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Zhenlin Gao
Shenzhen Polytechnic

Tom Green
Humber Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning

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Integrating Global Collaboration

Zhenlin Gao & Tom Green

Introduction

In the spring of 2011 I found myself lecturing at a number of universities throughout Southern and Central China. The topic was the rise of mobile technologies and how we, as teachers, need to learn how to teach the subject and how, as students, they need to look at the mobile space as an emerging medium. As is so common with these visits, I had the pleasure of meeting with the Deans and faculty of the Media Schools and a common topic of conversation was how our institutions could work together. Being a faculty member of the School of Media Studies and Information Technology at Humber College in Toronto, putting this sort of thing in place was not in the cards and my standard response to the question was, "This sort of thing is way above my pay grade." That changed, rather quickly when I met Wang Xiaojie, Dean of the School of Animation at Shenzhen Polytechnic (SZPT).

When he suggested the usual cooperation and I deflected the question, he made it quite clear he understood my position and that I should put my Dean in touch with him. Then I told him, as the meeting concluded, "Maybe we could do something with our two groups of students." That evening one of his faculty members—Zhenlin Gao, hereafter known as Jerry, contacted me and told me Dean Wang thought that our students working together was a great idea and for Jerry to make it happen.

It was the start of one of the most fascinating student-centric educational experiences Jerry and I have shared.

Planning

You just don't pull together students on opposite sides of the planet together and tell them to go create something. Jerry and I spent a good six months considering how this would work.

The underlying premise was: Our students will be entering a global collaborative work environment upon graduation. They will be working with people who live across the street, across the country and even across the globe. This project will, in a controlled manner, provide our students with that experience.

This premise actually was validated 2 years later by a commentary by David Helf and in the *Chronicle for Higher Education* when he asked, essentially, the same question we asked: "The brains of today's undergraduates—a product of a million years of hominid evolution—are instinctively collaborative, innately cooperative, and structurally wired for small-group interaction mediated by language and an awareness of the intentionality of others. What might happen if we structured our educational system to take advantage of these natural attributes?"

We were also encouraged to see collaboration appear in the *2014 NMC Horizon Report: Higher Education Edition*. One of the 6 key trends identified was the emergence of Collaborative Learning. In many respects this project reinforces the observation made that "universities are experimenting with policies that allow for more freedom in interactions between students working on projects and assessments."

The key questions (by both universities) during this planning phase were:

- How do we deal with differing skills and knowledge levels and facilitate a skill and knowledge transfer between the students?
- How do we accommodate the inevitable language, cultural and time differences – 36 hours- between the two groups?
- How do we manage academic credit?

First Steps

Not having any idea whether this would work or how the students would deal with collaboration, it was decided that rather than leap into the project with both students bodies we would conduct a limited test to learn how the students would work together and to identify any potential issues requiring institution resolution prior to a full ramp out.

In the winter of 2012, we asked 4 Humber and 4 Shenzhen Polytechnic (SZPT) students to participate in a test. The plan was rather simple:

1. Break into two teams comprised of 2 Humber students and two SZPT students.
2. Produce a collaborative web site within the space of 3 weeks.
3. Step back and watch the students work.

What we learned from this was:

- the students required minimal guidance from the institutions. They contacted each other and went to work.
- though we provided the two groups with Adobe Connect accounts, the students relied more on SSM, Skype

and email than the Connect software.

- language issues were resolved by the students once they discovered such services as Google Translate and Babelfish were more hindrance than help.
- the students identified the skill levels in the groups and assigned duties accordingly.

The two groups completed their projects on time and each told us it was a unique experience that should be pursued further. At this point, Jerry and I reported the results to our respective Deans with the recommendation that the Collaborative Project proceed. Our Deans both agreed with our recommendation and it was determined the first Global Collaboration would be launched in the 2012 Academic Year.

The reason for such a long period between test and launch was due to Jerry and I carefully balancing what we had learned with the student course loads. There were differing skill levels between the two cohorts, which had to be identified and adapted to.

We also spent time wrestling with Academic credit. This was an interesting problem considering SZPT is a degree granting institution and Humber is a Community College offering two-year diploma level practical programs. On top of the academic and cultural differences there were institutional and governmental differences that had to be accommodated. After 6 weeks of trying to accommodate the various institutional and governmental needs, Jerry and I suggested that each institution apply its academic credits criteria to their respective student cohorts. Both Deans readily agreed to this solution.

The next issue was when to initiate the program. Again cultural difference and vastly different academic years came into

play. Our Academic year begins in September and end in April of the following year with a 3-week Christmas vacation between semesters. SZPT has an Academic year that begins in September and ends in July with a one-month break for Chinese New Year between their semesters. As well we both had differing National holidays during our academic year. We both identified the October/November timeframe as the optimal time for the Collaboration. The first roll out, therefore, was October 2012 with a deadline for the projects on the first week of December 2012.

The project was assigned, the work teams established and the students went to work. In order to gather data regarding the effectiveness of the experiment Jerry surveyed his students before and after the project. Humber did not but, kept in almost daily contact with the Humber students and after reviewing the SZPT surveys the results were surprisingly similar for both student groups.

What we learned from the students before the first project was initiated:

- Both groups were very concerned about language differences.
- From the Chinese perspective, 95% of the students about to take part in the project did not see an opportunity to use English to communicate.
- Both groups were moderately (38%) to very confident (19%) they could complete the project,
- Neither group had any knowledge of the other's culture though the Humber cohort did include a few Chinese students.

Upon completion of the project SZPT surveyed the cohort and, again, the results between the two institutions were remarkably similar.

- Close to 78% of the students felt the project completed by their groups ran smoothly.
- The main obstacles encountered were Language, Time Zone, Communication methods and project Coordination were the top four. Culture, teamwork, skill and technical issues were below the previous four obstacles.
- 80% of the students said they would participate in future collaborations.

One added dimension to this project became evident after the Humber students graduated. A number of them reported that, during employment interviews, prospective employers recognized the value of the project on the student's resume and, in a couple of instances, was a primary factor in the student's subsequent employment. It anecdotally supports our contention that globalization requires collaboration and Global Collaborative Experience is gaining traction among employers.

The 2013 Project

In certain respects the student experience with the collaboration wasn't as positive as the previous year. As the project progressed through the October/November timeframe, the Humber students were discovering the enthusiasm and commitment levels of their SZPT partners were declining. In a November conversation with Jerry, when I became concerned, I learned there had been a policy change at SZPT regarding the academic credit where it was now regarded as extracurricular. This could be regarded as fatal to the experiment but, instead, it adds one of the most important data points to any academic institutions considering instituting a similar program: If students don't have "something at stake" – marks, academic credit- the incentive for

success will decline. We had suspected this when we first started out in 2011 and it was not a surprise when it manifested itself in 2013.

To resolve this, SZPT has agreed to offer the Collaboration as an elective available to the entire School of Animation. This decision neatly resolves the academic credit and motivation issue and actually broadens the skills sets and project scope of the groups.

Lessons Learned

Globalization means Global Collaboration drawn from teams from varying cultures and with differing skill levels. From an academic point of view this new way of working cannot be taught ... it needs to be experienced. Our students are graduating into this new environment and the experience gained during our project makes them much more adaptable to this work environment.

A student-centric focus helped bring this project to life. Both SZPT and Humber realized the experience was beneficial to the students and left the faculty to bring the project to life. Cultural and language difficulties decrease in concern among the students as they work together. Once both groups understand the task at hand they focus on the solution and find their own ways of bridging the cultural and language differences.

From an institutional perspective the financial cost of this project was essentially 0. Our job was facilitation but the main value, from an institutional perspective, was a deepening academic and personal relationship between the respective faculties and administration that may lead to other, more formal, opportunities.

As we move into the third year of the project we have agreed to tighten up the

organizational aspects of the project (i.e., progress monitoring and assessment).

Conclusion

Pulling together two student cohorts from opposite sides of the planet and having them work together on a joint collaborative project is not difficult to accomplish. It requires a student-centric focus on the part of the institution and the institutional will to initiate a project that could fail. When I asked Jerry, during the planning phase of the project, what would we do if the project failed he made a very wise comment: "Then we learn something, don't we." This is important because you learn just as much from failure as you do from success and, in many respects, there needs to be an institutional will to accept failure, analyze the causes of the failure and adapt. These are points both Jerry and I made to our Deans and they accepted the possibility the project could fail and how we would adapt to this possibility. At no point did either Dean suggest we end the project if it didn't work out as planned.

Employers are becoming more aware of the effects of globalization on their businesses and that Global Collaboration presents unique management challenges. As the Humber students discovered, this is a unique experiential skill set that provides a competitive advantage in the employment market.

Distance Education or Global Collaboration does not necessarily mean formal academic courses. Our project demonstrated there is a distinct experiential aspect of distance education that is just as valuable as formal learning.

Video 1. What is a Home? A website documenting the global collaboration between Humber and SZPT students. Go to umarbacchus.ca/collaborate/index.html

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About the Authors

Zhenlin Gao is a lecturer in the Animation School of Shenzhen Polytechnic, one of China's leading technical universities. He graduated with a Master of Multimedia from the University of Central Lancashire in the United Kingdom. He taught in Central Lancashire for five years. Zhenlin's research interest is user experience design, and he is also very keen to collaborate with higher education institutes overseas to help expand his

student's knowledge of the world, at the same time, improving student's user experiences.

Tom Green is Professor, Interactive Multimedia with the School of Media Studies at the Humber Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning in Toronto, Canada. He is also the author of over 15 books, with Pearson Education, Que, Peachpit Press, New Riders and Apress. He has produced several online videos for Lynda.com and Envato. Tom has also delivered expert lectures at such Post Secondary institutions as Shenzhen Polytechnic, Rochester Institute of Technology, Pasadena Community College, Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, Ocean University in Shanghai, University of Wisconsin, The Sloan Merlot Consortium and EMMA Foundation Master Classes for Post Secondary students in Hamburg, Germany and Toronto. Tom also believes his students deserve to be taught by instructors who are regarded as experts in their field and whose knowledge of their subject is current with industry best practice.