

Socially Responsible Programming for Study Abroad Students: Preparation through Videoconferencing

Dr. Fran Oneal
Director, International Honors Program
University of Alabama

Pre-departure education is a necessary preface for socially responsible programming. The University of Alabama provides this through its International Honors Program's seminar. International videoconferencing has brought a new dimension to the seminar, allowing students to engage in cross-cultural communication and gain knowledge that will help them engage in a socially responsible study abroad experience. The details of our videoconferencing ventures and their results are provided.

In 2004, nearly 200,000 American university students studied abroad in locations around the world¹. Many times that number of Americans traveled for business or tourism. Sadly, the image of the ugly American abroad is still widely held. A recent study conducted by *Glimpse Abroad* asked 350 returned study abroad students to name the characteristics they found to be associated with Americans by those they met overseas. The list is not flattering. The top responses were loud, obese, wealthy, arrogant, ignorant, rude, materialistic, friendly (one plus!), war-mongering, ethnocentric, environmentally disrespectful, and sexually promiscuous².

Clearly, if American academicians and students are to engage in socially responsible programs overseas, we must be aware that such a negative outlook on Americans precedes us; we must be prepared to do what we can to undo misinformed views of the American population in general; and we must address some of the perceived characteristics of Americans that have some

¹ A record 191,321 students studied abroad, according to a press release announcing **Open Doors 2005**, the annual report on international education published by the Institute of International Education with funding from the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. <http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/?p=69735>

² Costa, Hillary and Kerala Goodkin. 2005. *American Identity Abroad*. GlimpseAbroad.Org Study Abroad Acclimation Guide. p. 1.

basis in truth. Certainly we have the capacity to address the perception of Americans as ignorant by preparing our students in specific ways before they engage in overseas study and service.

All students in the International Honors Program at The University of Alabama participate in a seminar entitled Culture and Human Society before engaging in a study abroad experience³. The goals of the seminar are to prepare students for the stresses and obstacles they may encounter in studying abroad; to train them cross-cultural communication skills; to enable them to view issues from a variety of perspectives; and to familiarize them with specific facts about the world around them. The preparation they receive helps to fill in many gaps in knowledge and to erase the naiveté that may be mistaken for ignorance by those they meet overseas.

This seminar and others like it provide a necessary preface to socially responsible programming. Such programs—whether addressing income inequality, environmental protection, gender rights, cultural impingement, or other dimensions—must be undertaken in the context of knowledge and awareness. A student should participate in a program designed to effect change only when operating from a firm base of understanding of the context of the program. The fundamental skills of cross-cultural communication are also necessary equipment for engaging in socially responsible actions. Thus, participation in a seminar like that offered by the IHP is a necessary first step in a socially responsible program.

The seminar features an array of readings, in-class dramatizations, interviews with international students at UA, and research activities. One new dimension of the IHP seminar is videoconferencing with students at other universities around the world. Following up on the US

³ Students sometimes take the course after they return from studying abroad. In these cases, the seminar offers them a lens through which to see and a vocabulary with which to frame their study abroad experience. In addition, their contributions of anecdotal cases add depth to discussions with students who have not yet studied abroad.

State Department's Global Classroom initiative, the IHP has engaged for three semesters in videoconferencing with students in the UK, Chile, and the UAE. More relationships are being developed. Through the videoconferences, we accomplish several objectives: our students utilize their cross-cultural communication skills and experience the reality of cross-cultural *miscommunication* firsthand; they discuss issues with those who do not hold an American perspective; they learn of customs and lifestyles in another country. Our videoconferencing partners receive similar benefits, and in some cases, also gain practice in conversational English.

The sections which follow describe precisely how videoconferencing can be used in the classroom, our insights gained from the experience, and the technical requirements needed to link the classrooms.

Videoconferencing begins with collaboration between faculty members at two or more partner institutions. The faculty members jointly decide on the number of interactions, the topics, and any desired rules of discussion. Ideally, the number of participants is kept low, with approximately 15 per university being the maximum desirable. Arrangements are made for the class to meet in rooms equipped with videoconferencing technology, and ideally, a distance-learning technician to assist with any audio or visual glitches that may arise.

In the first meeting via videoconferencing, each student will introduce him/herself and give some brief personal information to make all the students feel familiar with one another. Information might include: age, year in school, major, hometown, place of residence (dormitory, apartment, at home with family), hobbies, or organizations. After the introductions, a good topic for sharing in the first session is information about campus life. Students can take turns describing their respective institutions: enrollment, yearly academic calendar, areas of

specialization, unique characteristics of the institution, traditions, locale, climate, and environment.

Subsequent sessions address specifically chosen topics for discussion. According to the judgment of the faculty members, the topics chosen may be neutral or controversial, generalized or specific to a discipline, or they may highlight differences or similarities between the two cultures. Examples of topics that have been discussed in various sessions between UA and our partners in the UK and Chile are: national holidays, environmental concerns, role of religion in our respective cultures, family structure, teen drinking, pop culture, regional attractions and sights. Of course, the interests of the students and the utility of the topics to them are to be considered.

For a given topic, the discussion may proceed in a number of formats. One format is as follows:

- Faculty Member A introduces a topic for discussion (eg., environmental concerns, role of religion in their culture, family structure, teen drinking, etc.) with an overview, statement of various positions, key data points, etc⁴. The introduction should be very brief, no more than 10 minutes.

- A student from University B replies to something that has been said.

⁴ Visual aids such as Powerpoint slides can be accommodated by most technical setups. These are sometimes useful during the overview segment. After the overview, preference should be given to face-to-face communications. As an alternative to slides during the overview, handouts can be shared via an email attachment sent in advance and distributed.

- A student from University A continues the discussion.
- Comments alternate from university to university.

Another format which has been successful is:

- Each student from University A makes a statement related to the topic for discussion, perhaps taking a total of 10-15 minutes. An example, each student could describe a holiday tradition from different times of the year; each student could mention a form of etiquette in their country; each student could tell one part of the story of an environmental problem in their locale; each student could give part of the description of political participation by young adults in their country.
- Students from University B begin to respond to the presentation.
- Dialogue bounces back and forth between the universities.

Other formats are certainly successful. The format should be jointly designed by the faculty leaders who have a clear understanding of the parameters involved at each end. The faculty leaders should take as passive a role as possible during the discussions. They may intervene to dispel any tense or awkward situations that seem to be lingering, or to clarify a misunderstanding perhaps based on language. However, since a major goal of the interactions is

for students to gain cross-cultural communications skills and cultural sensitivity, interventions should be kept to a minimum.

Results of the videoconferencing segments are immediate: students are intrigued by the differences between cultures and amazed as the similarities. The varying social value orientations that they have read about in texts come alive. For example, American students are amazed to learn that their college-age counterparts continue to live at home with their families while attending university. While the American students hold dear their families and extended families, they perceive an imperative to make an importance step away from the family at age eighteen. They learn that not all youths in all cultures share this strong sense of imperative. Another case in contrasts is the difference in attitudes towards alcohol consumption. Most American college students are under age 21 for most of their college years; alcohol consumption is common yet illegal. A whole set of cultural practices and taboos has grown up around the practice of illicit underage drinking. In our partner countries of the U.K. and Chile, attitudes towards alcohol consumption are much more casual. Parents do not worry about teenage alcohol consumption, due in large part to the fact that it is legal. A whole set of conversations around this topic (including binge drinking, drinking and driving, age of adulthood) engaged the student groups on several occasions. The experience causes students to reflect heavily on this particular aspect of American culture when shown in the light of other culture's attitudes.

In another instance, American students have been surprised at the in-depth knowledge of American foreign policy and American leaders held by students in both the UK and Chile. They learned quickly from this experience the feeling of discomfort when one is not equally well versed in politics or current affairs as is one's conversation partner. In a survey of University of

Alabama Honors students, 10% of respondents reported that they are “Very Attentive” to international news; 36% reported that they are “Attentive” to international news⁵. Yet, this experience with videoconferencing made many students aware that their attentiveness to international news is not as great as they had believed it to be. It is beneficial for the students to learn this reality—that a certain level of knowledge of international relations is expected—and to make adjustments at this point rather than when tossed into the conversational fray overseas.

As a final example, American students have been impressed with the Chilean students’ conversational skills in English. In response, even those American students who are studying Spanish were reluctant to display their more elementary skills. From the viewpoint of language fluency, videoconferencing prior to an overseas experience can be humbling experience. It clearly informs a student of the necessity diligent conversational practice in order to communicate with non-English speakers.

Videoconferencing has provided our students with interactions with university students who are very much like themselves, yet whose life experiences and worldviews are dramatically different. As with our program of conversation partners with UA’s international students, this experience broadens our students’ minds, challenges them to accept other world views, and helps them see themselves in a new light. Videoconferencing with international students holds a metaphorical mirror up to the American students and enables them to see themselves in starker contrast than ever before.

The conversations begun through videoconferencing can be continued through **email partnerships**. In these exchanges, students can make contributions to the discussion that

⁵ Survey of media usage among UA Honors College students, Fall 2005; 126 respondents.

perhaps they did not have time to voice in the classroom. They can also get to know one student in greater detail. When the two meet again in the group videoconference, it is easier to talk in relaxed manner. The UA students were able to see that the verbal skills of the Spanish-speaking students were sometimes greater than their writing skills, or vice versa. This was an important clue to them in their attempts to communicate with another person in a second language: try more than one form of communication.

Alternative forms of interaction can be used if simultaneous videoconferencing is not an option due to time-of-class-meeting constraints or technical constraints, or as an addition to videoconferencing. One is the **creation of a slide show** on a particular topic, uploaded to the internet, and viewed by the partner classroom. Discussion of the slide show can then take place in the videoconferencing sessions, in a chatroom, or by email. Another option is the **creation of a video**, which is then uploaded to the internet as streaming media and viewed by the partner institution. As before, discussion of the streaming video can then take place in the videoconferencing sessions, a chatroom, or by email.

The technology required for videoconferencing is simple, though the better the technological environment, the better the quality of the experience may well be. Any classroom with a computer with an internet connection, a videoconferencing camera with built in microphone⁶, and a large screen display monitor are the fundamental components needed at each end. A distance education classroom with a more sophisticated array of technical options would be the ideal choice of environment. It is desirable to have similar videoconferencing cameras at

⁶ The inexpensive Polycom Videoconferencing cameras supplied by the US State Department for use in their pilot year project in 2003 cost only \$400. All videoconferencing cameras will come with the necessary software to communicate with other computers.

each end, and also to have considerable bandwidth from the University's computing center made available for sending and receiving the video stream.

It is also desirable to have an additional computer in each room. At this second station, a technician or co-instructor can monitor the interaction and communicate via chatroom with the technician or co-instructor at the partner university. If the sound or picture connection breaks down, the two classrooms can communicate via messaging in order to solve the problem. The partnering faculty should implement several practice sessions of the linkage to adjust for lighting and sound issues, and to test the stability of the connection. The latter is generally only an issue when adequate bandwidth is not available at one of the partners.

Future applications of this instructional format include:

Guest lecturing via videoconferencing

Breaking-news discussion via videoconferencing

Language instruction via videoconferencing

Research presentations via videoconferencing

Q & A sessions about specific study-abroad locations via videoconferencing

Some trials of these applications have been utilized at The University of Alabama, for example, guest lecturers in the Introduction to International Business and Spanish language classes linked to classes in Spain and Chile.

In sum, videoconferencing as part of a seminar devoted to preparation for studying abroad is a valuable way to raise students' awareness of cultural issues, increase their political and social knowledge about the destination site, and hone their cross-cultural communication skills. Socially-conscious programming should be based on as broad a foundation of knowledge

as possible. Videoconferencing widens the scope of the students' personal experience and thus contributes to that broad foundation.