Cultivating a Global Collaborative Classroom Experience:
An International Exploration of Homelessness

Catherine Tompkins, Emily Ihara, Richena Purnell-Sayle, Rick Reo, & Stephanie Hazel

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

STUDENTS AS SCHOLARS
»oscar.gmu.edu«

ABSTRACT

The main collaborative student project compares and contrasts different aspects of homelessness both in Fairfax and in New Delhi, using Photovoice as the research methodology. Forty-four Mason students enrolled in SOCW 472 RS, Integrative Methods in Social Action and Social Change, and forty Jamia students enrolled in MSW-SII-09 Social Work Research, and collaborated together in a primarily asynchronous environment with the opportunity of participating in three synchronous sessions. The Mason/Jamia instructor team created small online groups of two Mason students and two Jamia students in order to facilitate these personal interactions and provided the PB Works and Blackboard platforms as communication tools. As part of the process, students were able to incorporate their favorite communication technologies including Facebook and WhatsApp. In addition to reaching the student outcomes and course objectives, the course design of this GCC involved intensive work and partnership among the Office of Global Strategy, IT Learning Support Services, Instructional Assessment, and the classroom faculty. Lessons learned and best practices will be presented.

Homelessness in Fairfax County and Surrounding Areas

The Global Collaborative Classroom Initiative

The Center for Global Studies, in partnership with the Center for Faculty and Teaching Excellence, the Office of Distance Education, and Learning Support Services, funded two rounds of projects from Mason faculty who were interested in organizing a Global Collaborative Classroom (GCC). This initiative aimed to support collaborative learning between classrooms in Mason and in universities outside the United States by connecting courses (undergraduate and graduate), through the use of online interactive technologies, with a view to enhancing the global engagement and professional experience of the instructors, and the global engagement and learning outcomes for the students.

Required components of a GCC course include: *Faculty driven courses (at least six weeks of a course) that will be team taught by a Mason faculty member and a faculty member from a partner institution; created from existing courses; revenue neutral between institutions; students enrolled and receive grades from their respective institutions; courses include Mason's three Global Learning Understanding Outcomes tied to collaborative activities; partnership with a Mason instructional designer.*

METHODOLOGY

SOCW 472 RS, Integrative Methods in Social Change and Social Action, collaborated with a master's level Social Work course at Jamia Millia Islamia, a university in New Delhi, India, to design and conduct collaborative research projects to facilitate student understanding of different cultural perspectives on a social problem, and learn how different global systems address a similar social problem. Students used Photovoice, a participatory action research methodology to collect data to address their research question, **"How does homelessness in the United States compare and contrast, both in its origins and its current state, to homelessness in India?"** Students worked in teams with their peers across the globe to address the research question together.

SOCW 472 RS uses generalist social work practice concepts with large systems and provides students with a "hands on" opportunity to apply concepts and principles of intervention with large systems. Students work with organizations and communities on a local, national, or global level to promote social action and social change. The course focuses on evaluating interventions addressing the social justice needs of diverse, at-risk, and oppressed populations.

Dr. Zubair Meenai, Professor, Department of Social Work, Jamia Millia Islamia University, had a Fulbright experience with Mason's Department of Social Work during the Spring 2015 semester. As a result of this experience and the collegial relationships formed with the Mason Social Work faculty, the partnership continued with this project.

RESULTS

Student Experience with Technology Used in the Course:
52% of students answered this statement in the affirmative: "The technology helped me feel more engaged" – improved understanding, increased motivation to be prepared for their team meetings, the ability to "put faces" to the ideas of their international partners, and a general feeling of collaboration.

Group Learning and Communication
55% of students communicated with their counterparts in the partner class abroad 6 or more times during the GCC. The most frequently used communication tools – WhatsApp, email, and Facebook – were self-selected by students. Facilitated course tools were PBworks and Blackboard.

Most Integral Components for Successful Communication:
1) Flexibility to choose their own online collaboration tools
2) Having responsive, willing, and prepared partners
3) Having common research interests with partners

Global Understanding: Many Students Reported Increases in:
• Interest in global issues
• Ability to view social issues from different perspectives
• Paying attention to global issues and seeking out international news
• Commitment to working towards social change

Inside a Connected Classroom

Homelessness in New Delhi, India

DISCUSSION

The overall impact on learning for the students was positive. A baseline meaningful global experience for the students and faculty was successfully integrated into this course. The cross-campus collaboration was imperative in creating the overall, positive experience. The lasting partnership with Dr. Meenai continues to be valued!

The social work faculty implemented this project into a course that already had several other objectives to meet. Although the faculty worked to infuse this project into the existing objectives of the course, it seemed to be perceived as more of an "add-on" for many students.

A challenge for both the students and faculty was the 9.5 hours difference between EST and New Delhi, India; there was also a significant difference in school calendars – the breaks and holidays were misaligned, and the JMI semester ended earlier than Mason's.

Student Reflections:

"*Talking about homelessness, I always had this perception that homelessness in the US would be the same as in India but after this class, a lot of things and ideas came up like the concept of relative and absolute poverty and also the difference in various policies.*"

"*…I believe it was extremely beneficial in terms of gaining a different perspective and personally encourages me to step out of my comfort zone, become more social, and experience a different culture that I would not have otherwise had the opportunity to experience.*"