Facebook as a Discussion Platform

Dr. Carolyn M. Shaw
Wichita State University

1845 Fairmount St.
Wichita KS 67260-0017

Carolyn.shaw@wichita.edu

This paper prepared for presentation at the FLACSO Conference,
Buenos Aires Argentina, July 2014

Please do not cite without permission.
Introduction

As students in many different countries study international relations, they learn a lot about the concepts of globalization, interdependence, and other terms that imply how connected people are around the world. Their own world views may shift as they become more informed about historical and current events in far away places. Their perspectives may change if they are exposed to global news sources in the course of their studies. In some sense, however, this understanding of the world remains abstract and impersonal until students are able to make real connections with people in different places. For a small number of students, this might mean engaging in a study abroad opportunity or a travel seminar, but for many their world remains fairly circumscribed with few connections to actual people in other countries. These realities inspired the design of a project to create an opportunity for students to connect with their peers in classrooms around the world without the significant cost of traveling abroad.

This paper presents the results of this cross-national classroom project, beginning with discussion of the project goals and design. I begin with a discussion of the first iteration of the project in Fall of 2012, focusing on the initial outcomes with specific examples from the different interacting groups. I then present the project modifications for the Spring and Fall 2013 semesters. The paper concludes with final reflections and lessons learned on several levels about the process and implementation of the project.

Project Goals and Design

Given the goal of connecting students from different countries, one of the first details to work out was the substance and purpose of their interactions. This project was directly inspired by the work of Natalya Riegg and Levon Sahakian that was presented at

---

1 Special thanks to Jeffrey Lantis of the College of Wooster for his assistance with this project, especially writing the survey instrument, and for serving as a sounding board for development ideas.
the ISA Midwest conference in November 2011. Based on their success in using images and student narratives to connect students in Kansas and Moscow, I decided to make my project media based as well. Each participating class was partnered with one or more classes at different institutions. Students from each class were assigned to post images and brief descriptions online of what certain core concepts in international relations meant to them. For example: "Freedom" might inspire a picture of the American flag, or an open jail cell, or someone dancing in a park, etc. Students then explained why they selected the image that they did.

The purpose of the exercise was to give students in different institutions and countries a chance to explore a variety of perspectives on some of the main concepts in international relations. The exercise was designed to address both theoretical and practical questions of framing our understandings of global politics. Are there certain concepts in the study of IR that are universal, understood to have a common meaning for everyone? Do we all have the same idea of what "peace" and "war" mean? Does inequality mean the same thing to you that it does to me? Do you think students in other countries have similar understandings of terms such as "development" or "sovereignty"? And what is the significance of these similarities or differences? Students would presumably gain personal insights by reflecting on their own understandings of key terms and by sharing these with others. Students would also gain an appreciation of the variety of meanings behind concepts that may be personally or culturally based. By recognizing that others around the world attribute different (or similar) meanings to key concepts, students would broaden their own understandings and gain a greater awareness of the diversity in the study of international relations.

Following the experiment of Dr. Riegg and Dr. Sahakian, I decided to use Facebook as the web based platform for interaction. Most students have Facebook accounts and are comfortable navigating in that space. For those who aren’t, the interface is still relatively simple to use. Any other university-based system such as Blackboard or Moodle requires

---

2 The details of Project WE can be found in "Intersectionality and Popular Empowerment in International Relations" in Intersectionality and Student-Centered Learning: Teaching Methodologies in A Transformative, Multicultural Classroom Environment, by North Georgia University Press (forthcoming).
students to have an account (or a guest account) at that institution, which would pose a significant hurdle to getting students to an online space where they could easily interact. I created a “secret group” on Facebook. The status of this group meant that the postings could only be seen by members of the group while they were in that group space. No postings were visible on timelines, user profiles, etc. This maintained the confidentiality of the postings by group members. I served as the Administrator of the group, adding students to the group, providing technical support, and monitoring the appropriateness of the postings. This meant that all group members had to “friend” me on Facebook so that I could add them to the group. They were told that they could “unfriend” me as soon as they were added, so that they didn’t need to worry about adding an unknown faculty member to their group of Facebook friends.

Implementation Fall 2012

The implementation phase began with a search for international partners (a number of American colleagues had already expressed interest in the project). After sending out a project proposal to every colleague I knew outside the US (and inviting them to share with their own colleagues), I eventually had four instructors who were available to participate during the Fall 2012 semester. Group One included students from Western Oregon University, Aoyama Gakuin (Japan) and part of a large class from London Metropolitan University for a total of 55 students. These schools all had later start dates in the fall semester, so it worked well to schedule them together. Group Two had earlier start dates and was composed of students from Wichita State University, College of Wooster, and the other half of London Metropolitan University with a total of 60 students. The students at London Met had to catch up with the postings by the other two schools once their semester got underway.

The instructors from each group chose six topics on which they wanted students to make postings. Group One chose: power, freedom, peace, globalization, democracy and peacebuilding. Group Two chose: security, human rights, conflict, development, diplomacy and globalization. Due dates for the postings were approximately every other week. The classes being taught varied from institution to institution and in the approach the instructor used to incorporate the project into the class. At Aoyama Gakuin, the instructor
encouraged students in her English Reading IV and Sociolinguistics classes to participate on a volunteer basis. There was no graded component and the instructor occasionally discussed with students the content of the postings. At Wichita State, College of Wooster, and Western Oregon, the project was assigned to international relations courses (Global Challenges, Intro to International Relations, and International Relations respectively). The graded weight for the assignment was between 5% and 10% of the total grade, or consisted of providing extra credit points for each posting. All of the instructors briefly discussed each posting in class after each assignment deadline. At London Metropolitan, the project was incorporated into a Peace and Conflict Studies class but with no graded component attached. No formal class time was devoted to discussion of the postings.

At the end of the semester, students in each institution were given a survey. Eight questions were on a four point rating scale. These questions sought to determine whether students felt they had gained a better understanding of the topics that were selected, as well as if they gained a better appreciation of different cultural perspectives, and an increased interest in interacting with others who are different from themselves. The survey also had four open ended questions asking them about lessons learned, the value of the project, and what changes they might make to it. (See Appendix for the full survey).

**Outcomes for Fall 2012**

The project had some unexpected glitches and did not go as smoothly as planned, but there were still some interesting exchanges among the students, and lessons learned from the process. Group One was a more cross-national group than Group Two. There were about the same number of postings made by Japanese and US students. Group Two had a lower participation rate with its international partners in Britain, so the majority of the postings were not as cross-national as the project envisioned. It is interesting to note, however that there were 5 international students in the Wooster group, and 3 international students in the Wichita State group, so even though the participants were from US schools, there were still cross national views being shared among them.

The rate of survey completion varied considerably between schools, with two US schools having over 90% completion, the Japanese partner having only 2 total responses, and no surveys completed by students at the British school. Thus any quantitative results
are at bit skewed and ambiguous. For the most part, students made their postings by the assigned deadlines and appropriately followed instructions. There were some dialogue exchanges between participants, but they were infrequent. The majority of students noted on the survey that they were inspired to respond to someone else’s posting 1-3 times on average. Most students just made their own posting then looked at what others put up without comment.

*Image analysis (Fall 2012)*

With over 180 pictures posted on the six topics for Group One, and approximately 240 total for Group Two, there was a wide variety of images to examine. Because Group One was more cross-national, my comments in this section are based only on a review of the postings by participants in Group One. Some pictures were stereotypical, some were unexpected. For example, on the topic of “Freedom” there were four images of classic US symbols (Statue of Liberty, bald eagles, and the Lincoln Memorial), as well as two images of “vote” signs. There were also five references to freedom movements such as desegregation in the US, anti-apartheid movements in South Africa, and the Arab Spring. It was interesting to note that several of these ‘classical’ American symbols were selected by Japanese students.

Other images of “Freedom” included pictures of nature with explanations such as: “Whether its just hanging out with some friends or camping with the family, the ocean allows me to let myself go mentally and clear my mind. Without the ocean in my life, I really don’t know who I would be today.” One of the nature scenes was thinking outside the box. The image was of a tiger behind a fence and noted that when we think about freedom, we think of *human* freedom, but we should consider animals too. The majority of the images selected and their corresponding comments, however, were linked to personal freedoms with images of people running or jumping freely, and comments such as “Freedom is being free and able to do whatever you want.” Other comments were similar but with a bit deeper reflection:

Freedom is an absence of oppression, whether it be in the form of a physical prison or a mental one. Freedom includes the rights to freedom of speech, expression and freedom of association. Nobody should be able to tell you what religion you believe in, what your sexuality should be or tell you who you’re allowed to associate with.
These are the most basic freedoms a just society can have but there are many more which are disputed, such as the right to property, so it is hard to come to a consensus on the level of freedom we perceive in our own societies.

My favorite post on the topic of “Freedom” was from a Japanese student. It was an unexpected picture of some cartoon animals (bunny, teddy, ducky, elephant) all sitting among the flowers and smiling happily. The comment from this post was: “Hearing a word freedom, we imagine the world where we have an infinite right. But I think that surprisingly freedom comprehends restriction to some extent. It is not to disturb other people’s freedom. So I selected this picture. They esteem each other, therefore they all smile.” I liked the balanced thought of the group, not just individual freedom. Some of the other stereotypical images from other topics included doves and the peace symbol for the topic of “Peace”, and a lot of pictures of the globe, McDonald’s, and other commercial products for “Globalization”.

Overall the quality of comments that students made on their own postings were good and thought provoking. Surprisingly, there were no obvious national patterns to the images or the comments. I was unable to accurately predict whether any given post was made by a US student or a Japanese student when looking at the images. Similarly, the comments were unique to each individual, sometimes reflecting nationalist views, but just as often not.

*Survey analysis (Fall 2012)*

The first four questions on the survey asked students whether they strongly agreed (4), somewhat agreed (3), somewhat disagreed (2), or strongly disagreed (1) with the statement “I better understand concepts related to ___ (topics for the project)”. The topics were combined thematically. For example, one question asked about ‘conflict and security’, another about ‘peace and diplomacy’. The results from all three US schools were quite similar, with the average score on all of these questions a 3.1 (somewhat agree). The Japanese students also responded the same way to these questions.

One question on the survey tried to capture whether students saw a connection between the project and the general content of the course. The average response for Wooster and Wichita State was 3.6. There was a close link between the project and the
course material. Oregon rated the connection 3.3. The Japanese students responded with a 1, ‘strongly disagree’ about a connection. This is likely due to the course in Japan being a linguistics class not an international politics class.

Despite the disconnect between the project and the course content for the Japanese students, however, they did strongly agree that as a result of participating in the project they could better appreciate different cultural perspectives and were more interested in interacting with others who were different from them. American students had a similar positive response to these two questions, with scores of 3.3 for appreciating different perspectives, and 3.4 for being more interested in interacting with others.

The open-ended questions provided some good insights about what the students perceived as valuable from their project participation, as well as their thoughts on their level of engagement and on the design of the project itself. In addressing the question “What was one of the most important lessons that you drew from this exercise?” several common themes emerged. Students were surprised by the wide variety of images and comments that a single word could invoke. Many remarked on how different the views were from other participants, while others remarked on the similarities. One comment captured both perspectives: “[I learned] how others see the world, its different and yet we are the same...if that makes any sense.” One student noted that s/he gained insights into her/his own classmates, not just partners at other schools. The students also observed that the project made them reflect more on their own views: “I think it was fascinating to have so many points of view. It made the overall learning experience greater because it made me think about ideas that I previously would not have considered.” “Being forced to use images to define concepts instead of words required a lot more thought from me...” Several expressed an open-mindedness to learning from others: “Other people have views that greatly differ from my own, and it’s important to take their view into account when deciding your own”. A final theme that emerged reflected on the power of the technology itself: “social media...is no longer for one techie generation, but is engrained in our lives.”

The second open-ended question asked whether students ‘self-censored’ their selection of images, or comments, knowing that students from a particular place would be reading them. The overwhelming response was “no” although the reasoning for this varied. Many students noted that it would defeat the purpose of the project to do so since the
purpose was to exchange different views and learn from each other. Several remarked that they felt it was a safe enough environment that they could say what they truly believed. Others stated that if anyone disagreed with what they posted, there was always the option to respond with a comment. “I believe knowledge should be free to comment on (with proper respect to everyone of course) and learning is more in-depth through this strategy.”

Many students felt that they did not choose images or make comments that were controversial, although one remarked that s/he specifically tried to play devil’s advocate in her/his selection. The handful of students who answered “yes” to this question did so with the explanation that they did not want to inadvertently offend someone they didn’t know, but they recognized that you cannot always tell what will offend someone and what won’t. One student noted: “I’ve seen some people get ‘attacked’ by what can be taken as hurtful comments. Its very hard to tell someone’s tone of voice over the internet.”

The majority of responses to the question “Do you think the exchange of views was valuable?” were mixed to positive. The comments from Western Oregon and Japan were more positive because there were more international interactions. There was a clear recognition that the project exposed students to different points of view and that was a valuable experience: “It helps us understand each other better” “The biggest reason why people have to fight is the lack of knowledge and judge[ment] with their own sense of value.” A Japanese comment was quite interesting:

“I believe it was very valuable. The reason is because living in Japan it is extremely difficult to exchange ideas with anyone who has a different background. Talking to people who grew up in different countries gives you an entirely new point of view about the world that you can never learn only from talking to those who live in the same country as you.”

The comments from WSU and Wooster were more mixed, recognizing that there would have been greater value to more international exchanges. It would be most valuable to “people with little exposure to other cultures”. The sense of connection was positive however: “[It helped] in feeling like a part of a global community rather than American society.”

The final open-ended question in the survey asked for suggestions for future revisions to the exercise. A few students seemed satisfied with the existing design, but most provided useful feedback for revisions. The most common response was that
students wanted more interaction with their peers, particularly peers from abroad. I found it particularly ironic that so many students wanted more engagement with each other, but seemed dependent up on the instructor to require it of them in order to make it happen. “I would suggest that along with one weekly post, that there should also be a mandatory response in which you need to make a comment on another person’s post. Since this wasn’t mandatory, I didn’t feel the need to make any comments.” Several students from each group wanted to get to know the people they were engaged with better. Some suggested simply providing more information about the partner school(s), instructor, and class in general. Others suggested some kind of synchronous communication arrangements such as skype (this was advocated by the student in Japan as well). A similar suggestion was to provide some sort of a group project/task to complete that would require greater collaboration. Students had mixed feelings about Facebook, recognizing that it was an easy platform to use, but somehow didn’t have a fully “academic” feel to it. Others had a bias against Facebook itself and didn’t feel secure using it. Students also wanted to see a tighter alignment in terms of posting deadlines, topical course materials, and schools participating from the start instead of joining later in the term.

Project Modifications for Spring 2013

The Spring project was originally a partnership of five different schools, three American, one Canadian, and one Russian. Unfortunately, the Russian school and one American school chose to drop out early in the semester (no explanation given). Of the remaining partners, there were a total of 115 participants in the group. The class being taught at all three institutions (Wichita State University, College of Wooster, and Lakehead University) was Introduction to International Relations. The topics chosen by the faculty for the semester were: power, diplomacy, war, terrorism, human rights and development.

Based on the feedback from the Fall semester, several modifications were made for the second iteration. One astute observer noted that the images that people chose to post were simply the top trending photos in the Google search engine for the assigned conceptual word. Students were thus encouraged to not just “Google search” the topic and pick the first picture they found, but to get an image in mind first, then go search for a
matching picture. This has led to a much greater (and more interesting) variety of images for the Spring semester.

Recognizing that more dialogue was desirable as a core purpose of the project, I required my students to post at least one comment on someone else’s photo for each topic, and at least one partner school did the same. This led to greater dialogue and some interesting extended exchanges between students on some of the images and explanations. I also decided to add more classes into one group rather than two groups, thus increasing the number and variety of exchanges to make it more interesting for the participants. The graded component for student participation varied, with the Lakehead students participating voluntarily and the Wooster and Wichita students receiving 5% and 10% of the grade respectively. Each faculty member actively incorporated discussion of the previous week’s postings into their class discussions.

After taking into consideration the comment of a student who did not want to use Facebook, I made very clear to my students on the first day that they were free to create a new anonymous Facebook account that would allow them to interact with others for the project, but would not compromise their identity in any way. One student chose to take me up on this option and created an account with a different name and did not add any photo or other personal information to the account. This allowed him to participate, but not compromise his online privacy concerns.

Outcomes for Spring 2013

Image Analysis (Spring 2013)

One of the topics that got quite a varied response from the students was the term “human rights”. The majority of images that were posted for this topic took the form of words/slogans/placards rather than a photo of a specific object or person. These placards included sayings such as “Human Rights are Not an Option”, “Equal People, Equal Rights, Equal Love”, or “Basic Human Rights = World Peace”. The comments that were made to accompany the images mentioned nearly every right imaginable, including water, food, respect, equality, fair trial, free speech, education, health care, and others. One image had the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on toilet paper with a comment that most people tend to take their rights for granted. Some of the explanations for the posts sparked
quite a few comments in reply. One particularly controversial post was on the 2nd Amendment to the US Constitution, defending a right to bear arms (ironically this was posted by an exchange student at an American university). There was also an image of George HW Bush with a comment criticizing how he tarnished the US human rights image abroad. This did not spark comments in the same way that the post did on the second amendment. Cartoon images were also widely used for this topic. One example was an image of Uncle Sam and the French President slamming the closet door on skeletons from Vietnam and Algeria while expressing concern about China's human rights policies. The comment pointed to the hypocrisy of developed countries criticizing developing countries on their human rights records. The handful of images of actual people largely showed people in need: refugees, prisoners, hungry children, and had comments stating that their conditions deserved a remedy. A few images focused on the aspect of justice and included mention of the International Criminal Court and the European Court of Human Rights. As in the semester before, it was difficult to discern any particular national pattern to the selected images or comments, with the exception of the documents they chose to represent rights (the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms or the US Bill of Rights).

Survey Analysis (Spring 2013)

The final survey was completed by two of the three schools for a total of 53 responses. The average response for whether the exercise helped them better understand the five IR concept selected was a 3.1 out of 4. Students felt there was a clear fit with the class materials (average of 3.5) and that the exercise helped them appreciate different cultural perspectives (average of 3.1). They also expressed a greater interest in interacting with other cultures as a result of the exercise (average of 3.1).

Beyond gaining a greater appreciation of the diversity of views on IR topics, students remarked that the exercise helped them apply what they had learned in class, formulate their ideas more fully, and express their differing views more diplomatically. They also noted that you could learn a lot from other students’ views, even those in your own country. There was also a comment from a US student that people in other countries do not always disagree with American views as much as many think.
Quite a few students at one university stated that they did self-censor their comments. Some because they were afraid of a negative or judgmental response from their professor or peers, others because they did not want to offend on sensitive topics such as War or Terrorism (no posting of graphic images, or comments critical of the military). One chose not to engage because s/he felt those on the other side were not willing to listen. Another student noted that s/he avoided posting US-centric images because the nature of the project was supposed to be global. Several who did not censor themselves noted that it was easier to type your different perspectives than to speak them out loud in class. Students largely felt that it provided a valuable exchange of views and served as a gauge of everyone's understanding of the concepts. They emphasized the importance of communication in learning and felt this exercise worked well. The most common suggestion for revisions was "to force more interaction between different classes around the world". It seems that students really felt the need for others to validate or engage with what they have taken the time to post about. Several students also suggested more frequent postings so they did not forget about them in between due dates.

Third Iteration: Fall 2013

This project was run for the third and final time during the Fall 2013 semester. Whereas I had been challenged to bring international partners on board in the first two iterations, for this particular semester I faced the opposite challenge. I had two colleagues at schools in Brazil (State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) and University of Brasilia) with large introductory classes who wanted to participate. I was not, however, teaching a course myself that was a good fit and neither were any of my previous collaborators. Several other interested schools from Japan and Ecuador opted not to participate before the semester even got underway. I extended invitations to several of my own former students who had participated previously and asked them to voluntarily participate so that there would be some small degree of cross national dialogue. The topics selected for this semester were: Globalization, Development, Democracy, Inequality, and Power.

The degree of interaction between students closely resembled the previous two semesters, which is impressive since all of the students were participating on a voluntary basis. (The UERJ students received 1 point extra credit for participating). There were a
minimal number of comments posted in response to images, but students mostly 'liked' each other's posts without commenting further. The majority of students noted on the survey that they were inspired to respond to someone else's posting 1-3 times on average.

Outcomes for Fall 2013

Image Analysis (Fall 2013)

Although the geographic distinctions between students were hard to identify based on images or comments in the previous two semesters, the comparison of the Fall 2012 and the Fall 2013 groups on the topic of globalization did produce some notable differences. Fall 2012 included a majority of American students and a handful of Japanese and British students, and their perspectives on globalization most often mentioned positive aspects of economic growth and cultural sharing, with some acknowledgement of inequalities.

"On the one hand it has made the majority of states in the world interconnected which has been very prosperous for trade. It has also allowed people to travel relatively freely all over the world and for cultures to come together like never before. On the other hand it is the effect of the universality of capitalism and as we can see much of the world is now a workhouse for the richer parts of the world."

The globalization of culture was not seen as a negative aspect: “Globalization is the coming together of many different cultures, ideas, and beliefs with one goal in mind... protect the one thing we all have in common before it’s gone” (with an image of the globe). The Brazilian students, however, tended to emphasize the negative impacts stemming from globalization before acknowledging possible benefits. One image included a map of the world with a giant hole dug in the continent of Africa and piles of money sitting on top of the US and Europe. The comment noted the exploitative nature of the global economy that benefited some much more than others. A similar comment stated:

"Globalization involves very much a zero-sum game in which gains as was proposed in the mid-1980s. What does it mean? A strong country can gain in a given area and other countries remain underdeveloped sunk in debt and therefore lose in that particular area. I echo the words of José Saramago says: "... It is the rich who rule, and the poor live as they can."

Another example relates to cultural versus economic integration. The cartoon image is of the US-Mexico border with a giant wall and a McDonald’s pick up window in it. The comment reads, “there is an American interest in commerce exchange with Mexico, but
there is not an interest (at least not so much) in social interaction, as we can see by the wall.” The theme that globalization resulted in a loss of culture was also present in a number of postings:

"The Internet is the principal vehicle to spreads the informations, values and opinions. It helps to get down the "walls" around the countries. However, sometimes people try to impose their values over others. Another bad point about this is that some people forget their own habits to choose foreign ones, like Chinese eating just McDonald’s or teenagers listening just North American songs."

Although no other groups chose “Inequality” as one of their IR topics in order to compare with the Fall 2013 group, the thread of conversation was very similar on this topic as well.

There was only one concept that was selected by instructors for all three iterations of the project: "Power". There were a total of 185 photos and comments posted regarding students’ perceptions of the concept of power. After categorizing the pictures and comments thematically, the one category that had the most posts across all three semesters was power viewed as influence and control, particularly as exhibited by leaders. Some students focused on the negative side with images of Hitler, while others emphasized the positive aspects of leadership with pictures of Barack Obama or Grande:  "Power isn't always about military or money but about the influence you have on people or a community." The second most common theme was power reflected in popular movements- demonstrations, protests, revolutions, unions: "True power lies within the people and is the power of love, preferably in numbers. By uniting and standing together for a belief or cause, people can achieve anything." The power of money and wealth to gain influence was also common. This comment, however, stands in contrast to the one on people power:

"I think that the best representation of power would have to be money. This is because with money, people can control others, influence the government, and do what they please. Someone may be educated and everything, but if that person does not have money their is really not much that person can do."

A unique theme that emerged in the Fall 2013 with the majority of Brazilian students was an emphasis on less tangible aspects of power, including freedom to make choices in your life, as well as individual character traits that make people powerful, such as respect, trust,
responsibility, charisma, and authenticity. Power almost became synonymous with "fate" in some of the posts:

"I believe that 'power' represents one of the mightiest weapons in the world. Power is what allows things to happen, or prevent them. This power is able to affect an individual or a huge portion of the population and depending the way as it is used, it is liable as far as ignite a war as make peace, impose fear or earn respect."

Unexpectedly, power was only defined through military force a handful of times each semester. Other themes included power as knowledge, information, innovation and nature (i.e. wind, tornados).

**Survey Analysis (Fall 2013)**

Due to the slightly different semester schedules, I provided the survey to the Brazilian instructors too late, as the semester was ending. One colleague was able to put the survey online and received 20 responses back, but the other was not able to get any student feedback. The incomplete data, however, is still informative.

On the four survey questions related to understanding specific IR concepts, the scores closely resembled those of the previous two semesters, with an average of 3.1 out of 4 based on their perceived understanding of globalization, development, democracy, inequality, and power. With regard to the question on the survey about a connection between the project and the general content of the course, there was clearly a tight fit between the exercise and the course content, with the average score being 3.6.

The Brazilian students who completed the survey strongly agreed that they had gained a better appreciation for different cultural perspectives and were more interested in interacting with others who were different from them (average scores of 3.6 and 3.8 respectively). It is ironic, however, given these responses that the great majority of the postings on the Facebook page were in fact of Brazilian origin. The Brazilian instructors noted anecdotally that their students were very curious to discover where students were from in the group and would seek more information about all the group members who had 'non-Brazilian' names. It may be that what these students experienced was similar to an observation made by a student in the Fall of 2012, noting that they had learned a lot about their own peers, not just about people from other cultures. Political perspectives in Brazil
are likely more diverse that the students themselves realize, thus making the comments in this activity surprisingly stimulating.

The open-ended questions answered by the Brazilian students provided similar insights to those of the previous semesters. Some of the lessons the students said they took away included learning how to organize their ideas and explain concepts more clearly, expanding their perspectives, and recognizing the value in discussing ideas to uncover preconceptions and incomplete understandings of IR terms. Most of them stated that they did not 'self-censor' their comments because they understood that one of the objectives of the project was to contrast different cultural perspectives. One mentioned changing her/his posting with the concern that making fun of a crisis situation (i.e. the US budget) was not very sensitive. Another noted that they had to change what they said because they simply could not find the right words to say what they wanted to in English. With regard to the question about the value of exchanging views, most agreed that it was valuable. Some noted that it made them more aware and tolerant of other views; others noted that there were often very similar ideas expressed. One student remarked that it was particularly valuable because it was an exchange between peers with the same level of knowledge.

The Brazilian students had some very good recommendations for future revisions, most of which differed from the previous survey responses. They wanted to get more instructor feedback for each week's postings to help draw out common themes, potential misinterpretations, etc. They also wanted instructors to choose more controversial topics such as 'religion' that would generate more discussion and show greater differences in perspectives. They were particularly interested in having people from a wider variety of cultures participate. One common suggestion that was made in each iteration was 'demanding more participation among the groups'. This is hard to respond to as an instructor since the students seem to want the instructor to force them to be more engaged instead of finding their own motivation.

The most striking comment with regard to revisions, however, was that the project should be multilingual: "Making an IR exercise just in your language seems not only that you are trying to impose your language over others, but that you only want those who can communicate with you to do so because they will legitimize your own vision." The Brazilian instructor had noted that the students struggled with language a bit and were
often using Google Translate to convert their Portuguese into English. Upon reflection, it seems perfectly reasonable that the US students could be asked to do the same thing and might gain a much greater appreciation of linguistic challenges that others face.

**Final Reflections**

Although the feedback from students on this project has been largely positive, and the analysis of the images and comments has been intriguing, I must admit to being a bit frustrated by the overall endeavor. Despite my best efforts to recruit faculty from many different countries, my response rate was quite low. Even those faculty who showed an initial interest either failed to follow through or had extenuating circumstances that made their participation impossible. Some of the circumstances out of their control included top down control of the curriculum in their university, which left them no flexibility to add an experimental component to their course, or having the class cancelled in which they were planning to introduce the project. It was also a challenge to try to find overlapping semesters between schools in the northern and southern hemispheres. One potential participant expressed concerns about privacy, and another was concerned about copyright laws and the use of images. It is my impression, however, that the biggest concern of potential partners was related to time constraints. Faculty did not want to add a new component that would be a heavy demand on their time. Comments from my partner schools indicated, that it took a little extra time at the beginning of the semester to set things up with students, but after that initial effort they took perhaps an extra 30 minutes every other week to review the postings, make a few additional comments, and mark a participation grade in their grade books. One faculty member noted that it was probably easier for students and faculty who were familiar with Blackboard, Moodle, and/or Facebook, but was not overly difficult for anyone. One unexpected positive aspect of my search for partners was that the project seemed to appeal to a broader audience than just international relations instructors, but reaching that broader audience with my proposed collaborative project was an added challenge.

In my search for collaborative partners, I discovered that a number of faculty did not have Facebook accounts, or did not interact with students on Facebook for professional reasons. All of my partners were willing to create an account for the purpose of engaging in
this project though. Very little expertise was required since I served as group administrator, and I was able to talk them through how to view the student postings and make comments in about ten minutes.

Overall the project was rewarding and I hope that the information provided through my experiment might be helpful to others who are considering how to bring students together from different cultures.
APPENDIX

IR Meanings Project
POST-EXERCISE ASSESSMENT SURVEY

Thank you for engaging in the IR Meanings Project, an interactive exercise for study of international relations theory and practice in cross-national and cross-institutional perspective. We now invite your input on the outcomes of the project based on your personal experiences. All responses are anonymous and will simply be used for assessment of the project experience and, perhaps, for future exercise refinements. Please address the following questions:

Rating the Experience:

1. I was better able to comprehend and conceptualize international relations concepts through this exercise:
   _____Strongly agree   _____Somewhat agree   _____Somewhat disagree   _____Strongly disagree

2. I better understand concepts related to war and terrorism through this exercise:
   _____Strongly agree   _____Somewhat agree   _____Somewhat disagree   _____Strongly disagree

3. I better understand concepts related to power and diplomacy through this exercise:
   _____Strongly agree   _____Somewhat agree   _____Somewhat disagree   _____Strongly disagree

4. I better understand concepts related to development and human rights through this exercise:
   _____Strongly agree   _____Somewhat agree   _____Somewhat disagree   _____Strongly disagree

5. How many times were you inspired to respond to someone else’s posting in the project?
   _____Never   _____1-3   _____4-5   _____Almost always

6. The IR Meanings Project complemented material covered in class:
   _____Strongly agree   _____Somewhat agree   _____Somewhat disagree   _____Strongly disagree

7. As a result of participating in this project, I could better appreciate different cultural perspectives?
   _____Strongly agree   _____Somewhat agree   _____Somewhat disagree   _____Strongly disagree

8. As a result of participating in this project, I am more interested in interacting with others who are different and feel I can learn from them:
Open-Ended Questions
9. What was one of the most important lessons that you drew from this exercise?

10. Were there any situations in which you ‘self-censored’ your selection of images, or comments, based on knowing that students from a particular group or place would be reading them? Why or why not?

11. Do you think the exchange of views was valuable? Why or why not?

12. If we were to revise this exercise, what changes might you recommend in the future?