

7 When two worldviews meet: promoting mutual understanding between ‘secular’ and religious students of Islamic studies in Russia and the United States

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Abstract

The authors discuss results from two co-taught courses in Islamic studies shared as a virtual exchange between the University of Michigan (U-M), USA, and Saint Petersburg State University (SPbU), Russia. These courses were shared with the intent of expanding the range of perspectives to which the students were exposed and to provide an opportunity to experience the approach to education and to the subject studied in the partner country. The SPbU student cohort included graduates of Islamic religious colleges from across Russia who studied along with non-religious students specializing in Islamic studies. The U-M cohort included students of diverse religious, ethnic, and national backgrounds. International teams met outside class to prepare questions for the weekly synchronous whole-class discussions and to create a final group presentation.

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1. Introduction

Our international team of instructors and instructional technologists hereby presents results from two courses in Islamic studies shared between the U-M and SPbU. In winter 2017, we team-taught the course ‘Islamic Intellectual History’, and in fall 2017, ‘Islamic Mysticism: Sufism in Space and Time’. Our joint venture was inspired in part by the efforts of the governments of the Russian Federation and the European Union to integrate Muslims into mainstream culture and society.

In Russia, in 2013, the Council of the Muftis of the Russian Federation headed by the chief religious authority, Mufti Ravil Gaynetdin, and his associates came together with a few forward-looking leaders of religious and ‘secular’ (i.e. with no declared religious affiliation) institutions of higher learning to launch an experiment in ‘integrated education’. This effort brought together graduates of Islamic religious colleges (*madrasas*) with SPbU students to pursue Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Master of Arts (MA) degrees in Islamic studies as an academic, rather than as a religious subject.

The U-M cohort consisted of students of diverse religious, ethnic, and national backgrounds, including practicing and non-practicing Muslims from the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia.

In the world of virtual exchange, shared courses on the study of religion remain a rarity. In their 2019 chapter, [Dorroll, Hall, and Baumi \(2019\)](#) describe virtual ethnography collaborations between Christian students in the United States and Muslim students in Egypt to foster cross-cultural and cross-religious engagement.

2. Course description

The courses were structured around the ‘shared syllabus’ model described by O’Dowd (2018). The 12 students at each university interacted both in 24-person all-group weekly meetings and in small three or four person groups outside of class.

The full class was connected for live discussions using formal videoconferencing systems. To facilitate the sharing of documents and occasional recording, connections were made through the BlueJeans cloud service. Discussions were conducted in English with occasional recourse to Russian and Arabic. Translation was provided by both instructors and students. The classes were assigned the same readings on the weeks’ subjects. Texts were mostly in English with occasional use of Russian translations, if available, as an option.

The small cross-institutional groups met outside of class, with their composition determined by the students’ level of study (bachelors, masters, or doctoral), shared academic interests, and language skills. Following the telecollaborative task categories outlined in O’Dowd and Ware (2009), the teams discussed the readings and formulated weekly discussion questions that constituted the foundation of joint class sessions. Additionally, each small group created a presentation on a mutually-agreed topic based upon their personal and academic interests. These were presented at the end of the semester in joint sessions. For communication, students chose the tools that best fitted their needs, including email, WhatsApp, Facebook, Skype, and Google tools.

At the completion of the courses, feedback was collected from the students at both universities through the use of written surveys and personal interviews. The surveys were offered in both Russian and English through the Qualtrics platform, with an eye toward consistency across courses and the accumulation of comparable data. Personal interviews were conducted face-to-face or on the BlueJeans platform.

3. Discussion

Both the all-group weekly meetings and the small-group interactions outside of class led to enriching perspective-taking experiences for the students. This was true both with regard to their study of the subject material and to their exposure to the differing cultures, religious denominations, and educational systems.

Within the small groups, advanced students significantly enriched the academic expertise of their partners, stimulating them to consider more deeply one or another aspect of the topic. As an example, one student altered the subject of her graduate thesis in response to conversations she held with her group partner. Students also reported pushing boundaries, working with resources that were not represented in their curriculum or not available to others in their group. For example, one group chose to present on the difference between the Ash‘arites and the Maturidi theological doctrine, the latter being routinely neglected in American survey courses on Islam in favor of the former.

In the classroom, there was a marked difference between religious and ‘secular’ students in the way they argued and defended their respective positions. Answering questions or advocating their viewpoints, religious students presented arguments that methodologically were vastly different from those proposed by their ‘secular’ classmates. For instance, students from religious educational institutions routinely cited a *hadith* (a statement of the Prophet Muhammad) or a verse from the Quran to support their point and were less prone to use examples from the historical experiences of societies outside the Muslim world (e.g. the conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism in Europe), whereas ‘secular’ students at both universities would defend their position with arguments taken from academic or religiously neutral sources. Intellectual cross-pollination among the students greatly enriched their learning experiences, making them more receptive to the position of the religious and cultural ‘other’, bridging the cognitive and experiential gap famously postulated by Edward Said (1994).

A key element of this exchange was the tension and opportunity provided by the so-called ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ approaches to the study of Islam. We brought

together different types of insiders: religious and ‘ethnic’ Muslims (those who come from a Muslim family but do not actively practice the religion), as well as different types of outsiders: students specializing in Islamic studies and other academic disciplines, e.g. cultural anthropology and political science.

Forcing the students to leave their ideological comfort zones, we designed a perspective-taking activity, asking the groups to articulate and defend the doctrinal positions of certain schools of thought and practice in Islam with which they may disagree or even consider ‘heretical’, e.g. those of the representatives of the rationalist Mu‘tazilite theology or the doctrines of Muslim philosophers based on the ‘pagan Greek wisdom’ of Aristotelianism or Neo-Platonism.

This exercise was an eye-opener for both ‘secular’ and religious students, despite the initial discomfort and unease of the latter cohort, many members of which presented the positions assigned to them with such caveats as: “[s]ince I have to be the representative of the Mu‘tazilite school today...” or “I personally do not think so, but because I am a representative of the Maliki school I would argue...”.

Such cognitive challenges created a complex interactive environment in the classroom that is unique and unachievable otherwise. At SPbU, the ‘secular’ BA students developed close working relations with their *madrasa*-trained peers, as they helped each other in the areas they understood best. Muslim students helped their ‘secular’ classmates to master the intricacies of the Arabic language and traditional Muslim sciences (especially jurisprudence), whereas their ‘secular’ counterparts assisted their Muslim partners, who were less proficient in English and Western history and culture.

Regarding the international partnerships, the ‘secular’ SPbU BA students generally communicated better with their Michigan partners than their religious SPbU peers, perhaps due to their superior command of English. In more successful partnerships, instant communication tools were commonly used, e.g. WhatsApp. In less successful partnerships, the major problems cited were a lack (or lateness) of their partners’ responses, the time difference, and the absence of initiative on either or both sides.

4. Student feedback and lessons learned

While the use of written surveys provided comparability across courses, we found that many of the responses were terse to the point of being uninformative. Through personal interviews, we were able to collect a much broader range of useful feedback and have subsequently moved to using only interviews, conducted in both English and Russian by our instructional technologists.

Those students who recognized the value of the opportunity provided by the collaboration, unsurprisingly, reported getting the most out of the experience. The most successful cases led to new research directions that might otherwise have not been considered.

One Russian student identified the most illuminating moment of the exchange as when they received an email inquiring after their well-being in the wake of a terrorist attack in their city (Saint Petersburg). In the current tense political climate, the purely human aspects of the interactions and mutual understanding have an outsized effect.

Broader lessons were learned by the students about differing approaches to education and socialized classroom scripts (Belz & Müller-Hartmann, 2003). The Russian students expect expert-level knowledge from *anyone* who speaks up in the classroom and take the professor's statements at face value. American students are more eager to express their *own* conclusions from information they gather, even though they may potentially disagree with the professor. The lesson drawn by this contrast was described by one of the Russian students as learning "not to be afraid to think", which we see as a powerful expression of the value of this exchange.

We found that the small groups did not work consistently well for a host of reasons including availability, language, technology, and student viewpoint on their value. In future courses together, we plan to change the structure of the small group interactions to improve the quality and quantity. Tasks designed to require collaboration and student accountability will need to be re-examined

as several students reported resorting to dividing the assignment among the members of the group without discussing it with one another. Adding reflective activities about the exchange will also prompt student thinking around learning from this experience.

In the all-group class discussions, students of both institutions indicated their appreciation for the engaging and challenging discussions that took place in the connected classroom. The challenges of engaging all the students regardless of their command of English and of providing balanced opportunities for all who wish to speak need more consideration in designing future courses of this nature.

5. Conclusion

Availing ourselves of the pedagogies and technologies of virtual exchange, we created two joint courses around the study of Islam, connecting students in Russia and the United States. We broadened the study of our subject area by including perspectives from different countries and religious and academic backgrounds through weekly joint discussions of course readings and small-group assignments outside of class. Students acquired expanded language and communication skills and were exposed to source material and educational approaches that they would have been unlikely otherwise to have encountered.

We, as instructors, are inspired to do more and look forward to other opportunities to connect our institutions in the future. We enjoyed the opportunity and challenge of creating and sustaining a close-knit textual and intellectual community driven by the common goals of discovering and testing various approaches to the conceptualization of Islam and its intellectual, moral-ethical, and cultural values and legacies. In the process, we learned how to deal effectively and impartially with multi-lingual, multi-denominational, and multi-cultural student contingents. Overall, in spite of the difficulties mentioned above, we consider these courses to be successful, and will be collaborating again in fall 2018 for the course ‘Islam in/and Russia’, adding Kazan Federal University to create a three-way collaboration.

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