International, Online Collaboration
Learning Benefits and Student Response
Lori Beckstead, Ryerson University, Canada

Abstract: This paper describes an international collaborative activity experienced by university students studying radio production in Toronto, Canada, and Melbourne, Australia. The “Bouncing Story” activity enabled students in different countries to work collaboratively on building an episodic radio drama using online technologies including web logs (blogs) and podcasting. Peer feedback is a central component of the activity. Student survey responses revealed a high level of engagement and positive learning outcomes. This paper outlines the intended benefits of the Bouncing Story collaboration, and explores the students’ reactions to the experience.

Keywords: Bouncing Story, International Collaboration, Online Collaboration, Peer Feedback, Radio Production, Radio Drama

The Bouncing Story is a simple collaboration between university students studying radio production in two different countries. The activity provides students with opportunities to practice creative script-writing skills, radio production skills, critical listening and feedback skills, teamwork, and to gain some insight into dramatic form for the aural medium.

The activity begins with students and professors from both countries introducing themselves to each other online using a shared blog. Students are asked to post a short biography of themselves, and are encouraged to interact with each other asynchronously using the blog. Next, a group of three to five students from one of the universities writes and produces the opening episode of a radio drama or comedy, which is posted online and made available as a podcast on a designated due date. The students are asked to produce an episode that is three to six minutes in length that introduces some interesting characters in an open-ended situation. Then a small group of students from the other university has exactly one week to write and produce a follow-up episode, continuing the storyline established in the first episode, and post their podcast for all participants to hear. One week later, a different group of students from the first university post their follow-up episode, and so on, “bouncing” back and forth between the two participating countries, week to week. Each student is a member of a team that is responsible for contributing one episode on a given due date, predetermined by the professor(s). Students do not know what will happen with the story until they hear the previous group’s episode. Thus, a drama or comedy filled with surprises unfolds in weekly episodes over the course of a semester.

In addition to contributing to his or her team’s episode through writing and/or production, each individual student is also required to provide extensive feedback to one of the groups overseas. The professor(s) establish in advance which students will critique which episode, allowing the professor to ensure that students remain engaged in the process over a longer period, rather than just when their turn to produce an episode is coming up. Using a series of questions provided by the professor for guidance, students write their feedback and post it to the shared blog within a week after the episode in question was posted. All students can access the blog to read what their peers have to say about the productions, and can post comments or questions in response to the feedback. Through this peer feedback process, students are also encouraged to ask each other questions about their work, to clarify points made in the critiques, and so on.

Intended Benefits for Student Learning
In a previous paper (Beckstead 2005), the author details how the Bouncing Story collaboration follows best practices in undergraduate education as described by Chickering and Gamson (1987). In short,
the activity follows six of the seven best practices identified by Chickering and Gamson: the activity emphasizes cooperation among students, encourages active learning, provides prompt feedback, emphasizes time on task, communicates high expectations, and respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

On a more specific level, the Bouncing Story activity is an interesting learning activity that goes beyond what may appear as its primary goal (i.e. to learn radio drama writing and production skills). Certainly the activity gives students ample opportunity to practice those skills, but it also affords additional learning opportunities in areas such as critical thinking, teamwork skills, motivation and engagement, and more. These additional intended benefits to student learning are outlined below.

**Motivation.** The Bouncing Story activity is intended to inspire a greater degree of motivation to do good work than the students might experience with more commonplace learning activities. It does this by ensuring there will be an audience listening critically to their work and providing feedback. The audience consists of people outside their usual learning community of classmates and professors, which may boost the students’ desire to prove themselves through their work.

**Authentic learning.** The activity provides students with an authentic learning experience--i.e. learning and evaluation strategies that have a real-life context (Seegers 1996, as cited in Dochy, Segers, & Sluijsmans 1999). The Bouncing Story is an authentic learning activity wherein students produce real products for broadcast to a wide audience, much as they would if they were working in the broadcasting industry.

**Interaction with international peers and professors.** The activity allows students to interact with and learn from a wider community of peers and professors. In studying inter-group student collaborations, Lou and MacGregor (2004, p.436) found that “peer collaboration through looking at others’ work and providing constructive feedback helps learners develop clearer understanding of desired goal[s]...and effective means for achieving the goals.” Similarly in the case of the Bouncing Story activity, it was expected that students who listen to others’ work and read their feedback would achieve a greater understanding of the expectations of the assignment and possibly discover new ways to fulfill them.

**Getting feedback.** The activity allows students to receive more feedback on their work than they would get from their professor alone, and within a short timeframe. The design of the activity ensures that each group gets feedback on their production from two to five peers within a week of handing it in. Topping attests that feedback from peers is generally available quickly and in large 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.” (Topping 1998, p.255).

**Giving feedback.** The activity allows each student to practice giving feedback by preparing an in-depth written critique of the work done by their peers. Critiques of student work are often carried out as a verbal discussion with the whole class, which does not necessarily hold every student accountable for evaluating the work in question. In this case, every student is accountable for contributing an informed evaluation. This allows each student to develop critical thinking skills and to practice the art of giving feedback to others. The latter is a necessary--yet often underdeveloped--skill in the broadcasting industry, and no doubt many others. There is widespread recognition that such assessment activities promote learning (Arter 1997; Dochy & McDowell 1997; as cited in Dochy et al 1999), and it is known that students who conduct peer assessment play a role in determining what constitutes high quality outcomes (Boud 1995; Brown, Bull & Pendlebury 1997; Dochy et al 1999; Topping 2003; as cited in Lindblom-Ylänne, Pihlajamäki, & Kotkas 2006).

**Team work.** The ability to work as part of a team is a skill that is necessary in many professional situations, and providing opportunities for students to practice working in teams has become a necessary aspect of higher education. However, poorly designed group work activities can permit students to divide up the work and then complete the work individually rather than as a learning team (Michaelsen 1996, as cited in Breslow 1998). Producing an audio drama in the studio, however, requires the direct participation of more than one person, whether as an actor, recordist, director, etc, and is therefore more difficult for students to work individually rather than collectively. It is necessary for the groups to determine the strengths and skills of all team members and utilize those to their collective advantage. Some groups must cope with conflict and compromise to achieve their goal. All of this reflects real-life team work issues.

**Level of student engagement.** The activity is intended to heighten the level of student engagement by involving students in a learning activity that is not only out of the ordinary, but also permits them to interact with students from another country and culture, and fosters some friendly competitiveness between students in different countries. The Bouncing Story activity generates an inter-cultural experience for students right in their own classroom.

The author set out to determine whether the students themselves experienced the Bouncing Story activity as the beneficial learning experience it was...
intended to be. In 2006, students who participated in the Bouncing Story collaboration were asked to fill out a survey at the completion of the activity. The surveys asked the students for their opinions about the experience through open-ended questions and Likert-scale questions. A space was provided on the survey to make a comment or explanation for each of the Likert-scale questions. The participants consisted of 13 Canadian students, of which 12 completed the survey, and nine Australian students, of which six completed the survey, for a total of 18 respondents. The Canadian students were in their second year of undergraduate studies while the Australian students were in their third and final year.

Student Response

Table 1 displays the results of the Likert-scale question portion of the survey. The numbers show that students were generally very positive about the Bouncing story activity, with all students agreeing or strongly agreeing that it was a worthwhile experience. These results show that in most cases, the students’ perception of the experience is in accordance with the stated objectives of the activity. For example, the majority of students agreed that the activity had helped them to improve their production skills (77.8%), their ability to work as part of a team (77.8%), and their understanding of the radio drama genre (100%). The majority also agreed that collaborating with students overseas was worthwhile (94.4%), and that the activity increased their motivation to do good work (77.8%).

Table 1: Student Perceptions of the Bouncing Story Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>SA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Participating in the Bouncing Story assignment helped me to improve:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. my production skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22.2% (4)</td>
<td>61.1% (11)</td>
<td>16.7% (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. my ability to work as part of a team</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22.2% (4)</td>
<td>61.1% (11)</td>
<td>16.7% (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. my critical feedback skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.5% (1)</td>
<td>38.9% (7)</td>
<td>38.9% (7)</td>
<td>16.7% (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. my understanding of the radio drama genre</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>72.2% (13)</td>
<td>27.8% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The fact that we collaborated with students overseas made it more worthwhile than if we had just done it within our own class.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.6% (1)</td>
<td>22.2% (4)</td>
<td>72.2% (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I was more motivated to do a great production because students overseas would be listening to it, not just my professor.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11.1% (2)</td>
<td>11.1% (2)</td>
<td>55.6% (10)</td>
<td>22.2% (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The feedback component (posted on the blog) was a worthwhile component of the Bouncing Story activity.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.5% (1)</td>
<td>27.8% (5)</td>
<td>55.6% (10)</td>
<td>11.1% (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The Bouncing Story assignment overall was a worthwhile experience.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>22.2% (4)</td>
<td>77.8% (14)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Note: SD=strongly disagree; SA=strongly agree.

In addition to the Likert-scale questions, respondents were given the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions. Respondents were asked what they liked about the Bouncing Story activity, what they would change about it, whether they thought it was worthwhile and why, and whether they had any additional comments or suggestions. Many of the student responses support the argument that the Bouncing Story activity affords a range of desirable learning opportunities for the students.

For example, a greater degree of motivation was discussed as one intended outcome. The following are comments that best characterize the general feeling of students with respect to motivation:
I like that it causes us to compete, which makes us want to be more creative, use proper production techniques to develop amazing stories that will be better than the overseas students. We needed to represent [our university] and show we were the better program!! So it was a good motivator. I think the drive to be more creative and ‘production perfect’ is due to the overseas collaboration.

The Bouncing Story is intended to be an authentic learning experience. Student response supports this:

[I liked] working in the studios because it is just so much fun to create things and when you run into problems there...you have to figure out why things went wrong in order to fix it. [We] created a very tangible product.

The activity is intended to provide interaction with a wider community as well as inter-group collaboration. Student responses suggest that the activity successfully achieved this goal:

Collaborating with producers outside your normal class of students is quite refreshing. It takes learning and collaboration out of the classroom and even out of the university, and it gives us an appreciation for media producers globally and the global media networks. The difference in culture and teaching method added to [the] creativity. It’s people we don’t know with a different frame of reference to us and different creative ideas. It was cool to work with students at another school.

A significant aspect of the activity is peer feedback. Although the Likert-scale responses don’t indicate a strong positive reaction to it (e.g. just 66.7 percent agreed that posting feedback to the blog was “worthwhile”), several remarks demonstrate support for the peer feedback aspect:

It was great to hear the opinions of others on the other side of the world and it gave me extra enthusiasm in the assignment. The critiques are very helpful. I liked being involved in other people’s work every week by critiquing in class. It made me think critically about my own work.

This last comment reflects an attitude that is comparable to the findings of Lou & MacGregor, who found that their students “became more aware of possible weaknesses in their [own] projects” through evaluating each other’s work (Lou & MacGregor 2004, p.437).

However, the number of students who disagreed or were uncertain that the online feedback component of the activity was worthwhile merits consideration. While 100 percent of the Australian students agreed that the feedback component was worthwhile, half of Canadian students were uncertain or disagreed. It appears that the Canadian students did not feel they received as much feedback from their overseas peers as they gave, as illustrated by the following comments:

I found putting our feedback [on the blog] was useful however I felt we didn’t get enough feedback from them. I don’t think we benefited as much from it because [the Australian students] didn’t have to post feedback but the feedback in general was worthwhile.

Although the Australian students were not graded on the feedback they provided (the Canadian students were), nonetheless the rate of participation in providing feedback among the Australian students was equal to that of the Canadian students, with 78 percent of participating students on both sides posting formal feedback to the shared blog. It is difficult to know why some Canadian students did not feel they got adequate feedback from their overseas peers, except perhaps for the fact that there were fewer Australian students participating and therefore fewer posts from Australian students compared with Canadian students. One student offered this explanation as to why he or she was uncertain that the feedback component was worthwhile:

I found it hard to be honest and polite [on the shared blog] and thought our in-class discussions were more worthwhile.

An Australian student commented that peer feedback on the blog should be made compulsory, “so that everyone contributes to the discussion afterwards. Otherwise people will just listen to one piece and write and produce one piece of the story.” This comment suggests that the student perceives the value of peer feedback (assuming that students would not normally suggest adding an additional requirement to their existing course load unless it was perceived as a valuable undertaking).

More careful research would need to be done to better determine student attitudes towards the peer feedback aspect, as the survey statement used in this case (“The feedback component, posted on the blog, was a worthwhile aspect of the Bouncing Story activity”) is a little too vague to provide very meaningful information.
The majority of students felt that the Bouncing Story activity helped their ability to work as part of a team (see Table 1). Good practice dictates that student groups should be selected to minimize barriers to cohesiveness, such as pre-existing relationships between students which may prevent effective teambuilding, and to distribute what Michaelsen (n.d.) terms ‘assets and liabilities’ as evenly as possible among teams. Therefore student teams were chosen by the professor rather than the students themselves. Student comments indicate some mixed feelings about the group work, with one student pointing out, “if someone was in a group where there was a person who did nothing I think that person should not get the same mark as the rest of the group.” Each group was asked to rate the contribution of its members, so the professor was made aware when an individual did not contribute to the expected level. In one case, a student whose peers rated him very low on the contribution scale was given a significantly reduced mark. However, that fact was not made known to the group members. Perhaps in future a more automated mechanism should be built into the group evaluations (e.g. contribution ratings from peers could be automatically factored into each individual’s mark) so that students feel their individual efforts are fairly rewarded. Other students indicated that they felt the group work contributed to positive learning outcomes, as evidenced by the following comments:

*I got to know my classmates more, which helped me learn about working with ‘strangers’ to a degree.*

*We learnt how to work with others as well as people overseas.*

It was good to work in a group in which each member had special skills—I learned audio stuff I didn’t know.

Interacting with students studying in a similar program in a different country gives the students a yardstick by which to measure their own skill development, as well as the types of instructional activities and assessments that are being used in their own classes. When students discover that they are on similar learning paths, they gain a sense of validation of their own learning. Interacting with overseas students also provides a very engaging aspect to this learning activity. Respondents indicated generally that their level of engagement with this assignment was very high:

*It was innovative in comparison to other projects we do where we just make assignments and hand them in or hold seminars. I’m over the old format this was good because it was different. It was a fun and interesting way of exploring radio drama. The bouncing story concept was engaging right from the beginning. Keep it up year after year as it’s a great concept. I don’t know anyone in our group/s that didn’t enjoy the experience. It was interesting and fun, it was different from what we’re used to.*

**Conclusion**

Student response to the Bouncing Story activity indicates that students were engaged and motivated, and felt they had learned valuable skills not only in radio production but also in teamwork, critical thinking, and feedback.

**References**


About the Author

Lori Beckstead
Ryerson University, Canada