

COIL Institute for Globally Networked Learning in the Humanities Course Development and Implementation Case Study

11. India – USA

Narrative

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“Missed Connections: Anatomy of a Failed GLC” The UTEP and Annamalai University Global Learning Community

I. Abstract

In 2011, UTEP attempted to establish a GLC with Annamalai University in Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu, India. The course was ultimately unable to be developed. The major issue in the failed attempt to connect had primarily to do with differences in partner expectations and the difficulty of cross-cultural asynchronous communication. Recommendations from the experience include increased development time, personal connection of direct partners, and clear institutional expectations on both sides.

II. Personal Reflection

I was very excited to hear in the summer of 2011 that a colleague at UTEP had lined up a potential partner institution in India with which to develop a GLC. I have lived there hoped to return and partner with educators as well as connect our students with students in South Asia.

Given the necessary strictures of the timeline for the COIL initiative the relationship had to be established and developed very quickly (less than 6 months). My first communication with my potential partner was in late June. With the first COIL seminars beginning in September, there was not a great deal of time to get to know one another and plan the basic outline of our global learning community.

I began with an email introducing myself to my potential partner and laying out the expectations for the COIL initiative and the possible steps to be taken to begin developing the GLC. I felt it my responsibility to orient my partner to the COIL initiative’s requirements as he was being introduced to the project late and we were inviting him to join us.

As the summer progressed, communication between my partner and I became spotty and unproductive so I switched to a more personal tone, talking about my family and our experience living in India. My partner too shared a little bit about himself and it seemed as if we were able to make a bit of a connection that bode well for the partnership.

Going into the first seminar at COIL in September my partner and I had not been able to complete the institute’s required steps to prepare for the discussions in NY. My partner had not been able to attend the NY seminar either in person or virtually making planning difficult. There was no opportunity for synchronous communication and all work, such as it was, was being conducted via email. I discussed the matter with COIL fellows and staff and they provided suggestions for how to proceed and encouragement to continue in the process.

I was scheduled to visit India on other business in November of 2011 and planned a trip to visit

Chidambaram at the end of my visit. This trip, due in part to some miscommunication between my partner and I and a misunderstanding about the distance and conditions of travel, proved more difficult than expected but I ultimately made it and was able to spend the better part of a day with my potential partner and the institution.

During this visit it became clear that the expectations for what my partner and his institution believed was happening and what I--and to some extent COIL--desired to happen, did not match and that reconciling them would be difficult.

Further complicating the issue was that we were operating under the assumption that UTEP's official agreement to participate with Annamalai U. through COIL would be sufficient for the purposes of partnering together through 2012 on a GLC. It became clear when I visited that this would not be the case for Annamalai U. They had institutional expectations and requirements, specifically pertaining to the issuance of an official Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that I was not able to fulfill, nor were we able to fulfill in time to complete the GLC.

That these expectations were not voiced on either side until late in the relationship further exacerbated confusion on both sides.

Attempts to reconcile the issue and move forward without the MOU in Spring of 2012 failed and I informed COIL in the summer of 2012 that we would not be able to complete the GLC in the prescribed time.

III. Assessment

Reflecting on the sheer speed with which the partnership was initiated in the summer of 2011, I am impressed with my colleagues and department's ability to put me in contact with a potential partner. But unfortunately the speed with which it needed to be fully developed by the fall of 2011 could not be matched. Given that all communication needed to occur asynchronously with mismatched language skills, the likelihood of quick success in this area was low.

Specifically reflecting on my communications to my partner, my initial email in the summer of 2011 was a bit of a data dump and may have not facilitated understanding and confidence in what was happening at the outset. If I had to do it again I certainly would have attempted to ease into the relationship a little more "softly," especially given the very "relational" nature of work in South Asia.

Though, to be clear, in the absence of the bureaucratic formalization of the partnership in the form of a separate MOU or an extended previous relationship between the institutions, it is not obvious that anything would have moved us forward. Here "fault" is really not an appropriate word. It had to do largely with differing institutional expectations for what constituted a "partnership." On the UTEP side we expected the letters from COIL accepting the partnership and our signing and indicating our desire to work with Annamalai to be sufficient to move forward with this particular project. The expectation being that a fuller, long term relationship could be negotiated after the COIL initiative was successful.

On our partner's side it is now clear that this was not sufficient. The expectation on Annamalai's part was that the relationship should be formalized at the outset and that work really could not be initiated until this was complete.

While a number of minor issues kept the partnership from succeeding, mismatched (and unarticulated) expectations on both sides ultimately prevented the successful partnership of Annamalai and UTEP.

Recommendations as a result of this experience:

- 1.) Clarify institutional and bureaucratic partnership expectations up front.

2.) Institutions should give themselves one year's lead time (at least) in the development of the partner relationship. This gives instructors time to get to know one another and negotiate differing expectations at the individual and institutional level. Of course if partnering faculty know each other personally prior to the initiation of the formal partnership, this time can be greatly reduced.

3.) Some portion of this development time will require synchronous if not face to face contact and communication, preferably over several months.

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