DESIGNING AN INTERNATIONAL COURSE COLLABORATION

Top tips from Ursula Valdez, lecturer in Interdisciplinary Arts & Sciences at UW Bothell.

1 Find a committed teaching partner and connect with UW resources for support

Support is available for UW faculty and staff who want to pursue teaching globally. The Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) Fellows program can guide you on how to successfully carry out globally networked learning, from finding a faculty partner to gathering institutional support and negotiating course content with your teaching partner. Valdez teamed up with Dr. Armando Valdes-Velasquez, at Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia in Lima, Peru. While having her own global connections was certainly helpful to Valdez—who grew up and studied in Peru and continues to teach there—it is not a prerequisite.

2 Look for engaging topics that cut across borders

Finding areas of common interest to students in both countries is one of the most important components of any co-taught international class, Valdez says. Working together, Valdez and her teaching partner settled on four major topics for discussion that had parallels in both countries: biodiversity and iconic species of the Pacific Northwest and Peru; use of forest resources and the impact of human activities on habitat loss, conservation and the economy; mountain ecology and climate change; and fisheries and conservation. Both classes were taught in English.

3 Collaboration leads to higher engagement

Interaction and collaboration with Peruvian students was highly motivating for her class, Valdez says. It led to higher engagement with class materials and better learning outcomes. “You begin to see things you didn’t see through the eyes of someone who may live in a very different society compared to yours,” says Kanwal Yousuf, of UW Bothell. “You get to compare issues that happen around your area to issues that are happening around the world. I learned a lot about why our ecosystem is so important, but most importantly I learned why collaborating and researching with other people from other parts of the world is so important.”

“Anyone can research, then compare and contrast bioregions of the world. But as these students learned about their local bioregions and how it impacted people they now were getting to know, students started gathering and posting additional information to benefit each other, not just to get a better grade. That is motivated learning at its best.”

- Greg Tuke, COIL Facilitator
Social media is your friend

The two faculty used multiple tools to help their students communicate across the globe. Valdez settled on Skype for streaming during classes, both for its large number of communication features and because it is readily accessible to Peruvians. Similar to using Canvas as a platform for discussions, Valdez decided to create a private Facebook group to allow students to share information outside the classroom.

Valdez also created a blog for students to share their ideas, and during field trips to Mount Rainier and other Cascade Mountains destinations, she encouraged them to make short videos that could be shared on their blog and Facebook group. This diverse array of communication tools made it easier for students to exchange ideas inside and outside the classroom.

“Yes, there were language barriers, technical barriers, but students felt empowered,” says Valdez. “We used everything we had at our disposal to help them learn together.”

Get students to be active—and take action:

Valdez brought her students out to the field, arranging outdoor workshops and field trips with a conservation biologist. But to help them understand that research for research’s sake is not enough, Valdez and Valdes-Velasquez helped them brainstorm opportunities to take action that would encourage real change.

At UW Bothell, students assembled a display table at the center of campus with information on protecting water quality in Puget Sound, and asked fellow students to sign a petition. The Peruvian students took similar actions back in Lima. “We were able to do concrete things to solve problems such as writing letters to various authorities, whether the head of state, ministry of environment or fishery, and letters to the editor in magazines,” Peruvian student Romina Najarro says. “It was rewarding to have new ideas for problem solving, as well as cultural exchange among students.”

Read more about how Ursula Valdez created an environmental studies course that was paired with a parallel class in Peru in Classrooms without borders, part of the Innovators Among Us series at uw.edu/trends/innovators.

APPLY TO BE A UW COIL FELLOW

UW faculty from all three campuses are encouraged to apply for the UW Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) Fellows. Successful applicants will receive $2,000 in funding and individualized support to implement an international collaboration course. The eleven 2015-2016 Fellows are working on projects with partner universities in Japan, the Philippines, Germany, Mozambique, Costa Rica, India, Greece, France and Chile. Read more at tiny.cc/UWCOIL.