

## Teaching and Learning Remotely: Collaborative Projects Transcript

On Thursday July 2, 2020, DCAL hosted a panel discussion about collaborative projects in remote classrooms. This is the transcript to the presentation portion of the event.

**Cecilia Gaposhkin, Professor of History:** I'm Cecilia Gaposhkin. I'm in the History Department and I was scheduled to do a First Year Seminar on Joan of Arc, which is one that I have taught a number of times before. Joan was a 15th century extraordinary woman, a teenager who raised an army, won over the support of the King of France and was ultimately captured and put on trial and burnt at stake. Really a remarkable story. And we have a lot of information about her. And so it lends itself well to a writing and research seminar, because all of it's in translation. This time around, Jed Dobson who runs the writing program that oversees the First Year Seminars, which are writing and research intensive, really suggested a couple things: One, that we go asynchronous and really emphasize the importance of finding ways of building community and connection among the students in this new environment.

And so I decided to try something that I'd always sort of thought might be fun to do, which is to have the students collectively write a book on Joan, so work on a single collective project. This didn't replace individual writing assignments they had to do, but it was intended to be a project that would have them engage in their writing in ways that could be asynchronous if that was necessary and communicate with themselves over the structure and the ideas. The thing about Joan is that we have a lot of sources about her, they're all translated and they're the same sources that everybody has been using to write the biography of Joan of Arc, of which basically a new one comes out every year, a very, very popular figure.

So that's what we did. I divided them into groups of four and we tried once a week to meet as a group to brainstorm what elements they should work on in terms of their writing. There were groups of four and there was an editor, a leader of every group every week and they both had to write material and then they were responsible for reading somebody else's and other groups material and sort of critiquing it and then later on in the term they were responsible for going back and rewriting every section. So in theory, every person in every group touched every piece of the book that we were working on and it ended up being about four or five chapters. So that was the gambit. We used Google Docs, which has a good feature that everything can get tracked. Multiple people could be working on it at the same time, but I could go back and see who had done what and so I was able to see essentially... one person in fact, I don't think wrote a single word until the very, very end and other people who are really involved.

So I could see the way in which they were conversing with one another in the commentary boxes and things like that. So I think it worked reasonably well. I would do it again, certainly in the remote environment. There's a lot of things I would do differently, which we can talk about if you want. I think maybe that sort of five minutes worth?

**Scott Pauls, Director of DCAL:** You actually have a minute or two in your allotted time but maybe you could pick up the biggest thing you would do differently.

**Cecilia Gaposhkin, Professor of History:** And I basically I would spend more time structuring the work that they have to do. I would front load some stuff. I would reorganize the timeline to do it. But one of the things that I had hoped, is that the students would show some more initiative in terms of the research questions. I had envisioned somebody saying like, “Oh, I need to figure out something about the inquisitorial process in the Middle Ages” and sort of go research that and somebody else, like, “Oh, we need to understand what the history of prophecy” was they would go and research that and in the end that was very, very hard to do. So I would structure into the writing of it some of those research assignments, because essentially I got a narrative, but they didn't write up the analysis around it, unless they really structured very specifically the research. So I would say it worked well on writing, editing and community building and less well on the research element. And I can take responsibility for figuring out how to do that better if I were to do this next time. I would certainly do it next time if I am teaching remotely. I've even considered whether I would do it quite differently if we were in class together. And the other thing that I would have made the project more successful is me just spending a lot more time with them in groups, like meeting into groups of four to talk about the problems in reading.

**Scott Pauls, Director of DCAL:** Great, thank you. As I said, we'll go to a comment portion after all three have gone so just to make things easy. I'm going to go across my Zoom screen. So Vasanta, do you want to go next?

**Vasanta Kommineni, Instructor of Computer Science:** Sure, I can go next. So I was teaching CS 50. So, this course is about software design and implementation and the goal of the course is to take the students through the process of developing a big software, teach them how to design, teach them how to implement, how to come up with like... distribute the work, and a major part of this is like how to work with teams. So we want to give them the experience of working with teams. So even in a non-remote session, in this course, we always do projects and they're always teams and teams work on the project together. But what happened in the remote session was like there were people everywhere and different time zones and also the connection was not good for some of them.

So what usually happens is like in the last week, you'll see a lot of students, if it was not remote, they would be sitting together, working together, and spending a lot of time together. So for me the biggest challenge was how to make sure that they have good team bonding and the other challenge was how to come up with the project which will be challenging enough, but at the same time will not involve too much of a component where they have to sit together and work and they can manage it remotely. So what worked well was that we made the teams early and so in every class at the end of the class, we had activity and in the activity they had to work with

their team and they had to solve it or they had to come up with a solution with a document or some kind of design. All these activities they did with the team.

So working with the team early on and not just for the project really helped them bond together. And another thing I did was I had a ice breaking session so I made a crossword puzzle, which was solely based on the course material and the words in the course and I got the feedback that they really loved it. So most of the teams worked well.

But at the same time during the activities, they were all in their own breakout rooms, I would go from breakout room to breakout room and talk to them. And see how the team dynamics were working, which I feel was very important for me and I feel even getting to know my students, the students also really appreciated that time they got with me.

What would I do differently is... so I feel that, because I was teaching remotely for the first time, I couldn't find the right balance between the difficulty of the project and so I went the easy way and the project was slightly easier so I feel I would have a slightly more challenging project, but still keeping in mind that they're doing it remotely and they might not have time to sit together and work, but slightly more difficult because it's a challenge. And once they solve a challenge together as a team I feel it's much more satisfactory than the level of project, which I gave them. So I feel slightly more difficult would definitely help them a lot more, but they did enjoy working in the teams and the comments they left were that it really worked well and starting early was definitely one key to it.

**Scott Pauls, Director of DCAL:** Thank you. Daniel, want to round out the projects?

**Daniel Kotlowitz, Professor of Theater:** Yeah, so I'm Daniel Kotlowitz . I teach in the Theater Department and the class I taught this spring I co-taught with Melinda Evans and it's called Creativity and Collaboration. So we place a very strong emphasis on process and product is really not that important in this class. So the basic structure of the class was that students break out into groups and they work together using movement and lighting on a variety of projects. There are three projects with the final project at the end. And again, the focus of the classes on this process that they're going through.

So we've always co-taught the course. Melinda Evans is a choreographer and I'm a lighting designer so the primary sort of mediums that the students have used have been movement and lighting design. One of the things that we sort of quickly discovered in this online environment is that Melinda and I had to really expand our ideas of what these mediums were. So Melinda sort of first reconceived movement entirely to be about movement in general and not just about moving of the human body. And I sort of threw out lighting design entirely and thought more about composition and design. So it's a real broadening of our thought process.

The positive side of this was that because we are working with mediums that were sort of outside our normal expertise we were much more focused on process and less on on the

products. So I think that actually helped the class a lot. I also think the goals for the students for the course in general were more clear. The students really focus deliberately on the tools that they were using to navigate these creative processes and they were less concerned about trying to make things that look good. So that was a real positive to the class.

The class is, almost entirely experiential, their discussions, critiques. We do four collaborative projects that are performed or presented to the class and then the students also do a short presentation about creative collaborations experienced in different disciplines. They also keep journals throughout the class that record and reflect on what's happening in their collaborative process and we really push them to think deeply about the process about what's working, what's not working, when the collaboration has momentum, when it doesn't, when there's conflict, how the conflict is resolved, if it's resolved, and how does the conflict impact the collaborative process?

The journals become real tools for the students because they're sort of touchstones for them, but they were also really useful for Melinda and I to have a real sense of what was going on in their processes because we were there for some of it, but a lot of this work is being done on their own. So we had 21 students in the class this year and we broke them into groups of four or five and one of the key things for us was that these groups stay together for the entire term. And we kind of have come to believe that that collaboration requires a lot of time to build trust. Trust is kind of the critical element and it just takes time to build that. I think we also found that the size of four to six students was kind of ideal because it was a large enough group that if, if the creative energy in the group was lagging at any point someone could pick up the ball and get it going again, but it was also small enough that everybody sort of felt compelled to contribute. So this felt like a good size both remotely and when we did it live.

All the classes were synchronous and class time was generally spent, we do a full classroom discussion and then we do breakout rooms and then presentation days projects were presented to the whole class and everybody would participate in the critiques. Melinda and I would visit breakout rooms when they were in them and you know we'd go in there, we'd offer suggestions, we'd asked questions, but the real reason we were in there was to kind of disrupt their process a little bit. So we would throw things at them, that would sort of kind of break into things.

We've certainly discovered that disruption is critical because you get very comfortable with the process that's not going anywhere. And so if you get kicked in the butt a little bit the students tended to, it got them moving. It was interesting too because the side of that we didn't realize was happening was that these disruptions were sort of giving a shared purpose to the students. They knew that when Melinda and I came into their room that we were going to cause trouble and that sort of we became a common enemy to them in the nicest way, but it did create a sense of solidarity with the students, essentially just giving them continuous problems to solve.

Every time they thought they had figured something out, sort of something else would come up. We also tended to make the projects in our responses to them a little bit ambiguous. I think the

students develop really strong collaborative relationships with each other because they really were searching for some sort of reason and order in these projects which were very often very vague and and one sentence long so that sort of became I think a bonding element for them.

One of the missteps in collaboration that we really worked hard to avoid is the sort of natural hierarchy that develops in a group, which is based on personality or the person with the biggest personality has the biggest voice and essentially everything goes their way. One of the things we did was we tried to encourage a hierarchy that was based on certain tasks so that everybody has a task. And we start that by having people bring things to the collaboration. For example, in one project, every student had to bring a video to the group. The project was about paths and obstacles. So everyone made a video and brought it to their group. And sort of shared their video, discussed it and you know the work that they did showed their investment in the work to the rest of the people in the group. And it also revealed sort of natural inclinations that some people had. So it's sort of equalized the voices in the groups usually.

I think one of the things we really miss in the online classroom was that usually we do this class in one big room and so the groups break up and they're all sitting in the same room, but they're working separately. What happens is this sort of serendipitous one group starts watching another group and starts getting ideas from what they're doing or they go over and start critiquing the work and there was a lot of interaction like that that we actually didn't really even know what's happening. In one of the journals, a student mentioned that they really would love to see what other groups were doing in the breakout rooms and we realized that this was a missing component. So we started joining breakout rooms. We would put more than one group into a breakout room and let them work together. That worked really well on the first project, one project two was the first time we did it. It worked really well. It was great. And then we did it again for project three and they hated it. I think it was because we started it too early in their process and they didn't feel like they had a really formed idea yet. So that was kind of interesting.

The other thing that I think we missed the most was something called mind mapping, which in the real person classes we have these huge pieces of paper, three feet by six feet, and magic markers and the students sort of write their ideas on the paper and they start making connections between the idea. The idea behind is that if there's proximity to these eyes to see seemingly disparate ideas that you'll start making connections that you wouldn't have made. And I had looked at all sorts of programs where you can do this and we did it on Zoom with Blackboard, but it never quite worked well and I think it was a real missing piece on the class. And I'm not quite sure. That's something that I would definitely try to figure out before I did this, again, which I will do this again.

I think the other thing that I would do differently is I really miss those five minutes at the end of class when students would come by and talk to you briefly. That really kind of made a huge difference. In the middle of the term we made individual meetings with every student and at that point I realized how much I didn't know them, because these five minute conversations I had

with them just showed me so much. And I just think Zoom is such a... you just can't read what's going on with people in Zoom, and that's something I really missed. And I think I would do these individual meetings, much more often in the class.