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The Digital Cahier Collective: Fostering Québec-Michigan Cultural Exchange through Co-Curricular Multimodal Composition Practices

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Abstract: This paper shares methods and findings from a recent cross-border digital experiential education design project. Students enrolled in a first-year writing course at Michigan State University formed small groups with fellow first-year students from Champlain College in Montreal, Québec. The cross-border student teams worked together, synchronously and asynchronously, to discuss region-specific cultural inquiry projects and curricular experience. Québécois students helped their Michigan-based peers develop and edit multimodal writing projects focused on personal cultural experience, and thereby learned about Michiganian cultural perspectives through both textual and conversational encounters. In turn, Michiganian students were able to gain similar insights from helping their Québécois peers with a parallel assessment task. By writing, reviewing, and sharing work through digital cahiers, students also experimented with digital collaborative tools and accessibility practices (Kress, 2003; Lockett, 2010).

Keywords: Digital writing; cultural inquiry; multimodality; international exchange; experiential education; US-Canada studies.

Introduction

This paper shares methods and findings from a recent experiential educational research and design project that connected first-year writing students at Michigan State University

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with peers from Champlain College in Montreal, Québec. The Canadian portion of our study occurred in the "traditional territory of the Kanien'kehà:ka, a place which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst many First Nations including the Kanien'kehá:ka of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Huron/Wendat, Abenaki, and Anishinaabeg. We recognize and respect the Kanien'kehà:ka as the traditional custodians of the lands"on which our study was conducted, and our students' learning occurred (www.mcgill.ca/circ/land-acknowledgement). Meanwhile the American half of our study was conducted on land ceded in the 1819 Treaty of Saginaw, which occupies the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary lands of the Three Fires Confederacy of Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples; we recognize and advocate for the sovereignty of Michigan's twelve federally recognized Indigenous nations (aiis.msu.edu/land). We would also like to thank *Québec's Ministere des Relations internationals et de la Francophonie* and Michigan State University's *Canadian Studies Center* and the *Center for Teaching and Learning Innovation* for financial and administrative support.

The core of our study involved small cross-border teams where students engaged in discussion and collaborated on regional cultural inquiries and digital writing exercises. In doing so, students also experimented with fundamental technological, collaborative, and accessibility practices in digital publishing by writing, reviewing, and publishing findings in digital cahiers (Kress, 2003; Lockett, 2010). Formative and summative assessment practices were integrated throughout the project, including revision processes where students guided international peers. Additional opportunities for one-on-one and large group feedback emerged during the pilot study from both student and instructor perspectives, including self-reflections as part of the courses' summative evaluations. Regarding accessibility, this project provided students with opportunities to consume, critique, and produce adaptive multimodal texts (Luce-Kapler, 2004).

Through an iterative design cycle, the respective courses on both sides of the US-Canada border were revised to facilitate integrated assessment practices. Although the convergence of the curricula created minor logistical and technical challenges, the project also opened pedagogical space for shared cross-border co-teaching, resulting in greater pedagogical diversity both in style and demographic identities (Sumara, 2002). This made for a richer intercultural and international learning context. This paper reports our findings and delineates our low-cost approach to curriculum and digital design, one that attempted to align localized first-year writing outcomes with foundational concepts in digital humanities, curriculum theory, writing pedagogy, and intercultural inquiry. More specifically, through this digital humanities project we hoped students would be able to explore:

1) Québec and Michigan cultural identities
2) Québec and Michigan arts and literatures
3) Digital composition and publishing practices
4) Project planning
5) Document design
6) Intercultural and international collaboration
7) Writing and rhetorical analysis
8) Editorial techniques.

Both courses included texts and guest lectures from their regional counterparts. By intentionally creating multiple intersections—textual, digital, and personal—across the two curricula, the research team sought a more nuanced understanding of the ways multimodal composition and assessment practices can be used to create digital transnational classrooms. The pedagogical implications of the study include both practical (curricular alignment) and technological insights (platform prototyping, accessibility, privacy), in addition to theoretical considerations. Regarding the latter, the researchers were especially interested in the value of direct or assessment-mediated cultural exchange versus informal discursive spaces. They collected a diverse array of texts to investigate that notion, plus additional aspects of student experience, including long-form survey responses, curricular documents, lesson plans, instructor reflections, and assessment artefacts.

Theoretical Framework

Almost two decades ago, Jewitt (2003) emphasized the modal and semiotic implications of digital writing practices, especially for secondary and post-secondary language arts students. This study was invested in the shifting ramifications of multimodal composition practices and explored both the pragmatic considerations and aesthetic possibilities of digital writing exchanges, especially in relation to intercultural learning objectives.

Luce-Kapler's (2004) exploration of pedagogy and literary transactions and Sumara's (2002) studies of literary anthropology also informed our curriculum design and subsequent analysis. We consider emerging textual and discursive experiences as sites for collection and critical analysis of narrative and cultural identifications (Iser, 1993). This perspective is supported by developments in complexity theory (Davis & Sumara, 2006), ecological philosophy (Bowers, 2001), and phenomenological research on human consciousness (Luce-Kapler, et al., 2007); it proposes a research framework that emphasizes the complex emergence of engagement through extant social structures and resists reducing phenomena to basic components, causal factors, or fundamental laws.

According to Donald (2001), for this type of engagement to occur, individuals must develop an awareness of other minds and, in turn, notice that these minds are therefore also aware of other minds, and so on. Lodge (2002) expands this argument by claiming collaborative engagement with text represents a mind-reading practice that helps writers not only develop their conscious awareness, but also to notice how this development occurs and evolves over time. Zunshine's (2006) examination of cognitive literary theory suggests that this process, that of becoming a sophisticated reader or writer of narrative texts, depends on developing metarepresentation: an ability to discern the usefulness of information based on characters' identities and the dynamics of their relationships.

Design Process

During the Fall semester of 2019 we developed a proposal for Québec's *Ministere des Relations internationals et de la Francophonie University Grant* program (international.gouv.qc.ca/en/new-york/programme-bourses-quebec-etats-unis). After some delays due to COVID, our project was approved in June 2020. That summer our team met digitally for a series of design conversations where we identified our key project

goals, identified the points of curricular convergence between the respective schools, created our teaching and assessment materials, and designed our research methods.

We decided to run two versions of the project: a pilot phase in the Fall of 2020 and a revised version for the Spring of 2021. Because we wanted to create a series of educational exchanges that pursued cultural, technical, and discursive aims, we carefully accounted for the points of intersection between the respective curricula. The initial points of contact occurred at the midpoint of the semester through a guest lecture swap whereby Haglund taught Lockett's class and vice-versa. These lectures introduced the project to come, in addition to contributing to the courses established learning outcomes (cultural identity and inquiry methods, disciplinary learning, and writing pedagogy). Shortly thereafter Wong, a professor of Graphic Design at Emily Carr University of Art and Design, also contributed guest lectures for both classrooms on graphic design practices. Beyond advancing curricular and project goals, the guest lecturing arrangements also increased the demographic and disciplinary diversity of the respective courses in light of the instructors' different cultural and ethnic identities, nationalities, and academic backgrounds.

The series of guest lectures was scheduled strategically—just before the classes began work on a major assessment task that involved both cultural inquiry and digital document design. Students were then polled regarding their comfort with cameras when meeting with their cross-border counterparts. They were then grouped according to that preference (cameras on or off). Because the Québec students outnumbered the Michigan students by approximately 3:2, groups of five were established with that ratio.

During a short classroom exercise, the Michigan students drafted templates for contacting their peers and inviting them to an initial meeting. Through that exercise, we discussed professional correspondence practices, tone, and general email etiquette. The Michigan students were then provided with the names, email addresses, and preferred gender pronouns of their Québec group members and asked to arrange a meeting over Zoom. In the pilot phase, students met only once; in the second phase, they were asked to schedule two meetings.

We gave students conversational prompts for the first meeting plus a short exercise to complete. Importantly, we tried to minimize the structural or explicit assessment demands for the meetings, to maximize possible time off-task. The aim was to create surplus curricular space for extemporaneous cultural exchange through casual student-to-student dialogue. The same pattern held for the second meeting during the second phase; in that dialogue, students were sharing prepared reviews of their peers' work through a semi-structured exchange that should have left a significant amount of extra time for conversational drift.

It is also important to note that the work students were sharing with each other focused on localized cultural inquiry. The Michigan students were not expected to conduct any independent cultural research on Québec; however, Lockett provided a brief in-class introduction to Québec politics and culture. As part of a parallel lesson on multimedia design, students also reviewed three rap music videos from Montreal-based artists: Dramatik's "Ghetto Génétik" (2019), Sarahmée's "Fuego (feat. Souldia)" (2019), and Eman et Vlooper's "Les Pauvres" (2015). Lastly, Michigan State students had an opportunity to question Haglund about his experience as an immigrant to Canada and Québec specifically. The same held for the Québec students; they conducted no

independent research on Michigan and received only a general introduction during the project briefing. Like their counterparts, they also had an opportunity to question Lockett about his experience as an immigrant in the United States and Michigan specifically.

Because their major assessment task focused on a personalized cultural inquiry, one rooted in their home state or country, we hoped students would learn directly from their cross-border peers while focusing on nuanced, personalized cultural experience in lieu of general or generic cultural lessons. We thought the adjacent curricular topics and discussions might also serve as possible conversation prompts and we were curious to learn if they would be addressed. Accordingly, there were no fixed global cultural learning outcomes across the respective curricula. Instead, the activity intentionally opened space for emergent cultural conversations.

Methods

A longform summative survey was our primary data collection site. We created four categories for our questions: the initial set focused on the logistics of the exchange, the second focused on the student's affective experience, the third on cultural exchange, and the final set included general reflective and evaluative prompts. Here is the survey we put to the students from Michigan State:

Q1 - Was scheduling the meeting difficult?
Q2 - How long was the conversation?
Q3 - Did people turn their cameras on during the chat?
Q4 - Did everyone contribute to the conversation?

Q5 - How did you feel about the conversation immediately before it started? What kinds of emotions were you experiencing?
Q6 - How did you feel during the conversation? What kinds of emotions were you experiencing?
Q7 - How did you feel immediately after the conversation? What kinds of emotions were you experiencing?
Q8 - Have you thought about the conversation since? If so, are there particular comments, ideas, or moments you recall?

Q9 - What did you learn about Montreal, Québec, and Canada?
Q10 - Would you like to learn more about Montreal, Québec, or Canada?
Q11 - What do you think your partners from Montreal learned about Michigan and/or Michigan State University?
Q12 - Do you think your group members are interested in learning more about Michigan?

Q13 - Is there anything you wished you had said or shared during the conversation?
Q14 - Did you find any aspects of the experience interesting or surprising? How so?
Q15 - Do you have any other comments or suggestions?

This primary instrument was also supplemented by secondary and tertiary methods, including a collection of curricular artifacts (samples of student work, lesson plans, course correspondence, and assessment texts), in addition to reflective journaling by Lockett and Haglund, plus notes from debrief meetings with the research team.

Unfortunately, we were not able to include surveys from the Montreal students due to cross-border research ethics complications (the study was approved by MSU's *Human Research Protection Program* but its scope was limited to MSU students). Haglund, however, conducted a similar informal survey and in-class debrief discussions with his students and included his observations thereof in his reflective journaling and lesson notes.

Analysis

Over the summer of 2021, we began our analysis by reviewing survey results and curricular artefacts independently. We used analytic methods described by van Manen (1990) and Sumara (2002) to merge responses, curricular texts, and instructor reflections into one cross-referenced and indexed data set, which was then thematically coded to represent the relationships among the participants experiences and the various research domains (Québec and Michigan cultural identities; Québec and Michigan arts and literatures; digital composition and publishing practices; project planning; document design; intercultural and international collaboration; writing and rhetorical analysis; and editorial techniques). Thereafter, we gathered as a team to share and compare our individual findings through a series of synchronous group meetings (conducted via Zoom, due to COVID restrictions and our different locations). These discussions were guided by Gee's (2005) discourse analysis, and we used these semi-structured dialogues to identify salient themes, anomalous or disparate findings, and key program redesign recommendations.

Discussion

We were surprised to learn that over 60% of the groups in the first phase extended their conversation beyond the scheduled hour. One particular group claimed their conversation lasted two hours:

> We talked for about two hours and it was a very good conversation, we almost forgot the passage of time. […] I realized that we had been talking for a long time, so I suggested that we end the conversation at the next exact moment. I was a little sad and sad at the end of the conversation, like a friend saying goodbye forever […].

Conversely, only 15% of the groups in the second phase had meetings longer than the allotted hour. Similarly, over 60% of the groups in the first phase opted to have their cameras on whereas only 30% of the groups in the second phase opted for cameras on.

This difference between cohorts might be a response to the expectation of two meetings instead of one. It could also be explained by Zoom fatigue. Most students in the first phase were in their first semester of post-secondary studies (and first semester

of a Zoom-based curriculum) whereas the second phase students had already experienced a full six months of remote learning. Regarding participation, however, both cohorts had similar reports: roughly 85% of responses reported that all or most group members actively participated.

Many students in both cohorts reported feeling somewhat anxious about meetings before they began. A few in both cohorts expressed excitement at the prospect of working with someone their age from another country. Many students in both cohorts reported a positive experience during the meeting. Once the conversation began, they felt relaxed and enjoyed the conversation, for example:

> I actually really liked the group I was in. They were all super nice and chill.
>
> I felt confident and happy. Learning new information about life in Montreal and [talking] about Michigan to others was exciting and fun.
>
> During the conversation I really liked it!! It was exciting and fun to be able to talk to people I haven't met yet. I got to learn a lot about Canada and the similarities and differences we share.

One student in the second cohort, however, reported a negative experience; they wrote:

> I realized that it was kind of a waste of time, because the students from Montreal weren't in the same courses as us, or even in University, and they didn't have anything to contribute, which isn't their fault. They were all very nice, but it was obviously a busy work to make the assignment seem more complex than it actually was. It was basically just making small talk for half an hour, and when we tried to talk about our piece, it didn't work, because the Montreal kids didn't have any qualifications to help us, or anything to add.

It seems this student was approaching the opportunity primarily from an instrumentalist perspective; they were dissatisfied with the editorial skill of their peers and felt the experience was a waste of their time. Perhaps we should have been more explicit in our framing of the activity and reinforced the notion that the activity was not merely a paper exchange, but also an opportunity to learn with and from people elsewhere.

Students also reported an exchange of cultural perspectives and experience beyond the specified assessment tasks:

> We talked about the difference in politics between America and Canada. I remember asking them how they felt after the 2016 election when everyone in America said they were moving to Canada and my group member said the immigration quota in Canada was overfull. This was something I didn't know, and we just laughed about it. One of our group members was from China too so we got to learn about his culture as well which was very interesting.

> We talked about Michigan Lakes, fishing, and summers in Michigan. The weather is very cold both in Canada and Michigan. Also, Ice Hockey is a very popular sport in Canada, and it was very interesting to me how one of my partners from MTL broke both his arms 2 years ago in an accident and was not able to play ice hockey for a year.
>
> I have thought about it briefly. We talked about health insurance and how it differs there vs here. I have thought about that mainly since the conversation because I think this difference is fascinating. We also talked about climate change and what people think about it here vs there.

As an aside, the topic of health care, interestingly, was reported by multiple students; this may have been related to the milieu of COVID. Regardless, it was also something students discussed in class during a debrief conversation (they asked Lockett about his perspectives on health care, knowing that he had personal experience with both systems).

Methodologically, the survey had some significant limitations in terms of scope (limited to MSU students) and depth (regarding cultural exchange and experience). Most students expressed some general learning in relation to Canada, Québec, and Québecois culture but rarely did these comments go beyond surface level observations, for example:

> The weather is cold/snowy, ice hockey is a popular sport. They have both Tim Hortons and Starbucks but Tim Hortons is preferred by more people because it is more affordable. Private schools have uniforms and public schools don't. Toronto is very expensive to live in.

Students shared similar comments regarding what they thought the Québec students learned about Michigan. Without more specific prompts, however, it is difficult to know more about how these conversations unfolded and the degree of depth with which they were discussed.

The student artifacts we collected were also inconclusive; they confirmed the students' acquisition of editing and graphic design learning outcomes but provided only limited or cursory insight into the efficacy of the design conversations with their peers (some students commented on the process in their review, most did not).

Lockett and Haglund's journaling cohered with many of the insights listed above. They also reported their own positive pedagogical experiences in two domains: 1) the fun of lecturing to students outside your own institution; and 2) the emotional support of regular project meetings. Like many of their peers, Lockett and Haglund were new to online teaching and experiencing their own familial and personal challenges related to the pandemic. Although project meetings had research agendas, the conversations often drifted to other curricular and pedagogical topics, including challenges. By working closely on the project, Lockett and Haglund claimed to have developed professional and personal bonds that provided a sense of safety. They both expressed that they were able to share personal and professional challenges with each other and furthermore, that they would be unlikely to have these kinds of conversations with regular colleagues at their own institutions.

Conclusion

One difficulty we encountered through the process related to curricular intersections. Given the COVID crisis and ensuing curricular instability, it was challenging for Lockett and Haglund to synchronize their respective courses and integrate shared assessment tasks. That said, repeating the process with subsequent courses should prove easier and certainly less time-consuming. The COVID context also prompted us to reduce the scale of the assessment task. We were initially aspiring to create a shared digital cahier or zine, one the students collectively would co-edit. This, however, proved too large a task to integrate within the respective curricula and had to be scaled back accordingly, to individualized digital compositions. One unanticipated benefit of COVID, however, was the ease with which students were able to collaborate through digital texts and Zoom. In some ways, the project benefited from the crisis, if only at the level of technological literacy; students were already familiar and comfortable with the digital tools we incorporated. Lastly, given the positive cultural experiences expressed by students and the learning prompted by the exchange, we highly recommend incorporating similar digital and international cultural exchanges, especially in the context of writing and rhetoric courses. These benefits are further compounded by the minimal cost of such projects. Which is to say international experiential learning often comes with a significant financial cost and access barriers to students. And although digital exchanges like this are unlikely to achieve the kinds of affective and aesthetic experiences actual international travel provides, they do provide similar benefits without any financial cost or access barriers for students.

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