



THE IRISH 'BORDERLANDS' – A BLENDED CASE STUDY IN MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING.

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Summary

The Irish conflict is being resolved. Lessons learned are being 'exported' to other trouble spots. Below the headline images of the leaders of the ethnic communities signing agreements many other initiatives are contributing to better mutual understanding. One of these is the 'Borderlands' degree offered across the Irish Border by Dundalk Institute of Technology and the University of Ulster.

'Borderlands' is an innovative, blended learning experience which seeks to draw 'second chance' learners into an academic study of all aspects of borderlands. It seeks to engage people from Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, from the unionist tradition and the nationalist tradition.

It is a content rich blended, degree course with all resources and exercises available online. Within each ten-week semester students meet face-to-face and online.

This paper, an intrinsic case study, examines both the successes of 'Borderlands' and some issues.

The issues fall into two categories:

(1) The difficulties encountered introducing both nervous staff and students to online learning;

(2) The difficulties encountered in trying to engage two ethnic groups in joint study.

The writer believes 'Borderlands' offers an online template for others seeking to understand and address the complexity of their borderlands.

Introduction

The Irish conflict is only occasionally in the world news. Images that now emerge are usually of political enemies attempting to make power sharing work and bringing their message of hope to other areas of conflict, like Iraq. There is evidence that, since the 1994 ceasefire, the two main communities are more at peace with each other. For example, Shuttleworth and Loyd's (2006, p12) analysis of census figures concluded, "that in 2001 we were living in a more residentially-segregated society than in 1971 but not markedly more segregated than in 1991." The number of sectarian attacks is down. Hanzard (2007) recorded a 17% fall in recorded sectarian crime between 2006 and 2007.

In reflecting on the changing situation Fitzduff (2002, p.170) recognized two major strands of conflict resolution in Ireland:

- A structural approach looking at the distribution of resources and power, at access to work, at rights issues and the constitution;

- A psycho-cultural approach that seeks to eliminate, ‘the ignorance and fears that fuel the defensiveness, resentment, and aggression of communities ...”

The former approach, when there is a political will, is reflected in legislation and is apparent in politicians and others working the new institutions. The latter approach is about creating opportunities to change perceptions about the story and culture of the other side; to move communities away from a zero-sum conflict “that permits no sense of mutual interest and common good.” (Brewer 2003, p.12)

However although the violent conflict may be almost resolved reconciliation, as Whittaker (1999, p. viii) pointed out, “takes longer than bringing the conflict to an end”.

The Borderlands Studies Programme can be viewed as part of the process of reconciliation. It is funded through Measure 5.4 of the European Union (EU) Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. The EU “places a responsibility on its members to respect cultural diversity at regional and national levels and to facilitate and enhance cultures in its member states.” (Nic Craith, 2002) Thus ‘Borderlands’ is part of the psycho-cultural approach.

Taught and administered by Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) and supported by Ulster University (UU) the ‘Borderlands’ degree straddles both sides of the Irish border and is therefore available to both Irish and British students, to both nationalist and unionist students. It caters mainly for second chance learners. Using Moodle, it offers content based, blended learning. The content and associated exercises are all online. They cover literature, cinema, politics, archaeology, history and geography.

‘Borderlands’ is a blended learning approach with three face-to-face lectures at DkIT (in the Irish Republic) punctuating weekly online sessions (over ten weeks) for each module. These online sessions consist of two hours of synchronous chat, with the opportunity for follow-up discussion in an asynchronous community. Administration and assessment are done online.

The writer has been intrinsically involved (Sake, 1995) with the development of this ‘Borderlands’ case study. The evidence presented includes the writer’s action research; an email survey; evaluation reports (Walsh 2003 and Ruddy 2008); a (archived) 2007 synchronous, online students’ evaluation and 2008 semi- structured interviews with the lead lecturer, the project leader and four students.

The case study identified two main issues.

Issue 1 - The difficulties encountered introducing both nervous staff and students to online learning.

Action Research

An early evaluation of ‘Borderlands’ found a high degree of satisfaction among the students. They liked the course, its content and the face-to-face sessions. (Walsh, 2003) However with regard to e-learning “ the recent evaluation carried out suggests that students are having more difficulty with this mode of learning than anticipated.” (Mooreland, 2005) The lecturers, new to online work, and untrained, found the synchronous chats a nightmare. The opportunity for asynchronous dialogue was rarely used. One student in an email to Kevin Howard, the lead lecturer, wrote:

“I found the online tutorials to be little more than a waste of time... After every session I was left with a feeling of frustration. I learned nothing...When the tutor asked for opinions the whole thing got out of hand and descended into chaos. By the time the lecturer tried to answer the question the proceedings had moved on considerably.”

(As reported to the writer in an interview with the lead lecturer.)

The writer approached his first online experience with ‘Borderlands’ in September 2003 as a piece of action research (McNiff, et al., 1996). The first night teaching the ‘Global Geography and Borderland’ module was as chaotic as described above. Two hours of synchronous chat ended with a frustrated tutor and confused students.

I reflected and decided that my action would be to use the synchronous chat tool for a virtual field trip. Using photographs and hyperlinks I prepared a series of 'visits' to geographical features. I also prepared short explanations to copy and paste. I felt this virtual field trip went well and collected feedback, via email, from 5 students. They liked the experience. They liked the structure.

I had learned that the lesson needed to be pre-planned, it needed to have a structure and needed to play to the strengths of the technology in terms of producing hyperlinked resources – photographs, copy, paste, and 'break out' visits to other sites.

The next action was to use these lessons learned to present an online lecture. This included making it clear to the participants that it **was** a lecture. Questions were to be kept to the minimum. Afterwards I sought emailed comments from the same 5 students. They enjoyed the lecture. "I could sip my coffee and not have to take notes knowing the lecture would be archived." Student 1. 'It was great to have a structure. To see the point of the evening.'" Student 2.

Aware of the limitations of a lecture in promoting peer learning, my next action was to end the online lecture with discussion points for follow up work in the asynchronous community. I promised to respond to questions within two days. The response was disappointing. The questions from students were few and there was no follow up dialogue. However the development of the online lecture had good consequences and the results of the action research were shared with the other tutors.

Developments

Improvements were identified in the 2007 synchronous evaluation.

"In the beginning we had great difficulty getting accustomed to online tutorials. Lecturers were not accustomed to them any more than we were. However that has all changed...tutors know what they are about and have prepared the lecture. That way they are better able to control the discussion and keep us all on the point." (Participant 1 – online evaluation)

Whilst acknowledging past problems all interviewees in the 2007 synchronous, online evaluation recorded a dramatic shift in attitude to the written synchronous sessions but some still preferred face-to-face lectures. "Online learning for me will never take the place of the classroom (I'm from the old school!!!)" (Participant 2 – online evaluation)

However all four students interviewed, by the writer in 2008, preferred the weekly synchronous 'written chat' to the face-to-face sessions at DkIT.

"Even if I miss something, or miss a whole (online) class the record is there for me." (Student A)

"At first I hated the online sessions. I thought I would never manage distance learning but now I feel quite proud of myself. I am an online learner" (Student B)

"I can sit at home, with my coffee, and learn. I can either say nothing or ask a question. We now understand how it works." (Student C)

"At my age it's great. I wish I'd done something like this years ago. I like the online lectures. They really annoyed me when I started" (Student D)

Margaret Clarke, the Project Administrator, when interviewed in 2008, pointed out that use of the asynchronous forums had also improved.

"Students, particularly from the current cohort, regularly used the forums to discuss and make further comments on the reading material and lectures between classes." (Interview with Margaret Clarke)

The lead lecturer, Kevin Howard, explained that, “ the changes that improved the students’ online experience and their assessment of it were, in hindsight, simple alterations to the structure of the online synchronous sessions.” (Interview with Kevin Howard)

These changes, initiated through action research and cascaded were:

- Lecturers prepared their work and instead of typing copied and pasted;
- Ground rules on interruptions and asking questions were established;
- Online resources and other sites were incorporated into the sessions. Students were asked to visit these resources and to return with succinct comments;
- Pictures and other resources were shared either by ‘pasting’ by the lecturer or by accessing a URL.

Whilst the synchronous online sessions became a popular aspect of the degree the asynchronous dialogue was used only occasionally and “did not develop as an important element in the students’ learning experience.” (Interview with Kevin Howard) This perception is at variance with that of the Project Administrator but is closer to the view of the writer.

It is significant that the 2008 evaluation, in praising Moodle, commented, “Staff have developed an effective working relationship with tutors both from within and outside the institute who are now highly skilled in delivering online learning courses effectively to graduate level.” (Ruddy, 2008) It is probably equally significant that in the time ‘Borderlands’ has been running online, social communication has developed rapidly - mobile technology, facebook, and utube etc were all, in a short period of time, used by millions. The general population was accepting and using the new technologies. What was new and daunting five years ago is now commonplace. Between the two evaluations the Moodle technology ceased to be an issue for students but online dialogue, promoting peer learning, remains underdeveloped.

Issue Two - The difficulties encountered in trying to engage two ethnic groups in joint study.

The intended international, cross border, cross community success of ‘Borderlands’ was limited. Kevin Howard commented “Although there were students from both sides of the international border they tended to be people from the Irish Nationalist/Catholic community which meant that one of the programme’s key aims wasn’t fully achieved.”

However Howard thought that the participation and contributions of a small number of southern Protestants (from the Irish Republic) “challenged easy assumptions about identity and belonging.” (Interview with Kevin Howard)

The students, in the online evaluation, also regretted that few Protestants from Northern Ireland participated.

“Unfortunately, there were few people from the Northern Protestant community in the class which I felt was disappointing, as I’m sure they would have added to the discussions and enhanced the course.” (Participant 4 – online evaluation)

“I regret that we had not more participants from the Unionist community as I think we could have learned much from them.” Participant 3 – online evaluation)

However all participants in the online evaluation and in the interviews felt that the content of the course helped their understanding of the Irish conflict and challenged their perceptions.

“My views on the conflict in N. Ireland have changed completely since coming on the course. We traced the history, from the earliest times, that led up to the establishment of the Northern state. I would like to believe that I am now a much more broadminded person as regards the Unionist people.” (Participant 3 – online evaluation)

“My personal understanding of the Northern Protestant community is much greater now after reading the content of the course so far.” (Participant 2 - online evaluation)

“I suppose the course has pretty much helped most people in their understanding of peace and reconciliation by allowing all of us to soak up the big picture rather than be constrained to our own blinkered view.” (Participant 1 –online evaluation)

The interviews with four students reinforced how the knowledge gained from studying the course content, “broadened our minds ... made us realise that so many of the stories we heard as children were myths.” (Student D - interview)

Ironically, the Celtic Tiger (the growth in the Irish economy) gave the course an unintended international diversity, as three Nigerian immigrant workers in the Irish Republic were also ‘Borderlands’ students. Although the Nigerians were not part of this study many referred to their, ‘Nigerian friends’ and one community worker course participant explained, in the synchronous, online evaluation, how the course helped her understanding of the problems immigrants faced in Ireland. In the interviews all four participants welcomed the knowledge they gained about Nigeria’s ethnic divisions.

The small number of students from the unionist community and the fact that none actually finished the course (Project Leader) illustrates the strength of the ethnic divide and the difficulty of addressing the legacy of the conflict, peace building and promoting reconciliation as laid out under Measure 5.4 of the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, that funded Borderlands.

Conclusion

Given the evidence presented above it can be said that technology ceased to be an issue in the development of ‘Borderlands’, although peer dialogue remains a challenge.

‘Borderlands’ is popular with its participants but they were predominantly from one ethnic group and this remains an issue, but perhaps not a surprising issue. Southern (2007, p. 18) in his study of protestant alienation referred to a unionist fear of a ‘Trojan Horse’ element and an “intense fear of a republican master plan.” Hughes and Donnelly (2003, p.161) in studying the increasing divergence of Catholic and Protestant attitudes suggested, “A growing number of unionists began to feel isolated or to accept suggestions that they should do so.” This view is supported by the finding of a ‘Social Audit of the Protestant Community in the Greater Newry and Mourne Area’. It records a sense of isolation, of marginalisation and seeking educational opportunities in Protestant districts away from the border. (Altnaveigh House, p74) 81% Of those surveyed did not use the local Further Education College in Newry as it was perceived to be in nationalist territory. (Ibid, p.48) Thus they are unlikely to cross the border for study.

The degree, although supported at management level by the University of Ulster, was centred on DkIT in the Irish Republic. This is where the administration was done, and where the face-to-face lectures were held. For unionists DkIT is in a foreign, unfriendly country. The online element and the project’s noble aims could not neuter this perception.

The evidence of the changing attitudes of nationalist participants is encouraging but one suspects that a predisposition to join the course meant a readiness to participate fully with an open mind. The self-selecting nature of the course meant that it was pushing at an open door. Likewise the willingness to persevere with the online element, even though it was initially challenging and unpopular, suggests a parallel disposition to accept technological change.

Based on the collected evidence, as an innovative blended learning degree ‘Borderlands’ is a success. As a project capable of changing ethnic attitudes and promoting greater understanding ‘Borderlands’ is a success. As a project designed to engage two communities

in communal study, on either side of an international border, 'Borderlands' is less successful.

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