

## Focus On: Collaborative Activity

Building learning communities at a distance

### Case study – Research and writing tele-collaborative student partnerships



**Where:** English for Academic Study/University of Glasgow (EAS/UoG) and Islamic University of Gaza (IUG)

**Date:** August 2015 and 2016

#### Impact

The practice was introduced as an intensive summer pre-session course in English for Specific Academic Purposes, and study skills for international students intending to study science-engineering-technology (SET) related disciplines at the University of Glasgow.

A revised version of the project was run in August 2016 and we are in the process of devising a toolkit to help interested professionals implement similar collaborations in their own settings.

#### Number of students affected:

60 students in 2015  
120 students in 2016

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#### Further information:

<https://easttelecollaboration.wordpress.com>

#### Abstract:

The project aimed to facilitate a writing and research tele-collaboration between international students on Science-Engineering-Technology (SET) pre-session courses, carried out at English for Academic Study at the University of Glasgow (EAS UoG), and their counterparts studying for a Master's degree in a relevant discipline at the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG). Through working in a close partnership in a highly contextualised and discipline-related scenario, the students supported each other in becoming subject experts as well as prospective professionals, developing a range of graduate attributes needed to thrive in academic and work environments, e.g. effective communication, problem-solving, collaboration, cross-cultural awareness and digital literacies.

## Description:

The pre-sessional courses are intensive summer courses preparing prospective students from overseas for their future post-graduate study. During such courses, the students work with materials related to their discipline but the focus is on developing language and generic academic skills, such as essay-writing or presenting, as the teachers are not subject specialists. Because of time constraints, faculty staff cannot be involved in the course assessments or delivery on a scale larger than giving an occasional lecture. Hence there is a gap when it comes to active engagement with the subject. Additionally, the course is heavy on assessment, most of which traditionally has been individual, and so does not fully prepare the students for the collaborative approaches to learning that they may be exposed to during their subsequent studies. To address this weakness of the course design, a tele-collaboration with SET graduates from IUG was established, during which small groups of pre-sessional students from UoG and their Gazan mentors were working on highly contextualised SET-related scenarios. This way they could engage in the ongoing content-oriented dialogue, as well as develop a range of transferrable skills.

To prepare the Gazan students for their mentoring role, they were offered a course in constructive feedback (<https://goo.gl/ifxdh7>) prior to the commencement of the tele-collaboration with the UoG students. Their brief was to complete an exploration-integration-application sequence of tasks, delivered through Google Docs over 2.5 weeks. The culmination of that course was providing constructive feedback on a sample of student writing which was then assessed by the EAS UoG tutors. Once the tele-collaboration proper started, the Gazan students offered a selection of SET-related scenarios for the UoG students to choose from (e.g. <https://padlet.com/annarolinska/easttelecollaboration>). This provided a basis for establishing teams. Each group had a dedicated Facebook group to facilitate the interaction, exchange of knowledge and resources as well as feedback dialogue. Towards the end of the project, the UoG students delivered group presentations to the audience in Glasgow and Gaza via a video link-up. The students in Gaza commented on the presentations and asked questions relevant to the research topics (please see <https://easttelecollaboration.wordpress.com/2015/08/31/big-day-1-project-presentations/> for examples of students' outputs).

In terms of technology, a virtual room (WiZiQ) was used to facilitate introductory sessions for IUG students, as well as a video-conferencing system for the delivery of presentations. Additionally, social media were used for publishing project updates (project website and blog) and facilitating interactions between project co-ordinators and students (closed Facebook groups). It was necessary to have an e-learning co-ordinator in the project team in each institution in order to maintain smooth communications and organisation. This proved challenging as the e-learning lead at UoG was also teaching full-time. In Gaza, students had to travel to the University during holiday time due to adverse weather conditions, as the connectivity and electricity supply there were more reliable.

Good will on the part of the students and staff proved to be key. They showed a great degree of perseverance and dedication. This was possible thanks to the value the project presented to them in regard to the development of knowledge and a range of skills. Feedback from students from both institutions indicated the authenticity of the experience as the particular project strength.

It is important to lay out communications well in advance, e.g. announcements for students reminding them of deadlines. These could come in different formats, e.g. word and video, and had to be paced at regular intervals to allow the students to make progress without feeling too overwhelmed. Time has to be allocated for staff involved to manage the e-learning aspects of the project, and the co-ordinators on both sides have to be willing to work slightly less sociable hours, as students may post queries any time due to time difference and different weekend patterns. Expectations have to be carefully managed as to how much help and guidance can be provided, and how quickly, but it is important that the students feel supported at all times and so form a close-knit community.

Clear benefits have to be provided to both cohorts of students. It was felt the students in Gaza had less advantage than the students in Glasgow, who, as a result of completing the course, could begin their studies at UoG. Therefore, the second iteration of the project in August 2016 involved Gazan students contributing to the group presentations and producing their individual reports, both of which received feedback on language and content from EAS teachers and graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) from the relevant Faculty, respectively. However, funding had to be secured to remunerate the GTAs, which may be a challenge in future iterations.

**Perceived benefits:**

## For students

- Enhanced opportunities to practise and develop a range of transferrable skills and graduate attributes in authentic conditions that closely reflect academic and work-related contexts, e.g. effective communication, meaningful negotiation, cross-cultural awareness, problem-solving, collaboration and digital literacies.
- Development of subject knowledge through working with peer specialists and on real-life complex problems related to the discipline.
- Development of relationships with peer experts from another country leading to further exchange of knowledge and experience.

## For staff

- Development of a range of skills in project management and collaboration at a distance, and experience of the use of technologies which require flexibility, adaptability, innovation and responsiveness.
- Development of working relationships with academics from other academic backgrounds and cultures and increased cross-cultural awareness.
- Raising of the research profile and increasing visibility within and outwith the university.

## For the institution

- Contribution to internationalisation.
- Opportunity to pilot the strength of a working relationship and so open up the potential for further and bigger collaborations.

**Issues/challenges:**

## For students

- Time pressures related to other commitments, remaining study workload, varying weekend/week day patterns (weekends in Gaza are different from those in UK) and a two-hour time difference between the two locations.
- Technology-related barriers, e.g. connectivity problems (mainly in Gaza), powercuts in Gaza and over-reliance on text-based technologies.

## For staff

- Time pressures resulting from other commitments and time/weekend pattern differences.
- Increased workload resulting from the need to manage the project online.
- Connectivity problems, particularly during the final video-streamed presentations.

## For the institution

- Funding.
- Certification and accreditation.

