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## **Abstract**

This study reports on an international project in which students taking the course *Contemporary Issues in Turkish Politics* in spring 2011 and fall 2011 at two institutions of higher education, 'Gettysburg College' in the United States and 'Izmir University of Economics' in Turkey, worked together in virtual learning environments to complete various tasks as part of their course work. The project employed a blend of traditional and technology-based teaching methods in order to introduce a technology like Skype in a bi-national learning environment in Turkey. Students collaborated and interacted with their international counterparts in two different virtual contexts. First, classrooms in the two countries were merged via Skype three times to conduct classroom-to-classroom discussion sessions on Turkish politics. Second, students were paired across locations to work on several assignments. In this paper, our goal is to present how Skype is used in a bi-national context as a blended teaching tool in an upper-level college course for instructors pursuing a similar exercise. In addition to outlining the process with a focus on Skype discussions and one-on-one student projects, we provide actual assignments and discussion questions. Students' views elicited through surveys administered throughout the semester are presented alongside anecdotal evidence to reflect how the project was received.

## **Keywords**

cross-cultural collaboration, e-learning environment, institutional cooperation, technology-based teaching, international blended learning

## **Disciplines**

Curriculum and Instruction | Higher Education | International and Comparative Education | Online and Distance Education

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

# How to merge courses via Skype™†? Lessons from an International Blended Learning Project‡

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This study reports on an international project in which students taking the course *Contemporary Issues in Turkish Politics* in spring 2011 and fall 2011 at two institutions of higher education, ‘Gettysburg College’ in the United States and ‘Izmir University of Economics’ in Turkey, worked together in virtual learning environments to complete various tasks as part of their course work. The project employed a blend of traditional and technology-based teaching methods in order to introduce a technology like Skype in a bi-national learning environment in Turkey. Students collaborated and interacted with their international counterparts in two different virtual contexts. First, classrooms in the two countries were merged via Skype three times to conduct classroom-to-classroom discussion sessions on Turkish politics. Second, students were paired across locations to work on several assignments. In this paper, our goal is to present how Skype is used in a bi-national context as a blended teaching tool in an upper-level college course for instructors pursuing a similar exercise. In addition to outlining the process with a focus on Skype discussions and one-on-one student projects, we provide actual assignments and discussion questions. Students’ views elicited through surveys administered throughout the semester are presented alongside anecdotal evidence to reflect how the project was received.

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## Introduction

Technology-based teaching practices associated with virtual learning tools, such as distance learning, social media, emails, blogging, wikis and social bookmarking, and communication applications, such as Skype, have been praised for performing better in increasing student engagement in comparison to traditional techniques, such as lectures (Taylor 2011). It has also been suggested that traditional education practices do not provide the ideal learning environment for the so-called ‘digital

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†Skype is a communication tool that offers voice and video connections to any computer running the Skype software application.

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natives' (Coates 2007; Hersch and Merrow 2005; Tapscott 2009). However, there are studies that highlight benefits of non-digital learning tools such as longhand note taking in comparison to laptop note taking 'even when laptops are used solely to take notes' (Mueller and Oppenheimer 2016, p. 1159). So, to what extent should we abandon traditional learning tools and methods? As we utilise technology-based teaching practices, how can we make sure we are not throwing out the baby with the bathwater? Blended learning, that is, 'a course that uses a combination of face-to-face and online learning',<sup>1</sup> provides a middle ground to explore. Yet, blended models come in different forms, shapes and sizes. Teaching scholars, developing a blended learning course, may find it challenging to pick and choose from various options available. Also, like any learning environment, blended learning has its own share of potential pitfalls. The goal of this paper is to present how Skype is used as a teaching tool to virtually connect students in Turkey with students in the United States in an upper-level college course for instructors pursuing a similar exercise. In other words, our focus is explaining nuts and bolts of how Skype as a technology-based teaching and learning tool can be utilized in various contexts (classroom-to-classroom discussion sessions and one-on-one team assignments). Our project aimed to introduce a technology like Skype in a bi-national learning environment in Turkey. Students taking the course, *Contemporary Issues in Turkish Politics* in the spring of 2011 and fall of 2011 at two institutions of higher education, 'Gettysburg College' in the United States and 'Izmir University of Economics' in Turkey, worked together in virtual learning environments to complete various tasks as part of their course work. Students collaborated and interacted with their international counterparts in two different virtual contexts. First, classrooms in the two countries were merged via Skype three times to conduct classroom-to-classroom discussion sessions on Turkish politics. Second, students were paired across locations to work on several assignments. Instructors also utilised face-to-face methods such as lectures to enhance learning experience. To the best of knowledge of the authors, this is the first blended learning experience that connects students internationally both as a group and as a team of two throughout the semester with a common set of assignments and reading/visual material.

Surveys given to students in both institutions suggest that students found the virtual learning environment to be rewarding. The overwhelming majority of students in both institutions indicated that the project provided valuable learning opportunities for them, and that classroom-to-classroom discussion sessions and one-on-one team assignments were engaging.

The remainder of this study is organised as follows. The next section reviews the existing literature on cross-cultural teaching and technology-based learning, followed by a description of the implementation of the project. In addition to outlining the process, we provide actual assignments, and discussion questions with notes on lessons learned. We also present a summary of students' views elicited through anonymous surveys administered throughout the semester alongside anecdotal evidence and reflection of instructors. The final section offers concluding remarks.

### **Cross-cultural teaching and learning with technology**

In the last decade, there has been an increased focus on teaching with technology (Andone *et al.* 2007; Bryant 2006; Elia 2006; Palfrey and Gasser 2008; Frydenberg and Andone 2010; Liaw 2006; Liaw and Johnson 2001; Gasson and Augusto 2008;

Frydenberg and Davi 2006; Chan, Frydenberg and Lee 2007; Lukosch 2007; Schmidt 2005; DeGagne and Wolk 2007). In the same vein, many educators have used such technology to develop virtual learning environments for students. Earlier work on specific techniques for improving student learning enhanced our understanding of deploying information technology for educational purposes and contributed to a body of knowledge that enables a better understanding of technology-based learning. The previous literature with a focus on developing an understanding of technology-based approaches to teaching, addressed the distance-learning dimension of teaching with technology, analysed the use of technology in the classroom, examined ways of improving specific skills of students such as the language proficiency through communication technology and explored methods of assessing and improving digital learning environments. Whether it is comparison of 'massive open online courses (MOOCs)'<sup>2</sup> and 'small private online courses (SPOCs)' (Garlock 2015), incorporating blogs and desktop video into a course (Beise 2006) or examining how learning was facilitated in a virtual classroom community using online discussion forums (Zhu 2010), the main threads of this line of research is about revealing highlights from digital teaching and learning experiences.

Blended (or hybrid) learning environments,<sup>3</sup> where traditional and digital teaching techniques join forces, became an intriguing area to explore for teaching scholars. Blended course is 'a course that uses a combination of face-to-face and online learning'.<sup>4</sup> Blended courses could potentially create high-impact learning environment by tailoring traditional course structure with the help of online features. For instance, use of social software, such as blogs and wikis, as teaching tools could expand collaboration possibilities for students (Bryant 2006). These online features could help instructors to achieve learning outcomes that would not be possible otherwise. They could also provide an individualised learning space that could complement traditional learning setting.

A sub-group of technology-based learning studies reported the use of Skype technology as a teaching tool. A pilot study connected home-bound students to their schools using Skype (Samsonov and Harris 2010). Blau and Caspi (2008) compared audio conferencing and traditional face-to-face learning. Macharaschwili and Coggin (2013) reported their 'Skype-buddy model' project that pairs students in traditional classroom with distance learners in order to increase interaction opportunities for online learners. Their work (Macharaschwili and Coggin 2013, p. 168) asks 'How does using Skype in a blended learning environment shape participants' (distance student and proxy student) engagement in the (online and traditional) classroom?' and 'What are the satisfactions, benefits, challenges and surprises for other students and instructors in a traditional classroom when Skype is used to include a distance student in full class and small group work in the classroom?' Kirschner (2015) combined Skype, blogging and class discussions to reduce stereotypes in Tandem language learning environment. Similarly, Abdelmalak (2015) reports how various virtual learning tools such as Twitter, Google Docs, Skype, blogs and wikis were used in an online course. Findings of the study suggest Google Docs, wikis, blogs and Twitter to perform better in providing students 'a sense of learning community while using Skype did not' (Abdelmalak 2015, p. 1).

One of the enriching dimensions of digital learning experiences is creating multicultural and/or international learning environments. Communication across cultures and nations provides benefits such as acquiring much needed diversity of

skills and knowledge. For instance, international learning communities such as iCollab connect learners across the globe without typical course formats (Cronin, Cochrane and Gordon 2016). ‘iCollab students work across cohorts, levels, institutions, countries, academic terms and time zones, using social media and other mobile, web-based tools for multimedia production, collaboration, cooperation and reflective practice as well as exploring the creation and negotiation of digital identities and personal learning networks’ (Cronin *et al.* 2016, p. 3). Smaller scope international collaborations are reported as well. Students studying comparable IT courses in the United States and Australia formed virtual teams and engaged in collaborative content creation via the Internet (Chan *et al.* 2007). Similarly, college students in the United States and Romania worked together for a month to create a multimedia presentation (Frydenberg and Andone 2010). Liaw and Johnson (2001) analysed email correspondence between university EFL students in Taiwan and pre-service bilingual/ESL teachers in the United States to yield insight into the cross-cultural communication process.

This project situates itself within works on blended learning. In attempting to emphasise the development of cross-cultural understanding among students and enhance learning experience, we integrated technology-based tools into a typical college course and connected students and classrooms in the United States and Turkey. Although many studies report the use of Internet-based technologies in the United States, there are not many studies that report how far these virtual learning tools are used in Turkey. However, there are many studies on perceptions of students and professionals in Turkey on technology-based teaching and learning methods. For example, Tekinarslan’s (2008) quantitative analysis of attitudes of students towards Internet-based learning at Sakarya University in Turkey suggests attitude levels change based on demographic identifiers. He adds that his findings are consistent with the larger literature on the subject matter, that is, change in attitudes of students in Turkey is comparable to students in other countries such as China and the United States. Similarly, Akkoyunlu and Soylu (2008, p. 183) studied perceptions of students at Hacettepe University in Turkey on blended learning and found that ‘students’ views on blended learning process, such as ease of use of the web environment, evaluation, face-to-face environment etc., differ according to their learning styles’. Simsek’s (2005) work, on the contrary, focused on the perception of professionals in six countries: the United States, Canada, Turkey, Indonesia, Nigeria and Poland. We couldn’t identify any studies on the use of communication applications such as Skype in Turkey. Although Skype is reported to be used elsewhere, to the best of our knowledge, however, none of the previously reported projects have connected two traditional classrooms internationally both as a group and as a team of two throughout the semester with a common set of assignments and course material. The next section provides an overview of the project.

## Project overview

*Contemporary Issues in Turkish Politics* is an upper-level college course that seeks to familiarise students with the main issues around which politics revolves in Turkey during the post-1980 period. Using scholarly work conducted on different dimensions of politics in Turkey, special attention is paid to the discussion of the issues of the consolidation of democracy, civil society, secularism, the rise of Islam, nationalism,

identity politics, socio-economic changes, political parties and modernity in order to capture the essence of the changing nature of Turkish politics. The course was offered by two institutions of higher education, 'Gettysburg College' in the United States and 'Izmir University of Economics' in Turkey in the spring of 2011 and fall of 2011.<sup>5</sup> Students worked together in virtual learning environments to complete various tasks as part of their course work. Students collaborated with their international counterparts in two different contexts. First, the two classrooms were merged via Skype three times to conduct classroom-to-classroom discussion sessions on Turkish politics. Second, students were paired up across the locations to work on several assignments.<sup>6</sup> Each assignment required them to have a one-on-one discussion session with their international counterparts. The goal was to enhance learning experience by creating international peer-learning opportunities for the students in both large and small groups. Students were also encouraged to locally share what they have learned from their one-on-one sessions with their classmates. We recommended students to use video chat systems, such as Skype, for their one-on-one virtual meetings.

### *Classroom-to-classroom Skype discussion sessions*

The dates of all three classroom-to-classroom discussion sessions were posted on the syllabi. Since class meeting times were coordinated such that 75 min of class time intersected across the two locations, all of the discussion sessions were scheduled during class meeting times. Prior to each session, students received discussion questions accompanied by guidelines. The instructors communicated their expectations of students prior to each session. Students were asked to come to class with a copy of the questions provided to them.<sup>7</sup> Instructors then coordinated and facilitated the discussion sessions and summarised students' inputs and asked follow-up questions after each question. The sessions covered a wide variety of topics, including but not limited to Turkish secularism, the role of the military in Turkish politics, the role of various political parties in Turkish politics, political Islam and the Kurdish question. The following are sample questions from discussion sessions.

- Do you think the secularism formula of Turkey was successful?
- Is it harder for Muslim majority states to separate religion and state?
- Turkey has a history of military interventions followed by transitions to democracy. Do you think the transition to democracy justifies the intervention? Is it acceptable to have military interventions when there is transition to democracy in the end?
- Which of the following statements do you agree with the most? Explain why you agree with a particular statement. (1) In the early years of the Republic of Turkey, it was necessary to restrict the cultural rights of the Kurdish minority to maintain the territorial integrity of the country. However, over time, these restrictions should have been eased. (2) Kurdish nationalism is a security challenge for Turkey. (3) It is possible to maintain territorial integrity of Turkey and advocate Kurdish cultural and political rights.
- This course provided opportunities for cross-cultural exchange. Did you refute any stereotypes about the 'other' culture?

The discussion sessions provided a high-impact learning environment for students. While some decided on their research project topics because of what they had heard

during these sessions, some integrated discussion content to other assignments such as essays. Instructors received various questions from their students on the discussion content during their lectures. Remarks made by international counterparts worked as a point of departure for some of the lectures. Most importantly, students remained engaged and committed to the discussion sessions and there were no shortage of comments from both ends.

### *Team assignments and one-on-one discussion sessions*

In addition to classroom-to-classroom Skype sessions, students were paired up across locations to complete several assignments. Each assignment required students to talk with their counterparts on various topics. While some of the questions aimed to produce specific discussion content, some encouraged students to explore the position of their international counterpart on various topics (See Appendix for assignments). For instance, one assignment concerned a film<sup>8</sup> that depicted honour killings in Turkey. Students were asked to compare gender-based violence data in Turkey with the United States. The goal of this particular assignment was to show students that, although it is a major concern in Turkey, the United States is not immune from gender-based violence. Another assignment asked students to compare the politics and culture of the United States and Turkey on a subject from a list provided to the students. Unlike the previous one, this assignment did not aim to produce a specific discussion framework. Instead, the goal was to help students explore various dimensions of the other culture through the eyes of their counterparts. Therefore, each team had a slightly different discussion session.<sup>9</sup> Once each assignment was turned in, students were asked if there was anything that stood out to them during their one-on-one session. Many were eager to share various parts of their conversation. Post-assignment discussions helped students to understand diversity of responses.

The project aimed to provide students with the opportunity to exchange ideas and opinions with international peers in small and large group discussion settings, using information technology. To achieve this, traditional learning methods were blended with technology-based approaches. While a large percentage of the reading materials overlapped, only the classroom-to-classroom Skype sessions and team assignments were identical for both groups. Each instructor used a different set of traditional teaching and evaluation techniques, such as lectures, exams, and research papers to complement and enhance the technology-based efforts. Instructors made sure students were well-prepared for each discussion taking into consideration gaps of knowledge. For instance, prior to the discussion on secularism in Turkey, 'Gettysburg College' students had a lecture on secularism since they were not as familiar with the subject matter as their Turkish counterparts. In the next section, we will present the survey results.

### **Participants**

In the survey administered at the beginning of spring 2011 semester, out of 25 'Gettysburg College' students, 13 identified as female and 12 as male; 14 students had studied abroad, but only 3 had been to Turkey before. Out of 19 'Izmir University of Economics' students, 11 identified as female and 8 as male; 5 had studied abroad, and 3 of them had visited the United States. According to the survey



administered at the beginning of fall 2011 semester, out of 20 ‘Gettysburg College’ students, 7 identified as female and 13 were male; 8 students had studied abroad, but only 1 had been to Turkey before. Out of 19 ‘Izmir University of Economics’ students, 6 identified as female and 13 were male; 3 had studied abroad, and 2 of them had visited the United States.

**Assessment**

In this section, we present some highlights from the survey and anecdotal data. A set of surveys were given throughout the semester<sup>10</sup> in ‘Gettysburg College’ and ‘Izmir University of Economics’. The survey responses were completely anonymous. Students were informed that their participation was voluntary and their decision to participate and/or their responses would not have an impact on their course grade. Surveys were given in ‘exam’ conditions, that is, students were not supposed to discuss their answers.

In the last survey of spring 2011 course, students were asked three specific questions regarding the virtual learning experience. Tables 1 and 2 display the distribution of students’ responses in both schools.

Although, in general, students in both institutions indicated that they benefited from the experience, ‘Gettysburg College’ students’ responses were more positive. For instance, out of 24 ‘Gettysburg College’ students, 22 ‘strongly’ or ‘somewhat’ agreed with the statement, ‘interaction with teammates in Turkey helped me to learn a lot about Turkish politics and culture’. Among ‘Izmir University of Economics’ respondents only 9 out of 18 ‘strongly’ or ‘somewhat’ agreed with the same statement. Interestingly, although ‘Izmir University of Economics’ students predominantly indicated that the project was worth their time, their responses to the more specific questions were not as enthusiastic as those of ‘Gettysburg College’ students.

In contrast, in the last survey of fall 2011, both groups rated the experience similarly. For example, out of 20 ‘Gettysburg College’ respondents, 17 ‘strongly’ or ‘somewhat’ agreed with the statement, ‘interaction with teammates in Turkey helped me to learn a lot about Turkish politics and culture’. Out of 14 ‘Izmir University of Economics’ students, 13 ‘strongly’ or ‘somewhat’ agreed with the same statement. (See Table 3 and 4 for further details.)

The surveys also included open-ended questions, some of which were repeated in the first and last survey to identify changes in students’ perceptions of the politics and culture of the other country over time.<sup>11</sup> Students were given the option of writing ‘I don’t know’ in the space provided. In the first survey of spring 2011, out of

Table 1. Final survey, ‘Gettysburg College’ spring 2011: views of the virtual learning environment.

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neutral	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Interaction with teammates in Turkey helped me to learn a lot about Turkish politics and culture.	15	7	1	1	0
Classroom-to-classroom Skype sessions were productive and engaging.	11	10	1	2	0
I learned a lot from classroom-to-classroom Skype sessions.	15	4	5	0	0

Table 2. Final survey, Izmir University of Economics spring 2011: views of the virtual learning environment.

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neutral	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Missing
Interaction with teammates in the United States helped me to learn a lot about politics in the United States, American culture and US–Turkey relations.	4	5	4	3	2	0
Classroom-to-classroom Skype sessions were productive and engaging.	7	4	5		2	0
I learned a lot from classroom-to-classroom Skype sessions.	5	6	3	1	2	1

25 ‘Gettysburg College’ students, 6 to 11 students (depending on the question) responded with ‘I don’t know’. In contrast, in the last survey, out of 24 ‘Gettysburg College’ students, only 0 to 2 responded with ‘I don’t know’. In the first survey of fall 2011, out of 20 ‘Gettysburg College’ students, 3 to 7 students (depending on the question) responded with ‘I don’t know’. In contrast, in the last survey, out of 20 ‘Gettysburg College’ students, only 4 responded with ‘I don’t know’ to only one of the seven open-ended questions. This suggests that more ‘Gettysburg College’ students could articulate opinions on Turkey by the end of the semester. What is more, in the final survey many of the ‘Gettysburg College’ students wrote statements that provided insight from their interaction with students in Turkey. For instance, the statement ‘I think people from Turkey are ....’ was completed with responses like the following: ‘exceptional in their moderate perspectives and advance to secularism, particularly compared to their neighbors’; ‘interesting, unique, and that we share more similarities than we think I also think they are very smart and futuristic and hopeful, meaning they

Table 3. Final survey, ‘Gettysburg College’ Fall 2011: views of the virtual learning environment.

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neutral	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Interaction with teammates in Turkey helped me to learn a lot about Turkish politics and culture.	8	9	1	1	1
Classroom-to-classroom Skype sessions were productive and engaging.	11	8	1	0	0
I learned a lot from classroom-to-classroom Skype sessions.	11	8	1	0	0

Table 4. Final survey, ‘Izmir University of Economics’ Fall 2011: views of the virtual learning environment.

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neutral	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Interaction with teammates in the United States helped me to learn a lot about politics in the United States, American culture and US–Turkey relations.	4	9	1	0	0
Classroom-to-classroom Skype sessions were productive and engaging.	7	6	1	0	0
I learned a lot from classroom-to-classroom Skype sessions.	7	6	1	0	0

want the best for their country’; ‘people that we should be learning more about. Indeed as global citizens people from every country should attempt to learn more about other cultures/peoples, dispelling myths and inaccuracies and broadening cultural horizons’; ‘you can’t generalize about people in any country’. This was a shift from the first survey conducted in the beginning of the semester. In the first survey, when the same statement was filled in with an opinion, these tended to be more generic, less informed phrases, such as ‘Muslim’; ‘interesting’; ‘usually good cooks’.

Students were also asked to complete ‘I think Turkish politics is...’ The following are examples of ‘Gettysburg College’ students’ responses from the final survey: ‘a complicated example of a different form of democracy at work in a region where democracy normally fails’; ‘extremely interesting to observe. The interplay between secularists and conservatives will capture my attention for some time’; ‘very interesting! Very unique – Turkey is at a crossroads and I will be interested to keep watching’; ‘definitely intertwined with Islam no matter how much they try to keep it out’; ‘drastically different between urban and rural areas’; ‘much more similar to life in the West than I previously thought’. Again, this is a major change from the first survey conducted at the beginning of the semester where the same statement opening elicited completions like ‘confusing’; ‘likely an interesting subject’; ‘corrupt at times. Religion has influence’. Similar changes were observed across all seven open ended questions.<sup>12</sup>

Turning now to the ‘Izmir University of Economics’ spring 2011 responses, in the first survey, 6 to 9 students (depending on the question) out of 19 wrote ‘I don’t know’. In the last survey, out of 18 students, 3 to 8 students (depending on the question) filled in the blanks with ‘I don’t know’. In the fall of 2011, responses suggest a stronger shift by the end of semester. In the first survey, 3 to 8 students (depending on the question) out of 19 wrote ‘I don’t know’. In the last survey, out of 18 students, 3 to 8 students (depending on the question) filled in the blanks with ‘I don’t know’.

In fall of 2011, right after each classroom-to-classroom Skype discussion session, instructors administered a brief survey to understand students’ take on each session.<sup>13</sup> In each survey, students were asked the following: (1) What were the most intriguing/interesting/eye-opening parts of the Skype discussion today?, (2) (Open-ended question.) I think this discussion changed the way I think about... One of the most important highlights is response rate. Almost all of the students who were present in class that day completed the survey. Students were not required to complete it, and surveys

were administered at the tail end of each class when students were ready to leave. What is more, most responses included rich content. Although we cannot know for sure whether students were eager to provide their input, we could speculate that Skype sessions made an impression on students and that they had something to share regarding their experience. Second aspect that stood out to instructors was parallels across 'Gettysburg College' and 'Izmir University of Economics' students' responses. They made reference to similar topics/point of views. For instance, in the first Skype session, out of 19 'Izmir University of Economics' students, 17 wrote about the discussion on whether Turkey is a European or Middle Eastern country. Out of 20 'Gettysburg College' students, 16 wrote about the discussion on whether Turkey is a European or Middle Eastern country. Although there were many other discussion topics covered that day, discussion on geopolitical identity of Turkey stood out for students across the Atlantic. In the third survey, most mentioned topics were Kurdish problem and cross-cultural component of the course for both groups. Eleven students of 'Gettysburg College' and 7 of 'Izmir University of Economics' made reference to the discussion on the Kurdish question. Second most discussed was how counterparts changed their opinion on Turkish politics over the semester. 6 'Gettysburg College' and 8 'Izmir University of Economics' students wrote about the discussion on 'changing opinions'.

In addition to collecting data through surveys, students shared their opinions and concerns regarding the project in different settings. Informal conversations with students were consistent with survey results. Some 'Izmir University of Economics' students claimed to have improved confidence in relation to their English language abilities. In different settings, students ranked the international peer-learning opportunity as a high-impact learning experience. One student even defined this experience to be 'revolutionary', in the sense that it was different from any other learning environment since they had shared the same course with students living in another continent. Unlike survey data, personal accounts of instructors have limited explanatory power. These are not hard-facts, and it is difficult to reach to conclusions regarding students' overall perception of the course. We do not present these to complement survey findings. However, we would like to unveil aspects of learning climate through anecdotal evidence. It had been a productive learning environment even when there were technical difficulties such as setting up virtual meeting times due to time difference. Throughout the semester, most students had a positive outlook regarding the project. As instructors, we found this experience rewarding and uplifting due to enthusiastic learning climate created and embraced by all participants.

In this project, virtual learning platforms were created to complement rather than replace traditional learning tools. Our experience suggests that hybrid/blended models create a productive and engaging learning environment that enables students to use the various tools provided to them. Anonymous surveys, anecdotal evidence and informal conversations with students support this claim. Students mentioned that the combination of Skype discussions with the traditional components of the course enhanced the learning experience.

### **Bridging the Atlantic: challenges and opportunities of a Bi-National Teaching Project For instructors**

Like any partnership, international partnership to team teach a course requires committed project leaders who are willing to compromise and plan ahead. Ironing out

details of a collaborative project takes time. It also requires rapid exchange of ideas to find solutions to unexpected problems. Prior to the initiation of the project, instructors had many face-to-face and virtual meetings over the course of 15 months in order to coordinate class meeting times, develop the syllabi, create assignments/discussion questions and discuss pedagogical priorities/principles. Maintaining contact prior to the project was vital for the success of the implementation stage. Although the project had been demanding on the time of instructors, it provided valuable learning opportunities for all parties involved. Higher education instructors tend to work on their syllabi and make decisions alone, unless they are team teaching. Working on some aspects of a course with a colleague teaching at another institution in another country opens up new opportunities for pedagogical improvement. In a way, through the use of technology, both instructors and students get the benefit of bi-national team teaching without the financial cost to institutions.

### ***For students***

For students too, an international project like this one brings about challenges and opportunities. The most significant challenge for the students was the 7-h time difference. For classroom-to-classroom sessions, this was not an issue since the course schedules were arranged by the instructors accordingly beforehand. However, some students found it difficult to plan real-time meetings with their international partners due to the time difference. Another challenge was the different academic calendars of the two institutions. ‘Gettysburg College’ started and finished the semester approximately 3 weeks before ‘Izmir University of Economics’. Moreover, breaks and/or holidays did not overlap. Although these differences created logistic difficulties, they also provided learning opportunities for students about the geography and traditions of the other country, and a chance for students to learn to collaborate with someone who is living in another country. Informal conversations with students suggested that students found communication across cultures to be a valuable experience given the global nature of contemporary work environments. They approached each component of the project with the understanding that it should benefit all students. For instance, while students in Turkey were willing to spend time to explain political history of Turkey, students in the United States encouraged their counterparts to express themselves in their second language. Actually, although students in both countries were concerned about the language barrier prior to the project, by the end, this was not a major concern. The ‘Izmir University of Economics’ students’ English language proficiency was more than sufficient to accomplish the tasks given to them.

There were minor issues related with technology. In particular, Internet connections were not always sufficiently reliable. Occasionally, there were dropped calls, and sometimes there were voice and video quality issues. However, these were negligible problems in that we never had to end a classroom-to-classroom session earlier than planned due to a technology-related issue.

Working in an increasingly interconnected world requires cross-cultural knowledge and skills. Independent from the course topic, courses that require students to work across cultures provide the distinct experience and opportunity to develop or advance cross-cultural skills and knowledge. In addition to the obvious benefits of developing a peer-to-peer collaborative environment and being able to have discussions with students from another country on course material, this experience also

provided new ways for students to work together. For instance, some of the 'Gettysburg College' students run their research topic ideas by their international counterparts. Some teams had extensive conversations on Turkish politics that went above and beyond the assignments required. Students were excited to learn from each other and share what they learned from their international teammates with their classmates.

We offered the same course, with minor changes one more time in fall of 2012. In other words, *Contemporary Issues in Turkish Politics* course, with its blended teaching component, was offered three times. We look forward to offering the course together again. Also in fall of 2015, we used similar tools and assignment structure for another upper-level course. As explained above, as teachers, we found this experience to be rewarding and engaging for students. The quality and type of Internet-based tools increased since the first time we offered the course in spring of 2011. These improvements provide a diverse set of virtual learning environments that can be utilised for different assignments. Next time we offer the course, we plan to revise one-on-one assignments in a way that students can produce specific products, such as short documentaries, together. In addition to classroom-to-classroom discussion sessions, we plan to merge classes in other ways. For instance, we plan to develop small group assignments where students with similar interests can work together. We think an application like Slack could provide the digital platform for such assignments. We also would like students to develop and work on a grand project together by using applications such as Google drive. For such a project, students will be asked to come up with an overarching theme, for example, refugee crisis, and identify components of the project, for example, identifying local communities in need. Smaller groups will be charged with specific tasks and by the end of the semester, students will evaluate the project together.

## Conclusion

Currently, there is a variety of educational and communication tools available on the web. These tools provide great opportunities to expand, not only our classrooms, but students' personal learning spaces as well. In an attempt to contribute to the discussion on teaching with technology, this paper has summarised the implementation of an international collaborative blended learning project using such tools, the challenges faced and the students' responses to the course. As instructors, our intention with the project was to help students understand subject matter in an engaging way and expand their inter-cultural competencies and introduce a technology like Skype in a bi-national learning environment in Turkey.

Students in both institutions found the virtual learning environment to be rewarding. The overwhelming majority of students in both institutions suggested that the project provided high-impact learning opportunities for them. They also explicitly indicated that virtual learning environments enhanced their overall learning experience.

Although the technology-based components were welcomed by students in both institutions, it is important to note that instructors did not just rely on technology to teach the course. Face-to-face instruction had been the primary teaching tool of the course that shaped the online component. In fact, anecdotal evidence from this study indicates that students benefit from a blend of digital and traditional learning

environments. This is consistent with previous research that suggested blended learning could potentially bring in the best of two teaching methods together by personalizing learning experience (Friedman 2015). However, it is crucial to take into account learning goals of individual courses and tailoring the right ‘blend’ for students, keeping an open mind to update the ratio as you go along. In this project, communication among instructors, and instructors and students guided the tailoring process. Front-end planning process of this project required instructors to discuss pedagogical priorities, logistic challenges, nature and content of assignments, common course material and learning goals.

Like many educators, we ask ourselves: How do we engage ‘digital natives’ (Prensky 2001) to courses we develop? What makes a course an intriguing, productive and rewarding experience for this generation? We think real learning requires commitment of all parties involved. Our experience suggests that our students observed the work we put in to develop, implement and sustain digital platform of this course. The online component of the course relied on face-to-face conversations of instructors prior to the project. Students valued the project’s goal that is developing bi-national connections. Students responded well by putting in extra hours of work, and focusing on positive aspects of the experience. This created an overall engaging learning climate for students. We hope that our positive experience will be helpful to other educators who are planning to undertake similar projects. As mentioned before, we did not have a control group. This limited the assessment of the project with regard to which course learning outcomes are fulfilled through technology-based learning environment. The next step should be a comparative study to investigate whether the learning outcomes are fulfilled better with or without the technology support. More specifically, it would be enlightening to capture what type of learning outcomes are achieved through communication technologies like Skype and what kinds of supportive material enhanced the learning experience.

## Notes

1. Faculty Focus Special Report. Blended and Flipped: Exploring New Models for Effective Teaching and Learning. July 2014. P. 2.
2. For more on MOOCs, see Laurillard (2016).
3. For more on blended learning, see Garrison and Kanuka (2004); Reasons, Valdares, and Slavkin (2005); Zhao and Breslow (2013); Smith and Brame 2016; Mirriahi, Alonzo and Fox (2015); Draffan and Rainger (2006); Simpson (2010); Scott (2014); Wilson and Randall (2012). For more on shortcomings of hybrid models, see Reasons *et al.* (2005).
4. Faculty Focus Special Report. Blended and Flipped: Exploring New Models for Effective Teaching and Learning. July 2014. P. 2.
5. The course is offered by the Department of Political Science in ‘Gettysburg College’. At ‘Izmir University of Economics’, the Department of Political Science and International Relations offers the course. ‘Gettysburg College’ and ‘Izmir University of Economics’ are both private higher education institutions. In both institutions, the course is offered as an undergraduate elective. Although course materials were not identical, part of reading and visual materials overlapped. We modified some of the assignments in fall of 2011 in line with the feed back we received from students.
6. The focus of the project has not been about enhancing the IT skills of students. Rather, we used their existing skills to expand academic discussion beyond classroom and provide opportunities for international, peer-to-peer collaboration.
7. Discussion sessions incorporated a common set of reading and/or visual material.
8. Zülfü Livaneli’s novel, *Bliss* is adopted into a film. The film, also called *Bliss*, is directed by Abdullah Oğuz.

9. Although students received identical assignments, each instructor graded assignments separately using their own rubric.
10. While five surveys were administered in fall of 2011, two surveys were administered in spring of 2011. After reviewing students' input, we decided to add a post-Skype session survey in fall of 2011 which increased number of surveys given to students.
11. Please note that since the surveys were anonymous, we could not match changes in responses at an individual level from t1 to t2. Here, we only report aggregate changes.
12. It is important to note that there might be various reasons for this particular change. Since we did not have a control group, we cannot suggest this was solely due to the virtual component of the course. In addition, this is not a rigorous content analysis but a simpler qualitative interpretation of the students' responses. More importantly, the goal of this paper is not about revealing which learning tool helps us to achieve what specific objectives, but explaining how we used a particular technology-based teaching tool and how the project was received.
13. Due to a problem, we could not administer the second post-Skype session survey in Turkey.

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## Appendix

### *A sample of team assignments*

*Team assignment: Bliss*

**Directions:** Please answer the following questions based on the film *Bliss*. Your answers should reflect a clear discussion with your teammate. Your answers should also be informative, articulate and coherent.

Prewriting your answers, you need to do the following:

- Watch the film and jot down your ideas.
  - Have a discussion on the film with your teammate.
- (1) Explain one part that you could not possibly relate to in the film. This has to be something that you had a very hard time understanding. Discuss with your teammate. Also, ask your teammate whether there was part s/he could not relate to.
  - (2) Read blogs and film reviews to understand how the film *Bliss* is received in the United States. What are the major themes highlighted? Ask your teammate to help you understand how the film was received in Turkey. Please briefly compare reactions to the film in both countries. Please provide examples (with web links).
  - (3) Have a discussion on gender-based violence in the United States and Turkey with your teammate. Please share statistics from reliable sources. Discuss.

*Team assignment: Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul*

**Directions:** Please answer the following questions based on the film *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul*. Your answers should reflect a clear discussion with your teammate. Your answers should also be informative, articulate and coherent.

Prewriting your answers, you need to do the following:

- Watch the film and jot down your ideas.
  - Have a discussion on the film with your teammate.
- (1) Among the featured artists in the film, who is your teammate's favourite? Who is your favourite? Please summarise your discussion as a team.
  - (2) If you were making a film on 'The Sound of New York/Los Angeles/(or any other city in US)' who would be the featured artists in your film? Please share those names with your teammate. Is s/he familiar with the artists? Please summarise your discussion as a team.
  - (3) The film depicts both the historic and recent expressions of musical creativity. Ask your teammate if s/he listens either or both of them. Also, discuss unique expressions of music in the United States. Talk about for instance bluegrass, jazz, blues and country music. Feel free to share music videos. Please write a brief essay that reflects your discussion.

*Team assignment: research paper*

Goal of this assignment is to give an opportunity to teammates to talk about their papers. Your answers should reflect a clear discussion on potential venues of collaboration.

- (1) As a team, please exchange your ideas about your paper topic. Topic of your paper might eventually change, but as of now, what would you like to write your paper on? Does it intersect with your teammate's topic? Please summarise your discussion on this.
- (2) What are the possibilities of corroboration? Please summarise your discussion.

*Team assignment: aspects of culture*

**Directions:** Pick one of the following topics and discuss with your teammate. Please write a summary of your discussion. Please be articulate, informative and coherent.

- Being a college (university) student in the United States and Turkey. (Please discuss challenges and opportunities)
- Family (expectations, family traditions, mutual responsibilities, how much time do family members spend together, when do they get together, rules of the house, etc.)