

# The Challenges of Collaborative Learning Across the Border—Canada and the United States: Divergent Paths/Intertwined Futures

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FOR THE PAST TWO YEARS, faculty at Siena College and Loyola International College for Diversity and Sustainability (LCDS), formerly Loyola International College, have jointly taught a comparative Canadian/U.S. history class. Siena College, located in Loudonville, New York, a suburb of Albany, is a private, Catholic Franciscan, residential, liberal arts' college with a student body of about 3,000. Founded in 1937, the Siena College offers thirty degree programs, forty-five minors and certificate programs, and professional curricula in teacher preparation, pre-medical, pre-law, and social work. Siena is organized into three colleges: Liberal Arts, Business, and Science. Established in 2001, LCDS is an interdisciplinary college at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec. Students from different academic and cultural backgrounds delve into some of the most complex and challenging issues facing humankind in the twenty-first century, examining their area of study from global and multicultural perspectives. Concordia University, an English language university, has more than 46,000 students and offers 433 undergraduate and graduate programs.

The creation of a collaborative class between Siena and LCDS was based on three assumptions. Firstly, that American students knew very little about their Canadian counterparts and their country's largest trading partner

and neighbor to the north. Secondly, that video conferencing and online technology could be used for joint student research and interaction without having to travel and for recording and exchanging lectures by faculty. Finally, since millennial students learn in ways different from previous generations and have less global knowledge, the active involvement of students in joint classroom discussions and required assignments would allow both American and Canadian students to not only learn about their North American counterparts, but also gain an understanding of their countries' distinct pasts and intertwined futures.

The first assumption has long been supported by scholars, including Michael Adams in *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada and the Myth of Converging Values*, Jason Kaufman in *The Origins of Canadian and American Political Differences*, and David M. Thomas and Barbara Boyle Torrey in their five-section edited collection, *Canada and The United States: Differences that Count*.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the plethora of scholarship that has surfaced in the last fifteen years highlighting the differences between the political, social, and economic structures and national values of the United States and Canadian, most American college students know very little about the history of Canada and its relationship with the United States. Even though Canada has long been one of the largest trading partners to the United States, most American college students cannot locate their North American neighbor on a map. Collegiate economics and business students analyze the trade strategies and treaties between the United States, China, Mexico, and the European Union, while ignoring the ties with Canada. The ignorance of these students is not entirely surprising, as few American high school teachers include the historical relationship between the United States and Canada as part of their history or economics lesson plans. Jeffrey Simpson, a columnist for Toronto's newspaper *Globe and Mail* once stated, "Most Americans know or care the square root of squat about Canada."<sup>2</sup>

My realization of the lack of knowledge of Canadian history held by Siena College students occurred after I completed my world history lecture on a warm September morning. A first-semester freshman from Canada conveyed his frustration that most of his classmates, particularly the members of his baseball team, knew nothing about his homeland, its participation in both World Wars, and its relationship with the United States. At that moment, it dawned on me that twenty years earlier before I began my research into the comparative history of these two North American neighbors, I was as naïve as my current students. I had visited Canada numerous times, as I had grown up and attended college within twenty miles of the border, but had little knowledge of the nation's unique political structure, border struggles, and collaboration with the U.S. during both

World Wars and the current Afghan conflict. The recognition of this absence of knowledge impacted my course design and book selection for a class on Canadian/U.S. history. My hope was that by tracing the relationship of these two North American allies from the American Revolution to the present day, students could comprehend not only the breadth of borderland studies, but also the significant events, people, and issues that have historically impacted and presently strain Canada-U.S. relations.

My Canadian partners, Dr. Rosemarie Schade and Dr. Mary Anne Poutanen, both shared this vision with me. They wanted to explore the many stereotypes held by Canadians about U.S. culture, including a belief that Canadian culture and government was superior to that of the U.S. predicated on what was seen as U.S. aggressive foreign policy, preoccupation with individual rights at the expense of the collectivity, and history of slavery and racism. Canadians were brought up with the romanticized stories about the Underground Railroad that transported U.S. slaves to Canada, whilst neglecting their own history of slavery and of colonization of Aboriginal peoples.

The next assumption was that a creative use of online technology would allow the exchange of ideas between both instructors and students on either side of the border. With shrinking budgets, many U.S. college administrators no longer approve re-assigned time for the team-teaching of a course on the same campus, and fewer students have opportunities to study abroad. By pre-recording lectures and uploading them to an Internet site, students would be presented the course material by American and Canadian historians without having to leave their classrooms. Through the use of video conferencing and joint research projects, instructors could utilize the Socratic Method and expose students to their compatriots on another campus in a non-threatening environment that addressed many of the challenges of face-to-face encounters. These activities would allow for collaborative learning and team building, the holding of debates, and the use of technology to conduct research and compile and edit written documents. Students would gain knowledge of outsiders' views of the U.S. and Canada without getting on a plane.

Finally, since millennial students learn in different ways from previous generations and generally have less global knowledge, the active involvement of students in classroom discussions and in required assignments would allow them to communicate with their North American counterparts in an innovative manner and broaden their perspectives. According to Jim Westerman, "Students are techno-savvy, and very communicative and possess an intense desire to connect with other people and collaborate by building teams, holding debates, and being participants in a flexible and fun classroom."<sup>3</sup>

This article will be divided into four sections and will provide guidance on how to design and implement a team-taught course with an instructor at another institution. First, I will describe how to compile a course containing assignments that deal with differing levels of student knowledge, skills, and expectations. Secondly, I will address how web conferencing and the utilization of social media and document sharing sites can engage students in debates and encourage them to reach a new level of knowledge by building research partnerships both inside and outside the classroom. Thirdly, I will discuss the impact of the course on students' perspectives. Finally, I will comment on the challenges of teaching an international collaborative course and offer suggestions for those hoping to undertake such an endeavor.

### **Course Design**

Course design has become a very complex aspect of higher education, steeped in learning goals and outcomes. No longer do faculty members just compile syllabi that include books, assignments, lectures, and tests; they are challenged to vary their student engagement techniques. At the very beginning of any course preparation, one must decide how to relay the needed information and to promote deeper learning and retention through a combination of lecturing and collaborative activities to keep students motivated. As Elizabeth Barkley has indicated, "Learning is a dynamic process in which students need to do the work required to learn. Instead of standing in front of the classroom presenting information students are expected to absorb, we can set up conditions where they are doing more of the work."<sup>4</sup>

My journey to create a class about the history of the United States and Canada at Siena College in Loudonville, New York began with the awarding of a grant from the Canadian Embassy and the expansion of an existing relationship between Siena College and LCDS. In June 2010, I was awarded a faculty enrichment grant by the International Council for Canadian Studies on behalf of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada through the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C. The funding stipulated that I develop a course with substantial Canadian content to be offered as part of my regular teaching load, preferably including the use of Internet technology and collaboration with a Canadian university. I learned of an existing relationship between faculty members who taught Siena's Introduction to Globalization Studies course and the principal of LCDS, Dr. Schade, that centered on a jointly held annual globalization conference.

In order to fulfill the grant requirements, I contacted Dr. Schade and explored similar courses that had been taught at other universities as a

means of beginning the task of designing a course. I located online syllabi for existing Canadian Studies courses in the United States. Most of the classes taught by American Canadian Studies department faculty explored the political or economic history of Canada from a non-comparative perspective and exclusively at their institutions. Therefore, my course was sailing into uncharted waters. Since a course description was required as part of the grant proposal, it provided Dr. Schade and me with a starting point. Our overall mission was to introduce students to the differing social, political, and economic makeup of Canada and the United States from the end of the American Revolution to the present day. Even though these two North American neighbors have been leading participants in many of the military and economic crises of the twentieth century, the leaders of these two nations often had taken divergent paths.

As this course had never been taught before at Siena or LCDS, one of the most fundamental and challenging components became compiling the syllabus and assignments that dealt with differing levels of student knowledge and expectations. Dr. Schade and I discussed the situational factors of our institutions, specifically the student body, administration, and locations that would help or hinder our efforts. Understanding not only the differences between Siena and LCDS students, but also the curriculum of each other's institutions allowed us to determine the necessary variances in assignments and readings and in terms of research topics. Both of us also remained aware that these preconceived expectations might change after the first day of class.

Dr. Schade and I initially turned our attention to developing a syllabus that met the learning goals of effective communication, meaningful reflection, and regard for human solidarity and diversity as outlined by both Siena and LCDS. Through the use of national, ideological, cultural, and economic scholarship, we wanted to challenge students to consider whether Americans and Canadians were similar to one another or completely different on all levels; address the impact of geography on this interpretation; and contemplate how contemporary events, including September 11, 2001, highlight the importance of our mutual national security and borders and have made the histories of these two ambivalent neighbors forever intertwined. Moreover, identity was critical in terms of determining similarities and differences. Since borders are artificially created, we needed to consider the various ways that people crossed or defied borders or lived within the ambiguous juncture of national boundary lines.

Determining the specific topics to be covered and crafting assignments and a reading list was the next stage. While our topics were similar, the type of reading material—with the exception of those utilized for the

joint video conference discussion—was not identical in terms of genre or focus. The mutual topics we agreed to cover were the differing economic, foreign, and social policies of U.S. and Canadian officials during both World Wars, the Great Depression, and the Korean War. We compiled a reading list and course material, including a U.S. and Canadian history textbook, *Readings in the American Past*; a Pearson Custom Text; *The People's History of Canada*, by J. M. Bumstead; documentary and feature-length films; primary documents; and historical monographs. Our goal was to provide students with fundamental social, political, and economic information on both nations at the outset of the course that would lead to more in-depth analysis and discussion of journal articles on specific topics during web conferencing in the second half of the semester and for the final research project.

For the second offering of the class, the syllabus was substantially revised as Dr. Mary Anne Poutanen, a Quebec History specialist, assumed the instructor role at LCDS. There were areas where the syllabi deviated with respect to subjects and the timing of discussions. For example, Dr. Poutanen introduced the topic of borderlands at the beginning of the course, while I left that discussion until later in the semester. Moreover, she explicitly emphasized subjects that covered the complex relationships between indigenous peoples, work, women, political activism, deportation, and the U.S./Canadian frontier. She also included two seminars on the role of colonization and of post-colonialism and Quebec's independence movement in Canada's history.

The Siena and LCDS class assignments encompassed a variety of student engagement techniques to ensure the achievement of the course goals and learning outcomes. Individual work included weekly questions and discussion leadership to ascertain the understanding of particular readings and to build knowledge and comparative analytical skills as the semester progressed. Film and book reviews allowed students to present their own interpretations of particular material and to determine the differing value of visual versus print material in comprehending new information. A collaborative research project, web conferencing, and one face-to-face meeting fostered both oral and written ideological exchanges and modifications for all students. Our assignments strove to engage students in learning new material by making the topics relevant and accessible, as well as by allowing them to use their already existing communication and technological skills. Students' exposure to their foreign counterparts' existing knowledge about U.S. and Canadian history, as well as to each other's stereotypical views, raised their intellectual skills from the level of knowledge and comprehension to synthesis and evaluation.<sup>5</sup>

The syllabus contained a clear description of all assignments, which Dr. Schade and I expanded upon during the first day of class and reaffirmed as specific due dates approached. By providing students with expectations of the course at the outset, as well as feedback about what they would learn during the semester, a more productive and positive learning atmosphere was established. For example, the reflection paper due the second week of class allowed students to privately express their understanding of the similarities and differences between the United States and Canada that would be revised and expanded upon at the end of the semester. Since we presented the assignment as something that would be revisited, students completed the essay with more enthusiasm and less resistance. Students also understood that by answering questions about the readings and having in-class discussions prior to joint web conferences, they were formulating new ideas to utilize in their final essay. In terms of the final research paper, by creating an incremental timetable for students to frame their thesis proposals and annotated bibliographies, it caused a greater motivation for students to contact their research partners as soon as possible rather than procrastinate. Finally, by providing a clear grading rubric, students knew what was at stake if they failed to adequately complete any of the course requirements, including the collaborative final research project.

Collaborative work played a large role in the Siena/LCDS classrooms, but required the planning and synchronization of assignments and due dates. According to Tuesday Cooper, collaborative learning—which is often referred to as group work or team work—is a “structured process where students are required to work in groups to complete a common task or assignment for a particular course. It has been identified as one of the most effective ways for students to become actively engaged in classroom activities.”<sup>6</sup> This is an effective strategy, but can be problematic even when used within one classroom. Many students may have limited experience working in teams on group assignments, and having to communicate with someone on another campus or in another country can add to the difficulty. Therefore, it was important that the final assignment was well structured and students were informed during the first class of the expectations and accountability of each researcher.<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Schade, Dr. Poutanen, and I also were aware that the blame for team-based learning problems lay with the instructor, not the students. The structure of group assignments can cause or correct the challenges faced with group assignments. A well-staged activity can promote deep learning and intense engagement, create better memories and experiences, and make reading and studying no longer an empty or abstract behavior. Michaelson, Knight, and Fink provide four principles for designing effective group activities. The first is to make each individual in the group accountable

for his or her contribution to the presentation or paper. This will mean that all members will be motivated to participate or face a grade penalty. Secondly, in the assignment outline, students should be required to interact with each other, so the task cannot be completed by only a few or even just one individual. Thirdly, the specific rewards for success in terms of grades should be outlined in the syllabus. Finally, some type of external comparison, such as a conference or peer review, will have a tendency to make students more likely to be active participants.<sup>8</sup>

To avoid known pitfalls in the Siena/LCDS course, the instructors assigned students research partners early on in the semester based on similar scholarly backgrounds and interests. Instructors provided possible topics, but students could frame their own. Students exchanged e-mail addresses and were given a deadline for a research proposal and an annotated bibliography. Staging the assignment, allowing time for feedback, and reshaping of the thesis relieved the angst of many students. Dr. Schade, Dr. Poutanen, and I allowed students to either produce two papers with differing national viewpoints on a topic or compile one paper by combining their efforts. We likely could have facilitated better communication between U.S. and Quebec students if they had met each other at the beginning of the class rather than at the end of the semester—perhaps even at the border, where the notion of borderlands and the construct of borders could have been explored. Dr. Poutanen found that going to Stanstead, which borders the United States, allowed her students to meet local residents who explored what it was like historically and today to share a border.

Student engagement also can be challenging even with an individual course section. Christy Price, Ed.D., of Dalton State College suggests a number of strategies to engage today's students. The first is to vary one's teaching methods in the classroom to maintain student attention by spending less time lecturing and more time using collaborative or multi-media activities. The second is to make assigned readings and the content covered relevant to students' daily lives. Thirdly, by justifying the rationale behind assignments, students will gain a greater understanding of the teaching and learning process and will be more likely to comply with course requirements. Finally, by providing a relaxed classroom atmosphere and fostering a good rapport with the instructor, student anxieties about difficult subjects will be alleviated, as they will be more willing to pursue learning outcomes with someone who connects with them on a personal level.<sup>9</sup> The structure of *Canada and the United States: Divergent Paths/Intertwined Futures* fostered such an ideal learning environment for both the faculty and students involved, which was reflected in assignments, readings, and the innovative use of technology.

To create a unique classroom atmosphere and raise the level of student engagement and awareness, lecturing was limited. Instead, instructors sequentially presented the material and learning tasks in an interactive discussion setting in the hopes that students' brains would physically respond to and absorb more of the new information. Firstly, students discussed their existing knowledge of the difference between the U.S. and Canada on the first day of class. Next, readings were assigned that broadly discussed the economic, social, and political differences and similarities between the two nations. Finally, students applied and explained their new knowledge during student-led discussions and video conferences with LCDS students. Many conscious attempts were made to allow students not only to learn about the difference between the U.S. and Canada, but also to raise their level of knowledge by challenging them to interpret new material critically and analytically in both oral and written form.

Dr. Schade, Dr. Poutanen, and I relayed the relevance of the material covered in class to students' personal and professional lives to increase their level of engagement with the content. To meet student expectations of the material to be covered in a history course that spans several decades and includes some unfamiliar topics, it was a juggling act of chipping away at students' existing knowledge that may be biased and inaccurate, while imparting a large amount of new information. We exposed students to several key world events that both countries participated in or experienced simultaneously as a means of addressing our students' lack of knowledge of their nations' histories. As World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War, and the war in Afghanistan are recognizable events that are often covered in high school and in the media, it guaranteed that all students had some basic knowledge of these crises. Through a variety of assignments and discussions, we strove to emphasize the key aspects of each conflict or economic downturn; highlight the unknown role that Canadian soldiers, politicians, and citizens played; and how the information differed from students' existing preconceived notions. We challenged Siena and LCDS students to consider the impact of these colossal occurrences on citizens across the border and shake them out of their nationalistic and often myopic perceptions.

For World War I, Clifton Cate's *Notes: A Soldier's Memoirs of World War I*, the film *Passchendaele*, as well as lectures on the Canadian home front and the U.S.'s role prior to and after 1917 served as the source material for book and movie reviews and a video conference topic. Siena students expressed their fascination upon learning about Americans enlisting in the Canadian armed forces prior to 1917 and the number of early battles the Canadians participated in, including Ypres and Passchendaele.

The varying impact of the Great Depression also presented some intriguing revelations on both sides, as American students expected a more socialist-based Canadian government to better handle the economic downturn and its effect on the general population. Katrina Srigley's *Breadwinning Daughters: Young Working Women in a Depression-Era City, 1929-1939* served as the central text, supplemented by lectures on government intervention, popular protests, and the domestic impact of the economic crisis. Siena students criticized the lack of government social welfare programs to assist the poor in the Canada, similar to America's New Deal. They also had no knowledge of the communist uprisings and provincial reactions to the depression on the other side of the border. The female students wanted to highlight and discuss Srigley's attention to the entrance of many women into the workforce to support their families and how this empowered many young, single women. In the second year, we revised the video discussion of the Great Depression by including the 1940 U.S. film, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

In the second half of the semester, students explored World War II, the subsequent Cold War, and the Canadian and U.S. roles in Afghanistan. Siena students had learned about the reigns of terror and genocide of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, the bombing of Pearl Harbor and D-Day, but had not considered other countries' involvement on the battlefield prior to 1941. Two films compiled by the Canadian National Film Council—*Dusk, 1936-1940* and *Blitzkrieg, April-November 1940*—introduced Siena students to early Canadian participation on the European front. Each segment described the early years of the war, Canada's independent decision to join the fight, the British Air Force training post in Canada, and the U.S. transport of supplies and ammunition to the Canadian border. All of this was new information for Siena students. In the second year of the course, Dr. Poutanen required students to read scholarly papers that focused on the various roles that the United States played in Canada during the Second World War.

The Cold War section also introduced a new angle on the Korean War through the perusal of *Warming Up to the Cold War: Canada and the U.S. Coalition of the Willing from Hiroshima to Korea*, by Robert Teigrob. Teigrob focused on American cultural influence as a reason for Canada's involvement in the conflict coupled with Canadian officials' quest to pursue new foreign policies and alliance avenues. The text added a new dimension to my existing emphasis on the history and present significance of the military operation. Siena and LCDS students had previously assumed that, like Vietnam, the conflict was solely an American effort. Canadian students were surprised that Canada profited from the war by provisioning U.S. armed forces with military armaments, Agent Orange, and napalm.

Both groups expressed amazement at the support of the operation by the Canadian media, politicians, and citizens, given the parting of ways of the two nations from 1960-1984.

Following several weeks of analyzing military conflicts and financial devastation, the reading and discussion shifted to a bi-national cooperative construction feat—the St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project. Since my recent book, *The Greatest Construction Show on Earth: An Oral History of the St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project*, highlighted the efforts of both countries in this project, Dr. Schade, Dr. Poutanen, and I decided to include it in our syllabi. We wanted to introduce our students to a project where the two countries collaborated—and still do. Most Siena students were from New York State and had no idea where the Seaway was, while LCDS is located in Montreal, Quebec, the initial port on the waterway. Students were intrigued by the text's mixture of political history and interviews of men and women who were their age when they participated in the construction. The discussion of this construction feat further enhanced the students' knowledge of politics, foreign policy, and domestic life in the first half of the twentieth century.

The conflict in Afghanistan was a fitting topic to end the semester, as the differing reasons for Canada and U.S. involvement fostered a lively conversation. Students read the *American Review of Canadian Studies* special edition on "Canada's Commitment to Afghanistan" to understand Canadian foreign policy since Vietnam and both nations' commitment to the efforts of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Most of the American students were unaware of the role of Canadian soldiers in the conflict and the issue of Canada abandoning its peacekeeping role and moving toward counterinsurgency. The discussion also raised many questions about whether Canada would now support the U.S. and NATO in future world conflicts as they had earlier in the century in tandem with Great Britain.

Two Siena Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) members served as seminar leaders that week, which made the topic more poignant since their classmates realized that two of their friends could be deployed to Afghanistan in the near future. The presenters discussed the American military view of the conflict, their admiration for Canada's role in the war effort, and their knowledge that the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks impacted all of North America in a variety of ways.

The final challenge required both Siena and LCDS students to revisit their preconceived notions of the similarities and differences between the United States and Canadian political, economic, and social systems. Assigning a reflection paper at the beginning of the course and at the conclusion served two purposes. The first was to assess students' writing

skills and knowledge in the initial weeks to serve as a benchmark. With this data in hand, we tweaked our syllabus to include more hours of writing instruction and additional fundamental readings. Secondly, this exercise allowed students and instructors to assess the achievement of their learning goals and the improvement of students' informed reasoning and writing skills by comparing the two papers. Both reflected the impact of the course on students' global knowledge and skills to interpret comparative perspectives. The outcomes determined whether the course needed to be revamped in the future to improve the desired end results.

### **The Use of Technology**

Technology can be used in a variety of ways in a team-taught class based on different campuses to share instructors' expertise and foster communication between students. Researchers indicate that the millennial generation is tech savvy, very communicative, and has an intense desire to connect with other people and collaborate.<sup>10</sup> By video conferencing and sharing lectures, faculty and students can exchange information in both a controlled, taped environment and a more organic setting. Each presents unexpected challenges, but can provide the opportunity for faculty on different campuses to convey course material from a different vantage point without having to travel and to cover more information. The recorded lectures can also allow for more flexibility in terms of faculty and student scheduling, as they can be viewed during and after class time. The main hurdle in using technology is that proper videotaping and editing equipment needs to be available on campus or at home, as well as web conferencing facilities. The compatibility of software and systems on both campuses is also critical.

Videotaping did require the capturing and editing of material on both ends, as well as the location of a mutually accessible hosting site. As Siena and LCDS students and faculty utilize different e-education platforms, Vimeo was selected because it was free and allowed for easy uploading of lectures from both sides and sharing with students. Since Dr. Schade's specialty was Weimar Germany, she lined up several graduate students and Canadianists to provide lectures on various Canadian topics, including Confederation, World War I, the Great Depression, and Expo 67. In the second year, Dr. Poutanen added a guest lecture concerning French-Canadian migration to the United States, given by Professor Bruno Ramirez. I agreed to record lectures on the structure of the American political system, World War I, and the St. Lawrence Seaway. This was cost-effective as it allowed students to hear about the material from a variety of presenters without having to leave the classroom.

Video conferencing can also present its own unique challenges in terms of campus system compatibility and creating an inclusive environment for students and instructors. Systems such as WebEx and Skype are available to most universities around the world, but the technology security policies vary and can prevent their usage in certain locations. One possible solution is for each university to purchase a Polycom system that can be used, but this requires funding and the knowledge of someone on campus to operate the equipment. This may already exist at most larger universities, but those at smaller private schools with no online offerings should investigate the existing equipment and personnel before starting a class. Instructors must also relinquish control of the classroom, be prepared for the unpredictability of students, and encourage all to participate.

Facilitating group discussions, according to Kathy Takayama, can be challenging if certain mechanisms and guidelines are not put into place to control dominant personalities and to foster a mutually beneficial exchange. Some of the challenging behaviors that may surface in small classrooms over a period of time are magnified in a video setting. However, as video conferences may take place early in the semester, these circumstances may not have manifested themselves yet in the classroom. The role of faculty members is to be aware of the possible scenarios, respond to unexpected situations, and act as regulators and, sometimes, referees: "Facilitating discussion requires the ability to engage different perspectives and skills in response to the needs of the group."<sup>11</sup>

After the first video conference, several common dilemmas may arise that are similar to classroom struggles: getting reluctant students to participate and dealing with hostile students, specifically those who dominate the conversation or who digress from the subject. Each of these situations occurred during the Siena/LCDS class and challenged the instructors to find solutions. Encouraging reluctant students to become involved in the conversation depended upon creating a judgment-free zone without focusing on trying to change behaviors. In the second year the course was offered, providing discussion questions ahead of time served as a much-needed framework that allowed students to contemplate issues prior to the conference and fostered a more structured conversation that made even the most reluctant students participate.

The first video conference served as an introduction and discussion of Seymour Lipset's *Continental Divide*, and was the first indication that the members of the two classes had set identities and stereotypical views of each other. The conversation focused on how the contemporary attitudes of U.S. and Canadian citizens still reflected the mentality of the winners and losers of the American Revolution, the success-driven mentality of Americans versus the more community-oriented and laissez-faire Canadians, and the

differing levels of religious participation on either side of the border. After this discussion, it became apparent that certain stereotypes learned from the media and literature prevailed over actual knowledge. The Canadian students accused the American students of being obsessed with studying, earning money, and striving for professional success, while the American students harped on their cross-border classmates' "loser" complex and questioned Canada's actual contribution to world events. Both classes seemed angry and confused.

Prior to the second video conference, students viewed *Passchendaele*, a Paul Gross film, and wrote a review. Dr. Schade and I chose two leaders from each class to guide the proceedings in an attempt to control disruptive students. Student discussion of the differing roles of the two countries in World War I served as the planned premise of the gathering, but Siena students instead focused on bantering about the strange plot twists, the use of a love story, and the lack of battle scenes in *Passchendaele*. Siena students realized the monumental undertaking in producing and marketing the film when LCDS students informed them that no major film production companies existed in Canada and that Paul Gross solicited private donations to finance the endeavor. The LCDS students also wanted to convey the importance and lack of recognition of the Canadian role and sacrifices in the war, and lamented that their Siena counterparts missed the point of the film by attempting to compare it to more violent American war epics. However, the internment of German citizens in Canada during the war and the general population's distrust and xenophobia conveyed in the film created discussion and outrage in both classrooms.

The last video conference again forced students out of their comfort zones in terms of analytical and critical thinking as they discussed their final papers. The conference began on a congenial note, with LCDS students presenting their research findings and sharing their views on the Afghanistan conflict. The first enlightenment came with the realization that the U.S. and Canadian forces were not fighting in the same region of the country or with the same objectives—humanitarian efforts and rebuilding (Canada) versus ferreting out the Taliban (U.S.). The other heated topic of conversation involved a LCDS student's paper on the Canadian healthcare system, a topic near and dear to her heart since she worked in a children's hospital. The debate unearthed frustrations related and unrelated to the topic and reflected reasons why the reforms of both countries' healthcare systems continue to face opposition. The LCDS students adamantly argued the moral and economic superiority of the Canadian system, as it covered all citizens equally. The main Siena counter-argument surrounded the quality of and access to care, as well as the waiting list for surgeries on the other side of the border. The heated

debate ended in a stalemate. The frustration of students illustrated their inability to be open-minded or critical of their own country's policies and to consider alternative viewpoints or solutions. It was especially hard for Quebec students to understand the position represented by their U.S. counterparts, given that the collectivity plays a much larger role than in the United States, where individualism is emphasized.

As the course has been taught twice at the time of this writing, some of the issues of the video conferences in the prior year have been addressed. Students are now aware of the differences between the Canadian and American systems and better understand the biases of each country's citizens and scholars toward each other, especially highlighted by the media and national discourse in the first week. Siena and LCDS instructors now also discuss ground rules and codes of conduct and provide discussion topics and questions to prevent students from deviating from the topic as often or from acting inappropriately.

The final use of technology involved students completing a joint research project. This activity required student access to similar software, close monitoring, and scheduling. When dealing with a campus in the same country, most students will be able to access Google Docs or Google Chat, but when the students are in different countries, things get more complicated. For this use of technology to be successful, faculty must be aware of the software and programs available on their campus—and whether students know how to use them. Also, monitoring that students are in communication with each other and their work is progressing is more difficult when you cannot discuss issues with both parties after class or in office hours. The best solution is to have a video conference between the two faculty members and the students concerned to iron out issues early in the semester. The close coordination of grading and standards between professors and making sure that these policies are clearly outlined in the syllabus avoids problems at the end of the semester.

### **Impact on Students**

Students involved in a team-taught class with a foreign university enhance their global knowledge through reading fundamental and comparative literature. The assumption is that the students do not have any knowledge of the social, political, or economic structure of the country they will be studying. In certain cases, some may not possess similar knowledge of their own country. Therefore, the accessibility of the material and the discussion and understanding of the background of a new nation will create a level of comfort for students, allowing them to comprehend and see the relevance of the material. By reading and analyzing course

readings, they will expand the knowledge of similarities and differences between the U.S. and other nations and possess a more global outlook.

Collaborative learning exercises with students on another campus allows for the utilization of technology both in and out of the classroom. Video conferences and research projects enabled students to defend their arguments orally and on paper and exposed them to the views of outsiders of their respective countries. By interacting and working collaboratively with foreign colleagues in their age group, students on both sides of the border reassessed their existing national and global historical knowledge. The interplay between students during web conferences challenged instructors and students to re-evaluate longstanding historical information on key world events and to consider how the rest of the world viewed their nation's actions and citizens. What rallied students most was not the writing of research papers and reading books, but the live video conferences discussing controversial issues.

When involved in a team-based class across the border, faculty can have a broad impact on the experience and engagement of students in their own classroom and in their colleague's section. Based on each instructor's area of expertise and teaching style, students will be privy to different vantage points and learning techniques. By exchanging lectures across the border and pairing a novice instructor with a more experienced one, participants can invigorate their desires to teach and be encouraged to try new engagement techniques and approaches to technology. This endeavor also presents an opportunity for a less-experienced instructor and a seasoned veteran to learn from each other. "We have so long thought of mentoring as a one-way street, with the old hand tutoring and advising the novitiate. But in today's academic environment the generations can edify each other, and beneficiaries of such an exchange include students, colleges and universities, and higher education itself."<sup>12</sup>

Another impact that a collaborative course can have on students' perspectives is that it can bring relevancy to the course topic by showing the close relationship geographically, economically, and politically of the U.S. and Canada, through comparative readings and through discussion with their foreign counterparts. After completing this course, Siena and LCDS students will continue to enhance their previously virtually non-existent knowledge of one of their country's largest neighbors. By tracing the relationship of these two North American allies from the American Revolution to the present day, students comprehend not only the breadth of borderland studies, but also significant events, people, and issues that have historically impacted and presently strain Canadian-U.S. relations. Future Siena College and LCDS graduates will leave their campuses with degrees in political science, economics, and history, more cognizant of

the challenges that the United States and Canada jointly face in the new global economy and will be able to utilize this knowledge in their jobs in the business, educational, and political arenas.

The relevance of the class material to current events also can be invaluable. During the Spring 2012 semester in early March, college students in Quebec went on strike to protest a tuition increase. The strike continued during the time of this writing and some of the LCDS students had not completed the work for the collaborative class. The strike had a major impact on Siena students, as it meant that the communication with their LCDS research partners ended before their final joint paper was due. Some did cross the picket lines and completed the joint project work, but some of the Siena students ended up finishing on their own. The situation could have been perceived in a negative light; however, it created a great topic for conversation in my class about the differences between U.S. and Canadian college students and tuition rates. Siena students pondered whether Canada was actually a “truer democracy” than the U.S. and whether American students would react to a tuition increase in the same manner.

The strike also impacted the content and attendance at the annual Siena/LCDS globalization conference. It was scheduled for late March before the protests turned violent. The collaborative course was supposed to have an in-person joint class and meetings between research partners, but they didn’t happen. However, on a positive note, Elizabeth May—a longtime environmental lawyer, Member of Parliament, head of the Green Party, and author of many of Canada’s environmental laws—gave a passionate speech about the state of Canadian politics and Prime Minister Steven Harper. Many of the Siena students could not comprehend her belief that she could change current environmental policies and overthrow the Prime Minister, nor that her ideas were supported by members of the audience.

The final impact on Siena and LCDS students was that, by the end of the semester, their opinion of the intertwined and unique destinies of Canada and the U.S. had been transformed based on the active and collaborative learning that had taken place. Many came into the class with what W. G. Perry and B. S. Bloom refer to as “dualist thinking” and very “basic knowledge,” but left with the ability to evaluate information on the historical and current political, social, and economic situation of the two nations based on analysis and values.<sup>13</sup> Their opinions and preconceived notions had been challenged and altered. The reason for this change was the conscious effort by the instructors to use active learning, as well as the ideas about the dynamic learning process. By presenting events like World War I and the Great Depression that the students had a basic understanding of, the instructors helped students make sense of the new information by

looking at the similarities and differences of the new data to their existing knowledge: “Learning is a dynamic process of making sense and meaning out of new information by connecting it to what is already known.”<sup>14</sup> Due to the fact that their past world view had been challenged and their mind actively engaged for the entire semester, the hope is that they will retain the information for use in future classes and in their lives.

### **Tips for Teaching Collaborative Classes**

Faculty who decide to teach international collaborative courses must negotiate a variety of challenges, including cultural barriers, technological challenges, conflicting course goals, and varying levels of student preparation. In terms of cultural barriers, depending on the country, there can be a language barrier that will require students and faculty to be bilingual. Also, the educational system and requirements of universities varies and could impact the compatibility of the students in terms of collaborative work and in terms of course content and web conferencing. Some of the variables will change from one semester to the other depending on the makeup of the class. Other important differences influencing the outcome include private versus public universities and the diversity of students’ experiences with respect to class, ethnicity, and race. We matched a private university in the U.S. with a public one located in Montreal, Quebec, where politics and history differ in comparison to the rest of Canada. The varying levels of political participation and cultural values surfaced due to a lengthy student strike over a proposed tuition hike. The debates about access to university and tuition fees have had a long and contentious history in the province. In fact, a student strike across Quebec had an impact on the class. Quebec students who supported the strike argued for the right to either low-cost or free university education. This position contrasts sharply with the tuition fees Siena students pay and indeed even with the rates Canadian students outside of Quebec are charged.

Another important difference is the diversity of students at Concordia in general and in the seminar specifically. The student body consisted of students from Asia, Africa, Europe, the United States, and Latin America, in addition to second- and third-generation students of European heritage and a significant percentage of French-speaking Quebecers with roots going back to 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century France. Thus, students attending the class represented various ethnicities and many of them came from working-class and lower-middle-class families. They usually bear the costs of a university education themselves. Finally, Quebec’s relationship with Canada plays an important role in the classroom and is expressed both explicitly and implicitly. A significant percentage of the students

are either Francophones or educated in French-language elementary and secondary schools. Thus, the idea of “la nation” was never far from the minds of many of the Quebec students who see Quebec as a nation within a nation or even on the road to independence.

Other critical elements of team-taught classes between different campuses include adequate funding for course design and travel. The design phase requires a time commitment by instructors to create assignments, compile readings, and investigate technological capabilities. This preparation should begin at least one semester before the first day of classes and may require travelling to each other’s campuses, ordering books or locating articles for consideration, and accessing the availability of these materials to students. While the types of readings can vary, the topics to be covered should predominantly be the same to foster video conferencing and to ensure students are on the same page as their counterparts in terms of conducting a research project. Depending on the country chosen, the availability of print material may vary and consulting with your bookstore or checking for online versions is a good idea. The biggest difficulty may arise in terms of viewing films, as they may not even be available for purchase in a foreign country. The future of the Siena/LCDS collaboration is precarious, given the fiscal and ideological policies of the present federal government in Canada that has cut funding programs based on a view of history emphasizing military and monarchy. A more fruitful strategy may be to seek funding from the Quebec government, which has a number of suitable programs.

When considering assignments for a team-taught class, the key is to know the background of your students and make the material approachable and relevant to their everyday lives. One cannot assume students’ prior knowledge of any topic in regards to their own country, much less a foreign nation. Instructors need to provide both readings and lectures early in the semester to provide the foundational basis for more analytical readings and research in later weeks. This material often changes every semester and even during the semester. Instructors are challenged to assess the amount of information that students at their own institutions have been exposed to in terms of literary, critical thinking, and analytical skills. Team-teaching a class can present new problems since both instructors need to be aware of not only the background of his or her own students, but also of the students at the collaborating institution. Instructors must discuss the differences between the makeup of their student bodies as well as the curriculum of their institutions to gain a grasp of necessary variances in assignments, readings, and research topics. Flexibility and awareness that these preconceived expectations may change after the first day of class is crucial.

Another key component is to clearly define assignments and grading mechanisms for students in both classes. This would be difficult even in a class team-taught by colleagues on the same campus, since people's philosophies and expectations differ. While assignment and grading rubrics are useful in terms of informing the students of the structure of the paper, the instructions about how to proceed are key. If a joint research project is the desired end result, the skill assessment, revision policies, and final outcome need to be in tandem.

In the syllabus as well as in class, instructors need to define individual versus team accountability for weekly assignments and the final research paper. In a collaborative class, it would be the best-case scenario to have the same assignment every week, the same grading percentages, and the same reading assignments. Barring this, clearly presenting the purpose of the final research assignment is necessary. Students must be given detailed guidelines on the process of writing the research paper. This may include meeting with a member of the library staff to discuss information literacy, scheduling a workshop on constructing a thesis statement and citations by the writing center, and breaking the assignment into several smaller steps. By having them hand in the assignment in several parts, students can build new research skills, writing skills, and time management. After pairing up students, the first step is to have them agree on a topic. Several weeks later, a thesis, annotated bibliography, and detailed outline should be completed for evaluation by both instructors. This segmented process allows for feedback and revision of topics and the location of proper sources—as well as for teaching students effective time management. According to Tuesday Cooper, “Students are less likely to wait until the last minute to complete an assignment and feel the need to plagiarize when they have been guided through the process in a timely fashion during the semester.”<sup>15</sup>

While the idea of teaching a class with a foreign university may be tempting, the language and differing educational systems can be insurmountable. Having an existing relationship with an instructor at another university is essential due to the need to determine the compatibility of the students. The existence of a similar course or area of study may also seem like a viable indicator, but other variables need to be assessed. While the American system may be similar in terms of providing higher education to students, the amount of course content, the level of analysis required in oral and written work, and the emphasis put on independent and critical thinking varies from state to state and between small and large universities. The goal is to find not only a mutually agreeable campus and faculty member, but also students who at least on the surface seem equal in terms of skills and levels of engagement. If one attempts to teach a class with a foreign university, a clear understanding of that country's

educational system as well as of the specific collaborating campus can be more difficult to ascertain. However, at the very minimum, a common language is needed.

Finally, one needs to be aware of the challenges of using technology both inside and outside the classroom. Determining the video conferencing and lecture-capturing technology on campus is a key component to making a collaboratively taught course successful. Based on the existing equipment on campus and available classrooms with enhanced capabilities, this may need to be investigated a year before the first day of class. Without the assistance of an information technology specialist, this can be difficult.

### Conclusion

Regardless of the difficulties encountered, instructors and students will benefit immensely from a collaborative team-taught class between two universities. The course will broaden student awareness of their contemporaries and allow faculty members to learn from each other. The active learning, collaborative assignments, and classroom atmosphere engage students and faculty in a transforming experience.

### Notes

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