

### Internationalizing course discussions: round two of a German-American partnership

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Arbeitspapier / working paper

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

SSG Sozialwissenschaften, USB Köln

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Fuchs, D., Zeiser, P., & Engelkamp, S. (2010). *Internationalizing course discussions: round two of a German-American partnership*. Münster: Universität Münster, FB Erziehungswissenschaft und Sozialwissenschaften, Institut für Politikwissenschaft. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-257386>

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**Internationalizing Course Discussions:  
Round Two of a  
German-American Partnership**

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Working Draft:  
Not for Quotation or Citation

Paper Prepared for Presentation at the annual meeting of the  
Southern Political Science Association  
January 6-9, 2010  
Atlanta, GA

Because of globalization and global commerce, “internationalizing the curriculum” has become a common catch-phrase throughout American higher education. The catch-phrase has many definitions and varied means of implementation throughout the country. Broadly, internationalizing the curriculum includes “projects to bring international perspectives into the undergraduate curriculum, promote study abroad, build academic partnerships with foreign universities, and even create American-style campuses around the world” (Lovett, 2008, p. A40).<sup>1</sup>

In “We Need a New Model of Global Education,” Clara M. Lovett argues that “the challenge today is not simply to teach students to ‘know the other.’ It is to help students see the world and its wonders and problems through the eyes and minds of others, to explore alternative interpretations of events and trends” (Lovett, 2007, p. A40). The goals of internationalizing the curriculum in political science, as defined by a joint APSA-American Council on Education Symposium on the topic, are also quite varied when applied to substantive subjects such as public policy, political theory, and international relations – but can be condensed to comparing and contrasting: Western and non-Western political ideas, systems, and behaviors; political culture and its impact on political systems; actors’ roles in policy-making at home and abroad; politics of difference (ethnicity, class, gender, culture, etc.); and international relations theories as tools to study the world as well as their relation to practice. Commonly suggested strategies for internationalizing the curriculum of American universities and college courses include: bringing international perspectives into the reading list, requiring students to read foreign media, assigning students research papers or other assignments which focus on

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<sup>1</sup> We thank Erin Soles and Deb Miller, of the University of North Florida, for their technical assistance with Blackboard. We also thank Dr. Darren Wheeler, Ball State University, for sharing his instructions and rubric for on-line discussions, which we adapted for our own use.

international or other nations' perspectives, international case studies, and in-class activities or debates which emphasize international perspectives (Barber et al., 2007). Some of these strategies rely on traditional teaching methods, while others implement active learning.

Outside of the American campus classroom, of course, study abroad is a main form of internationalizing the curriculum. It offers students opportunities to achieve such goals as: experiencing other cultures and customs, understanding global issues and events from other perspectives, gaining a new perspective on and appreciation for their own country, and gaining self-confidence and independence. Yet not all students have the interest, ability, or funds to study abroad and thus achieve these goals.

Today's technology, however, offers effective methods and techniques for internationalizing the curriculum and requiring students to think beyond their own national borders. Following from other political scientists' efforts at on-line simulations and/or video-conferences with other countries (Martin, 2007; Jones, 2008), we utilize communication technology to create opportunities for our students to engage in discussions with students at a university in another country. In 2008 and 2009, students at the University of North Florida and the University of Münster engaged in joint on-line discussions. Faculty in the US and Germany cooperated on their syllabi, coordinated readings, and required common assignments from their students. Students in both countries participated in on-line discussions in response to the same questions, with the expectation that they would learn substantively about not only course concepts, but also the culture and attitudes of the other country's citizens.

Based upon achievement of educational objectives, these on-line “discussions across borders” provide an effective way to increase student awareness of other cultures and perspectives as well as substantive course content. As such discussions could be replicable at other institutions, this paper presents the educational objectives for, design and process of, assessment of,<sup>2</sup> and challenges in carrying out discussions across borders.

### **Educational Objectives**

Pedagogically, we had two overriding goals for our discussions: active learning and internationalization. Bonwell and Eison (1991) define active learning as “instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing” (p. 2). Though there is little agreement on a common definition, Bonwell and Eison (1991) insist active learning focuses on engaging students in more than just passive listening: “They must read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems. Most important, to be actively involved, students must engage in such higher-order thinking tasks as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation” (p. 2). A variety of techniques and strategies fall within active learning: guided lectures, in-class writing, case study methods, discussion and debate, role playing, games, and simulations (Bonwell & Eison, 1991).

We utilized discussion and debate as our active learning techniques, and sought to internationalize them by engaging in “discussions across borders.” We sought not simply to introduce international content into our courses, but to, in Lovett’s words quoted above, make it possible for students “to explore alternative interpretations of events and trends” (Lovett, 2007, p. A40) by conversing on-line with students from another country.

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<sup>2</sup> Our categories here are an adaptation of the “design components” utilized in Lantis, Kuzma, and Beohrer’s *The New International Studies Classroom: Active Teaching, Active Learning*.

Specifically, we intended for our internationalized discussion to enable students to: 1) engage with and experience other cultures; 2) understand and identify differing cultural perspectives on course topics (such as power and globalization); 3) gain a new perspective on their own cultural and personal viewpoints; 4) practice communicating on-line about potentially sensitive topics, with strangers from another country, including producing engaging, clear written comments; and 5) gain and demonstrate substantive knowledge about course concepts. We considered these objectives important both educationally and for our students' preparation for eventual careers. These objectives were conveyed to the students at both universities in writing and during in-class explanations of the activity.

The discussions between students at the University of North Florida (UNF) and University of Münster (Münster) were designed and carried out with these educational objectives in mind. We believe the first four goals are general enough that they could apply to many courses, even outside political science – really, any course in which students engage in discussion and another perspective could be valued. Certainly within the field, such discussions across borders would be useful in a variety of comparative politics and international relations courses. Course- and content-specific goals can then be added, as we did with our fifth objective.

### **Design and Process**

Internationalizing course discussions requires a fair amount of planning and active management during the discussions. We found the following steps are necessary for effective cross-border discussions.

Making connections with foreign universities: in our case, the American professor and German professor attended graduate school together and stayed in contact. However, there are numerous ways faculty can make contacts with foreign universities if they believe internationalizing course discussions would be useful in their courses: conference contacts, schools with which their universities have exchange or other partnerships, etc.

Considering the language barrier: University of Münster offers upper-division international relations courses in English, also making this an easy connection for us. Many other foreign universities do as well – and, of course, Americans in advanced language courses could seek out discussion partners whose courses are offered in that particular language.

Matching compatible courses: Compatible course levels, topics, and size are necessary for effective discussions. Students get frustrated in discussions with un- or under-prepared partners, so it is important to match course levels: upper-division courses in one country with upper-division courses in the other. Course topics must also be closely related, in order to allow for common knowledge for successful on-line discussions and related written assignments, which in turn relies upon common readings. Moreover, a close match in course topics makes it easier to refer to the content of the on-line discussions in class sessions and vice versa. In 2008, our discussions across borders focused on power, although the American students studied Germany's power in the world today while the Germans studied corporate power. In 2009, both groups studied globalization as the course topic.

Courses must also be compatible with regard to class size. In 2008, many of the German students dropped their course – they were unused to required course activities

throughout the week and dropped rather than risk their grades. Roughly thirty American students were left to discuss with only about five German students who posted regularly. The unbalanced number of participants became a problem for American and German students alike, with the UNF students becoming frustrated by the weak German participation and the Münster students overwhelmed by the volume of American postings. A more equal number of course participants during 2009 eliminated those complaints.

Fixing a Schedule: The fact that many foreign universities operate on very different academic year calendars than US universities is a challenge that must be taken into consideration and will vary by country. In our case, the UNF Fall semester runs from mid-August until early December, while the Münster semester runs from mid-October until early February. The Münster professor needs time to get her students started on their materials, yet the UNF professor needs to wrap up the discussions before the end of her term. In the end, we plan four weeks of mutually convenient discussions. Other issues related to scheduling include how long each graded discussion continues (we have limited ours to one week, but students sometimes feel they are really getting interesting as they end) and ensuring students post regularly throughout the week (German students often post early in the week while American students procrastinate until later in the week, frustrating the Germans). We have, thus far, utilized asynchronous communications due to the time difference – but our students are encouraging us introduce live chats and/or webcam capabilities.

Technology: There are a number of communication technology tools at all price ranges that make cross-border discussions possible, both propriety products such as



Illuminate Live! or open source products such as Moodle. In our case, we utilize the Blackboard distance-learning platform. Private blogs and wiki tools are other means through which such cross-border discussions could be held.

Coordinating Assignments: We coordinate on three types of assignments: readings, the discussions themselves, and reflective essays. Our decision to coordinate readings resulted from the desire to create a common conceptual language for all students. For example, in 2008 students at both universities read Joseph Nye's *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go it Alone*. Coordinating readings has had mixed results. The American professor requires her students to tie discussion posts directly to readings – to encourage students to stick to the topic and to promote a high level of intellectual engagement. The German students, however, do not appreciate these constant references to the text, as they feel the American students are too tied to the textbook and not engaging in meaningful discussions of their own thoughts. After two years of the activity, the American professor agrees with them and we will be searching for other ways to encourage and ensure common ground in the discussions.

The discussions themselves were graded assignments for both sets of students in 2008,<sup>3</sup> but in 2009 changes to the grading system in Germany meant the German professor could require but not grade the discussions. Of our four weeks of discussions, the first week is required but devoted to ungraded discussions around a set of “icebreaker” questions, both to give the faculty a chance to make sure the technology is in order and to give the students a chance to get to know one another before engaging in graded, academic discussions. The icebreaker forum and a separate forum for “nonacademic” discussions (such as movies and music) remain open throughout. For the

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 1 for the UNF grading rubric and Appendix 2 for full instructions provided to the students.

next two weeks of academic discussions, faculty post discussion questions centered on course topics and common readings. For example, in 2008 we posted for discussion the first week: “Applying Nye’s concepts of hard and soft power, assess Germany’s power in the world today. Please consider: sources of power, uses of power, and potential future changes in power (if any).” Students could, and did, create news threads, such as “Can Germany overcome its past?” and “Will Germany’s power become ‘Europeanized’?” During the final week, we generally ask a question that brings the previous weeks’ discussions to a meaningful conclusion.

We also coordinate on a written assignment: students at both universities write reflective essays, following the discussions, in which they compare and contrast the contributions of their own and the other university’s students to discussions (see Appendix 3). These reflective essays are designed to assess the educational objectives, particularly the goals of understanding others’ perspectives and gaining a new perspective on one’s own country as a result. We discuss below the results of these essays.

Managing Discussions: Each year, over the course of four weeks of discussion, the two sets of students together made over 400 posts on Blackboard discussion forums. As faculty, we post initial questions and, as noted above, allow students to create new threads of discussion. Although we have decided to stay out of the discussions ourselves, to encourage independence and openness among the students,<sup>4</sup> we face a considerable daily time commitment in staying aware of how the discussions are

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<sup>4</sup> In 2008, the German students expressed a desire for faculty involvement, although the American students were equally divided among those who wanted faculty to join the discussions and those who did not. In 2009, the American students were universally against faculty involvement in discussions, and the Germans were split among those who believed “it is more lively when only involving students” and those who wished for more guidance or thought faculty involvement would enhance quality.

progressing. Given that one of the educational objectives is to enable students to engage with and experience other cultures, we seek to ensure that no major ‘culture clashes’ occur and to monitor for culturally insensitive posts – neither have been a problem to date. Both faculty comment in class sessions upon the progress of discussions, provide examples of effective posts, and provide via e-mail comments to individual students when posts are especially effective, ineffective, or border upon culturally insensitive.

### **Achievement of Educational Objectives and Student Feedback**

While assessment also relates to design and process, of course, we feel that this is such a major point that we are discussing it in a separate section. Specifically, we cover two separate topics with regard to assessment: student achievement of educational objectives and student evaluations of the process and design.

#### *Student Achievement of Educational Objectives:*

We assess student achievement of educational objectives through the discussions themselves and through the writing assignment, measuring both against criterion-based rubrics. The discussions themselves primarily focused on educational objectives #1 engage and experience other cultures, #4 communicate sensitively and clearly on-line, and #5 acquire and demonstrate substantive knowledge about course concepts. On the UNF side, the most commonly earned student grade – based upon rubric criteria (see Appendix 1) – is B+ or B-. Student posts generally: demonstrate knowledge of the assigned readings and other students’ posts, engage the perspectives of the Germans (through questions and the search for common ground), and demonstrate understanding

of course concepts. As faculty, we are also especially pleased with students' efforts to incorporate outside research and knowledge in the discussions.

<b>Discussions Across Borders Educational Objectives</b>
1. engage with and experience other cultures
2. understand and identify differing cultural perspectives on course topics
3. gain a new perspective on their own cultural and personal viewpoints
4. practice communicating on-line about potentially sensitive topics, with strangers from another country, including producing engaging, clear written comments
5. gain and demonstrate substantive knowledge about power and other course concepts

In 2008, the UNF course had far more students active in the discussion than the Münster course and it was harder for UNF students to meaningfully engage on-line with German students than other American students, so student achievement of educational objective #1 was perhaps spotty: some American students worked harder to engage the few German contributors than others. In 2009, however, the number of contributions from each side was more equal and students were able to engage with and experience other cultures through the discussions.

On the German side, grades varied widely with some students participating frequently in the on-line discussions with substantively excellent posts while others showed an average performance, and others again barely participated. Student posts generally demonstrated knowledge of the assigned readings and other students' posts, engaged the perspectives of the other side, and demonstrated understanding of power, globalization and other course concepts. As the German students also had plenty of opportunities to

engage on-line with UNF students, all educational objectives of the on-line discussions were achieved.

We assign students a reflective essay because, in active learning, “experiential learning frequently occurs after, rather than during, an exercise” (Lantis, Kuzma, & Boehrer, 2000, p. 4). While both sets of students have some in-class opportunities to talk about the progress of discussions, the writing assignment is the main opportunity for students to reflect upon the entire activity and draw conclusions about the all three weeks of substantive discussion. As can be seen in Appendix 3, the assignment requires students to compare and contrast the contributions made by the UNF and Münster students and is intended to assess primarily educational objectives #2, #3, and #5 (understanding differing cultural perspectives, understanding anew one’s own cultural and personal perspectives, and understanding course concepts).

The UNF students’ essays show that most students achieve the objective of understanding differing cultural perspectives (#2). In 2008, student comparisons in the UNF essays focused on differing national opinions of power, how different histories led to individual opinions, and the value of hearing from the German students, rather than just reading about German perspectives in textbooks. Given that the American course included content on Germany, the UNF students found value in having discussions where “one is studying the topic, while the other is living it.”<sup>5</sup> American students were somewhat surprised but also educated by the apparent discomfort of the Germans in discussing Germany’s power: “I feel like I understand better how Germans internalize power, by the way they discussed it with inhibition and in a round about way, and how

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<sup>5</sup> All quotes are taken directly from student essays and evaluations, without corrections for grammar or syntax. Quotes from essays are anonymous to respect student wishes and the student evaluations were, of course, anonymous.

that concept of power ties in with their identity. That was something that was not easy to grasp just from reading the texts.”

Many UNF students were surprised by the similarities in opinions between the Germans and Americans – just as they were surprised by dissension among the Germans themselves. They recognized that opinions were individual and could not be stereotyped by culture/nationality alone. In both 2008 and 2009, UNF students concluded that the Münster students’ opinions were not “drastically different opinions than those of the American students, but rather opinions that were affected by a number of different life experiences, cultural influence, and information” and that “the German students and American students have similar views . . . but the two perspectives were arrived at from very different places.”

The UNF student essays demonstrate they achieved objective #3, gaining a new perspective on one’s own viewpoints, though perhaps to a lesser extent. In 2008, this was in part due to the lack of activity by the Germans in the discussions, but also to resistance or close-mindedness on the part of some American students. In the final week’s discussions of information technology – including that used by Barack Obama in the 2008 election – typically conservative Jacksonville, Florida students did not all appreciate the perceived “left of center” opinions of the Germans on the American presidential election. One UNF student, disappointed by the discussions as a whole, was as hard on his classmates as he was on the German students, arguing that the discussions were not truly debates because the UNF students did not want “to hurt the feelings of their German counterparts or . . . to appear like ignorant Americans.” In 2009, after disagreements between American and Germans on the power and influence of international

organizations, one UNF student noticed but did not analyze the differences: “either the American students are naïve about the realities of a cooperative global community, or German students, with their greater exposure, have grown a bit disgruntled.” On the positive side, however, many UNF students recognized that (in one student’s words) “since we are unable to detach from our own upbringing and culture, asking the questions that we ask ourselves to others in a different culture provides an opinion that either confirms or contradicts our narrow view.”

Finally, the UNF essays did reflect a solid understanding of objective #5, regarding course concepts. All their reflective essays engaged the textbooks and demonstrated understanding of the concepts as they compared the two groups’ contributions to discussion on the assigned topics. In 2009, many American students noted the value of the discussions as a form of globalization while in a course on globalization.

The Münster students’ essays show that the participating students achieved the objective of understanding differing cultural perspectives, as well (#2). In 2008, the German students noticed that cultural differences were especially strong and visible when the discussion were about questions of national history and identity. Unsurprisingly then, they found these differences to be most evident in the first substantive week of discussion, when the discussion focused on Germany's past and its implications for German power in the world today. Reflecting on the discussion on Germany’s power, most students recognized cultural differences between German and American participants speaking about their own country. Thus, they reported, they learned that perceptions of self and others are a result of different cultural beliefs and values. The discussion showed them that concepts such as ‘pride’ “cannot be taken out of the national context as the

connotation is different in the US and in Germany.” A German student, for example, mentioned that she was startled by a UNF student’s surprise in a post that there are countries which are not as patriotic as the US. Noticing these differences on national identities, an interesting discussion on the mutual perception of their own nation and those of their fellow students abroad evolved. Münster students also noted a difference in engaging with issues of national identity and history in the postings: “Americans conceive national identity as a very strong feeling towards which everyone must adhere, whereas the Germans conceive it more like a fact that they cannot influence and which is just a minor attribute of their personal identity.”

German students noted considerable agreement between the American students and themselves on more general and global issues, in stark contrast to the differences on national identity issues. Also, in their 2009 essays, many German students expressed their surprise to find their UNF fellows to be rather close to their own point of view when the discussion moved towards global environmental governance. Thus, many German students realized that their UNF counterparts did not fit in their stereotypes as the latter demanded a stronger environmental commitment from the US government as well.

However, students in Münster also noted some differences on international issues, for instance, in the specifics of the role of corporations in global politics: “Some Americans adhered to the view that multinational corporations have an influence on a state's foreign policy, whereas German students took more a systemic view, speaking about ‘economic integration’ that alters the shape of international relations.” Likewise, one especially “confusing point,” students in Münster observed, was the differing perception of the international dimension between German and US students. For instance, both in 2008



and in 2009, the European integration process and the importance of international institutions were far more present in the thinking of the German students than in that of the Americans. In the 2009 controversial discussion with UNF students on liberalization and free trade, many Münster students noticed an American idealism on these issues, while German students tended to be rather skeptical.

Differing cultural perceptions were highlighted in 2009 when Münster students observed that UNF students frequently linked the issue of a globalizing world with the spread of ‘Western values’ and ‘US hegemony’. Münster students identified different cultural perspectives to explain the US perception of China as not a serious competitor to US hegemony. In the words of a Münster student: “It was surprising how UNF opinions were sometimes very cliché, such as the US being the only possible hegemon and globalisation being about spreading democracy. On the other hand, some UNF contributions took on a very critical point of view seeing especially in the discussion on potential for a global civil society.” In the discussions and their essays, German students were more likely to question the universality of apparently “global values” and the possibility of a global civil society while Americans less able to remove themselves from the typical American view of “global culture.”

Despite these differences identified, however, the German students – like the American students – were surprised “that the opinions and attitudes of the German and American students were not as different as [...] expected.” They wondered whether that resulted from an “elite perspective,” i.e. both groups being university students or because both German and US students came from industrialized and economically advanced

countries. Many German students suggested collaborating with universities from non-western countries in future discussions across borders.

During the 2008 discussions on German power, Münster students reflected in their essays about how their country was perceived by the UNF students, but their essays also show that the German students gained a new perspective on their own cultural viewpoints as they were confronted with a foreign perception of themselves. One student at Münster noted that it was “interesting for a German to see the politics and the development of his country viewed by an outsider.” Thus, educational objective #3 was achieved. With regard to objective #4, German students noticed how difficult it is to communicate their understanding of theoretical concepts like power, identity or globalization to outsiders. In 2009, most German students realized the importance of cultural and personal viewpoints in the discussions on the implications of free trade and the possibility of a global civil society. In the evaluation sheet, one Münster student commented that “discovering that stereotypes exist for a reason” was the best part of the discussions.

The Münster essays did reflect a solid achievement of objective #5, as well. Students engaged the literature and demonstrated a critical understanding of the concepts as they compared the different theoretical notions of power and globalization and their applications in the discussions. In 2008, most German students focused in their reflective essays on Joseph Nye’s concepts of hard and soft power, one student even stated that he found in Nye his “new favorite author.” Other students reflected on the shortcomings of Nye’s concept of power vis-à-vis other concepts that were discussed in class. In 2009, most German students did not as much engage the literature on globalization but rather reflected critically on the shortcomings that a too narrow theoretical background might

entail for a meaningful discussion to become possible in the first place. All students from Münster voiced their critique about the UNF students' heavy reliance on the common reading assignments. However, some essays reflected on the importance of a sound theoretical foundation and precise definitions of core concepts – a much welcomed but rather surprising outcome for international course discussions.

*Student Evaluation of Cross-Border Discussion Design, Process, and Success:*

The students' evaluations on both sides showed some common points but also a few interesting differences. The following table summarizes the distribution of responses.

<b>UNF Student Evaluations</b>	<b>Common Perspectives</b>	<b>Münster Student Evaluations</b>
	Effective learning experience	
	Include another country, specifically a lesser developed country	
	Limitation of Blackboard technology	
	Frustration with asymmetries in participation (2008)	
	Intercultural sharing of ideas is “best part” of the activity	
	Different levels of preparation and background knowledge for discussions	
	Difficulty remembering to join the discussions	
	Suggest introducing live chats or a video-conferencing/web-cam component.	
	Frustration with posts that added little to the discussions	
Dissatisfaction with one-week time limits for discussions		Dissatisfaction with having three discussions within three weeks
Number of points attached to the assignments		Comparative Essay helped significantly in reflecting on the experience
Pleased to have been included in an experiment to improve teaching and learning at their university		Americans gave stereotypical opinions

The anonymous UNF student evaluations<sup>6</sup> showed, on the whole, that students found the discussions across borders to be an effective learning experience that met the stated objectives. Across both years, forty-five percent of UNF students strongly agreed and a total of seventy-three percent strongly or somewhat agreed that “discussions with students from a foreign university exposed me to cultural differences.” Fifty-five percent strongly agreed that “discussions with students from a foreign university exposed me to differences in attitudes.”

Due to the small number of German students participating through all discussion rounds and completing the anonymous student evaluations on the German side, the evaluation cannot be considered statistically representative. However, the Münster student evaluations<sup>7</sup> showed that across both years students on average agreed that discussions across borders exposed them to cultural differences as well as differences in attitudes. In general, the German students experienced the on-line discussions with the UNF students as a means to engage with and effectively experience another culture. What is more, almost all of the students in Münster saw the discussions as a useful tool to expose students who cannot study abroad to different cultures and attitudes. Similar to the situation at UNF, however, the one student disagreeing with this proposition did so very strongly. In general, however, both groups of students almost unanimously identified the intercultural exposure provided by the on-line discussions as “the best part of the discussions.”

The evaluations of both groups of students also indicated a slight problem resulting from the different levels of preparation the on-line discussions. UNF students were

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<sup>6</sup> UNF student evaluations total n=40: 2008 n=23 and 2009 n=17

<sup>7</sup> Münster student evaluations total n=16: 2008 n=5 and 2009 n=11

somewhat dissatisfied with how well course readings and class activities prepared them for the on-line discussions. On the German side, there was a tendency among the students to judge the quality of their classmates' statements higher than that of the UNF students' contributions (while also being critical of the sophistication of some of their own classmates' postings). Interestingly, both groups of students reported difficulty remembering to join the discussions – that there was an on-line component to a physical course. In 2008, in particular in the German case, this turned out to be a real problem, as students are used to seminars meeting only once a week with no activities except readings in between meetings. Furthermore, both sets of students also noted that they were critical of the quality of some of the postings. Specifically, there was substantial frustration over classmates' messages that said little more, substantively, than "I agree."

The aspects of the time management that caused student dissatisfaction were different. UNF students reported frustration with the one-week time limits for discussions, as they felt faculty cut off discussions just when they were getting to the most interesting points. Münster students, however, felt overwhelmed by the overall volume of on-line discussions in the limited time. They would have preferred to have the three discussions spaced a bit more apart from each other, with down-time in between each required discussion.

Some comments and criticisms were raised only by one or the other groups of students, finally. Thus, students at UNF commented on the number of points attached to the assignments and suggested introducing a video-conferencing or other web-cam component. And, despite their many criticisms (mostly constructive), the UNF students indicated that they were pleased to have been included in an attempt to improve teaching

and learning at their university. German students, in turn, suggested live chats and highlighted the value of the comparative essay in helping them reflect on the on-line discussions.

## **Conclusion**

The difference that culture makes – especially its impact on differing interpretations of academic subjects and concepts – is hard to learn from a textbook. Exposing students to other cultures via active learning across borders proved in our case to be an effective way to let students in the US and Germany experience other cultures, understand global issues from others’ perspectives, and gain new perspectives on their own perception of international relations and politics. As noted above, we found the discussions successfully achieved the defined learning outcomes, and we were especially pleased that both sets of students clearly achieved intercultural learning and generally gained a new perspective on their own culture and attitudes.

We continue to learn and adjust the discussions, so as to improve the students’ experience. Challenges remain. We continue to seek ways to respond to student criticisms regarding the scheduling and length of discussion, but are limited by the differing academic years. Each year, we discover new cultural and administrative differences between the two education systems, which affect the extent to which we can coordinate assignments and requirements. We continually rediscover the universal desire to promote a higher academic level of discussion among our students. And, we wish to better assess the “value added” in terms of actual content learned or engaged through the discussions across borders.

Challenges aside, technology and creativity can allow faculty to provide students – many of whom may never have the chance to study abroad – with internationalized educational experiences that go well beyond simply introducing international content into courses.

# Appendix 1

## Discussion Grading Rubric (UNF)

### Discussions Across Borders Scoring Guide

Each weekly discussion is worth a maximum of 5 points, for a total of 15 points during the term. To encourage true interaction through discussion, I expect each student to submit *at least* three posts per discussion/week. The sum of a student's posts are judged collectively so a particularly good post may get a student a lot of credit while another that is of poor quality may not benefit the student at all.

#### Excellent/Very Good [5 (A) or 4.5 (B+)]

- The student has obviously read the textbooks and makes useful references to them in his/her posts.
- Posts clearly articulate relevant ideas/opinions and respond to the question and/or the posts of others.
- It is obvious that the student has read the posts of others in the class.
- There are no fewer than 3 posts for the week.
- Mistakes in spelling and grammar are few and far between. Language is always appropriate for a classroom setting.
- Posts are always respectful of other students' opinions and culture.

#### Good [4 (B-)]

- The student generally demonstrates that he/she has read the textbooks but the linkages are occasionally weak or unclear.
- Posts generally articulate relevant ideas/opinions but sometimes drift off topic or only partially respond to the question being discussed.
- It appears that the student has read most of the posts written by others in the class.
- There are no fewer than 3 posts for the week.
- There are occasional spelling and grammar mistakes that sometimes make the student's arguments hard to follow. Language is occasionally inappropriate for a classroom setting.
- Posts are generally respectful of other students' opinions and culture.

#### Average [3.5 (C)]

- Student fails to consistently demonstrate that he/she has read the textbooks. References to the textbook are either token or included haphazardly.
- Posts usually drift off topic or only partially respond to the question being discussed.
- It appears that the student has read few, if any, of his/her classmates' comments. Posts repeat points others have made or are usually limited to "I agree" or "I disagree".
- There are only 2 posts for the week.
- There are numerous spelling and grammar mistakes that usually make the student's arguments very difficult to follow. Language is often inappropriate for a classroom setting.
- Posts are generally respectful of other students' opinions and culture.

#### Unacceptable [3 or lower (F)]

- The student fails to demonstrate that he/she read the textbooks. References to the textbooks are non-existent or inaccurate.
- Posts almost invariably have little or nothing to do with the topics at hand. Someone was just typing for the sake of typing.
- The student has obviously not even looked at the comments made by others and his/her posts make no attempts to engage anyone in a discussion of the issues.
- There are fewer than 2 posts for the week.
- Spelling and grammar errors make the posts virtually unintelligible. Language is usually inappropriate for a classroom setting.
- Posts fail to respect other students' opinions and culture.



## Appendix 2

### Discussion Instructions (UNF)

#### Discussions Across Borders Instructions and Rules

1. Interaction with students at the University of Münster in Germany through discussion will constitute 15% of a student's grade. During the discussion period, logging on regularly and posting material will be required if a student wishes to do well.
2. UNF and University of Münster students can access Blackboard by logging in at <https://blackboard.unf.edu> (UNF students can also log in through MyWings; University of Münster students *can not* use MyWings to enter Blackboard.). UNF students use their N number and UNF password; German students will be assigned a userid and password.
3. Once you have logged on to Blackboard, click on "Int'l Studies: Capstone Seminar" to enter the course. (German students should not have any other courses to choose from.)
4. Once you have entered the course, discussion forums and threads can be reached directly through the "Discussion Board" link in the menu located on the left hand side of the screen and then on **2008FALL.INR4930.82727.01.**
5. Once in the discussion section, click on the forums/question and/or threads you wish to read.
6. There will be four required weekly discussions in response to questions posted by faculty members. Discussions will be the weeks of:  
October 27 (ungraded but required for UNF students)  
November 3 (graded; 5 points maximum)  
November 10 (graded; 5 points maximum)  
November 17 (graded; 5 points maximum)

The weekly discussions are time-limited and will begin at noon Sunday (or 6 p.m. Sunday Germany). All weekly discussions will conclude the following Saturday at noon (or 6 p.m. Germany). Students may post at any time during that week. This will be the only time that a student can post on that particular week's question. Students may NOT go back and post on a previous week's discussion question for credit after that week's discussion has been closed.

7. The instructors will post a discussion question each week. However, students are welcome to create new threads and pose their own questions or to discuss other, *relevant* topics as is appropriate.
8. There are a number of **Ground Rules** that students would do well to remember as they post messages during the semester:  
Courtesy and respect for others is mandatory. Any comments that are disrespectful, insulting, disparaging, or otherwise inappropriate are prohibited. It is possible to disagree without being disagreeable. Students are expected to keep discussions civil at all times despite the fact that much of the material being discussed may be sensitive in nature.  
The instructor will be the sole arbiter in deciding what comments are inappropriate. If students are in doubt, ask the instructor prior to publishing such posts.  
Proofread your posts before you send them. Poor grammar and bad spelling make it difficult to follow one's ideas. Consider each post a "mini-paper" for the course and craft it accordingly.  
It is the responsibility of the student to ensure that his/her posts reflect an at least a basic understanding of the material. Making reference to the textbooks is the best way to demonstrate an understanding the material.

**QUANTITY** does not make up for **QUALITY** when it comes to discussions. Despite a minimum quantity of posts, I also demand quality. See the Scoring Guide for grading criteria.

Part of the discussion grade is interacting with your classmates and German partners. Don't wait until the last minute, put up a post or two, and then call it a week. It is better to post over several sessions than all at once.

## **Appendix 3**

### **Written Assignment (UNF)**

**Discussions Across Borders**  
**Comparative Essay**  
**5 points**  
**Due December 2, 2008**

Each student will write a 2-4-page paper comparing and contrasting the opinions and attitudes of the UNF students and University of Münster students during our Blackboard discussions.

- Focus on opinions and attitudes relative to power, Germany's power today, and/or corporate power:
- How were opinions similar?
- How were they different?
- Did you find the similarities or the differences more surprising?
- Did the Münster students' opinions about Germany's power change your views of that country (especially your views from the readings alone)?

In this essay, students must do the following:

- Clearly present criteria for comparison
- Demonstrate an understanding of the discussions held between UNF and University of Münster.
- Begin the paper with an analytical (or argumentative) thesis statement
- Provide specific examples or explanations of similarities and differences

The essays:

- Must be typed, double-spaced, have one-inch margins, and use 10-12 point fonts.
- Must document all sources (including the course text) using APA or MLA style, both of which require parenthetical references. Footnotes and endnotes are not acceptable.
- Must be at least two FULL pages to have met the assignment requirements.
- May utilize but do not require outside research.
- Do NOT require a report cover. Please staple or paperclip.
- Will be graded using the Comparative Essay Scoring Guide available on Blackboard.

## References

- Barber, B., Cassell, M., Ingebritsen, C., Lamy, S., Leslie, I., Martin, P., & Ward, D. (2007). Internationalizing the Undergraduate Curriculum. *PS Political Science and Politics, 40(1)*, 105-120.
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- Lovett, C. M. (2008, April 11). We Need a New Model of Global Education. *The Chronicle of Higher Education, 54(31)*, A40. Retrieved December 16, 2008 from Proquest doi: 1483698941.
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