

A Global Dialogue on Peace: Creating an International Learning Community Through Social Media

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Technology and social media, often seen as counter productive to student learning, can provide intriguing new ways to extend and enhance learning across international borders. This article explores one successful learning project, based on the Nobel Peace Prize, that connected students from Norway, South Africa, and the United States through various social media forms, allowing them to learn about, dialogue on, and create projects surrounding the concepts of world peace, sustainable peace, and global citizenship, while themselves practicing that citizenship. The article details the pedagogy behind the learning project, explains the student responses, and describes the way that the high impact practices involved helped to increase student engagement. It also describes the international faculty collaboration that made this international learning project successful.

Recent studies point to several specific learning methods and opportunities that can have a significant impact on student learning and engagement. Among these high impact practices as outlined and assessed by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), are common intellectual experiences, learning communities, collaborative assignments and global learning opportunities (Kuh, 2008). If these practices can significantly enhance student academic performance at the local level, what could occur if the practices are extended and integrated across international borders to engage students from different cultures and to allow them to work together on meaningful topics? With the technology and social media tools now available, can local high impact practices be extended, shared and maximized?

For many years, the benefits of using technology to augment student learning have been studied. Heinich, Molenda, Russell, and Smaldino (2001) highlighted the use of various types of technology as aids to improving student learning. As technology has developed and become more pervasive and amenable to classroom use, computer-based technology has “dramatically increased to include emerging technology for visual presentation, simulation, accessing course materials and World Wide Web resources, and interactivity” (Devec, Shih, & Kashyap, 2006, p. 293). In most recent years, web technology has become ubiquitous at most institutions and in many classrooms (Arbaugh, 2005; Boulos, Maramba, & Wheeler, 2006). For those educators interested in improving student learning in the physical classroom by connecting students to a global community of learners, the use of web-based technology can create more venues for international study and student engagement, and it can, through the use of discussion boards, blogs, and social media venues, foster a more collegial atmosphere for learning that includes students in classrooms across the globe (Ossiannson, 2010).

A recent pedagogical pilot project involving three colleges—the American College of Norway (ACN) in Moss, Norway; the University of North Dakota (UND) in North Dakota, USA; and Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) in Port Elizabeth, South Africa—specifically details the way in which students at international sites can be brought together via technology and social media to engage in high impact learning practices through a global dialogue on important issues like world peace, sustainable peace and global citizenship. The techniques used in this experiment can easily be replicated in or tailored to other classrooms and learning activities.

This pilot project was constructed around the annual Nobel Peace Prize Forum (NPPF) at Augsburg College in St. Paul, MN, and therefore centered on issues of world peace and sustainable peace, topics that naturally lend themselves to an international discussion. It involved the aforementioned institutions, where a group of faculty from each worked to create a set of readings, assignments, and discussions for all three colleges that could be facilitated in individual classes but that would provide frequent opportunities for interaction via various online forums. Faculty and staff at these institutions met in person and virtually to construct a learning project that would allow groups of their students to read extensively about world peace, global citizenship and sustainable peace, to complete assignments surrounding these issues, to formulate informed responses to specific questions, and to dialogue through Facebook and blogs, with students at the other participating institutions about these topics. Ultimately, students participated in person and virtually in the annual NPPF where they could hear international celebrities, including Nobel Peace Prize Laureates, address these same issues.

This extensive set of assignments created to facilitate an international collaborative learning opportunity grows out of a long time collaboration between the ACN and the UND and is based, in part, on

the success of other integrative classroom experiences (Carmichael & Carmichael, 2012; Carmichael, Finney, & Magnus, 2005; Hilliard, 2012; Slater, 2010). The collaborative assignments were built on the recognition that student engagement is critical to academic success (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2008) and embraced the belief that “technology can be harnessed to enhance the widely desired goals of increased student engagement” (Bowen, 2012, p. x).

The ACN is a unique learning community that offers up to three semesters of university courses to Norwegian, American and other international students. The Norwegian and other non-U.S. students transfer to universities located within the United States to pursue their desired bachelor’s degrees upon completion of the ACN program. American students typically spend one semester at ACN as a study abroad experience. Faculty from the UND develop and teach courses for ACN, and these two schools have partnered in an international exchange of faculty and students for over 20 years. UND, a large comprehensive research university with over 200 majors and over 15,000 students is the official school of record for the ACN. ACN helps to facilitate both student and faculty exchange between Norway and the United States, and over a thousand students have participated in the program. ACN seeks also to form various educational partnerships with other international colleges, including, most recently, NMMU in South Africa, a public university with over 23,000 students. The ACN has always pursued a strong philosophy of peace studies and human rights education, and its work on these particular assignments is one in a series of educational experiments aimed at bringing young people into a global awareness of the need for understanding and activism. Thus this project—bringing students together virtually across three continents—was a natural outgrowth of the institution’s ongoing educational mission.

The Nobel Peace Prize Learning Project: Pedagogy and Practice

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In addition to its educational partnerships with U.S. and international universities, since 2011 the ACN had been a remote partner in the NPPF, which is housed and organized by Augsburg College, MN. The NPPF is a “unique civic learning experience” (NPPF, 2014, para. 2) that celebrates Nobel Peace Prize Laureates and the work done by individuals and organizations in peacemaking efforts (see more about NPPF at www.nobelpeaceprizeforum.org/about). In an attempt to bring the forum to the global level, Executive Director of NPPF Maureen Reed came to Norway in December of 2010. In a meeting with the ACN it was

decided that the two organizations would collaborate. Faculty at ACN would integrate the theme of the annual forum into the classroom, ACN staff and faculty would create additional learning forums for students to approach issues surrounding globalization and peace, and students would watch and participate in the NPPF via live streaming.

The staff at ACN knew that participation in this internationally viewed forum that features Nobel Peace Prize Laureates and offers opportunities to hear them live and interact with other peace activists around the world was incredibly important and should be fully integrated into the curriculum of some of the ACN courses and shared with other students at international universities. Thus a method for better engaging students in the conference was sought, and the concept of piloting a cross-border Nobel Peace Prize Project was created to put into place during the 2012-2013 academic year.

In the initial planning stage for Peace Prize Project, ACN staff met and decided to take an ambitious route to encourage higher levels of student involvement and engagement. Five main goals were developed:

- to reach out to students outside of Norway and the United States and include them in international dialogue;
- to engage these students actively over an entire semester by integrating project readings and activities to ongoing classwork at ACN and participating institutions;
- to create culminating projects that could be shared internationally via various platforms;
- to allow students freedom to plan activities and projects surrounding the NPPF that were meaningful to them; and
- to prepare and present a break-out session at the NPPF.

Creating the International Partnership

ACN decided to involve all 70 of their students, which included both Norwegian students and U.S. students studying abroad at ACN. Then ACN staff invited the faculty and students of the Integrated Studies Program (a first year learning community) at UND to participate. Sixty first year students in this program participated. Finally, ACN invited forty undergraduate students at NMMU to participate. These students came from South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Zambia. It was felt that reaching these groups of young students early in their postsecondary career and allowing them access to interact with each other, even through remote, electronic forums, would lead to cultivating in them a deep interest in issues of world peace and a sense of global dialogue that would expand their viewpoints and encourage the

kind of developmental growth that occurs as part of an international study experience.

The project's main theme was to be based around the idea of globalization, disarmament (nonviolence) and dialogue. These three ideas were inspired by the work of the first female recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, Bertha von Suttner. Norwegian author Anne Synnøve Simensen's (2012) recently published work, *Kvinnen Bak Fredsprisen: Historien om Bertha von Suttner og Alfred Nobel/The Woman Behind the Peace Prize: The History of Bertha von Suttner and Alfred Nobel*, detailed peace activist Bertha von Suttner's influence on Alfred Nobel and her influence in his establishment of the Nobel Peace Prize. Simensen agreed to work with the ACN and to be part of this international dialogue with the other partner university students.

As it was important that the Peace Prize Project be integrated into all of the classes, Spring 2013 faculty at ACN were made aware of the project and the opportunity to work with Anne Synnøve Simensen. Faculty were asked to be a part of the planning process and to build portions of their curriculum around the themes, issues and ideas generated through the project. Instructors teaching courses in the Humanities, English, and Political Science agreed to participate. It was understood that some students, being more naturally inclined, would want to participate more fully, but it was desired that the entire student body be asked to contemplate the topic and become more aware of the Nobel Peace Prize and the NPPF. This was achieved by the integration of the theme into each class to varying degrees. Thus it would be that all students in all ACN classes would become familiar with, and think critically about, these issues. For students interested in engaging more fully with the issues and event, the ACN Nobel Peace Committee would be formed. This committee would be made up and directed entirely by students and would help shape the direction of the Nobel Peace Prize Project overall. Both the in-class assignments and extra-curricular student committee would promote student engagement in the issues surrounding the international dialogue.

Common Classroom Materials and Social Media Assignments

At the classroom level, ACN staff and UND faculty worked together to develop a structure for student discussion modeled on "Socrates Café" experiences that would be local and global, shared through social media. The Socrates Café, introduced and utilized by Christopher Phillips (2002), brings small discussion groups together to discuss discreet, specific and stimulating topics like, "What is justice?" It was decided that groups of students at each institution

would engage in Peace Cafés about a set of the same specific questions, would share the culminating responses via social media (Facebook groups and blogs) and would use those same media to comment on the responses of the other students. The questions would grow out of and would utilize literature on the ideas and philosophies surrounding "peace," and that all students would read the same sets of literature. ACN staff and Anne Synnøve Simensen would create the packet of readings and would provide a bare structure for activities, but it was decided that students themselves should choose and develop the forums for on-ground and online discussions as well as any other projects they felt were important, making the project more immediate and interesting to the students' own learning. Faculty at all three institutions agreed to this structure and approach.

The literature packet created included excerpts from Bertha von Suttner's (2009) famous book *Lay Down Your Arms*, speeches by Victor Hugo, excerpts from Tolstoy's (2010) *The Law of Love and The Law of Violence*, letters exchanged between Tolstoy and Gandhi, and speeches from Nobel Peace Prize Laureates such as Martin Luther King, Jr., F. W. de Klerk, Christian Lange and Mother Teresa. As Simensen's (2012) book was only available in Norwegian, an ACN film student was engaged to bring Bertha von Suttner (2009) to the screen. A short documentary was created to effectively tell the story of von Suttner and was posted to a YouTube site. The documentary and the literature packet were shared with the participating institutions.

Armed with the same basic knowledge included in the literature packet and documentary, students at the ACN, the UND, and NMMU were then asked to conduct a series of Peace Cafés. In these philosophical gatherings, small groups of students were asked to use the Socratic method to explore the questions "What is peace?", "Who is a global citizen?", and "How can sustainable peace be achieved?" Simultaneously, these questions were being pondered on three different continents.

The groups in North Dakota and in South Africa were asked to summarize their conversations in writing and email them to the ACN. The conversations were published on a blog developed by ACN students, and excerpts were posted to the ACN Promoting Peace Facebook page. Students at all three institutions were able to analyze and debate the responses of their international peers, and they considered why groups would have similar or different ideas about the questions. Allowing three seemingly different groups of students access to the same information and then asking them to discuss three open-ended questions using the same method of discussion was an enlightening opportunity for all students involved and an effective

way of globalizing the project. Suddenly, a more localized, discreet project became a group effort on a global scale, providing students with experience in working with culturally diverse groups of their peers and asking them to collaborate across borders and social media platforms. These responses continued to be shared by the students at each institution via the blogs and the Facebook site. In turn, in each classroom, the responses posted online became the topic of conversation among the students and with the faculty.

The Global Learning Community

Students from the interdisciplinary Integrated Studies Program at UND participated in the project over a series of eight weeks. They began with student centered research projects that asked the students to find out information on the Nobel Peace Prize, to whom the Prize has been granted in the past, and on the criteria for the award. Students worked in small groups, using online resources to find answers to the questions. They shared their findings with each other, developed sets of new questions, such as “Who deserves a Peace Prize?” and “How many women have received a Peace Prize?” which they also sought to answer through online resources. To end the session, they watched the video on Bertha von Suttner that ACN made available through YouTube.

After a larger group discussion of findings, students carried on their work outside of class by reading electronic copies of all of the ACN literature packet readings, posted on their online classroom site (Blackboard). They prepared responses to questions based on their readings, which they brought back to class. In class, they worked in revolving, small Peace Cafe’ discussions, to use their new knowledge and their own experiences to answer the three key questions: “What is Peace?”, “Who is a global citizen?”, and “How can sustainable Peace be achieved?” Their answers were reported, by them, back onto the classroom online discussion board and the course instructors emailed the responses to ACN, where students there posted those comments on the blog and Facebook page along with answers from the ACN students.

UND students continued their participation by reading the blog and Facebook page and making comments. In addition, they watched live-streamed and recorded versions of the NPPF on Bertha von Suttner, where Anne Synnøve Simensen and the ACN students presented their work. After the forum, the UND students met for one final Peace Cafe’ at an on-campus coffee shop where they discussed all of the material they had learned, information from the NPPF and all the answers on the three questions posed from the student groups in Norway and South Africa. Then

they made their final contributions to the online global dialogue.

The faculty and students from NMMU held three preliminary sessions of preparation using the readings provided by ACN. They also watched the YouTube video on von Suttner and then watched two live-streamed sessions from the NPPF. Following those sessions, students participated in hour long Peace Cafés on the same three questions that the other institutions used. Their conversations were posted to the ACN Facebook page and to the blog. A final reflective paper was required of all students as part of their course requirements.

As the literature suggests, giving the core of the responsibility to the students and allowing them to develop their own projects and weigh in on the material gave impressive results (Astin, 1993; Glasgow, 1997; Kuh, 2008; Light, 2001; McCombs & Whistler, 1997; Newell, 2001). The weekly meetings of the ACN Peace Committee allowed the ACN coordinator to give feedback on the progress being made, encouragement when needed and guidance when necessary. Attendance at the weekly meetings was very high, despite the voluntary nature of the group. Students were often excited to show what they had been working on and interested in what the other groups were doing. The original idea was that the Peace Committee would conclude its work once the NPPF took place in March. A unanimous vote by the committee members amended the end date to the last day of the semester, an addition of five weeks, because the group wanted time to continue developing larger projects inspired by the involvement of the students from the participating universities as well as by the speeches heard during the NPPF. This kind of student investment in learning can be rare, but it is essential to motivating life long learning attitudes and to engaging students in work that will be meaningful to them and to a world that needs their energy, passion and ideas.

Student Engagement Opportunities

For students wishing to be further involved, the goal of the project was to transfer much of the responsibility to the students themselves to increase involvement since it is well documented that learning that emerges from, and is developed through, the involvement of students is more meaningful and results in better learning outcomes (Astin, 1993; Lardner & Malnarich, 2009, McCombs & Whistler, 1997; Newell, 2001) and higher levels of engagement (Boix Mansilla & Duraising, 2007; Kuh, 2008). In early December 2012, students at ACN were invited to a meeting at the College to discuss the NPPF and ACN’s role in it. Eighteen students (out of a student body of 66) voluntarily came to that introductory meeting, which began with a brief explanation of what the NPPF was

and how the ACN had participated the year before. Then each student was asked to provide a suggestion about what they would like to do and an argument for how it related to the ideas of globalization, disarmament (nonviolence), and dialogue.

This initial meeting led to the creation of the ACN's Peace Committee, with students from both Norway and the US comprising its members. Sixteen participants joined the committee, and each individual was assigned one or multiple areas of responsibility. Students met weekly as a group from January to May, and active group work was done on the students' free time. Students produced videos and wrote and produced songs, created blogs and a Facebook page, created art pieces and choreographed and performed dances, all relating to peace issues.

The final goal of the 2013 project was to send a delegation of students to Minneapolis, MN to not only attend the NPPF, but also to present a break-out session at the forum. Together with Norwegian author Anne Synnøve Simenson, two ACN students were invited by the forum to present on Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Bertha von Suttner and the work that ACN had done based around the ideals of von Suttner in cooperation with the UND and the NMMU. This session was the only break-out session at the 3-day forum to be live-streamed so that students at the partner institutions could participate in real time. The session, like most other events at the NPPF, was also recorded and was viewed by people from around the world.

Student Responses

The dialogue that ranged across three continents yielded encouraging results that students expressed via the blogs and Facebook postings. As previously stated, students were asked specifically to think critically about the following questions:

- What is peace?
- Who is a global citizen?
- How can sustainable peace be achieved?

In a pre-writing experience, before the Project began, students were asked to respond to these questions, and overall responses were general, vague, and lacked any critical thought. Following are some representative responses: "Peace is good for everyone and we should work to have peace everywhere"; "We live in a global world, so we are all citizens of it"; "Peace is when there is no one fighting. It can't be attained because there will always be war"; and, "Peace is the opposite of war, and we need opposites."

However, after engaging in the Project's campus-based discussions, the blogs, and the Facebook discussions, student online responses became ultimately

startling and sophisticated. Several students offered sample responses:

- "Peace is a combination of many things we practice everyday. These things are Love, Happiness, Justice, Equality, Compassion, and Cooperation. Also, Peace isn't only the absence of war, but the absence of all things that lead to war. These things range from: poverty, racism, and intolerance."
- "Peace is the mutual understanding that others will have different ideals and the ability to accept and tolerate them—the ability to take things for what they're worth instead of causing conflict. Peace can come from putting others above yourself and valuing others' opinions. Peace is conflict without anger as well. A peaceful person isn't a push over, just someone who isn't going to get angry or violent at things he or she doesn't agree with."
- "'Violence, lack of concern, and the lack of human welfare. This must never be allowed to start. And the place to stop it is at the level of the individual' (Mumtaz Soysal). An individual's efforts towards the betterment of justice, equality, and peace for all are the traits of a global citizen."
- "To ensure sustainable peace, it is important for all citizens to have a quality standard of living and equal human rights. We must be willing to have sacrifices for the good of others; [*sic*] give back to the less fortunate. If people had more power, more peace would be translated through equal representation of groups."

These responses, and many others like them, grew out of hours of intense conversation among student groups within each institution, were based on research and reading the students had completed, and became fodder for international response and consideration once they were posted on the blog and Facebook. It is clear that students developed much more critical, informed ideas about these important topics as they pursued thinking about them and discussing them with their international peers. The perspectives articulated in the final online responses also indicate a level of global perspective informed by international discussion.

In addition to the international dialogue, other creative projects emerged, particularly at ACN, the hub of the entire project. These projects were proposed and carried out by students and made available to the students at the other two partner institutions. The Peace Committee from ACN, comprised of both Norwegian and U.S. students, became incredibly invested in the project, producing the following:

- ACN Promoting Peace website/blog (<http://acnpromotingpeace.wordpress.com/>): One student (a communications major) designed and created the site; three students (a political science major, a business major and a journalism major) blogged about peace-related issues.
- ACN Promoting Peace Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/ACNPromotingPeace?fref=ts>): Four students were responsible for engaging participating students in conversation using this medium of communication.
- Photography: Two students (an astronomy major and an anthropology major) recorded the work of the group in pictures.
- Live-streaming of the NPPF: Five students were in charge of arranging a three-day event at ACN to encourage as many students as possible to attend the live-streaming of NPPF.
- Art work: Four art students expressed their ideas of peace through artwork.
- Music (available on ACN Promoting Peace Facebook page): Two students wrote and recorded songs, one of whom wrote, filmed, and edited an accompanying music video.
- Dance: One student, active in dance, made a documentary about how some young Norwegians with minority backgrounds use healthy activities such as dance to lead healthy and successful lives rather than turning to crime.

Two students were selected to attend the NPPF in Minneapolis, MN, and accompanied ACN staff and Anne Synnøve Simensen. These students had the opportunity to meet and talk with Nobel Peace Prize Laureates Dr. Mohammad Yunis and Tawakkol Karman. They were also able to share, with a global audience, many of their ideas developed throughout this project, while their colleagues from ACN, UND, and NMMU watched and participated via live streaming.

The result of the many hours of voluntary work was a very active and engaging Facebook page with interactions from students in the US, Norway, and South Africa, a blog that had thousands of views from over 28 countries, hundreds of photos documenting the work of the group, four pieces of artwork (one presented to the Executive Director of the NPPF and one presented to Anne Synnøve Simensen), two original songs written and recorded by ACN students, a music video, a dance documentary, and a successful Weekend of Peace arranged by a group of students for the viewing of the NPPF.

Though students at UND and at Nelson Mandela University were not as active as the core ACN student Peace Committee, they were able to connect more fully

with the important issues of sustainable peace and global citizenship because they could come to these topics through their peers in other countries. Understanding and debating issues of this nature with people their own age, in media forms that they embrace and use well, led them to engage more fully in the debate and to create thoughtful responses to important questions.

Analysis and Conclusion

It has, of course, been known for a very long time that international experiences like study abroad can have incredible impacts on student learning and engagement (Bollag & Field, 2006; Carmichael & Carmichael, 2012; Coleman, 2001; Hilliard, 2012; Klein, 2002). Study abroad is perceived to increase sensitivity to global issues, increase learning engagement, and stimulate life long learning (Stroud, 2010; Tarrant, 2010). In addition, as stated previously, high impact practices that include group work and learning communities, increases levels of student engagement and hence of student success (Kuh, 2008).

However, not all students can study abroad, and, until fairly recently, the ability to interact immediately and intimately across geographical borders was incredibly slow and, for the purposes of daily education, virtually impossible. With the advent of technology and social media, however, the possibilities for international dialogue, for the formulation of learning communities whose borders extend across continents, and for immediate global debate, are endless. It is the case, in fact, that this project would not have been possible without technology like Blackboard, live-streaming, and digital recording devices or without social media forms like YouTube, blogs, and Facebook. As the ability for international collaborations like this continue, faculty and students will have access to more methods for participating in “collaborative activities in multicultural settings which could add to participants’ knowledge and skills” (Hilliard, 2012, p. 1).

Technology has “radically altered the availability of knowledge” (Bowen, 2012, p. 2) but, by taking control of our ability to foster deep learning skills like critical thinking, writing and communication, faculty can harness technology and social media to facilitate students’ abilities to engage with their own learning and with issues of national and international importance (Fink, 2003). The use of social media particularly in this project offered students an immediate and personal way to interact virtually that, as Grover and Stewart (2010) identified, could not have been imagined a few years ago. Taking advantage of these new technologies, with which today’s students and faculty in most countries around the world are comfortable (Moran, Seaman, & Tinti-

Kane, 2011), can allow any college class to be extended beyond the borders of the institution and even its own country. Inviting international discussions has never been easier, and the results of this experiment indicate that the value of these interactions is undeniable and invaluable.

The ACN intends to revise and extend the NPPF activities and assignments, starting the student Peace Committee early in the fall, extending further collaborative opportunities to the UND and to NMMU, and seeking more international colleges to participate. The UND plans to continue in this vital collaboration and will create a specific class on Peace and Human Rights that will have, at its core, participation in the NPPF and the collaboration with ACN. The learning that has taken place through these assignments, the connections made across borders and the high levels of student engagement have been inspiring, and it is clear that this model of learning needs to be continued, extended and reproduced around other issues.

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