



## **Creating the Global Classroom: Is There a Place for Virtual Academic Collaboration?**

Emese Ivan PhD

(St John's University, Queens, NY, USA)

[ivane@stjohns.edu](mailto:ivane@stjohns.edu)

Edit Nagy

(University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA)

[nagyedit@yahoo.com](mailto:nagyedit@yahoo.com)

Abstract: Today's citizens need to be world-minded in order to use their global knowledge and intercultural skills to make informed decisions in our interconnected world. In turn, it is important that our students are prepared to participate in societies that are no longer defined by nations and geographical borders. Consequently, institutions of higher education have in recent years realized the need to prepare graduates to live and participate as global citizens through the internationalization of their campuses. The American Council on Education (ACE) advocates that educational programs make use of technology to provide students with cross-cultural learning experiences. No surprise that educators jumped worldwide willingly on an intriguing new method of teaching: joint courses. This teaching method does not only incorporate the latest (video)technology into our teaching but also 'brings the world into the classroom' by connecting students from different countries to work together on projects, case studies, or discuss current issues in any field – in a financially efficient way. But how to use the new social and digital media tools intelligently, humanely, mindfully, and above all ethically? The aim of this paper is to address the issues surrounding legal and ethical ramifications of virtual international academic collaboration between professors and universities

### 1. Introduction

Delivering different class contents to our students online has increased dramatically during the last decade. Universities have entered the online education market in order to satisfy the growing demand of their students as well as to face their existing and growing financial and facility constraints. In pursue of happiness for both consumers



(students) and employers (universities), educators jumped worldwide willingly on an intriguing new method of teaching: joint courses. This teaching method does not only incorporate the latest (video)technology into our teaching – highly appreciated by universities – but also ‘brings the world into the classroom’ by connecting students from different countries to work together on projects, case studies, or discuss current issues in any field. The joint course method can be very beneficial for teaching a wide variety of subject matters: language, history, management, or sports. Knowledge as well as classrooms turned borderless at the beginning of the 21st Century!

For individuals, including educators, the issue of where digital culture is heading is personal as well as philosophical. First, knowing how to make use of online tools, video technology, and/or wikis, like it or not, an essential ingredient to personal success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Similarly, those who understand the fundamentals of digital participation, online collaboration, informational credibility, and network awareness will be able to exert more control over their own fates than those who lack this lore. Thus, the question that we must ask: How to use the new social and digital media tools intelligently, humanely, mindfully, and above all, ethically? After teaching joint courses between the US and Hungary, the authors would like to share their experiences as well as shed some light on issues related to intellectual property and copyright, right to participation and access to materials, and ethics of virtual academic collaboration between professors and universities.

## 2. What is a Joint Course?

Joint course is a possible academic cooperation between at least two universities’ traditional classrooms, their students and faculties who are linked periodically via conference calls and use distance learning technologies.

According to the literature of teaching methods, the closest terms to the joint courses are blended learning, hybrid courses or flip teaching (Walace&Young: 2010; Wang&Burton: 2010). All of these methods are mixing the traditional face-to-face classroom methods with web-based educational technology (e-learning, blackboard, sakai). But in practice in all of these cases, only one professor responsible for the



course's curriculum and the students follow that one professor's lectures, assignments and other requirements.

On the other hand, the joint course main attribution is the opportunity of cooperation between two or more college classrooms. This adds a new learning component to teaching methodology namely, additional independence and flexibility to students as well as more freedom and creativity to professors. In joint courses professors use some elements of the cooperative learning methods, which focus on structured group learning maximizing on students' own and each other's learning potential. (Wang&Burton: 2010)

The major differences between methods like blended learning, hybrid courses or flipped classroom teaching and the joint course are the interdependence and the cooperation between two or more separate classes and their professors. What makes the joint course teaching method unique and intriguing is the necessary level of collaboration, cooperation, and interdependence between the partner institutions, professors, and students involved.

Incorporating joint courses into our curriculum also provides educators – teachers, professors – with great opportunities of interdisciplinary and/or international collaborations. Universities and colleges offer a wide variety and growing number of courses online. There are endless opportunities for academic collaboration and cooperation between individuals, classes, departments, schools, and universities – one that is also heavily encouraged and supported by the administration and management of institutions in higher education.<sup>1</sup> But using of technology is not just vital to getting ahead – we need this knowledge also to keep us from falling behind. Whether we like the idea or not our use of technology has grown way beyond our control generating not only new challenges but also multiplying age-old human, cultural tools of sociality, politics, and economics (Castells: 2004) Thus, the issues we ought to face while engaging into virtual collaborations will also be similar to those we are experiencing in our real word – with an added dimension of issues evolving from the usage of the new media(Castells:2004; Rheingold:2012). But are we prepared and ready to face all of these challenges beyond the excitement of engaging into new teaching methods involving technology? Seldom do scholars study teaching with technology in terms of success or failure. More commonly contributors to this literature debate over the main



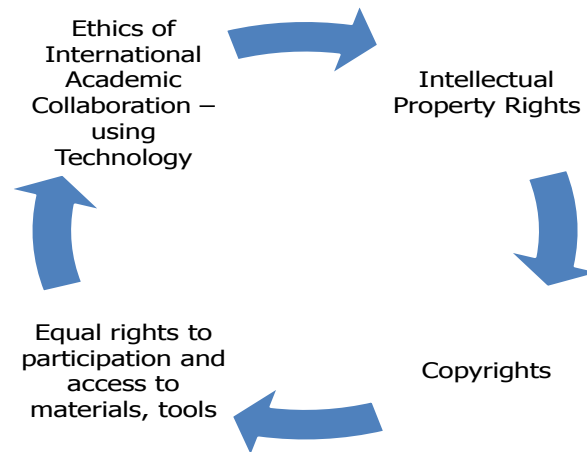
problems of teaching methodology, or discuss the pros and cons of one method over the other. This paper tries to assess the eventual problems associated with teaching international joint courses and also shed some light on its often overlooked legal and ethical ramifications – while leaving plenty of opportunity for further research.

### 3. A Pilot Project Going Wrong: My Course, Your Course, Our Course, Their Course....

As it was noted above, one of the most important pillars of a successful joint course is the collaboration between the educators involved in the project, by planning, offering, organizing, and leading the classes on different locations through the whole semester. Collaborative teaching requires pedagogical skills on the part of the participating teachers - but skills on their own will not be enough. There is also a need and willingness to share ideas, knowledge of the subject matter, experiences, plans, and thoughts as well as cooperate in the preparation, planning, and teaching through the entire lifetime of a joint course. Consequently, a possible problem with teaching and collaborating in an international joint class can be attributed to issues of class preparation – such as class scheduling, classroom support, curriculum design, lack of prepared materials for use in class, lack of common interests and topics, etc -; the teachers' background and experience in the subject matter – such as lack of familiarity with joint method class techniques -; and human, cultural issues, and personal differences – such as lack of openness or honesty in collaboration, unwillingness to share, etc.

Working on joint course projects during the 2010 and 2011 academic years respectively the authors have faced some of the above mentioned problems.<sup>2</sup> Although the study is limited to the experiences that occurred in two settings, the pattern of miscommunication between the partner universities and collaborators raised some general questions that was worth more detailed exploration. These questions are related to intellectual property and copyright, right to participation and access to materials, and ethics of virtual academic collaboration in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. (Figure 1)

Figure 1. Model of Ethical-Legal Framework of Virtual Academic Collaboration



### 3.1. Class Preparation

Eventual problems related to an international joint class start with preparation. Educators, most likely, have two options: develop a class together from the scratch based on their individual interest, dedication, and knowledge of the subject matter, or use one already existing class curriculum and implement or transform it to the other international setting. The second option is, of course, the easiest and less time consuming way to start the project. But the easiest is not at all the simplest because many factors can and will complicate the project developed this way on the long term.

For example, undergraduate students in the US and Europe can arrive to a history class having very different knowledge level in the particular subject matter. A ‘copy and paste’ method of the curriculum or learning activities that work just excellent in one setting could easily fail in the other.

Also, if an existing course is adopted with already existing syllabus, reading lists, developed activities and assignments there should not be any question about copyrights and intellectual property rights of the faculty who developed the course. Thus, the original author’s name should also be mentioned on the new and parallel offered course syllabus and/or in the catalogue of the partner university.<sup>3</sup> Even though the agreements



between the professors to start and develop a joint course might have been made verbally these general rules should be followed under all circumstances.

While the professors need to understand their respective student group's background and motivation they also must be able to relate to and discuss with an open mind the concerns, interests and/or ideas coming from the other group and its teacher. And this also does not come always easy. Because we, professors, are used to our own planning processes and do trust – most likely – only our own routines and experiences. But in a joint course joint and collaborative preparation can be seen as a key to success. Thus, it is here to say that a very precise clarification of the two professors' roles in the project must be made at a very early stage. This agreement should include – but not being limited – to whether both professors are going to give lectures to both groups and if yes how many times; whether and how they will be preparing their students to deal with arguments or cultural differences while working in groups with students from the other location. Putting it differently, we must carefully discuss our rights to participate as well as our responsibilities during the collaboration.

All above mentioned points need time to be carefully considered during the preparation process. Unfortunately, we educators, as well as university administration and management often are impatient and willing to engage in teaching joint courses fast, without taking all the necessary steps of preparation – although we all know that the use of modern technology can even multiply the difficulties that professors face today in the classroom. And teaching joint courses can be really annoying for all participants if the cameras, computers, video screens, or projectors are difficult to operate or the audio system/microphone has poor quality or, especially in a bigger classroom, students have limited access to it. Without these technologies the natural way of communication and discussion among the two student groups is lost as also is the enjoyment and excitement of an otherwise well planned international collaboration.

### 3.2 Human, Cultural Issues and Personal Differences

In today's interconnected world universities are paying particular attention to two concepts: internationalization of the curriculum and utilization of existing, cutting edge technologies and media resources. The joint course method delivers the possibility of an international experience by using video technology.



Teaching international joint courses requires asynchronous preparation of the course on behalf of the professors living and working in different countries, obeying different informal and formal rules of educational as well as social systems; followed by delivering the courses together but at the same time to two culturally diverse student bodies. Each professor is connected with his/her own university, department, experiencing the everyday dynamics of that particular setting. He/she is required to work according a set of rules of the existing system of higher education, while he/she is also highly interested in promoting the joint course among students as well as administrators. In this line of thinking, decisions on behalf of the otherwise jointly delivered class most likely to be made instantly by the professors following one's institutional culture. Often there is no time sometimes there is no intention, to incorporate into the already bureaucratic process of academic decision making the other collaborator who works with the joint course in another country. No doubt, contributors will face such difficulties during the lifetime of the project. Educators usually reluctant to make negative statements about colleagues, they rather attribute the existing problems to 'differences in their teaching philosophies.' But a decision in a seemingly irrelevant matter on one end can easily turn into a highly delicate issue on the other. For example, assume a professor recruiting students for the international joint course in one country. He/she follows all the rules of course promotion of his/her home institution and additionally as a bonus to his/her future students he/she also offers a certificate issued by the participating (international) university at the successful completion of the class. There was no previous discussion on the topic between the collaborators. For him/her this is just an additional promotional tool to work with. Also we can assume in the respective country the professor has the right to issue such certificate on behalf of the university. Maybe he/she was just thinking about a letter of accomplishment from the other professor. In the contrary, in the other country the collaborator-professor does not have the right to issue such certificates and has never heard about promoting the joint course that way. On his/her end the promise made by his colleague may lead to very serious professional, ethical, and legal consequences. Last but not at least, by teaching a joint course an educator devotes himself/herself to a long term interpersonal – and may be also international – collaboration. As a relatively



newly established method of teaching no doubt professors participating in such a project will increase their recognition among the colleagues at their respective institutions. Collaborating with another university and utilizing on the existing new technology professors should be able to enhance students' learning outcomes, involve international experiences into their own and their students' educational processes, and also leverage on academic collaborations in the form of future publications, grants, fellowships, or presentations at conferences. Collaboration can be fruitful and successful if the collaborators have the willingness to recognize each other's works and share credits for the jointly delivered class. But that very important element also depends on the personalities – personal values, ambitions, etc – of the participants. There is also the probability of one educator 'jumping on' an already existing class and promote personal advancement just by 'riding the waves.' The main point here is whether both professors being co-teachers and collaborators in the project anticipate focusing on the "co" part from the start to the very end of the long process delivering a joint course or not. And the question we must ask ourselves before entering into such an engagement is the following: Do we understand the ethics of virtual academic collaboration the same way, or we look at the joint collaborative project as 'mine' – 'yours' 'their' - instead of 'ours?' (Figure 2)

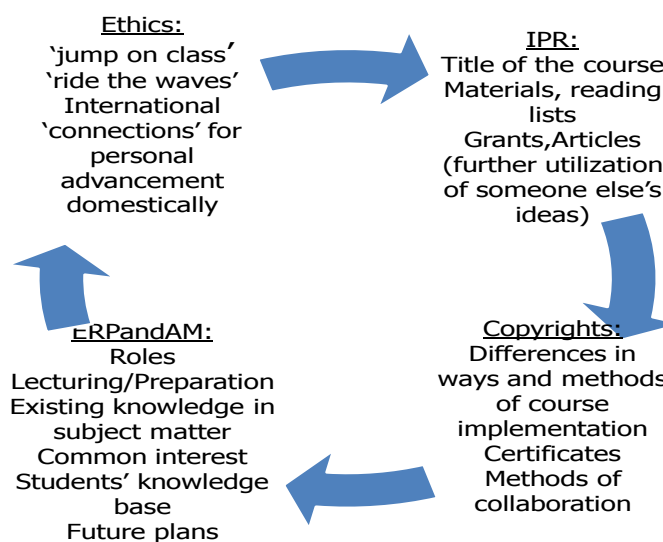


Figure 2. Application of Ethical-Legal Model of Virtual Academic Collaboration to Teaching International Joint Courses





#### 4. Dos (And Don'ts) in International Joint Courses

The 2010 Nobel Prize winner in economics, Elinor Ostrom, found that collective collaborative actions were more likely to succeed when a small number of design principles were observed and more likely to fail in the absence of these measures. These are the following:

1. Group boundaries are clearly defined.
2. Rules governing the use of collective goods are well matched to local needs and conditions
3. Most individuals effected by these rules can participate in modifying the rules
4. The right of community members to devise their own rules is respected by external authorities
5. A system of monitoring member's behavior exists; the community members themselves undertake this monitoring
6. A graduated system of sanctions is used
7. Community members have access to low-cost conflict resolutions
8. Appropriation, provision, monitoring, enforcement, conflict resolution, and governance activities are organized (Ostrom:1990)

No doubt, the power of networked media also stimulates new ways to share and act together in academic settings. Networked knowledge at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century derives from a variety of disciplines that had previously not been connected: (digital) technology and human behavior. Castells, who studies social aspects of networked media worldwide, argues that the shape of interpersonal connections matter because of the way technology enables the human social networks that push us to work more rapidly, in new settings, across more boundaries than ever before (Castells: 2004). Rheingold even states: "I did not let my child loose on the streets without teaching her about traffic and looking both ways. Similarly, I do not like otherwise well educated people loose in digital culture without knowing something about it." (Rheingold: 2011)



No doubt, a successful collaboration through an international joint course methodology shall start with a well defined written agreement between – at least – departments over viewing the process of preparation, provision, and evaluation of the collaborative process. Participating professors as well as administrators must pay particular attention to the professional background, intention, interest, and personal qualities of the partnering university in general, and faculty in particular, before entering into such collaboration.

Building on Ostrom's findings academics searching opportunities through teaching international joint courses will be able to prepare a written guideline or even a partnership agreement. Although sometimes academics would like to skip the time consuming steps related to issues of project management, this step can be the key to keeping up the collaborators' enthusiasm thorough the project and at the end turning the joint course into a real success. On the other end, the authors personal experience with dos and don'ts while teaching international joint courses also provides evidence to Ostrom's model on necessary collaborative actions that make a project successful - from the perspective of a virtual academic collaborative setting.

## 5. Conclusion

Howard Rheingold, an influential writer and thinker on social media starts his book "Net Smart: How to Thrive Online" (Rheingold: 2012) with the following sentence:

"The future of digital culture - yours, mine, and ours – depends on how well we learn to use the media that have infiltrated, amplified, distracted, enriched, and complicated our lives. How you employ a search engine, stream a video from your phonecam, or update your Facebook status matters to you and everyone, because the ways people use new media in the first years of an emerging communication regime can influence the way those media ends up being used for decades to come." (Winner: 1986)

With this study our intention was to emphasize the need to exercise conscious decision making in order to avoid the negative effects of virtual or online academic collaborations and turn the new way of cooperation between academics and students into a "net positive." The new 'classroom' for virtual collaborations is technology-initiated but the



method remains to be human-centered, where – through individual choices – we, the professors have the control over how, when, and with whom we interact, cooperate, and collaborate. And by doing so we, the instructors, should always keep our focus on how we incorporate the new methods of teaching with technology into our repertoire for the benefit of our students. This is another line of research we also need to continue.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example, the American Council on Education (ACE) advocates that educational programs make use of technology to provide students with cross-cultural learning experiences.

<sup>2</sup> During the 2010 and 2011 academic year respectively the authors were engaged into international joint course teaching between universities located in the USA and one in Hungary. One of the classes connected students studying Socialist Control and Resistance the other focused on Economic History of the Olympic Games. In the US the two classes were taught by two different professors specialized in the respective fields. In Hungary both class was taught by the same professor. The authors' experiences are used as a case study and form the basis for this research.

<sup>3</sup> Most of the US universities have these criteria in their collective agreements.

## References

Castells, M., (2004) "Why Networks Matter" in *Network Logic: Who Governs in an Interconnected World?* McCarthy, M., Miller, P., Skidmore, P. (eds). (London: Demos)

Ostrom, E., (1990) *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Reingold, H., (2012) *Net Smart: How to Thrive Online* (Boston: MIT Press)

Walace L., Young J.(2010) "Implementing Blending Learning: Policy Implications for Universities" *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, Volume XIII. No.4.*

Wang F., Burton J.K. (2010)" Collaborative Learning Problems and Identity Salience: A Mixed Methods Study" *Journal of Educational Technology Development and Exchange, 3(1), 1-12.*



Winner, L., (1986) *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) p. 19-39 cited in Reingold, H., (2012) *Net Smart: How to Thrive Online* (Boston: MIT Press)