as the students’ client for the semester-long project. An increased global awareness and expanded knowledge of international issues were the primary benefits for the students who wrote the Research Guide. However, they also received numerous other benefits related to the development of skills vital to their professional success. The benefits of the Research Guide extend to the entire university community. On the most basic level, the very existence of the guide serves to raise awareness of international issues. The fact that it covers all the colleges and is intended for all students at the university, not merely those students pursuing majors in international business or political science, sends a message that international awareness is important for all majors, all students, and in fact, all members of the UCF community.

Keywords: undergraduate students, global education, global citizenship, international research, technical communication, international curriculum

Introduction

A great deal of attention has been focused on the need to internationalize the curriculum in colleges and universities. There has been recognition of the need for American college students to have greater international awareness and better knowledge of other cultures (Ungar, 2016). The educational system has a responsibility to produce “global citizens,” individuals who possess global knowledge, intercultural awareness, and sensitivity, and a framework for global civic engagement (Perry et al., 2013). Institutions of higher education are charged with the responsibility of fostering a global consciousness among students (Gacel-Avila, 2005). They must also prepare students to work in an increasingly global marketplace (Brustein, 2017). In the past two decades, there has been a significant increase in international business and in the number of multinational corporations (MNC). Clearly, in the 21st century, an effective college curriculum is one that broadens students’ intercultural awareness and knowledge and prepares them for the many challenges of global citizen.
Study Abroad and Other Approaches to International Education

Traditionally, international education has been linked primarily, or in some cases solely, with study abroad programs. Study abroad programs are indeed valuable and do help students develop greater understanding of other cultures, while study abroad is typically only available to a small number of students at any given university. It is often the province of the wealthier students whose parents are able to pay for their travel. Furthermore, students in some demanding majors, like Engineering, are unable to find the time to study abroad due to curricular rigidity (Rajala, 2012, p. 1381). Relegating internationalization to study abroad programs, no matter how excellent those programs are, does not allow internationalization efforts to reach as many students as other methods of internationalizing the curriculum.

Other approaches to internationalizing the curriculum, such as recruiting students and teachers from other countries and changing curricular materials to reflect non-Western perspectives. When changing curricular materials, internationalization of courses is often synonymous with making courses interdisciplinary. Institutes and seminars that focus on means to internationalize the curriculum are an excellent way to bring together faculty from many disciplines and give them the tools and the time to work on developing courses that span disciplines. The courses that result will help students understand cultural differences in context. At the University of Central Florida (UCF), faculty have an opportunity to participate in a four-day summer institute run by the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning (FCTL). There are several tracks within the institute and one of them focuses on international education. Frequently, faculty members from diverse disciplines work together in small teams to develop curriculum with an international focus. The course project described in this paper was the result of one such collaboration between the author and the individual who was the assistant director of the university’s Office of International Studies (OIS)\(^1\). The focus of the project was an at-home internationalization effort to involve students in globalizing the curriculum.

Student Involvement in Internationalization Efforts

Research has shown that active rather than passive learning is the best method for increasing students’ intercultural awareness (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1991; Merrett, 2000). Students have ample opportunities for experiential learning when participating in study abroad and when engaged in international service-learning. However, students who are unable to study abroad can benefit from assignments requiring them to collaborate with diverse others (Flammia, Cleary, & Slattery, 2010; Patterson, Carrillo, & Salinas, 2012; Sklad, Friedman, Park, & Oomen, 2016).

This paper describes a semester-long project undertaken by a technical communication class to write a guide to international research for undergraduate students at the UCF. The project directly involved students in the creation of information that would be used by undergraduate students to add international elements to their research and to heighten their awareness and understanding of intercultural issues. The project benefited the students from creating the manual in many ways. At the same time, it provided an information product that would serve the entire undergraduate student body of the university.

Background on the Collaboration and the Course

The project was the second collaboration between the author and UCF’s OIS. The first collaboration

\(^1\) The office is now called the Global Perspectives Office. At the time, the project was conducted, it was also called the Office of International Studies (OIS).
involved having one of the author’s technical documentation classes write a *Study Abroad Guide* for UCF students. The *Study Abroad Guide* was very successful. One key to the success of this document was the fact that it was written by students for students.

The project was conducted in a senior-level technical communication course (ENC 4294: Technical Documentation and Client-Based Collaboration). It is a required course for all students in the English Department’s Technical Communication Program. All the students in the class were majoring in English/technical communication. Typically, in this course, students work collaboratively on a semester-long documentation project for a client outside the university. In this particular class, the client for the students’ project was UCF’s OIS, and their contact person was Mr Angel Cardec. All of the students in the class had already completed at least one other course, in which they were required to work collaboratively to produce a long (75-100 pages) manual. The students were generally strong writers and editors. Few of the students in the course had extensive international experience/knowledge and none were international students.

**The Semester-Long Project**

The students’ project was a *Research Guide* for undergraduate students at the UCF. The purpose of the *Research Guide* was to provide UCF students with the knowledge to incorporate international elements into their research projects, and by doing so, increase their global awareness. The audience for the guide included all undergraduate students.

The *Research Guide* was intended to make students aware of all the resources available to them whether they were performing research for a specific assignment in a course or for their own personal enrichment. It was also intended to increase their awareness of diversity. The students in the course were confident about their ability to write for their intended audience, since they were all members of the audience themselves. The *Research Guide* included six major sections:

1. Internationalizing a topic;  
2. Paper design;  
3. Impact of culture on the research process;  
4. Resources and references;  
5. Precautionary measures;  
6. Finance and scholarships.

The first section told students how to add international elements to their research, particularly by focusing on the historical, geographical, political, economic, and social contexts of their topics. The second section gave students information on document design as it relates to international audiences. The third section focused on analyzing how culture affects the perception of both the researcher and the audience. Researchers need to be aware of how their worldviews impacts their writing style and treatment of their subject matter. They also need to take into consideration how readers in different cultures will perceive the information presented through the lens of their own culture. The fourth section catalogued the myriad resources available for international research including print and electronic documents, music, and art. This section also told students how to evaluate the quality and reliability of resources. The fifth section discussed ways to avoid time-consuming mistakes when conducting international research. The last section gave students information on numerous sources of funding for international research, including specific contact information and advice for applying for grants, scholarships, and fellowships.
The *Research Guide* was produced both as a print document and as a portable document format (PDF) file linked to UCF’s OIS’ website. Before creating the design for the guide, the students studied the website and print documents produced by the OIS to ensure that it would be consistent with other documentation representing the office.

**Benefits to the Technical Communication Students**

An increased global awareness and expanded knowledge of international issues were the primary benefits for the students who wrote the *Research Guide*. However, they also received numerous other benefits related to the development of skills vital to their professional success. In order to complete the project, the students developed planning and project management skills, research and interviewing skills, writing and editing skills, peer review and teamwork skills, and interpersonal communication skills. These skills are precisely the kind of core skills that employers seek in recent graduates (Bridgstock, 2009). In fact according to a survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), the ability to communicate effectively, work collaboratively, make decisions, and engage in problem solving are among the top 10 skills employers want in the recent graduates that they hire (Adams, 2014).

**Planning and Project Management Skills**

The students were given a request for proposal (RFP) by their client. In Mr Cardec’s RFP, he detailed the type of document the OIS needed and charged the students with the responsibility for creating a proposal to outline precisely how they planned to carry out the project. The students developed a detailed proposal that included a discussion of the background for the document, a thorough description of the content of the research guide, their plans for team management including the roles and responsibilities of all the team members, a project schedule, a budget, and a section discussing their qualifications that included copies of their resumes.

The students submitted the proposal to their client for review, and then, revised it based upon his comments. The final revised version of the proposal was considered a contract between the class and their client, the OIS as represented by Mr Cardec.

**Research and Interviewing Skills**

The next step in the process was for students to research the content for the guide. To do so, they worked closely with one of UCF’s research librarian who specializes in international topics. They also set up interviews with representatives from each college at the university to determine what types of information would be most relevant for different disciplines. Because the university has 13 colleges and numerous majors within each college, this task was challenging. Of course, it was not possible to produce specific information on international research customized to each and every major at the university. However, it was possible for the students to gather key resources that would serve a broad range of majors within each of the colleges.

**Writing and Editing Skills**

The students divided the work of writing the manual among the 17 members of the class. Sixteen of the students were designated writers and one student was responsible for serving as the style editor of the document. All of the students, except the style editor, wrote weekly drafts of their sections of the document. The class met on Tuesdays and Thursdays. On each Tuesday, students would edit each other’s work in class. After class, the style editor would take all the edited drafts and edited them again before giving the drafts to the professor who then edited them one more time. On Thursdays, the students would receive their edited drafts with three sets of
color-coded comments: comments in blue ink were from the peer review of one of their classmates, comments in green ink were from the style editor, and comments in red ink were from the professor.

The style editor was responsible for developing the editing cycle, for giving the students guidance regarding the use editorial marks, and for overseeing the entire process including the final editing of the completed draft.

In addition to all the internal reviews that each draft went through, the document was also reviewed at key points throughout the semester by Mr Cardec, other members of the OIS staff, and librarians, to ensure that the content was accurate and that the document met all of the OIS’s requirements. Receiving professional reviews and learning how to respond to them were the valuable part of the students’ experience in the course. Throughout the semester, all the students improved their writing and editing skills.

**Teamwork Skills**

The students worked as a team from the initial development of the project proposal to the final editing of the document. All major decisions regarding the project were made democratically with the professor retaining the right to intervene, only if the students wanted to undertake something that would not be realistic in terms of the budget and time constraints of the project. The students divided the responsibility for various aspects of the project and for the contents of the manual. Two students were chosen to serve as project managers. These students handled scheduling, disseminated information to their classmates, took minutes of all team meetings, and generally oversaw the creation of the *Research Guide*.

Two other students served as technical editors. They helped their classmates with any problems related to technology and worked on creating the PDF version of the final document. Another student was the team’s graphics editor. This student took responsibility for coordinating all the pictures, charts, and graphs to be used in the manual, and checking them for the correct format and file type and for consistency.

Disputes were to be handled by the project managers initially and referred to the professor if they could not be resolved at that level. However, during the course of the semester, there were no problems requiring mediation either by the professor or the project managers. One reason why the team can function so well was that all team members were involved in the creation of the proposal, which in addition to serving as a contract between the team and their client, and also served as a contract for the team members with one another.

**Interpersonal Communication Skills**

The students developed their interpersonal communication skills throughout the semester. They were required to participate in all class discussions. During the semester, each student gave an oral presentation to the class focusing on some aspect of research, editing, or intercultural communication that could be of help to the class as they worked on the project. Another benefit was the experience students gained dealing with a client in a professional setting. They found this experience to be useful preparation for their future careers.

**International Awareness**

The greatest benefit for the students writing the *Research Guide* was the new level of understanding and knowledge, and expertise they gained regarding international research. The level of international awareness of the students increased dramatically even for those students who entered the course with some knowledge of international issues and with experience traveling abroad.

Many of the students in the class expressed regret that they had not known more about international research, and particularly about the many funding opportunities for research and studying abroad, earlier in
their college careers. Most of the students in the class were in their senior year and would be graduating at the end of the next semester.

Benefits to Students, Faculty, and the University Community as a Whole

The Research Guide itself provides valuable information that can serve as a starting point for international research for a student in virtually any major that UCF offers. In the course of conducting their research, the class learned of many existing resources that they brought to the attention of their audience. Some of these resources were centrally located in the library and other resources were located in various colleges and departments around campus. Furthermore, the section they included on financial aid for international research projects will help students seek out opportunities that they might not have considered otherwise.

Faculty may wish to use the guide as a basis for assignments in their courses. As part of their research, students interviewed faculty members in many departments. The guide includes information relevant to numerous disciplines and may inspire faculty members by sparking ideas of the ways that they can incorporate international assignments in their courses.

Clearly, the benefits of the Research Guide extend to the entire university community. On the most basic level, the very existence of the guide serves to raise awareness of international issues. The fact that it covers all the colleges and is intended for all students at the university, not merely those students pursuing majors in international business or political science, sends a message that international awareness is important for all majors, all students, and in fact, all members of the UCF community.

Suggestions for Similar Projects in Other Courses

This particular project required a heavy component of research and writing, and therefore, it was well-suited to students majoring in technical communication. However, such a writing project might also be appropriate for students in other majors, including business, communication, journalism, marketing, public relations, history, foreign languages, and political science, to name just a few.

Another way to approach such a project would be to involve a team of students across disciplines. For example, information technology or digital media majors could be charged with designing a website, and business or communication majors could be responsible for researching and writing the content of the site. Such an approach would have many benefits both for the students working on the project and for the students who would use the document they produced. As noted earlier, one approach to internationalization is through interdisciplinary courses. A project, like the one described in this paper, could be a major assignment in a team-taught interdisciplinary course that would bring together students from at least two different majors. Such a project would allow students to understand the complexity of international issues and to see the importance understanding them in historical, political, economic, and social contexts. It would be a very effective way of demonstrating these concepts, because students would be involved in active rather than passive learning. Further, students would actually be involved in the creation of content for their peers.

Students working on such a project would be challenged to reach out and interact with faculty and staff in other colleges, departments, and support offices on campus, as well as working with librarians. They would become much more involved in the campus community, and this involvement would benefit them, the users of their documents, and the campus community as a whole. The involvement would benefit students in their professional development and allow them to use skills relevant to their future careers. It would benefit the users
of the document by providing practical information and by increasing their awareness of how international issues relate to the disciplines when they are studying. Finally, it would benefit the community as a whole by raising awareness of the importance of international issues across campus and providing a starting point for further discussion and exploration of these issues in a way that is relevant to all students, faculty, departments, and colleges on campus.

Conclusion

Projects like the one described in this paper are an effective means for getting students involved in the process of internationalizing the curriculum. The projects have numerous benefits for students, faculty members, and the entire university community. Such projects are a viable alternative to study abroad and have the potential to impact a much larger number of students than traditional study abroad programs. Although the project described in this article was conducted in a technical communication course, similar projects can be undertaken in a wide range of other disciplines.

References


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