

# VOICES FROM THE PERIPHERY: THE VICTORIA UNIVERSITY AND UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO GLOBAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

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While traveling for business the Vice Chancellor of Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia, came across an article written about the University of Texas at El Paso. The inflight magazine featured UTEP's extraordinary effort to provide access and a quality education for thousands of Latina/o students in the West Texas, Southern New Mexico, and Northern Mexico regions. What struck the reader most was that the student body at UTEP shared numerous similarities with students at Victoria University. Such was the serendipitous beginning of our collaborative courses. In this chapter, we reflect on the partnership's goal of increasing cultural literacy among students who are themselves often positioned as 'other' in socio-economic and cultural terms in relation to the dominant national culture around them. The University of Texas at El Paso student profile is 76% Hispanic with 83% residing in El Paso County. El Paso County is an economically depressed region; therefore, 81% of students are employed while 64% receive federal financial aid in the form of Pell Grants. Additionally, 55% are first generation college students.

Victoria University is in the industrial west of Melbourne and since its inception has promoted successful participation in tertiary and vocational education among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Since the 1950s the west has been the new home for immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, and since the 1970s it has seen immigrants from South East Asia and, more recently, China, South Asia, and Africa. With almost 50,000 students, over 46% are from non-English speaking backgrounds. As at UTEP, many students at VU are first generation vocational/tertiary students.

The similarities between the universities' profiles and the goal of each to bring the world to students who would otherwise not be able to study abroad because of economic and other barriers led both institutions to seek international partners as a means to enhance the globalization of their curriculum. This led to a sustained dialogue between the two universities and ultimately a memorandum of understanding signed by each institution's Vice Chancellor and Vice President. For UTEP and VU, the forging of international partnerships is integral to their strategic objectives inasmuch as both are committed to engendering "responsible and ethical citizens who use their intercultural understanding to contribute to their local and global communities" (Victoria University 2012). Collaborations were formed across different colleges and departments at both universities. One became the Global Learning Community (GLC), which linked the Entering Student Program at UTEP and the Liberal Arts Program at VU. In addition to the goals of global citizenship, these learning communities aim to increase student engagement with one another, their instructors, and the integrated course content and, in doing so, to improve academic performance and retention.

## COURSE DEVELOPMENT AND DESIGN

As the academic collaborations between the two universities expanded, our respective Deans suggested that several of the courses that we authors routinely delivered could be interwoven and developed into a synergetic course for first-year students. Early in 2009, we met for the first time through videoconferencing and promptly established a collegial rapport

that culminated in the integration of the first-year VU Liberal Arts course *Analyse a Range of Texts (Imagining Australia)* and the similarly themed first year UTEP course *The US – Mexico Border*. Both courses explored themes of identity formation, multiculturalism and nationalism, race and gender. It quickly became obvious that combining the two curricula would provide an engaging learning environment where groups of students who were considered marginal within their respective communities could develop into global citizens with a deeper understanding of the themes of the class as well as of the world around them.

From these initial discussions about the thematic content emerged the title of the project: *The VU - UTEP Global Learning Community (GLC)*. Agreement on the name and content (the ‘what’), however, did not indicate ‘how’ we could create a collaborative course, given that class members were on different sides of the world in vastly different time zones. These issues presented formidable obstacles, and the solution at the time was synchronous videoconferencing, which would at least provide a means of face-to-face contact between two student cohorts.

Aware of the time differences and how they could impact student participation, we decided that the course should be a hybrid, a mix of face-to-face and online learning. We would deliver lectures, tutorials and computer lab sessions in our respective classrooms and then enhance these class components with asynchronous online discussions and assignment collaborations between VU - UTEP students. These student collaborations we thought would foster international dialogue and ‘reflective learning’ for the purpose of individual ‘deep learning’ (Kolb 1984; Gibbs 1998; Park & Kastanis 2009). Students would blog, others could comment and then the original author could reflect on their contribution and comment in response to their own critical thinking and that of others. We hoped that this would lead to students learning how to question their own prejudices and open horizons to new ideas and values.

We were aware that many of our students hailed from situations where the ability to travel abroad for academic enrichment was limited if not non-existent; therefore our collaboration became even more meaningful. We soon recognised that we were in the process of creating a space that could

significantly overcome the tyranny of distance. If we could not send our students out into the world, then we could bring the world to our students. The next question quickly became how exactly would we do this?

Inter-institutional license limitations on existing VU and UTEP Learning Management Systems (Blackboard) led us to think about building a website containing course information, such as lecture schedules and assessment details, which would be linked to several thematic discussion forums enabled by a Web 2.0 platform such as Blogger.com. During this stage we designed the fundamental information architecture, and this has not changed greatly since mid-2009. A member of UTEP instructional support staff had experience with the open source Ning.com software and proposed it as a more elegant means to overcome inter-institutional license limitations and provide a secure, invitation only Web 2.0 Social Networking Site (SNS). This would be adaptable to the collaborative classes’ information needs, and especially suitable for the creation of cross-cohort discussion forums, as well as the uploading of videos, readings, lectures, and student assessment tasks. It also enabled students to create their own personalized pages from which they could communicate with a profoundly individual feel. The facility for students to create customised pages was quite contrary to the institutional Learning Management Systems of the time, which maintained a corporate sameness across the site. This facility greatly helped students to take some ownership and feel more secure, comfortable, and thus motivated to spend more time on the site beyond merely fulfilling assessment tasks.

Once the site was built, we realised that it needed a distinctive inter-institutional branding, and in conjunction with UTEP and VU Marketing, we initiated and collaborated on the design of a distinctive template style for the site (see Fig. 1). This included a header with the logos of both institutions, the title of the collaborative course, a spliced photograph of both campuses, and a clock widget showing the present time in El Paso and Melbourne. The GLC platform was designed for both the uploading of lecture materials and other course information, but more importantly for facilitating discussion and shared learning. The platform had three separate discussion forums: an El Paso and a VU forum, which served to separate course assessment tasks,

and an informal forum open to general discussion, which enabled students to get to know each other better.

Students posted their article summary, film review or brief opinion piece in their institution's forum; however, any student or instructor could contribute comments on the post (the role of the instructor has varied in an effort to promote student participation). The informal forum was a site for both cohorts to share their independent research findings and develop social networks for investigating their own experiences, thereby gaining a better understanding of the cultural tapestry that exists, not just in the one class, but in two classrooms on opposite sides of the globe. Students were encouraged to upload photographs, videos, music and maps, and even links to e-journals or academic and other websites.



Figure 1: VU and UTEP Global Learning Website

The GLC also utilized video conferencing to further expand the students' ability to communicate with one another. These interactions were held early, midway, and at the end of the course and ranged from broad-based

discussions to more focused analyses of particular themes. This synchronous and visual communication was especially important at the start of the collaboration because it greatly helped student bonding. Students could see and talk to one another, rather than merely being relatively anonymous online bloggers.

Before the second iteration of the course in 2010, we gave a joint presentation on the GLC titled 'Bridging Courses, Countries, and Continents: The Creation of the UTEP-VU Learning Community', at the 23rd International Conference on the First-Year Experience, in Maui, Hawaii (June 2010). Here we met in person for the first time (another unique if old fashioned form of communication) and designed our second course, *Stories Across Cultures: Mobile Worlds and Politics of Belonging Amongst Diasporic Communities in Australia and the United States*, which combines the Liberal Arts course Analyse Stories/ Narratives with Cultures and the UTEP course University Studies 1301. This is now delivered in alternate semesters.



Figure 2: VU students



**Figure 3: UTEP students**

At the conference we realised that the course had even greater potential and discussed ways to increase thematic integration and expand collaborative inter-cohort assessment tasks. For the latter goal, we introduced the making of collaborative videos using YouTube's cloud based editing suite. The video makers further communicated on the Ning.com site, on Facebook, or via Skype. The videos are unique hybrids, VUTEP or Mel Paso movies, and are most astounding because students shared and interrogated perceptions of each other. The filmmakers portrayed borderless, globalized conceptions of their chosen thematic content, an indication that they were beginning to think of themselves as part of the larger globe, as entities beyond borders.

We, the instructors, moderated the forums and maintained decorum as well as the course platform. Support for projects requiring technological expertise was facilitated by instructional support services at UTEP and by a very tech savvy Library Officer at VU. Their commitment to the project and responsiveness to students who sought advice for resolving ICT (information and communication technology) issues outside scheduled hours were crucial and inspiring.

## CULTURAL LITERACY

A prime motive of the GLC is the idea that, for students to better understand their role as active global citizens, cultural illiteracy must be confronted and deconstructed analytically. Cultural literacy refers to the common core of knowledge that literate individuals within a culture share and that forms the basis for textbooks, dictionaries, and even state-mandated curricula. Cultural literacy however, can blindly construct cultural illiteracy, a monocultural knowledge that legitimates the economic and political status quo, thus occluding the knowledge, values, and perspectives that define the identities of vast cultural groups that reside on the margins (Cummins and Sayer 1995). With today's fluid cultural demographics, it is important to confront cultural illiteracy and create intercultural learning communities that take advantage of accessible and culturally appropriate educational and communications technology.

Our inaugural GLC, first implemented in the spring of 2009 in Australia (thus, fall 2009 in the United States), dismantled students' cultural illiteracy by providing intercultural contact and learning. The course linked students at each institution for eight weeks to study colonialism, nationalism, culture, migration, gender and sexuality through a unique intercultural perspective.

This intercultural perspective took as its core the idea that students knew something about their respective nations' history but had rarely applied a critical perspective in order to contest the foundations of hegemonic conceptualizations. Indeed, to disturb the status quo, the first student project was to produce a digital story of how VU and UTEP students imagined the other's nation. For the VU cohort, the imaginings of Australia by some UTEP students were most 'other' to their experience. Especially for recently arrived immigrants, kangaroos, crocodiles and surfing are not part of their social imaginary. For UTEP students the VU imaginings were equally steeped in race and ethnic stereotypes of Latina/os, largely influenced by the bygone days of black and white Hollywood cinema and television, or more contemporary depictions of drug runners and routine homicide (*Breaking Bad*; *The Bridge*).



However, these musings provided a springboard for examining conventional narratives regarding the construction of a national identity for each nation as well as the students' identities and positions within it. Benedict Anderson's imagined political community (1991, 5) and Franz Fanon's (1986) psychoanalytic understanding of the relations between colonizer and colonized became guides for disrupting anachronistic imaginings and forming more nuanced conceptualizations of each nation. The themes of manifest destiny, colonialism, race, the white man's burden, indigenous dispossession, migration and exclusion resonated with both cohorts. National themes such as indigenous dispossession came to be recognized as transnational, if not global issues and thus provided new ground for discussions about the politics of identity, belonging and nation. Moreover, a learning space had been established where our students honed their critical thinking skills at the formative stage of their academic experience.

From the outset, the GLC fostered an intercultural dialogue among students, many of whom are considered other in their respective nations, while developing intercultural empathy led to instances of post-intercultural learning. Strangers had become friends and were learning with each other. Bland stereotypical portrayals of difference gave way to more substantive recognition of difference and sameness, of humans facing all too common human problems.

The initial GLC demonstrated the potential that global learning communities have to expand and empower student educational experience by providing a means for extensive intercultural interaction without incurring the more significant expense of study abroad. Moreover, the GLC provided a space where two site-encumbered groups (it could involve more groups), who would have otherwise not met, came into contact and challenged one another to develop new ways of thinking about global and local issues, thereby confronting and dismantling cultural illiteracy and moving on from sometimes thought-stifling intercultural etiquette.

## **FIRST-YEAR TRANSITION AND PARTICIPATORY PEDAGOGY**

In the 21st century, student centered strategies and classroom design, relevant

to learning programs for first year students, are the subject of discussion and conferences among educators worldwide. For higher educational institutions, a successful first-year transition aims to develop a positive, caring, self-directed student experience through the implementation of innovative curricula. For VU and UTEP, access and support for student success have become a primary strategy for attracting and retaining students. For instance, both universities have student mentor and other programs to help first-year students navigate their studies and their respective institutions in order to improve and complete their university experience. More pressing for us was the need to accommodate a first year transitional model that effectively engaged students of such diverse backgrounds with programs that were academically stimulating and supportive, while generating a sense of connectedness to university life and community. The creation of the GLC was appealing for a number of reasons. As the following student remarks:

As a student who had just finished high school in 2010, I was worried and nervous about my first time experiencing university... I've learnt a lot about different religions and complicated situations that everyday people overcome. I also learnt a lot about racism and gender issues that I didn't know existed. This class is also a great way of teaching because the documentaries and films that link to the readings done in class really help in understanding the learning intentions because there are so many classes that don't even do that. The best experience in this class was the conference calls with UTEP where we talked about our cultural and political differences in Australia and America. In the GLC class, you really learn a lot about the world around you.

In an effort to accommodate various learning styles, the GLC incorporates several modes of instructional design. These modes seek to combine on-site and off-site learning support for students. This all-embracing approach helps students develop an identity within their respective institutions and, more importantly a collegiality among peers and with faculty and staff.

Participatory pedagogy (Siemens 2008) is the hallmark of the GLC. Students from the two universities construct dialogue threads on the Ning.com site, and

thus weave a dynamic interconnectedness across borders, characterized by an ever-expanding discourse between diverse voices. Within the institutional setting the GLC serves to displace in part the role of the instructor and challenges traditional classroom-situated pedagogies. Moreover, the GLC instructors provide resources designed to open a heterogeneous space for marginal groups to explore other marginalized cultural groups, as well as anchoring these resources in debates that require a critical analysis of various forms of power. As one student put it, “The readings didn’t describe but dealt with assumptions about nature, class, gender, sexuality, democracy and relations of power.”

Our broad canvas was underpinned by a comparative analysis of how the U.S. and Australia were historically imagined and how these imaginings have been contested by contemporary theoretical interpolations. This stimulated independent and group inquiry as students sifted through an array of information, from the challenging curriculum to the sharing and uploading of music or videos, and online debates. It created a fluid participatory framework that oscillated from the personal knowledge of the individual student to a sharing of information among a network of peers. In short, this learning space engaged a network of peers with the institutional curriculum. Indeed, the transnational conversation facilitated knowledge creation within multiple networks rather than promoting a limited discrete individualistic learning.

Marshall McLuhan’s statement that ‘the medium is the message’, in its least ironic sense, is too absolute, too technologically deterministic. However, new types of communication technology in our experience have allowed messages to be communicated between those who would not have typically conversed. The Web 2.0 communication revolution is very different from letter writing pen pals of the past. Obviously different are the speed of communication and the types of materials that can be shared, and this difference affects discursive content. Web 2.0 discussions often tend to assume a present, rather than a pensive waiting for the next letter to arrive; responses are rapid and give rise to lively debate and reflective musing. Moreover, our discussions stemmed from a curricular context and framing questions that encouraged self-reflexivity and contextualized knowledge.

Kop and Hill (2008) in their analysis of connectivism, as argued by Siemens (2005) and Downes (2008), contend that:

Knowledge does not reside in one location, but rather that it is a confluence of information arising out of multiple individuals seeking inquiry related to a common interest and providing feedback to one another.

Clearly there is a synergy between the GLC and connectivism as a theoretical framework in that the GLC as a learning process is clustered around shared interests (e.g., age group, course topics, etc.). Siemens describes these groups in terms of communities in which “the clustering of similar areas of interest... allows for interaction, sharing, dialoging, and thinking together” (Siemens, quoted in Kop and Hill 2008). Another theorist of connectivism, described the “learning community”:

as a node, which is always part of a larger network. Nodes arise out of the connection points that are found on a network. A network is comprised of two or more nodes linked in order to share resources. Nodes may be of varying size and strength, depending on the concentration of information and the number of individuals who are navigating through a particular node.

(Downes quoted in Kop and Hill 2008).

However, a singular theoretical stand would be presumptuous of us at present because the answers to many questions remain elusive. For example Starke-Meyerring (2010, p.263) raises fundamental questions about the nature of communication that occurs on such learning platforms:

We currently know little about the negotiation of identities and subject positions in these networked learning environments—an important question because, after all, challenging and negotiating normalized ways of knowing and doing is no easy feat, as identities and subject positions are intimately tied up in these ways of knowing and acting.

Our emphasis has been on accruing ethnographic data and questioning our formative contention that the GLC promotes learning only when students feel empowered to share knowledge, that is, when they are not overly inhibited for knowledge to be critiqued and reformulated in online forums (blogs). Learning and knowledge is circulated and, as Siemens (2008) argues, “rests in” a “diversity of opinions” and this is combined with the knowledge gained from the institution. What is created is in effect a discursive network of competing knowledge(s), which constitutes deeper learning.

We witnessed this in the early semester project in which students were placed in groups and asked to produce a digital story of how each group imagined the other’s nation. Many overtly regurgitated stereotypical assumptions about nation and peoples, and in some cases each cohort found these portrayals offensive. The VU and UTEP students vetted their frustration and anger and discussed possible interventions with their instructors. Both instructors waited to see what would transpire. The ensuing online discussions were forthright but devoid of name calling or flaming. In effect, respect was growing with the loss of anonymity. What transpired was a “robust exercise in free speech” couched in a “collective politeness” (Papacharissi 2004, 270), which culminated in a deep understanding of place, identity and belonging. Students recognized the value of competing discourses and used these multiple sources to construct their own knowledge. As one student commented:

This subject gave us the opportunity to explore Australia’s and (El Paso’s) footprint through [set texts] ...which positioned us as readers to critically think about our history and what we knew (or didn’t know)... the Ning site (web 2.0 platform) enabled an exploration of these themes in depth... [R]eading other students’ set work tasks and the discussions which flowed from these enabled me to gain a different understanding of not only the prescribed texts but also allowed other student opinions which at times was [sic] other than my own. Having said that, I came to respect and appreciate the many different ways of understanding.

## ASSESSMENT

The initial collaborative course, called *Imagining Nations, Imagining Regions: The Making of Cultural Diversity in Australia and on the U.S.-Mexico Border*, was delivered in September and October 2009. Student assessment for the eight-week collaborative course was based on the presentation of an e-portfolio. The e-portfolio collated all the individual student’s contributions to the GLC site, whether these were short collaborative films, journal article summaries, book reviews, film reviews, comments on the postings of other students, participation in forum discussions, reflective writing, i-photo presentations or peer group evaluations.

To gauge the impact of the course on students’ perception of their own learning and cultural literacy, we ran pre and post course evaluations for VU and UTEP students. When collated, the evaluations demonstrated that both institutional cohorts enjoyed the intercultural experience and felt that they had learnt a great deal, indeed more than they had indicated likely in the pre-course survey. The what and how dialectic had been synthesised, and one student’s opinion of the consequence was:

Besides gaining friends, this was a new experience that most people haven’t experienced yet. Even though it was an “experiment”, I believe it turned out to be very successful. We learned together and we could ask each other for help. I think we learned tolerance, too, because of so many topics we had to express. Everyone had different opinions and point of views.

(Student Post Course Evaluation, 2009)

Initial and subsequent student evaluations reiterate that the GLC has been most successful in forging new ground for teaching and learning. Students at both universities are empowered to explore and share the unique context of each other’s national histories and cultural identities. In fact, the outcome has been the creation of a dynamic e-learning community across borders, which has liberated learner experience from the traditional classroom context and demonstrated the efficacy of a participatory pedagogy.

The GLC has measurably increased student (and teacher) information literacy and improved cultural literacy (Cummins and Sayer 1995). The latter evolved quickly, from sometimes embarrassingly uneducated and stereotypical comments at the beginning of the course, to informed empathetic discussions by the closing weeks. Students begin as strangers from strange lands and end up as friends who continue to communicate by email, Facebook or Ning.com, long after the course has finished. We left the original site up for the following semester and were surprised to find students still using it until we eventually retired and archived it. The group had taken ownership, thus making it a special and memorable site for friends to discuss their lives, future studies and even issues raised in the original course.

Knowing that most of their new friends come from working class backgrounds, many have invited others to come and stay at their home on the other side of the Pacific. Their international learning experience, although not as immersive as a study abroad program, has nevertheless increased cultural literacy and empathy, fostering a desire to one day go and learn more. Indeed several students have done so. However both universities have a large percentage of entering students who share key similarities that potentially impact academic opportunity; these include those of first-generation, minority, and lower socio-economic status. Thus for many students, the opportunity to travel abroad for academic enrichment is almost non-existent, in part because of cost, but also due to family responsibilities or cultural restrictions, especially for women. In an effort to address these needs while providing the cornerstone for first-year transition and success, the UTEP-VU GLC brought foreign lands and cultures to their students at minimal cost.

A research associate at UTEP designed pre and post-course evaluation instruments. The pre-course instrument consisted of an open-ended survey that queried the student on their previous knowledge of their region and nation, as well as their knowledge of the regions and nation of the international partner. At the end of the collaboration, we administered a post-course open-ended survey to measure knowledge gained from the collaboration. Additionally, UTEP facilitated focus groups consisting of 10-12 students who participated in the 2010 GLCs. Individual in-depth interviews (approximately 1 to 1.5 hours each) were recorded and transcribed.

Qualitative coding was ascribed to all data collected in order to identify and establish emerging patterns and themes with respect to the issues assessed.

The issues probed in all of the pre and post-course evaluation instruments as well as in the focus groups consisted of the following:

1. Exposure to multiple cultures and environments
2. Perceived outcomes from participating in the GLC (including student transition)
3. Expanding cultural literacy through structured interactions/academic content
4. Role of technology in enhancing access to global/multicultural interactions
5. Interest in participating in study abroad

Further we asked students to assess the Ning.com platform as shown in Table 1.

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Unsure	
	UTEP	VU	UTEP	VU	UTEP	VU
Easy to Navigate	66.7%	53.8%	33.3%	46.2%		
Effective for Exchange of Ideas with UTEP Peers	73.3%	69.2%	26.7%	30.8%		
Effective for Exchange of Ideas with VU Peers	73.3%	53.8%	26.7%	38.5%		
Effective for Course Materials	60%	53.8%	33.3%	38.5%	6.7%	
Comfortable for Exchanging Different Perspectives	66.7%	53.8%	26.7%	38.5%	6.7%	

**Table 1: Assessment Data for the GLC website: UTEP (N=15), VU (N=13)**



## CONCLUSION

The global learning community offers a space for students to achieve course goals while better understanding intercultural connections. For our first-year students, participation in the GLC allowed them to experience many different forms of diversity at the initial stage of their college years while providing a collaborative, intercultural environment through which to address a challenging curriculum. Moreover, the GLC provided a prototypical setting for students to consider future participation in study abroad. We argue that the UTEP-VU GLC provides a model for a dynamic first year learning experience that fosters the development of global citizens. Additionally, the GLC encouraged peer assisted learning and we found that students were most willing to support one another in their varied projects and assignments.

From student responses, *Imagining Nations, Imagining Regions: The Making of Cultural Diversity in Australia and on the US-Mexico Border* was most successful in forging new ground for teaching and learning. The importance of reiterating student responses is most salient;

I believe interacting with UTEP students indeed helped me to achieve my course objectives. Their questions and curiosity about our issues, history, culture etc. made it even more interesting and motivating to research the information myself with the intent of sharing it with everyone. I felt it was a good relationship and we all contributed well.

Prior to taking this course, I had a very vague and incorrect view of Australia...however, with this [GLC] collaboration, I was fortunate to learn many things about the country. It is incredible for me to have realized that our region [U.S.-Mexico border] has noticeable similarities than I would have never imagined.

Although the proposed outcomes of the GLC have been largely student focused, the course has also provided a rich environment for inter-institutional teaching collaboration and therefore international collegiality. UTEP and

VU became teaching and curricular design partners, sharing problems and their resolutions, in an ever deepening knowledge transfer relationship.

## ADDENDUM: JOANNE KROPP

I took over the UTEP-VU GLCs from Dr Irma Montelongo in fall 2013 when she moved to another department in our university. Dr Effy George continued to teach the VU sections. During our first semester working together we made no major changes to the course content or format, except that I added a few readings that centered on the idea of nationalism in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands. In the next semester, spring 2014, we made a number of changes, the biggest being the addition of another videoconference, bringing the total to three per semester. We did that because in course evaluations as well as in class the students asked for more face-to-face interaction. In order to facilitate even more interaction, Effy suggested adding another forum on Ning.com where students could have informal chats in addition to the assigned postings in the discussion forum. It had always been possible to communicate one-on-one through each person's personal page, but the chat room opened up the opportunity for groups of students to talk with each other. Students built friendships through their conversations and many continued to communicate after the semester ended using Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat. As we continued to teach our GLCs, Effy and I updated our content by adding recent scholarship and articles addressing the themes of the classes.

Due to the solid foundation that Effy and Irma provided, and the tweaking and improvements that Effy and I have added, the GLCs have proven to be a great success. Students are more engaged in these sections than in my other UNIV 1301 sections and thoroughly enjoy interacting with the VU students. The UTEP GLC students bond very quickly with each other and are pleased to have the opportunity to show off their own culture while learning about life in Australia. Attrition and failure rates are lower and evaluations of both the course and the experience are higher than in other sections. Students become interested in UTEP's Study Abroad Program as freshmen and work harder to keep their grades high and start early in their planning to raise money in order to travel to another country to study. They also consider

taking advantage of UTEP's Student Leadership Institute and the Student Enrichment Experience, both of which offer travel opportunities for students who maintain high grades.

These positive outcomes have resulted in expanding the GLC concept of linking courses at UTEP. In fall of 2015 I taught another GLC with VU. I also had a second GLC with Dr. Nate Mickelson at Guttman Community College, part of the City University of New York system. Our course focused on the question 'What constitutes a community?' We explored how communities 'imagine' themselves and represent their identity in public spaces. We also examined the theme of gentrification, refurbishing neighborhoods to attract wealthy people and displacing the poorer residents. We used Ning.com, in the same ways as the VU-UTEP GLC model, to provide a virtual space where students at both universities could investigate their own backgrounds and experiences and those of their global cohort for a better understanding of identity formation in different places in the United States.

This GLC had a fourteen-week overlap and both sets of students had the same readings and watched the same films over their respective semesters. This pairing had the advantage of being in time zones that are more compatible, having a two-hour time difference, so we were able to have five videoconferences during our scheduled class times. Each videoconference had a themed discussion derived from our readings and, when possible, a guest speaker. Over the semester the UTEP students worked in teams to present a five minute researched digital public history display that commemorated a local community history project or a proposed project. They chose from local museum exhibits, sets of murals, sets of monuments, local public space projects, state or local parks, historic buildings, artwork, music, poetry or other representations of communities in El Paso. Their assignment was to explain a specific community's history and then show how that community's identity is commemorated. The Guttman College students also worked in teams over the semester and created multimedia portfolios describing how a specific neighborhood in New York has changed over the last 10 to 20 years due to gentrification and/or the migration of new people into a specific community. All of the GLC students posted their projects on Ning.com and discussed them in the final videoconference. The end-of-semester evaluations

revealed that students learned more than they had expected to about El Paso and New York, enjoyed learning about commonality and differences when comparing various community identities, and looked forward to traveling in the future as part of their college experience.

The UTEP-VU GLC model has proven to be a highly successful method for engaging students in coursework that expands their understanding of not only other cultures but also themselves. The format can easily be adapted to form partnerships with a wide range of institutions and it is not difficult to plan common themes and shared coursework. The GLCs have been a richly rewarding experience for students and are a joy to teach. I look forward to a continuing partnership with VU and, hopefully, other institutions as well.

## NOTES

1 Flaming, an often offensive, nonsensical, albeit passionate online response thought to have detrimental effects (Papacharissi 2004).

2 VU and UTEP have established student exchange programs between each institution, and some former GLC students have taken advantage of these, others have gone of their own accord.

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