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Hybrid Courses and Online Policy Dialogues: A Transborder Distance Learning Collaboration

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Abstract

This essay describes a blended (hybrid) course collaboration used to facilitate policy dialogues between graduate students at two institutions (one in Canada and the other in the US) as a way to teach about policy. The course content and design is informed by three trends in research and practice: increased policy borrowing across boundaries and jurisdictions; calls to democratize policy making in general and in education policy in particular; and developments in teaching and learning online. Drawing on students' informal feedback in combination with reflections on instructors' experiences, we suggest that policy dialogues are a promising strategy for promoting students' learning about education policy. We also illustrate how professors can use a hybrid course structure between two institutions.

Cet essai décrit la démarche de collaboration lors d'un cours hybride visant à faciliter les dialogues politiques entre les étudiants de troisième cycle de deux établissements (un au Canada et l'autre aux États-Unis). Cette collaboration est une façon de former les étudiants au sujet de la politique. Le contenu et la forme du cours reposent sur trois tendances en matière de recherche et de pratique : accroissement de l'emprunt des politiques au-delà des frontières et des juridictions; appels à la démocratisation de l'élaboration de politiques en général et de celles relatives à l'éducation en particulier; et évolution de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage en ligne. En nous basant sur les commentaires informels des étudiants et sur les réflexions des enseignants à propos de leurs expériences, nous suggérons que les dialogues politiques constituent une stratégie prometteuse pour promouvoir l'apprentissage des étudiants en matière de politiques sur l'éducation. Nous illustrons aussi la façon dont les enseignants peuvent utiliser une structure de cours hybride entre deux établissements d'enseignement.

Keywords
blended course, hybrid course, online, policy, transborder

How should professors teach education policy? While many universities offer courses and degrees in the field of education policy studies, little is known about how professors teach education policy and the effectiveness of these methods. Research on methods for teaching policy analysis is limited to using case studies in undergraduate economics classes (Velenchik, 1995), adopting a seminar format (Croxton, Fellin, & Churchill, 1987), and interrogating policy analysis frameworks in social work education (O'Connor & Netting, 2008). As new professors of education policy, we hope to see this knowledge base expand and offer our experiences teaching a collaborative trans-border course as a step towards this goal. We propose that professors can use policy dialogues to promote students' understanding of specific policy issues, policy development, and comparative policy analysis. Policy dialogues are discussions between individuals about policy. They can occur in face-to-face, real-time environments and online. In our consideration of online policy dialogues we draw on knowledge about the impact and effectiveness of communication technologies in teaching and learning in higher education (e.g., Burnett, Dickinson, McDonagh, Merchant, Myers and Wilkinson, 2003; Motschnig-Pitrik & Holzinger, 2002; Urtel, 2008).

This essay describes a collaboration between two graduate level courses (one in Canada and the other in the United States). As course instructors, we adapted a blended (hybrid) course structure to facilitate policy dialogues between students at the two institutions as a way to teach about policy. Drawing on students' informal feedback in combination with our reflections on our experiences, we suggest that policy dialogues are a promising strategy for promoting students' learning about education policy. We also illustrate how professors can use a hybrid course structure between two institutions.

Theoretical Framework

Our course content and design is informed by three trends in research and practice: (a) increased policy borrowing across boundaries and jurisdictions (Blackmore, 2000; Halpin & Troyna, 1995; Levin, 2001); (b) calls to democratize policy making in general and in education policy in particular (Mintrom, 2009; Ozga, 2000); and (c) developments in teaching and learning online (Richardson, 2009; Walters Swenson & Evans, 2003).

In many instances, globalization and technology have dissolved national boundaries. The movement of knowledge, skills and practices around the globe is now an expectation in many fields. Policy borrowing – "taking ideas from one jurisdiction and applying them to another" (Levin, 2001, p. 7) – has received tremendous attention in the field of policy studies because the *practice* of policy borrowing has become more prevalent. However, "what works in one location may not necessarily meet the needs of another jurisdiction" (Winton & Pollock, 2009, p. 1).

There is also growing interest in democratizing policy processes. International organizations, national, state/provincial and local governments, non governmental organizations, and individual citizens around the world are encouraging greater public engagement with policy. Policy dialogues are proposed as a means for achieving this goal. For Joshee and Johnson (2007), a policy dialogue is "a process through which the parties involved convey their own sense of, position on, and story about an issue" (p. 5). Policy dialogues involve individuals coming to new understandings through listening, questioning, critiquing, discussing points of disagreement, and reflecting on their own contexts (Joshee & Johnson, 2007). They can occur in

face-to-face meetings, in asynchronous and synchronous online exchanges, and through texts (Joshee & Johnson, 2007).

Policy dialogues can serve different purposes. They may or may not be designed to inform policy (Davies, McCallie, Simonson, Lehr, & Duensing, 2009). Policy dialogues designed to directly influence policy decisions take many forms including government consultations, citizen juries, citizen consensus groups, polling, and focus groups (Canadian Policy Research Network, 2000; Co-Intelligence Agency, 1999). These dialogues are typically, although not necessarily, initiated by the decision-makers.

Conversely, some policy dialogues are not designed to influence policy. While these kinds of dialogues are growing in popularity, "dialogue events that do not seek to inform public policy are undertheorized and under-researched" (Davies et al., 2009, p. 341). Davies et al. (2009) argue that the effects of policy dialogues that are not designed to influence policy should be examined at the individual level rather than the institutional level. They propose that policy dialogues of this type are *sites of individual learning* through social processes. Individual learning through policy dialogues may have three additional effects: they may empower individuals to become further involved in the issue; they may be viewed as personally beneficial to the individual; and they may contribute to incremental changes in society (Davies et al., 2009).

In addition to enabling online policy dialogues, technological advances have helped break down barriers through numerous types of computer mediated communication (CMC), networking systems, and information gathering programs. Different forms of CMC, such as academic list serves, email, web-based course delivery tools, video conferencing, blogging and wikis are used daily by students and instructors (Collis & van der Wende, 2002) and are changing much of the research and pedagogical practice in higher education (Mitchell & Erickson, 2004). In this current education climate, "instructors must be more than information suppliers. Students already have many ways to access information. They want instructors who are guides." (Walters Swenson & Evans, 2003, p. 29).

We wanted our students to experience an enriched learning environment that reflects the changes in the field of policy as well as changes in pedagogical practices. Contemplation of internationalization by scholars and institutions is growing (Levin, 2001; The University of Western Ontario, 2009), and we wanted our students to experience some sense of this internationalization through a trans-border collaboration. We decided that structuring our courses in a way that we now understand to be blended or hybrid courses – courses that combine online practices together with other instructional tools or model – might be a way to achieve our goals. We hoped the online policy dialogues would enable students to learn from a variety of sources rather than be limited to the scope and structure of the course (Dawley, 2007). The following section describes in more detail the course design and delivery.

Collaboration Overview

During the 2009 winter semester, graduate students in education policy classes at the University at Buffalo – State University of New York (UB), in New York, USA and The University of Western Ontario (UWO) in Ontario, Canada participated in a cross-border collaborative project that aimed to promote understanding of comparative policy analysis. The project was funded by the Canadian-American Studies Committee at UB and the Transborder Research University Network at UWO.

We were aware, from our prior teaching experiences, that students registered in these courses come with varying understandings of policy, have different life experiences, and have numerous ways of gathering information through the Internet. We believed that learning is "a social event [that] requires interaction with multiple individuals, including peers" (Dawley, 2007). For this reason we hoped to create new knowledge using various forms of policy dialogues. Policy dialogues offer participants the opportunity to come to new understandings through listening, questioning, critiquing, discussing, and reflecting (Joshee & Johnson, 2007). Our challenge was to figure out how best to create policy dialogues between two groups that were in two different countries, enrolled in similar but also different graduate programs, and met at somewhat different times. To do this, we adapted a hybrid course structure for our collaboration. It included a number of different communication media such as video conferences, online dialogues (blogs), a one-day face-to-face workshop in Buffalo, New York, and local face-to-face classes. Using these media, students participated in policy dialogues that compared and contrasted education policies from both Canadian and US contexts. At the end of the course students gave us informal feedback about their experience in the collaboration. Student responses informed our personal evaluations of the strengths and weaknesses of the collaboration design and policy dialogues.

Lessons Learned

As certified public school teachers who have taught in a number of countries, we both have some degree of teaching skill and knowledge, and we are aware of the current infusion of technology and web tools to aid student learning. We are also keenly aware of the pitfalls experienced by some conscientious educators when they try to make teaching aids such as web tools fit courses, programs and curriculum. For this reason, in designing the course we first asked ourselves what we wanted students to learn about the field of education policy; then we asked what media would help to achieve these outcomes. Our students were expected to examine various theoretical approaches to educational policy analysis; apply divergent theoretical approaches to policies in their local context and their neighbouring country; recognize global patterns in educational policy; identify global trends in local educational policy contexts; and conduct a comparative analysis of an educational policy issue. Considering the course objectives, we believed policy dialogues might be an effective means of achieving them. Policy dialogues reflect and support our desire that students be knowledge generators and not mere knowledge consumers (Dawley, 2007). Thus, we needed to provide multiple and variable opportunities for students to interact. Using both face-to-face and computer-mediated communication enabled both synchronous (real time) and asynchronous interactions. As mentioned above, we used video-conferencing, blogs and one face-to-face workshop.

Approaches to Policy Dialogues

Each of the three communication media - video conferencing, blogs and face-to-face interactions - supported the policy dialogues in different ways and also posed different challenges in course delivery. These supports and challenges are described for each of these communication media through a discussion about the technology and organization of the media

used in the courses and through exploring the teaching and learning that occurred with the use of each media.

Video conferencing. For purposes of this essay, video conferencing can be defined as "a live connection between people in separate locations for the purpose of communication, usually involving audio…text as well as video" (Tufts University, Educational Media Center, n.d. in Newman, Falco, Silverman, & Barbanell, 2008, pp. 1-2). Emerging research demonstrates that video conferencing can support student learning when used within regular classrooms during the formative years; students who have experienced video conferencing develop a greater capacity for problem-solving, discussion and questioning (Barbanell, 2008; Newman, 2005; Newman, Falco, Silverman, & Barbanell, 2008). It also provides students with opportunities to reflect on multiple resources of information and transfer knowledge (Newman et al., 2008). With these documented successes in the K-12 public school system, we expected the video conferences to generate outcomes that would lead to rich policy dialogues between and within the two graduate classes.

We used video conferencing on four occasions. Each video conference had a different purpose and each was setup in a slightly different manner. The first was held at the beginning of the course and was meant to facilitate the social process of course participation by creating space for student introductions (Merrill, 2004). The second video conference was a multi-point, provider-based video conference (Newman et al., 2008) that featured a guest speaker from the Ontario Ministry of Education's Leadership Division who was considered to be an expert in policy making in the provincial government. She participated from a third video conference site. The third video conference was a collaborative classroom video conference that included a discussion between the two classes that focused on international trends in education policy. The last video conference consisted of a guest lecturer who presented in person to the UB class and to UWO via video conference. Each of these video conferences revolved around policy dialogue, that is, they provided time for students to ask questions to presenters and each other, to present different perspectives, and reflect on their own understanding and experiences.

Technology and organization. Being digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001) who wanted to keep up with the ever changing digital world but not necessarily being at the forefront, we made some inaccurate assumptions concerning the use of video conferencing. From a technical standpoint we hoped to begin at a basic level. We chose video conferencing because we thought that since it has been around for a while it was generally well known, "low tech", available in almost all educational institutions, required few additional skills and learning, and was one way to facilitate a sense of connection through "seeing" fellow students. Things turned out to be a little more complex than we anticipated, however, and we learned quickly. At a very basic level there were logistical issues. The scheduled time and the length of the video conferences were problematic. Classes at the two institutions were scheduled at slightly different times, and as a result at the video conferences could only last 50 minutes – at the end of the UB students' class and at the beginning of the UWO students' class. Because many of the UB students had a second class after the policy class they had to leave at a set time which meant that discussions sometimes ended abruptly.

There were also technical issues. Because video conferencing was new to us, we were not aware of the implications of different video conferencing equipment and facilities for the video conferences. For example, differences in the ability of the course instructors to control the camera proved to be an important issue. The UB instructor did not have control over the camera

whereas the UWO instructor did. The UWO instructor was therefore able to focus the camera on individual speakers at UWO enabling UB viewers to see speakers clearly and pick up nonverbal cues. This facilitated UB students' understanding of what was spoken. At UB, the instructor did not have control of the camera. Instead, the camera was positioned in a way that captured all twelve students in a single frame and enabled UWO students to see them all at all times. Because there was considerable distance between the speakers and the camera, UWO students were not always able to determine which UB student was speaking. This made it challenging to read the speaker's nonverbal cues. This experience showed us the value in having a sensitive camera controller and the importance of nonverbal cues in video conferencing.

Teaching and learning. We soon learned that other kinds of teaching and learning had to occur to ensure greater success at video conferencing. Although both happen in "real time", many students were not prepared for the differences that exist between a face-to-face class and a video conference. As Dawley (2007) points out, "participants need initial training in how to effectively use and participate in [it]" (p. 147). Engagement with video conferencing technology required adjustments in student behaviours. For example, individuals needed to ensure that microphones were turned off unless they were speaking. If they did not turn them off, the sounds of papers rustling, watches scraping, noses blowing, and pens clicking interfered with students' ability to hear speakers (Winton & Pollock, 2009). Since there was a sluggish relay time between when someone spoke and when those words were heard at the other site, students had to learn to set aside an extended wait time before speaking failure to do so meant responses could be interpreted as an interruption, and in extreme cases, rudeness, which may not have necessarily been the communicator's intent.

Technical issues aside, did the video conferencing help to meet the course content goals? The synchronous nature of video conferencing provided students with the opportunity to compare policy and discuss policy issues with those in another country who have firsthand knowledge and life experience of how the policies play out in that context. Students told us they believed they learned more about a policy issue from the discussions held via video conference than they could have learned from simply reading a policy document. Students also said they appreciated having their questions answered immediately. Further, students and faculty felt that the discussions held via video conferences encouraged national comparisons that they did not believe they would have considered in discussions limited to their respective classrooms (Winton & Pollock, 2009).

The video conferences enabled students to hear, share, and question guest speakers in the two countries. For instance, the three-way video conference with a policymaker in Ontario's Ministry of Education enabled American students to learn about Ontario policymaking. Before the video conference all participants read a brief article about American policymaking which encouraged comparison between policymaking processes from both countries' perspectives including the article's author, the Ontario policymaker, and students' lived experiences.

Video conferencing made plain differences in general global awareness. American students appeared to have little awareness of Ontario policies or points of reference. The Canadian group, on the other hand, seemed to have some knowledge of American policies (e.g., No Child Left Behind). One student who was from Africa commented that there is an assumption in his home country that because he is studying abroad he is aware of, and has exposure to, global policies and understandings. Up until this collaboration, however, his exposure had been limited to the USA. The video conferences exposed him to not just American issues and

perspectives, but also Canadian ones. These observations confirm Dawley's (2007) claim that "users gain a more global view of the world by interacting with participants from various locations" (p. 147).

Blogging. Knowledge generation requires an element of reflection and we were aware that in synchronous situations such as video conferencing, the face-to-face situations provided for little reflection time. Romiszowski and Mason (2001) support this belief and point out that "computer-mediated discourse achieves a higher overall reflective level than reflections generated by teachers in face-to-face discourse" (p. 413). Aside from another way to connect these two courses, blogging provided the flexibility for students to reflect and research before posting or responding. Blogs (short for weblogs) are posted on a type of website that is easily created and updateable so that author(s) can instantly post on the Internet from any Internet connection. Blog websites are different from general websites; they "are not built on static chunks of content. Instead, they are comprised of reflections and conversations…Blogs engage readers with ideas and questions and links. They ask readers to think and to respond. They demand interaction" (Richardson, 2009). Blogs were included as part of the course delivery with the intent that the interactions within the blogs would reflect policy dialoguing.

Technology and structure. In an attempt to provide structure for students, we placed students from both institutions into closed groups according to related policy topics of interest. We asked students to apply newly-learned approaches to analyzing policy to their common policy issue. This well-intended structure turned out to be unsuccessful. This was in part due to changes in students' interests as they progressed in their research. Students who shared interests at the beginning of the course ultimately examined different policy issues. Changes in focus meant that in order for students to support one another's research, students often had to undertake new research on topics different from their own. As a result, students spent more time learning about one another's policy issue than on applying the analytical lenses to a single issue that everyone understood.

Teaching and learning. Dawley (2007) asserts that blogs are one way to "support the writing process, reflection in learning, provide student empowerment, and to promote the idea of students as experts in their own learning process" (p. 208). This did not happen with our well-intended collaboration. The purpose of the blogs was to generate knowledge through an online policy dialogue. This required skills other than those needed for knowledge mastery. We assumed that since most students would have at least an undergraduate degree, and in the case of Canadian students, an education degree, and were in a graduate program, they would have had some experience in knowledge generation. However, students seemed to be more comfortable and familiar with traditional knowledge mastery where the process of learning occurs through automated procedural knowledge (Gagne, Yekovich, & Yekovich, 1993). We realize now that students need to know how to conduct and analyze research even if it is merely searching for applicable resources and that as instructors we have to explicitly state these expectations (Walters Swenson & Evans, 2003) and then provide an opportunity for students to learn these necessary skills.

The expectation of reflection and rich, in-depth contributions created anxiety and discomfort for many participants. Many students felt the blogs were not as effective as they might have been. They asked for clearer expectations from faculty, and some expressed frustration that often the questions they posed to their group were not answered immediately or at all. Sometimes the reported information was inaccurate. Nevertheless, a few students told us

that the blogs enabled access to policy documents and research that they would not otherwise have been aware of or able to access, and most students felt that with some modifications to the approach taken in this course, blogging could support their learning.

One-day workshop. The two courses were considered hybrids because they used a number of different media and two different face-to-face settings. Each class had face-to-face contact with a principal course instructor in a traditional classroom setting. But because this was a cross-border comparative policy initiative, we thought that it would also be beneficial for students to have a face-to-face experience with students from across the border.

Technology and organization. As mentioned earlier, students from UWO travelled across the Canada-US border to UB for a one-day workshop. The day began with a presentation from an experienced cross-border policy researcher. She described her experiences conducting historical research as an American in a small Canadian town. Next, students met with the students in their blog groups where they took turns presenting their developing comparative policy research papers. Later, students were regrouped and again presented their developing work. This enabled students to hear research on a variety of policy issues as well as receive feedback on their own work.

Teaching and learning. We believe students greatly benefitted from their peers' comments on their comparative research papers. Students seemed to enjoy interacting face-to-face more than blogging or video conferencing. This was not surprising as we were asking many of the students to step outside their comfort zone, yet only provided limited direction and support. For example, we did not review video etiquette or stress its importance before they occurred. We assumed that students had the skills and knowledge to be knowledge generators for the blogs, but this was not the case. When in doubt people generally revert back to what they are used to and for our students that seemed to be traditional ways of learning. We realize now, as Walters Swenson and Evans (2003) point out, "[s]tudents need preparation for taking a hybrid courses. They need to know how to work the technology and conduct research" (p. 30).

Overall Content Goal

While the blogs and video conferences were not without challenges, we believe the collaboration enhanced students' understanding of the ways national and local contexts affect policy making and implementation. We noted differences in the course discussions and assignments between students who participated in the cross-border dialogues and those who did not (in our previous classes). Informally, some students said the cross border dialogues helped them better understand their own contexts and the limits their context places on local policy. They also said they knew more about policy in the other nation as a result of the cross-border policy dialogues. We feel that students in this course developed a deeper understanding of the influences of local, state/provincial, and national contexts. This deep understanding arose through attempts to explain why policies that seem similar look very different in different contexts.

Modifications

The student input and our own reflections were integrated into subsequent offerings of the course. We taught modified versions of this transborder distance learning initiative again in 2010 and 2011. Upfront, we made the course expectations explicit both for the course content and with regard to the intended learning process and knowledge generation. From a technical perspective, video conferencing etiquette was introduced and reviewed before each video conference. We organized the blogs differently since students and faculty indicated they have potential for enhancing learning. Subsequent blogs were open to everyone with threaded discussions on different policy topics. This change resulted in related dialogues and resources being located in one place.

We also increased the number of face-to-face workshops. "Students recommended meeting face-to-face early in the course to meet one another and build connections that might further the success of the blogs and video conferences" (Winton & Pollock, 2009). The student advice reflects Walters Swenson & Evans's (2003) advice that "early face-to-face sessions improve the course experience" (p. 38). The final workshop remained an opportunity for students to present their culminating course work, which some have determined to be very desirable (Walters Swenson & Evans, 2003).

In terms of course content around comparative policy analysis and the use of policy dialogues, we spent time in early classes explaining how education is organized and administered in the two national contexts. This includes how policy is developed, who participates in making policy decisions, the history of public education, funding of education, and local, state/provincial, and federal roles and responsibilities for public education. The policy dialogues focussed on specific policy issues shared by both nations. The dialogues were supported by common readings about the issue in the two countries.

Finally, we formally collected data from students about their experiences so we can confirm, or perhaps challenge, our current beliefs about the usefulness of policy dialogues for teaching and learning about education policy. In our data analysis we will explore the differences between face-to-face policy dialogues, which seemed to easily encourage student engagement and collaboration, with policy dialogues online. In order for deep learning to occur with on-line course design, interaction is necessary (Draves, 2000; Kearsley, 2000). In our case, if students are to engage in comparative policy analysis that includes the "other" country, student interaction is critical. For this reason, engaging students online has become more intentional. We applied a modified version of Conrad and Donaldson's (2004) developmental approach. This approach consists of four stages or phases of engagement: newcomer (instructors are social negotiators); co-operator (instructors are structural engineers); collaborator (teachers are facilitators); and initiator/partner (teachers are community members/ challengers). This developmental approach assists adult learners in transitioning from being knowledge consumers where information is merely transferred from teacher/expert to learner to knowledge generators where the learner moves past knowledge consumption to becoming a confident generator of meaningful knowledge for themselves and others.

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