



A “How To” Guide for Organising a Linking Classroom Seminar

Why Organise a Linking Classroom Seminar?

The exercise of Linking Classrooms via webinar technology between different universities can achieve several ends:

1. Students and professors from different universities located in different parts of the country (or world) have the opportunity to interact. A major part of this interaction provides students with the opportunity to ask question of another professor (researcher) in a different location. This is made possible by linking the classrooms in real time via webinar. Asking questions in a public forum is an excellent exercise, as it prepares the students to open up to different scholars (other than their own professors). This process teaches students the possibility of interacting with different scholars and asking them questions. This is an important step towards teaching students social networking skills.
2. Learning to ask questions is an important skill for social scientific research, especially if students decide to conduct personal interviews for their own research. Keeping up with the new technologies for real time interaction across broad distances creates possibilities for research interaction.
3. The Linking Classrooms experience also provides the students with an opportunity to deepen their learning about particular research methods and theories based on different research projects undertaken by scholars that they can see and hear. This can help to break down the mystique of scholarship and inspire students to pursue their own research questions.
4. Linking of classrooms via webinar also allows for developing relationships between the students and professors of different universities. Through this exercise, professors and students can give each other insights about research on religion, enabling students and professors to come up with further insights. Instructors and students also learn more



about the other universities and the type of research going on there. This can lead to further collaboration and broadening of scholarly networks.

5. This is a fantastic opportunity for a graduate research assistant (RA) to learn about new technologies and to practice skills that can be used in teaching and research.

Steps in Organising the Linking of Classrooms Seminar via Webinar

1. Two professors need to figure out if your teaching schedules in a particular semester allow for a linked classroom experience.
2. Decide on a topic or research method/theory that you would want to focus on with the students. The best way to go about this would be to discuss the topics covered in your courses and choose one that is somewhat common to both. Each classroom could cover a different aspect of the same topic.
3. Consider how the students from each classroom will prepare for the linked session. Perhaps they will read the same articles or watch a film. Sometimes it helps if the students have a common “text” to reflect on and respond to before the session itself.
4. Setting a date and time and informing the students about webinar should be done well in advance of the session and could be included in the course syllabus. Students will need some time to consider whether or not they are going to participate (consent), and to familiarize themselves with the readings. They will also want to learn about the other university and professor with whom you would be linking.
5. One of the most vital steps is to contact the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) department at each university. Keep in mind that staff members in ICT departments of any university have full calendars like you. They need ample notice (months not weeks) in order to work with you. If you want to organise a webinar towards the beginning of the term, it is best to contact the ICT helpdesk people at the



beginning of the prior term. For instance, for a webinar that took place in February 2015 the ICT people were contacted during the first week of October 2014.

6. ICT departments have numerous layers of authority and initially you probably cannot access the ICT branch responsible for Linking Classrooms technologies directly. Therefore, you may have to start with the IT Helpdesk and in all probability proceed to other levels in order to access staff who can give you the information and support you need. This entire process can be very time consuming. For example, it took one RA numerous visits with the Level 1 staff in order to make sure that the message about the project had been escalated to the higher level staff. In this entire process, the professor was contacted several times via email for the purpose of administration and authenticity.
7. Once the message about the software and hardware needs for the Linking Classrooms project gets to the appropriate level of staff in the ICT department, a face to face meeting can be organised. In consultation with ICT staff, find out which software is available for you to use in the Linking Classrooms session. Universities have software contracts with different providers and you want to choose what's best for your needs. Both universities need not have the same software. The university with the proprietary software is the host of the session and the other university is invited to join as a participant.
8. Training can be provided for the technologies supported by the university that can be used for the Linking Classrooms session. This is a very important preparatory step.
9. It is a must that the classrooms used in both universities have the necessary equipment: a computer equipped with a web camera and microphone that is linked to a projector so that images can be projected onto a large screen. This enables people from both classrooms to see, hear and speak to one another.
10. Practising with the technology a few times beforehand is a great way to assure that things should be alright during the actual day of the event. This rehearsal is more of a training/interaction between the ICT staff, the professors and RAs at each location. If possible, use the actual classrooms and equipment that will be used during the Linking Classrooms session. Some software packages allow you to 'share the screen'- an option



on Blackboard Collaborate - so that your slides are visible to the students in both classrooms. It is also better to turn off the microphone of the classroom that is not speaking, so that the sound is clearer to audiences. Moreover, this avoids a feedback loop. Blackboard Collaborate has a space to type messages and the option to 'raise hands' if you have a question. Students with laptops could use emoticons and type questions or comments in the delegated space to make the session more interactive.

11. On the scheduled day, it is advised that you reach the venue at least an hour to an hour and a half before the actual class starts in order to ensure the proper functioning of all the equipment.
12. Decide on an outline for the flow of the session: who will speak when and for how long. Allow adequate time for introductions of the classrooms, questions and discussion – students tend to warm up but it takes some time. It is better to start with friendlier/less formal questions so that the students can become comfortable with one another.
13. Ideally, the RAs will handle the technical aspects of the event: change power point slides, adjust the view on the screen, take questions, and pass around the microphone to the students when they ask questions. Have the RA pan the camera around the entire class and have the students greet one another across the miles.
14. During the question/discussion portion of the session, you can use the web camera to show the person asking question and the person who is answering. The volume should be turned on both sides. The RA can take a microphone to the students asking questions for better sound quality. Also, it is advised that the instructors wear a remote microphone so that it gives them more mobility and flexibility.
15. As the Linking Classrooms session is coming to a close, exchange thanks between classrooms and it might be a good idea to prepare the students to do so ahead of the session. Panning the camera around the class and having the students say a 'goodbye' to one another is another good idea.



16. Finally, invite feedback from the students about their experience and their thoughts regarding the Linking Classrooms webinar. You can use the feedback to improve the next session.