

Conducting an intercontinental PGT seminar via video conference

What did/do you do?

We used a video-conference suite to deliver cross-institutional PGT seminar teaching with York University, Canada.

Who is involved?

At Newcastle, this initiative involved the following members of the university community:

- Dr. Matt Davies, Dr. Kyle Grayson, and Dr. Simon Philpott were the academic leads on this project in their roles as instructors on the module POL 8048: World Politics and Popular Culture.
- PGT students from across the HASS faculty who were enrolled on the module.
- Ian Grunhut who provided technical support in relation to the video-conferencing suite

At York University in Canada, this initiative involved the following members of the university community:

- Prof. David Mutimer who was the academic lead for the graduate module
- MA and doctoral students from across the Arts and Social Sciences faculty who were enrolled on the module
- Technicians who managed the video-conferencing suite

How do you do it?

The seminars were co-designed and co-taught with our colleague at York--including identical reading lists and topics for the weeks that videoconferencing took place--but the modules were not integrated at an institutional level because of differences in assessment norms, contact time, and the start dates of the academic term. Beyond content, we ensured that both seminars were scheduled at the same time. While it sounds easy, this was perhaps the most difficult part of the start-up organising because of the inherent difficulties of navigating two timetabling systems, two room booking systems, and a five hour time difference.

There was a considerable amount of communication between the Newcastle and York teams in order to select topics and readings that would be appropriate given the differing levels of experience--from UK based PGTs with 3 years of academic training to Canadian based PGTs and PGRs with a minimum of 4 years and as much as 7 years of discipline specific training.

We actively sought to avoid having the co-taught seminars become a mere gimmick. Thus, we took measures to ensure that the videoconferencing contributed to module aims and outcomes by making the linked seminars meaningful for the students in terms of their individual and collective learning experiences. Each weekly seminar was conducted by video-conference allowing students from both institutions to interact with one another as well as with academic staff in real-time across the Atlantic. Students were divided into weekly presentation groups that crossed institutional sites by including at least one member from Newcastle and York. They prepared their presentations using online communication tools like email, Skype, and Google Drive and then delivered them during seminar time as a team. The videoconferencing technology allowed for presentation aids like PowerPoint slides, YouTube videos, and MP3s--central objects of analysis for the module--to be viewed/listened to at both sites in real time.

Teaching and Learning Case Study

2013/14

Matt Davies
Kyle Grayson
Simon Philpott
Politics

Coherent Curriculum themes:

- Research-informed teaching
- Skills and employability

Other keywords:

PGT, video conference, seminar, internationalisation, collaborative teaching, research-led teaching

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Why do you do it?

There were several reasons for undertaking this pilot. In term of pedagogy, we felt that this project:

- provided an opportunity for sustained cultural exchange at no cost for students located at different institutions;
- exposed Newcastle PGT students to their academic peers located at an elite social sciences university in Canada. This gave our PGT students who had just started their degrees an opportunity to be socialised into the norms of PG study and seminar discussion by peers--most of the York students were far more experienced than their Newcastle counter-parts. It also provided our PGTs with an awareness of the quality of their competitors in the global employment marketplace;
- introduced students to emerging forms of communication--such as videoconferencing, Skype, and online collaborative working environments like Google Drive--that are becoming commonplace in the work environment;
- enriched seminar discussions by having students and instructors of diverse backgrounds and politico-cultural reference points engage in an informed exchange of views on key topic areas in the field;
- provided an opportunity for students to participate in collaboration from a distance, a challenging form of team work.

Moreover, we felt that this teaching experience would feed into our research by:

- providing a catalyst for further collaboration with colleagues at York on joint-funding applications in the area of popular culture and world politics
- providing data for the development of a learning and teaching article on inter-institutional seminars via video-conference.

Does it work?

In a word: yes! The technology itself was marvellous. Lag was rare, and, at its worst, was barely perceivable. The system was also reliable. We had very few problems connecting--most of these could be attributed to user error--and in over 20hrs of videoconferencing, our connection only dropped once. The sound was clear and cameras could be controlled to focus on individuals who were talking so that people at the remote site could tell who was speaking. Presentation aids also could be viewed and listened to at both sites without any difficulty.

Student feedback also indicated that they found the experience beneficial. As one student stated, 'I really liked how we could have our class with students from York University; this was such an innovative concept! It allowed for greater collaboration and allowed us to hear more viewpoints.'

For us, while encompassing significant start-up costs, the experience was very enjoyable and rewarding. Not only was this a fun module to teach because of the inter-institutional collaboration, but it has also led to peer recognition in the form of a forthcoming interview on our approach to teaching popular culture and world politics in the journal Transformations as well as our participation--with our colleague at York--on a dedicated learning and teaching roundtable at the annual Popular Culture and World Politics conference in Stockholm. Finally, we are currently working with our partner at York on a large grant application with the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.