

# **The Bouncing Story Project: International Online Radio Drama Collaborations in the Classroom**

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*What do you get when you cross a British new-age hippie with a Canadian ex-porn star snowboarder? The answer is in the Bouncing Story Project, an innovative, international collaboration between radio students in Canada and England that was developed week by week on the Internet. Begun in 2003, two successful, semester-long collaborations have produced not only exciting radio drama but also some insight into the benefits of cross-cultural collaboration in media production classes. This paper outlines the collaboration process, evaluates the educational benefits of the project, and explores possibilities for wider implementation of Internet-based collaborations amongst international broadcasting schools.*

## **Introduction**

One enduring challenge for educators is devising learning and teaching activities that are engaging and fun while challenging students and addressing course aims. The Bouncing Story Project was devised in response to that challenge. Its aims were twofold: one, to allow radio production students the chance to practice their craft while connecting to a wider, international community of student broadcasters and media consumers; and two, to learn by experience whether conducting a successful, international, online collaboration within the framework of a radio production course is possible, and if so, how it is best done.

The project has run twice, and at the end of each twelve-week collaboration students were asked to complete a survey indicating their level of satisfaction with the project. This paper will evaluate the success of the project based on a framework of instructional design principles and on student response, will outline related practical issues, and will explore possibilities for building future iterations of the project.

## **Project Overview**

The Bouncing Story Project resulted in an online, serial radio drama produced by students studying radio production at two universities: one in Toronto, Canada and the other in Bournemouth, England. The students at each university were divided into small production groups comprised of three to five students, each of which was responsible for writing and producing one episode of the drama according to a predetermined schedule. The “bouncing” part of the name comes from the idea that as each group of students produced its scheduled weekly instalment, the onus to produce the next episode “bounced” across the Atlantic Ocean

to a group of students from the other university. In other words, the drama began with one episode produced by a group of students from England, then a group of students from Canada listened to it and wrote and produced the follow-up episode, and so on. Each episode was posted online so that students, and others, could follow along as the drama unfolded. Because the episodes were archived online, anyone could listen to them at any time. Part of the fun with this project stemmed from the fact that there was no pre-existing script to follow: week by week, the students were surprised by what each group wrote and produced. When a group's turn to contribute an episode came, the group had only one week to listen to the previous episode and write and produce the next. In this manner, a serial radio drama unfolded weekly, with many plot twists and turns, as well as some rather creative explanations for the characters' sudden switch from a Canadian accent to a British one (and vice versa) woven into the plot.

By way of example, in the first iteration of the project, the opening episode took place in an airport waiting lounge. A number of diverse characters who were waiting to board a plane were introduced, each with their own quirky character flaws. There was the British, new-age hippie girl who forgot her relaxation crystal at home and seemed to be suffering a great deal of anxiety because of it; the athletic and attractive – but not-too-bright – Canadian snowboarder; the outwardly polite African flight attendant whose inner dialogue was laced with biting sarcasm and harsh judgments, and other fascinating characters. The student producers were careful not to disclose the destination of the flight by obscuring the sound of the public address system in the lounge each time the boarding call was announced. This was a thoughtful way in which the first group left the narrative a little open-ended for the next group to have some flexibility in where they chose to take the story. Ultimately, over the course of the project, the plane ended up crashed on “Washed Up Celebrity Island” where the characters interacted with Britney Spears and Michael Jackson, a murder was solved, and the audience followed a character on her after-death journey to the underworld.

While producing a radio drama – or perhaps to name it more aptly, a radio soap opera – is one of the major outcomes of the project, a second, equally important component is peer feedback. In addition to being scheduled as part of a group to produce an episode for a particular week, each individual student is required to provide written feedback on another group's episode. Students at both universities were made members of a password-protected, course delivery web site where they had access to an online discussion board to which they could post their feedback for all participants to read and respond to.

### **Educational benefits**

Successful classroom activities need to engage students, provide motivation, and be fun, while achieving the desired learning outcomes. The Bouncing Story Project does this by incorporating several beneficial educational strategies such as cooperative learning, active learning, peer feedback, and international cooperation. Many of these strategies conform to

the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education as outlined by Chickering and Gamson,<sup>1</sup> widely accepted as a valid framework for post-secondary instructional design.<sup>2</sup> Of the seven principles, the Bouncing Story Project specifically incorporates the following six. The project:

- Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students;
- Uses active learning techniques;
- Gives prompt feedback;
- Emphasises time on task;
- Communicates high expectations; and
- Respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

These principles and how they relate to the Bouncing Story Project are outlined in greater detail below.

### **Cooperative learning**

Cooperative learning, whereby students work together in small groups on a structured learning task,<sup>3</sup> is widely accepted as an educational strategy that has many advantages for improving learning outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Cooperative learning promotes positive interdependence, whereby students support each other in their learning while working towards a common goal. This is realised in the case of the Bouncing Story Project through production teams of three to five students: a good size to encourage participation from each member, and to allow students to self-select into roles suited to their individual interests and skills such as script writer, performer, technical producer, editor, director, and so on. These differentiated roles within the learning group incorporate two of Chickering and Gamson's seven principles: respecting diverse talents and ways of learning; and developing reciprocity and cooperation among students.<sup>5</sup> By its nature, a production assignment requires group members to take on different roles in order to complete the task, which allows the diverse talents of the students to shine. Although students must take on differentiated roles within the group, each of those roles requires input from the others in order to be successful. The technical producer, for example, cannot begin her job until the performers are ready, who in turn cannot complete their roles unless the scriptwriter has done his part, and so on. This group dynamic promotes positive interdependence among the students. Students working together on this project demonstrate a great deal of cooperation not only in executing their dramatic episode but also in learning to build upon existing work by others. One student indicated that "the exercise really strengthened my ability to make things flow from other people's ideas and building on other people's creative thoughts". Additionally, students must cooperate to complete the assignment within the short time frame allotted – a parameter which addresses two more of

Chickering and Gamson's principles of good practice: emphasising time on task, and communicating high expectations.<sup>6</sup> Cooperative learning provides additional benefits: students who may be somewhat lacking in a particular skill or who lack an abundance of creativity can learn from and be inspired by others in the group, as evidenced by these student comments: "It was good to work in a group in which each member had special skills – I learned audio stuff [production skills] I didn't know", and "Watching my peers edit in the studio taught me various new shortcuts".

### **Active learning**

Active learning, the use of which is one of Chickering and Gamson's principles of good practice in undergraduate education,<sup>7</sup> has been defined as instructional activities in which students do things and think about what they are doing.<sup>8</sup> This is in contrast to more traditional modes of instruction involving one-way transmission of information from lecturer to student. The Bouncing Story Project is undoubtedly an active learning approach, wherein students are learning by doing in two ways: one, by producing radio drama in the studio, and two, by listening critically to the work of others and providing written feedback about it. Research studies have shown that active learning strategies suit a wider range of learning styles, are comparable to traditional lecture-based instruction in terms of the students' mastery of content, and are better than lecture-based instruction in improving students' skills in thinking and writing.<sup>9</sup>

### **Peer feedback**

Many education experts agree that peer assessment can be an effective method for developing critical thinking, communication, and collaborative skills.<sup>10</sup> Rather than relying on the instructor as the final arbiter of the merits of a student work, peer assessment allows students to get involved in the analysis and assessment of each other's work. They must think critically about the work and apply what they know about the subject as they carry out their assessment. For the peer feedback component of the Bouncing Story Project, students were given guidelines by which to critique episodes produced by other groups, and were asked to post their written feedback on an online discussion board for all participants to read (and respond to, if they so wished). This served several purposes. Not only is it an excellent way to open up dialogue between students in the two countries, it also fulfills another of Chickering and Gamson's seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education: providing prompt feedback.<sup>11</sup> Topping contends that feedback from peers tends to be available more swiftly and in greater quantity, and that "while [it] may not be of the high quality expected of a professional staff member, its greater immediacy, frequency, and volume compensate for this".<sup>12</sup> Students get feedback from their overseas peers within one week of posting their episode of the Bouncing Story online, and the recipients of the feedback may ask questions to clarify the feedback and/or witness other students agreeing with or challenging some aspects of the critiques. Students are graded on the quality of the feedback

they give, which encourages them to write a considered and thorough critique that is meaningful to the recipients. Participating students have found the peer feedback to be very useful. One student wrote, “Reading other people’s comments, likes/dislikes, really helped along the way. People’s productions got better and better”. Another student wrote: “It’s always good to get critical feedback from students – there isn’t enough of that in this program”. However, there is the potential for students to be hesitant to find fault with their peers’ work, particularly if they feel they may be responsible for lowering the grade of the student(s) they are critiquing.<sup>13</sup> To avoid having student critics gloss over or ignore areas that need improvement in each other’s productions, it is best that the peer feedback should not be taken into account when assessing the students’ grade for their radio episode. This should allow students to be confident that pointing out shortcomings in a group’s episode will not necessarily result in a poor grade for that group, allowing the class to analyse problems and discuss solutions more freely.

Peer feedback serves a further purpose of keeping students engaged in the project’s process even when they are not immediately engaged in producing an episode. By requiring the students to go online and listen to an episode, the students become involved with the project through different modes of engagement (that is, listening and critiquing in addition to writing and producing). Students are assigned a particular episode to critique, allowing the professor to control the timing of each student’s involvement in the process by spacing out the due dates of their produced episode and their critique, thus keeping students involved in the project over a longer period of time. Most students, however, stay engaged with the process beyond the required involvement set by the professor because they are interested in hearing how the story progresses and reading what other students thought of each new episode.

Peer feedback requires students to listen to and think about each others’ work on a more profound level than if the student was listening for simple enjoyment. This helps students to discover alternate production approaches and to be inspired by the ideas and creativity of others. As one participating student pointed out, “I learned new techniques by listening to the other productions”. The professor can use the student feedback to get a measure of each student’s understanding of the course material: through it a student can demonstrate that he or she has assimilated knowledge about script writing and audio production and can put this knowledge to use by analysing others’ work and giving valid feedback on it. The ability to give useful, valid feedback and the ability to receive it with confidence are of utmost importance, certainly in the broadcasting industry but also as general, lifelong skills. Therefore, the experience students gain in this area through the Bouncing Story Project is helping to produce well-rounded graduates who are ready to face the challenges of their chosen industry.

## Motivation

Educational psychologists have determined myriad factors that can affect students' motivation in the classroom: everything from extrinsic motivators such as grades, rewards and instructor's enthusiasm, to intrinsic factors such as curiosity, desire to learn, feelings of accomplishment, and so on.<sup>14</sup> One thing that is clear about student motivation, however, is that on the whole, "effective learning in the classroom depends on the teacher's ability ... to maintain the interest that brought students to the course in the first place".<sup>15</sup> Incorporating an activity such as the Bouncing Story Project is one way the teacher can maintain the students' interest. The project seems to inspire a high degree of motivation among students to participate and to do good work in a number of ways. Firstly, the international collaboration component is a novelty for the students; they may never have worked with students from another country on a project before, a prospect that generates a lot of excitement – and hence intrinsic motivation – amongst the students. This cross-cultural interaction allows students to validate their own learning, particularly when they discover that their overseas peers are following a similar learning path. "It gave us the opportunity to see what other students in similar programs were doing", as one student pointed out.

Secondly, students are extrinsically motivated to do their best work because they know that their work will be heard not only by their professor and classmates but also by others; because the work is posted on the Internet for listening, there is the possibility that anyone could surf by and listen. But the main motivator is the *guaranteed* audience of the overseas students who will not only be listening but will also be critiquing the work. Knowing that there will be a critical audience listening to their work communicates high expectations, one of the principles of good practice as identified by Chickering and Gamson.<sup>16</sup> And finally, a little friendly, overseas competition seems to be a great motivator. There tends to be a strong desire amongst students from both participating universities to prove that their work is just as good as or better than the work of the students from the other university, which motivates them to self-impose very high standards and create the best possible production – another way in which the project communicates high expectations.

## Challenges

Running a collaborative, online, and international project such as this presents many challenges for the instructors. The instructors should be prepared to spend a good deal of time well in advance of the commencement of the project carefully planning, organising, and scheduling. Outlined below are some of the main factors that should be taken into account during planning and implementation.

*How many students will participate from each partner institution?* This has implications for group size as well as how often a new episode should be expected. For example, there were twice as many students from Canada involved than there were from England, so the schedule required two consecutive episodes from Canada, then one from

England, then two more from Canada and so on. If there are too many students, either group sizes will increase to beyond a workable number, or there will not be enough weeks in a semester to allow each group to participate. With larger classes, professors may want to consider having the students work on two separate but simultaneous dramas to accommodate the number of students.

*At what academic level are the students?* In this particular case, first year undergraduate students in Canada, all of whom had completed a previous undergraduate degree, were partnered with Master's level students in England. There did not appear to be any major discrepancy in their relative competency levels, which was likely a factor in the successful outcome of the project. Students should feel that there is something they can learn from the other group, and any perception on the part of one class of a gap in ability or competency between the partnered classes may result in that class feeling like there is not much challenge in it for them.

*What level of commitment are the professors/organisers from each institution prepared to make?* Because this project runs on very tight deadlines, and because it can easily derail if a student group does not complete their episode as scheduled, professors must be prepared not only to plan and schedule the project in advance, but also ensure that students are meeting all deadlines. Part of this commitment must include assessing each episode and ensuring that it forms part of the students' final grade for the course. During the two iterations of the Bouncing Story Project, the Canadian students received a grade that counted towards their final grade, while the British students received no marks for their work on the project. Interestingly, the first time the project ran in 2003, this discrepancy did not seem to cause any problem at all, whereas during the second iteration of the project in 2004, the participation and commitment of the British students was significantly lower. This caused the level of satisfaction amongst the Canadian students about the project to drop off as well, as evidenced from the results of the survey they filled out: "We needed more accountability from the overseas participants", one student wrote.

The drop-off in participation from the second group of British students can likely be explained because the British students from the first project had more of a stake in achieving success with the project, as each of them was directly involved in devising the project. (I flew to England to meet with the entire class personally and it was during this meeting that we brainstormed the idea for the project.) The second group of British students did not have any role in the conception of the project, and so it is likely they did not feel as personally committed to it – especially in the absence of any final grade incentive. The lesson learned here is that the students must have incentive to participate, whether through involvement in the conception and shaping of the project or, in a more concrete way, through allocated marks. This finding is supported by Bullen, who concludes that "it helps if students are involved directly in setting the agenda for the collaborative activity".<sup>17</sup>

*Is the project compatible with the course content and sequence?* One approach is to partner with a course or class that is studying comparable material at approximately the same time. Another approach is to partner classes that are studying related, but not the same, material. For example, pairing a radio production class whose focus is mainly on technical production with a dramatic writing class (so long as they have the requisite production skills) may make for synergistic learning opportunities. Classes that are too disparate in their focus may make the collaboration difficult.

*What are the schedules and calendar cycles of the partner institutions?* The logistics of working out a schedule across academic calendar years that vary from country to country, as well as accommodating various study breaks and national holidays, can become quite tricky.

*What are the technical requirements?* This is a very important factor that can thwart the project if not given due consideration and preparation. The project relies on students being able to access an online audio stream in a timely manner. Planning must encompass issues such as:

- Web server space and audio streaming server space;
- Creating a central web page from which students can access the audio stream for each episode;
- Uploading weekly episodes to the server and creating links to them in a timely fashion. Any delay could put the next group at a disadvantage as they will have less time to listen to the previous episode and respond to it;
- Which type of streaming technology to use and whether all students have access to it (for example, we used Real Media, but issues arose concerning required upgrades to the Real Player, Mac versus PC issues, et cetera);
- Sound quality – audio streaming does not sound great on slow Internet connections, which makes it a challenge for students to critique the technical quality of the audio production;
- Institutional firewalls or other restrictions which may prevent students from being able to access the online audio stream;
- Technical support for students in case they encounter problems accessing the website and/or audio stream – who will provide this support, and when will the support be available?

Managing the technical implementation of the project can be time consuming, and generally it would be preferable to have technical support looked after by someone other than the professor, who presumably will be busy enough planning the schedule, ensuring the

project is meeting course objectives, and grading episodes and critiques. Having implemented a similar online, international, collaborative project, Diochon and Cameron share the view that appropriate technical support would ensure that “the use of technology does not overshadow the main learning objectives”<sup>18</sup> for both students and professors.

By careful design, the project avoided one big challenge and potential pitfall: students were not required to collaborate directly with students from the partner country in order to complete their assigned work. Although a collaboration did occur (in the form of building an episodic radio drama between the two countries), and certainly a cross-national interchange took place, students nonetheless were not required to meet with their international counterparts in order to plan and produce their assignment – this planning was always done amongst students who were in the same physical location and were able to meet and communicate face to face. In this way, some of the complications inherent in group collaboration using asynchronous, virtual communication were avoided, such as the time lag that occurs as collaborators wait for responses to emails or try to organise a synchronous virtual meeting while working around different time zones and individual schedules.

Overall, the project required all participants to be prepared for the unexpected – not only because no one knew where the drama would turn with each new episode, but also because some last minute changes were inevitable: a missed episode, a change in schedule to accommodate an unforeseen event, a technical problem, and so on. The ability to cope with uncertainty and change is an attribute that is increasingly required of graduates if they are to be successful in their chosen industry. This project builds in a level of uncertainty as part of the challenge.

### **Future possibilities**

There is the potential for future projects to expand beyond the current parameters of the Bouncing Story Project. For example, other forms of media could comprise the central production aspect, such as documentary features, radio programs, current events programs, and so on. There is the potential for collaborating with more than one partner country or institution to create a three-way collaboration, or to carry out multiple projects with several different partners at the same time. It is possible that future partners could be from sectors other than universities, such as community radio groups or public radio stations, which could serve to build connections between students and practitioners in the industry.

In future projects, the social climate of the online interaction could be given greater consideration. Researchers have identified the importance of creating social presence amongst students before they engage in cross-national online learning.<sup>19</sup> Gunawardena and Zittle have correlated high levels of social presence with high levels of satisfaction among students about their learning.<sup>20</sup> Although students contributed short biographies of themselves to be included on the website by way of getting to know each other, including more intensive opportunities for students to socialise with each other would likely increase

their level of motivation and engagement with the project. Introductory discussions conducted asynchronously online, synchronous chats, or video conferencing might add the right element of social interaction to make the project a truly international experience.

A recent new method of electronic media publishing – podcasting – could prove to be a better way to disseminate the weekly episodes. In the past, episodes were made available through online archives – a method by which the user must remember to visit the website each week and actively “pull” the episode from the web. Podcasting, whereby the user receives recurring audio content through a subscription, automatically “pushes” the episodes to the user. Anyone subscribing to the Bouncing Story Project Podcast would find each week’s episode on his or her computer or portable MP3 player as soon as it was published, without the need to actively seek it out. Incorporating podcasting into the project would not only be a more efficient way to distribute episodes to interested listeners, but also a good way to expose students to the ins and outs of this new mode of electronic publishing.

## Conclusions

Incorporating six of Chickering and Gamson’s Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education, the Bouncing Story Project affords many pedagogical benefits that make navigating the logistical and technical challenges posed by engaging in an international, online collaboration worthwhile. Levels of student satisfaction at the end of the project were high, with 92 percent (forty-four out of forty-eight respondents) indicating that they thought the activity was worthwhile. The last word is reserved for the students, who wrote the kind of feedback that every professor hopes to hear:

“I loved this assignment because it was creative and fun and a challenge”.

“Simply, the assignment was fantastic”.

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur W. Chickering and Zelda F. Gamson, “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education”, *AAHE Bulletin* 39 no. 7 (1987), 3-7.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Graham, Kursat Cagiltay, Byung-Ro Lim, Joni Craner and Thomas M. Duffy, “Seven Principles of Effective Teaching: a Practical Lens for Evaluating Online Courses”, *The Technology Source* (March/April 2001), <http://sln.suny.edu/sln/public/original.nsf/0/b495223246cabd6b85256a090058ab98?OpenDocument> (accessed 12 August 2005).

<sup>3</sup> James Cooper, Susan Prescott, Lenora Cook, Lyle Smith, Randall Mueck, and Joseph Cuseo, *Cooperative Learning and College Instruction: Effective Use of Student Learning Teams* (Long Beach, CA: California State University Foundation, 1990).

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[http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content\\_storage\\_01/0000000b/80/22/19/e0.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content_storage_01/0000000b/80/22/19/e0.pdf) (accessed 12 August 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid; Robert E. Slavin, "Cooperative Learning", *Review of Education Research* 50, no. 2 (1980), 315-42.

<sup>5</sup> Chickering and Gamson, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Charles C. Bonwell and James A. Eison, "Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom", *ERIC Digest* (1991), <http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/bib/91-9dig.htm> (accessed 16 June 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Linda B. Nilson, "Improving Student Peer Feedback", *College Teaching* 51, no. 1 (2003), 34-8.

<sup>11</sup> Chickering and Gamson, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Keith Topping, "Peer Assessment Between Students in Colleges and Universities", *Review of Educational Research* 68, no. 3 (1998), 255.

<sup>13</sup> Nilson, 35.

<sup>14</sup> Linda S. Lumsden, "Student Motivation to Learn", *ERIC Digest* no. 92 (1994), <http://www.ericdigests.org/1995-1/learn.htm> (accessed August 11, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> S. C. Ericksen, "The Lecture", *Memo to the Faculty* no. 60 (Ann Arbor: Center for Research on Teaching and Learning, University of Michigan, 1978), 3, quoted in Barbara Gross Davis, *Tools for Teaching* (San Francisco: Josey Bass Publishers, 1993), [chapter online] <http://teaching.berkeley.edu/bgd/motivate.html> (accessed 12 August 2005), Introduction.

<sup>16</sup> Chickering and Gamson, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Bullen, "Collaborating in the Virtual Learning Environment: Problems, Practicalities and Potentials", (n.d.), <http://www2.cstudies.ubc.ca/~bullen/costa.html> (accessed 11 August 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Monica C. Diochon and Ann Frances Cameron, "Technology-based Interactive Learning: Designing an International Student Research Project", *Active Learning in Higher Education* 2, no. 2 (2001), 124.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Bullen, "Participation and Critical Thinking in Online University Distance Education", *Journal of Distance Education* 13, no. 2 (1998), 1-32; Simone Volet and Marold Wosnitza, "Social Affordances and Students' Engagement in Cross-national Online Learning", *Journal of Research in International Education* 3, no. 1 (2004), 5-29.

<sup>20</sup> C. N. Gunawardena and F. J. Zittle, "Social Presence as a Predictor of Satisfaction Within a Computer-mediated Conferencing Environment", *American Journal of Distance Education* 11, no. 3 (1997), cited in Simone Volet and Marold Wosnitza, "Social Affordances and Students' Engagement in Cross-national Online Learning", *Journal of Research in International Education* 3, no. 1 (2004), 7.