

CASE STUDIES AND BEST PRACTICES IN SWEDEN

Erasmus+ KA2 project: “REACT - Creation of a Collaborative Environment in e-classrooms”

Intellectual Output 2 “Creation of a set of innovative activities, tools and educational collaborative methods adapted to a virtual classroom curriculum”

Erasmus+ Project
KA2 - Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices
Project Number: 2020-1-DE02-KA226-VET-007926



CASE STUDY 2 - CROSS-CULTURAL ONLINE COURSE IN CRIMINOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

The case presents applied collaborative online learning in a cross-cultural context and highlights the benefits of technology use to overcome geographical, financial and cultural barriers. The course was implemented as a collaboration project between two universities in Sweden and the United States, initiated by the course professors in 2015.

OVERVIEW

The case study involves two universities collaborating for a 4-week online course in criminology: The Holy Names University (United States) and the University of Gävle (Sweden). This cross-cultural course was established to give students the chance to experience “studying abroad” without the barriers of relocation and need for scholarships.

There were some institutional differences that had to be overcome for this cooperation. While for US students, participation in the online course was mandatory within their study program, the course was voluntary for the Swedish students. Each university applied their own grading system regarding the collaborative work of the students.

Another major institutional difference relates to the criminological approach in the two countries. Sweden is known for its emphasis on prevention and rehabilitation with overall lower incarceration rates, whereas the US is rather characterized by a punitive model with high incarceration rates. This pronounced difference in criminal justice policy between the countries was made a central aspect of cross-cultural learning and provided the grounds for active discussion and reflection among the students in the course.

The teachers responsible for the collaborative online course were Dr. Gallo from the US University and Dr. Lilja from the Swedish university, each responsible for the criminology program in their departments and both with previous experience in online collaborative learning. They were supported by the instructional designer Dr. Fowlin.

Blackboard was used as main learning management system as it was familiar to students and staff of both institutions. Especially the wiki, discussion forum and journal were important tools chosen to facilitate the course. Additional tools as Skype and Google Hangouts were selected to support the video meetings for synchronous communication.

The criminology course was designed to promote participation of first-generation students, students of color and students with lower family income in abroad study programs. Establishing the cross-cultural study experience in an online format minimized the need for financial resources and provided a low-threshold solution for students.

The main approach that guided the educational processes was computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL). The approach was chosen for its integration of technological, social and educational components. Social interaction in a cross-cultural environment was a central aspect of the learning experience.

Instructional theories applied in the design of the course included sociocultural learning, situated learning, communities of practice and distributed cognition.

For a student-centered approach, the course designers decided to make students' own contributions a major focus of the learning. Next to group research papers, students were required to engage in a written discussion forum where they commented, reflected and discussed course content with each other. A personal journal gave students additional room for reflection on group collaboration, course content and personal learning strategies.

To set the context for an engaging collaborative learning experience, the introduction to the course was given high importance. Cultural differences between Sweden and the US were addressed as well as the institutional differences between the participating universities. With this understanding, common ground rules were defined for successful collaboration that fit the needs of students and staff from both institutions. Important issues were the agreement on preferred working times that respected the time difference between Sweden and the US, and cultural habits on communication, work ethics and holidays.

An open forum was established for students to get to know each other already before the start of the course. Also the teachers of the course introduced themselves in a personal presentation to highlight approachability and encourage contact between students and course facilitators.

RESULTS

Important lessons learned during the implementation of the course:

- Availability of Wi-Fi at the university and students' mobile data access are important to ensure communication between and within the teams. The teaching staff had to be prepared to provide alternative solutions for students without own Wi-Fi access.
- Difference in time zones has to be taken into account not only for synchronous communication moments, but also to allow timely feedback in discussion forums before a deadline.

- The social forum integrated in the course turned out not to be necessary, as students communicated on personal topics also during synchronous meetings and through personal social media accounts.
- Students reported to have had an intellectually and socially enriching experience during the course.
- Reactions to mandatory video meetings between students were mixed. On the one hand, mandatory meetings were found to encourage collaboration and social interaction. On the other hand, students felt they reduced their flexibility and conflicted with personal schedules.
- The collaborative online course in Criminology between Sweden and the US was overall rated as a successful exchange of learning and co-creation of knowledge between the two universities.

CONCLUSIONS

The chosen approach provided grounds for knowledge construction, negotiation of meaning, and it increased the students' level of critical thinking. The course succeeded in meaningfully engaging first-generation students in cross-cultural learning through online tools.

The involved universities considered the team of designers a main factor for the course's success. Expertise in social, technological and educational dimensions of online learning was crucial for successful design and implementation.

According to the teachers' evaluation, the wiki was an especially valuable tool for creating a collaborative environment of knowledge construction. They rated highly the achieved level of group interaction, reflection, problem-solving skills and critical thinking that students showed during the course.

REFERENCES

Fowlin, J.M., Gallo, C., Lilja, M. (2020). Expanding the Reach to First-Generation Students: A Collaborative Learning Experience Between Criminology Students in Sweden and the United States. In: Bishop, M.J., Boling, E., Elen, J., Svihla, V. (eds) Handbook of Research in Educational Communications and Technology. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36119-8_33