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Teaching Policy by Collaborating Across Borders

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Abstract

Drawing on research from two cross-border course collaborations, we show that focused cross-border online dialogues between Canadian and American graduate students can broaden students' thinking beyond national borders, provide insight into how policies are implemented in schools, enable access to diverse perspectives on policy issues, and support learning about the influence of local, state/provincial, and national contexts on policy processes.

Introduction

Can engaging in dialogues across borders help students learn about educational policy? This paper describes our collaborations of graduate courses in educational administration programs in two universities: the University at Buffalo (UB) in Buffalo, New York, USA and the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, Canada. We combined face-to-face meetings and asynchronous online dialogues between students in two distinct courses.

The purpose of this paper is to present outcomes of the collaborations for students' learning about education policy. First, we describe the nature of our collaborations. Then, we discuss the theoretical perspectives that informed and inspired our collaborative efforts and course designs. Next, we describe our methodological and analytical approaches. Turning to a discussion of our findings, we show that focused cross-border online dialogues can provide insight into how policies are implemented in schools, broaden students' thinking beyond national borders, enable access to diverse perspectives on policy issues, and support learning about the influence of local, state/provincial, and national contexts on policy processes.

Nature of our Collaborations

We have organized three course collaborations since 2009. This paper focuses on the two most recent ones (Spring 2010 and 2011) since our first collaboration involved different courses and distance teaching strategies (Pollock & Winton, 2011). A third institution was involved in the collaboration in 2011 but did not participate in the research discussed in this paper. Our courses were grounded in the same theoretical perspective and shared similar learning objectives. Students in each class read the same course readings and completed similar assignments. However, students were graded by individual course instructors and earned credits at their respective institutions.

The collaborative elements of the courses involved engaging students in policy dialogues through face-to-face meetings and online asynchronous discussions. Simply put, policy dialogues are discussions about policy issues. Each week students met at their home institutions with their course instructors. They critically analyzed and discussed a policy issue of importance in both New York and Ontario. Weekly readings included at least one text focussed on the policy issue in Canada and another

focussed on the same issue in the US. Following the in-class meetings, students discussed the policy topic online with students from all three institutions. Students took turns facilitating the dialogues, and participants shaped them according to their interests. The online dialogues took place on Blackboard, a Learning Management System maintained by UB and accessed through an Internet connection. The discussions were asynchronous.

In addition to the online dialogues, our students met face-to-face two (2010) or three (2011) times throughout the collaborations. Each meeting had distinct purposes. The first meeting was designed to help students get to know one another by sharing interests through informal dialogue and structured activities. Early face-to-face meetings between online dialogue participants improve the course experience (Walters Swenson & Evans, 2003). A second purpose of this meeting was to help students become familiar with the organization of education in each country. The final face-to-face meeting was designed as a conference in which students presented comparative policy analysis papers they had developed throughout the course with the assistance of students in the online policy dialogues. In Spring 2011 a third face-to-face meeting was held midway through the semester to enable students to participate in a face-to-face dialogue about Aboriginal education policies in Canada and the US.

Why Collaborate?

Our decision to collaborate across the US-Canadian border in our policy courses came in part from two key beliefs about policy. First, in order to understand why a policy text is written and enacted as it is, it is necessary to understand the historical, economic, political, and social contexts of the policy at multiple levels including the local, district, state/provincial, national, and international levels (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006). Recognizing these multiple contexts and their influences on a policy in a particular location may be easier when it is compared to a policy in a different location. Second, there is considerable discussion about policy borrowing between nations and the relative influence of the state in education policy decisions in the field of education policy (Ozga & Jones, 2006; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Despite the proliferation of seemingly similar policies across education jurisdictions and common influences on policymaking around the world, local, state, and national contexts remain important (Lingard, 2010; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

We opted to use asynchronous online dialogues in our collaborations to promote these understandings about policy for a number of reasons. First, they provided a practical way for students to maintain on-going discussions despite physical distances between them. Second, policy dialogues recognize and respond to principles of adult learning including adult learners' need for self-directed learning, their preference for solving problems in real life contexts, the importance of critical reflection, and recognition of learners' past experiences and individual differences (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 1998). Asynchronous discussions promote reflective thinking (Romano, 2008; Skibba, 2006). Policy dialogues also support constructivist and social constructivist theories of learning. Constructivism assumes that knowledge is constructed through individuals' encounters with their environment and is based on their prior knowledge. Social constructivism recognizes that learning is a social process (Kaye & Volkers, 2007). The principles of adult learning and constructivism can be addressed in online learning environments (Chan, 2010; Ruey, 2010). Finally, online dialogues enable everyone to

participate in discussions, including students who are uncomfortable speaking in face-to-face meetings (Beckett, Amaro-Jimenez, & Beckett, 2010; Lin, 2008), and facilitate student-to-student interaction, unlike in traditional face-to-face class meetings in which exchanges tend to be between students and instructor (Walters Swenson & Evans, 2003). Enabling everyone to participate and reconfiguring power dynamics reflect our commitments to democratic policy processes and the critical democratic perspective (Solomon & Portelli, 2001; Winton, 2010) that grounds our courses.

Determining Outcomes of our Cross-Border Online Dialogues

Getting students from outside institutions access to the course website at UB, training students how to use Blackboard, and setting up policy dialogue groups was time-consuming and required more time than anticipated. Actively participating in the dialogues consistently was time-consuming for students and faculty alike. Given the demands of creating and maintaining the online policy dialogues, we wanted to know whether they helped students learn about policy. We also recognized the unique nature of our collaborations and hoped to contribute to the developing fields of the scholarship of teaching and teaching in educational leadership. We designed a questionnaire containing open-ended questions that asked collaboration participants about the learning outcomes, benefits, and challenges of the cross-border online policy dialogues. We introduced the study to students during the final face-to-face meetings and invited them to complete the questionnaire about their experiences in the course. All students received questionnaires and envelopes and were asked to return the questionnaires (completed or not) in the envelope to a graduate assistant in each country. The graduate assistants kept the envelopes containing the questionnaires until after final grades were submitted.

Twenty-one of thirty-seven students answered at least one question on the questionnaire. Responses were entered into a word processing program and unique ideas within each response were identified and analyzed as individual statements. The statements were analyzed using an open-coding approach. Three general themes emerged from the analysis: learning about policy; benefits of online dialogues; and challenges of online dialogue. Eighty statements were categorized into the general theme learning about policy; this theme is the focus of this article. This general theme was further analyzed into subthemes: policy issues; policy in the “other” country; policy “on the ground”; influence of contexts; sharing resources; diverse perspectives; lack of focus, and redundant. One subtheme, influence of contexts, was further divided into positive and negative statements. We turn now to discussion of the eight subthemes below.

What/do Students Learn about Policy through Cross-Border Online Dialogues?

The data suggest the cross-border online dialogues offered much support for students’ learning about education policy (59/80 statements were positive). Of the subthemes identified through the analysis, learning about policy in the “other” country contained the most supporting statements (17/59) and no negative statements.

[The dialogue] forced me to learn and become more aware, which is good! I don’t do enough self learning or self educating, beyond Ontario borders.

[I]n talking with other students you are able to learn about another country’s policy, process and implementation.

[I] probably wouldn’t have studied the American side of things on my own.

Statements in this subtheme, such as those above, suggest learning about education policy in the other country through the online dialogues was an outcome of the cross-border aspect of our collaborations. The exposure to diverse perspectives enabled by the online policy dialogues was also identified as supporting students' learning about policy (13/59 positive statements).

The online dialogue provided opportunities to gather information from different perspectives

[H]earing from different perspectives broadened my outlook on various issues.

Responses regarding students' learning about how local, state/provincial, and national contexts affect policy processes were mixed. This subtheme contained the most statements – both positive (10/80) and negative (8/80). Supporting statements included:

[T]o see first hand how 13 schools in Buffalo were going to close to be replaced by charter schools and how NCLB attached district funding to increased numbers of charter schools – wow!

[Our] discussion about Quebec and Buffalo helped student[s] learn about role of context on language policy.

Not everyone felt the online dialogues supported their learning about how local, state/provincial, and national contexts affect policy processes, however. There were almost as many negative statements as positive ones. One negative statement explains that there was “little rich or consistent discussion that uncovered the local and national contexts” while another states that the “dialogue seemed to be focused more on a national level”. The mix of both positive and negative statements may in part be due to the different content discussed in the various dialogues. Students were grouped into different dialogue groups; some groups may have discussed the influence of national, state/provincial, and local contexts more than others. While the instructors encouraged students to consider and discuss these connections, the dialogues were facilitated and directed by students rather than instructors. In 2011, students were able to participate in dialogues other than the one they were assigned to but the constraints of time may have discouraged participation in multiple dialogues. Some (8) statements suggest the dialogues supported students' learning about how policies are playing out “on the ground” in local schools and communities.

[T]he largest benefit was learning how policies impact day-to-day operations in Canadian schools.

People working at schools provided a lot of information which I would never find from [an] “official statement”.

The supporting statements suggest that through the online dialogues some students were able to gain knowledge about policy practices that reading policy documents from another context could not provide. Statements in the subtheme policy issues address whether participating in the cross-border online dialogues supported learning about education policy issues important in both countries. Five statements were coded as positive, that is, they suggest participating in the online dialogues supported students' learning about policy issues. These statements include:

[The online dialogues] provided insight and fostered better understanding of education policy.

Dialogues helped me to understand the issues better.

The relatively limited number of statements suggesting the dialogues promote knowledge about policy issues may be an outcome of the timing of the dialogues. The

dialogues took place following in-class discussions of assigned readings about policy issues. Thus, students may have entered each dialogue with an awareness of the issue and used the dialogues as a space to explore how that issue is interpreted and enacted in the other national context in particular and to understand various perspectives on the issue not raised in the class discussions. Indeed, seven statements identify the absence or limited amount of new information discussed in the dialogues. Instead, the dialogues repeated what students already knew:

Most of the issues we discussed in the online policy dialogues were either a reiteration of the course readings or something that I was already familiar with or could find online, in a professional magazine, in a journal, by Googling, and by looking it up on Youtube.

[Dialogues] did not push understanding beyond readings, in-class dialogues, news, or guest speakers.

As discussed, the different content of each dialogue may help explain why some statements suggest participating in cross-border online dialogues supports students' learning about policy issues, while others suggest it does not. The diversity of experience and knowledge amongst students may also be important. Some students were teachers and school or district administrators, others were students in fields outside education, while still others were students from countries other than the US or Canada with limited or no experience working in education systems. Finally, six statements explain that the dialogues did not stay focused on the policy issue under discussion:

[There was] not a lot of discussion about policies – more about other areas of education.

[M]ost discussions center around digressions and personal experiences.

Considered together, the data suggest cross-border online dialogues can provide insight into how policies are implemented in schools, broaden students' thinking beyond national borders, enable access to diverse perspectives on policy issues, and support learning about the influence of local, state/provincial, and national contexts on policy processes. Given this potential and the tendency for some dialogues to go off topic, it may be a good idea to require that a few questions be explored each week (such as the influences of local, state/provincial and national contexts) in addition to students' interests.

Time and Effort Well Spent

Creating, monitoring, and participating actively in our online policy dialogues demand a lot of time and commitment from faculty and students. Fortunately, participants' responses suggest that cross-border online policy dialogues can support students' learning about how policy issues are understood and implemented in another national context and in some cases how context affects how policies are enacted. We hope our cross-border collaborations and research on cross-border online policy dialogues stimulates discussion within the field of comparative and international education on approaches for teaching and learning comparative policy analysis. Beyond the field of education, our findings contribute to the scant knowledge base on teaching policy analysis. This knowledge is limited to using case studies in undergraduate economics classes (Velenchik, 1995) and adopting a seminar format (Croxtton, Fellin, & Churchill, 1987) and teaching policy analysis as research (O'Connor & Netting, 2008) in social work education.

Conclusion

Focused cross-border online dialogues between Canadian and American graduate students can broaden students' thinking beyond national borders, provide insight into how policies are implemented in schools, enable access to diverse perspectives on policy issues, and support learning about the influence of local, state/provincial, and national contexts on policy processes.

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