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► To cite this version:

Gary Evans Jr. Scudder, Jennifer A. Vincent. Internationalizing the Curriculum: Champlain College and the Global Module Project. Conference ICL2007, September 26 -28, 2007, 2007, Villach, Austria. 10 p. hal-00197234

HAL Id: hal-00197234

<https://telearn.hal.science/hal-00197234>

Submitted on 14 Dec 2007

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Internationalizing the Curriculum: Champlain College and the Global Module Project

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Key words: *global learning, study abroad, e-learning,*

Abstract:

Champlain College, a leader in both online and international education, uses the Internet to create Global Modules that link the students and faculty at two or three international educational institutions for shared online readings, discussion and teamwork. Students at Champlain have used the Global Modules format to discuss women's issues with students in the U.A.E., terrorism with Jordanian students, globalization with Indian students, the peace movement with Austrian students and the Lebanon crisis with Australian students. This year Champlain will take the unprecedented approach of embedding the Global Modules in its new core curriculum in a course entitled Concepts of Community. This presentation will present a brief overview of the Global Module approach, including the technological and pedagogical implications.

When discussing his hopes for a brighter future, the Jordanian leader El Hassan Bin Talal proposed “promoting a politics of inclusion, and involving ourselves in dialogue and exchange.” Noble goals, certainly, but how do we create an environment for this dialogue and exchange? To that end, Champlain College, a small baccalaureate college in Burlington, Vermont, has spent the past two years completely restructuring its core curriculum to best prepare students of the 21st century for their role as global citizens. A key component of this new core curriculum is the college's innovative Global Modules project, where Champlain students connect with students at various international universities for short, thematic, course-embedded, online discussions. Starting in the spring 2008 semester Champlain will start positioning the Global Modules as mandatory assignments in certain key required interdisciplinary courses. The goal is to create an integrated series of progressive assignments based on global dialogue carried over the four year university experience. In this paper we will examine Champlain's innovative approach to providing an international education.

Before discussing the Global Modules project and its role in Champlain's new core curriculum, it might be a good idea to step back and take a look at a more traditional solution to global learning – study abroad. While the advantages of studying abroad are well-documented, and Champlain continues to support active participation in it, we feel offering study abroad alone is not enough. Many factors, ranging from financial considerations to tightly-structured degree requirements, combine to ensure that less than 2% of university students are able to participate in such programs. We must also realize that the experiences are often singular, isolated events that come late in the curriculum, usually 3rd year, and typically exclude areas like the Middle East.

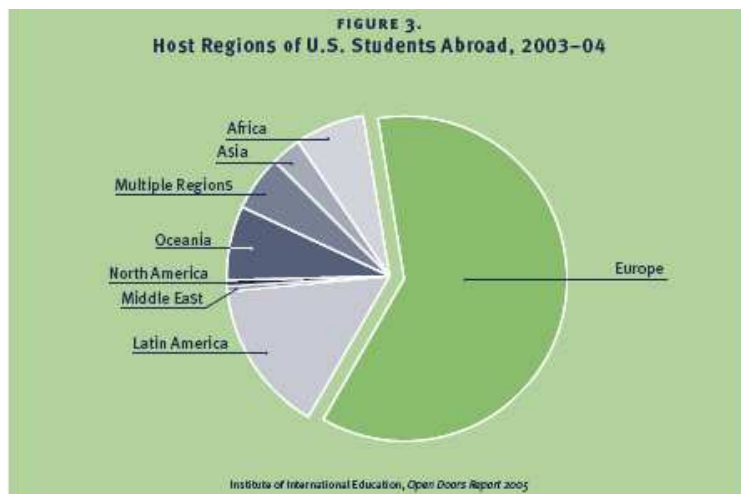


Figure 3 of The Institute of International Education's *Open Doors Report 2005*, clearly shows that the destination of US students is overwhelmingly Eurocentric, with the Middle East hosting a mere 0.4% of all study abroad students from the US. This enormous lack of diversity is unacceptable if we are to prepare students for the global challenges of the 21st century. As stated by NAFSA: Association of International Educators, and the Alliance for International Educational and Cultural Exchange, two expert organizations deeply committed to international exchange and study abroad,

“We no longer have the option of getting along without the expertise that we need to understand and conduct our relations with the world. We do not have the option of not knowing our enemies—or not understanding the world where terrorism originates and speaking its languages. We do not have the option of not knowing our friends—or not understanding how to forge and sustain international relationships . . .”

The need for increased diversity in the destinations of study abroad students was also cited as a major challenge by the Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program in their 2005 publication “Global Competence & National Needs”.

What solutions have been offered to ameliorate these obstacles? The Commission’s recommendation is to spend more money on study abroad. While this may increase participation by students, it does nothing to change the diversification of the student body participants, nor does it address the lack of diversification of destinations offered. The Champlain College Global Modules project is an extremely low-cost, online global-learning solution which allows for the free exchange of ideas and opinions between international students that can be incorporated into any class. Global Modules make international dialogue possible for *every* student, from *every* nation. Further, because, as will be discussed shortly, the Global Modules are designed around topics chosen to inspire focused discussion, it is possible to maximize the exchange. Finally, it is important to keep in mind that the Global Modules are not designed to replace study abroad. Instead, one of our hopes is that by requiring students to communicate with other students from around the world early in their university career it will actually increase the number who study abroad, as well as enhance their study abroad experience.

To that end, we have initiated an ambitious program of embedding Global Modules across the curriculum. Participation in the Global Module project not only raises cultural awareness for all students early in their college careers, they also allow our students to speak freely with students from all over the world, from Singapore to Uganda, from Jordan to Australia. Global Modules are an online global-learning solution which allows for the free exchange of ideas and opinions between international students that can be incorporated into any class. Using Global Modules involve very little training, preparation or class-time, with assessable results that clearly demonstrate their effectiveness.

Global Modules are designed to link the students and faculty at two or three international educational institutions for shared readings, discussion and teamwork through a structured online environment. These readings, chosen through consultation among the faculty at the different universities, are designed to challenge unspoken cultural assumptions as well as promote critical thinking and collaborative learning. The key is to choose readings and assignments that force the students to work together to cooperate and solve problems, and in the process come to grips with their national or regional biases. Students are broken up into groups with equal representation from the participating schools. As a group they try and solve various national, regional or international problems and present their findings to their peers. Group critique and reflection then round out the experience and place their work in a greater global context. Each module is structured as follows:

Week 1	Students post introductions in the online shell and get to know each other
Week 2	Shared reading assignments; students post answers to questions
Week 3	Small groups established – equal representation; small group assignments
Week 4	Groups post projects; group critique

The approach is designed to be both flexible and simple, which allows for the greatest ease of participation. Consistently this approach has provided rich student discussion. Let's take an example from a Global Module run by Bouziane Zaid from Al Akhawayn University in Morocco and Robert Mayer from Champlain College. The Global Module was based on a topic we call Woman as "the Other." The students read the introduction to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, discuss similarities and differences between the status of women in their respective countries, and worked together to produce plans for improving the lives of women worldwide. As part of the early discussion, a Moroccan woman made the point,

Simone de Beauvoir is totally right in her definition of women as "others" in many societies. In my country Morocco, for instance, women are seen in different way from men. Women do not have the right to laugh or speak loudly. They should come back home at an early time and respect certain rules. In other words, they have to talk, behave, interact in a special way completely different from the male.

Her point was important because she was making the progression from a general theoretical discussion to using specific examples from her home country to back up her argument. It's this exchange between students from different countries that is the core of the Global Module project. Another Moroccan student built upon these earlier points.

In that case of Moroccan women, more than "Others", women are "inferiors". The word "other" include the idea of a second part but here, in those country where women are very depreciated, and we can say that, in a way, they suffer of a lack of freedom. However, even if this example of Moroccan women is quite true, it exists some exceptions. In big cities like Casablanca for example, it is striking to see how women seem free and open, particularly in their way of dressing. They look like western women. However, men's behavior towards women in Morocco always remind us that we are more considered as an object or a property than as a full human being. (But it's just a very general observation, of course there are a lot of different cases and not all Moroccan men treat women as objects!).

This posting is interesting because we've now added another layer of analysis. The student is providing information about her home country, but is also drawing distinctions between the urban and rural positions of women. It is enlightening that, despite her freedom that the Internet provides for interchange, the student felt the need to throw in the qualifying remark at the end about Moroccan males. Another Moroccan student, this time a male, then proposed,

I don't think that the "specific" situation of women which makes them "the Other" does concern only Arab, Islamic or underdeveloped societies. I always wonder why through the History of leader countries in domains of human rights and gender equality, such as USA and France, there was no woman in the position of the President. I am interested in discussing that point.

Here the male Moroccan student has taken the step of actively asking questions of his American peers, but also, in the process, challenging assumptions about the superiority of the American treatment of women. This is exactly the type of give and take that we are looking for in the Global Modules.

A key element in constructing a successful Global Module is the selection of a topic, which can be a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, the topic chosen should, along with

corresponding readings and questions, peak the students' interest, make them question some of their cultural assumptions, and get them thinking in a more global fashion. On the other hand, the topic should not be so controversial that it may start an argument that is counter-productive.

It is essential to give the participating professors the freedom to come up with their own topics if they choose. This helps to ensure that the discussions remain meaningful and up to date by tying them to unfolding world events. At the same time, one of our objectives is to create a large database of successful assignments, readings, and discussion questions. This gives professors a selection of ready-made Global Modules to choose from and also a guideline for constructing new assignments. For example, the first core curriculum course that the Global Modules will be embedded in is entitled Concepts of Community. We are actively preparing a number of community-based topics that will give participating professors a variety of options. However, we will still provide professors the option of choosing a different topic relating to the general theme of community and helping them develop it.

Potential partnerships can be as varied as the topics since the discussions take place in a virtual forum which allows for asynchronous dialogue between the participants. The main objective when designing the technology to use is that it must provide a communications portal that anyone in the world with internet access can use. Champlain College originally designed a custom built message board with minimal features. The message board offered simple threaded discussions, which provided ease of use for the student to follow the discussion, particularly if English is their second language, as well as ease of use for the instructor to follow the discussion and track postings by individual students. As the Global Modules project has expanded, Champlain College has invested in vBulletin, a specialized commercial bulletin board package that is highly customizable and flexible. This technology was chosen over a similar commercial bulletin board package, phpbb, because it was able to offer several structures to the discussions- flat, threaded or a hybrid. vBulletin also offers an

effective way to easily maintain the current and growing volume of modules being run simultaneously each semester, as well as the ability to archive desired discussion material. As we have chosen to increase the sophistication of our technology, Champlain College is always mindful to balance that against potentially limiting participation due to bandwidth constraints.

Since running our first Global Module in 2004, between our Burlington, US campus and our campus in Dubai, UAE, we have successfully expanded the scope of the modules and international participation in the project. We have now run many global modules with our campus in Mumbai, India, as well as other institutions, such as Klagenfurt University in Austria, Al Akhawayn University in Morocco, the University of Melbourne in Australia, Nipissing University in Canada, Moi University in Kenya, the University of Jordan and Princess Sumaya University in Jordan. In addition, we've run the global modules with topics based in a number of disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, literature, economics and history.

Our professors and students have discussed topics with their colleagues from around the world that express the universality of the human experience. We've discussed topics as varied as women's issues with students from the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Canada and Morocco, globalization with students from India, terrorism with students from Jordan, peace activism with students from Austria, educational issues with students from Israel, and the war in Lebanon with students from Australia. In the coming semester we will be expanding to more universities in Kenya, Uganda, Sweden, Spain, Hungary, Malaysia and Singapore.

Incorporating such global learning into the curriculum is exactly what groups like the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) have been promoting for a number of years. In one of their most recent reports, "College Learning for the New Global Century", they concisely outline the essential learning outcomes to prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century. The report concluded that these four outcomes were essential for today's successful university graduate:

KNOWLEDGE OF HUMAN CULTURES AND THE PHYSICAL AND NATURAL WORLD

- Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts

Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring

INTELLECTUAL AND PRACTICAL SKILLS, INCLUDING

- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving

Practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance

PERSONAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, INCLUDING

- Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

Anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges

INTEGRATIVE LEARNING, INCLUDING

- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

Demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems

While most of these outcomes were reinforced by the Global Modules experience, a closer look at the third category, Personal and Social Responsibility, clearly reflects key strengths of the approach.

Internally, Champlain has amassed a wealth of assessment data to support the validity of the Global Modules approach, based on a simple twelve question survey given to every domestic and international participant. Here are the results from five key questions from the spring 2007 semester:

1. I am now aware of a greater number of perspectives on the topic we covered than I was before participating in this Global Module.
 - Strongly Agree – 60.5%
 - Agree – 39.5%
2. I will probably try to find out more about the cultures that I encountered during this Global Module.
 - Strongly Agree – 35.1%

- Agree – 54.1%
- Disagree – 10.8%

3. I feel more comfortable communicating electronically with people from other countries or cultures than I thought I would have before participating in this Global Module.

- Strongly Agree – 42.1%
- Agree – 52.6%
- Disagree – 5.3%

4 I believe that I will now feel more comfortable communicating face to face with people from other countries or cultures because of my participation in this Global Module.

- Strongly Agree – 34.2%
- Agree – 57.9%
- Disagree – 7.9%

5. I believe that I will be more tolerant when others have trouble accepting or understanding my view on a particular topic.

- Strongly Agree – 37.8%
- Agree – 59.5%
- Disagree – 2.7%

While the numbers from all twelve questions were overwhelming positive, these five questions in particular were representative and also very encouraging. Almost ninety percent of the respondents in question 2 stated that they would try and find out more about the other cultures that they had encountered in the Global Module. Questions 3 and 4 are interesting in that they suggest that while the exchange was virtual, it at least had the potential to apply to face to face collaboration as well. Question 5, because it focused on toleration in general and not specifically about involvement in a future Global Module, provided very encouraging results.

Amy, a Champlain College student who participated in a Global Module, wrote, “The experience of this Global Module was probably the best experience that I have ever had while attending Champlain College. I hope that the school continues to provide this opportunity to students in the future.” The Champlain College Global Modules project offers a simple, innovative addition to study abroad as part of a systemic reappraisal of global education. Study abroad can be financially daunting, both for students and institutions, which limits its

participants greatly. It also faces the challenges of a lack of diversity in destination countries, and these mostly Eurocentric experiences are often singular, isolated events with no incorporated reflection or assessment. Global Modules can be run anywhere that has access to the internet, ensuring campus-wide participation in structured, meaningful, assessable international discussions. As we implement Global Modules across our new core curriculum, it will allow us to start students' awareness of other cultures early, and keep that conversation fully integrated and ongoing in the curriculum.

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