Teaching Note - Then and Now: Canadian and American Students Discover Each Other

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Few educators will have missed the messages delivered in a series of recent television advertisements for Cisco© starring Canadian actor Ellen Page (Juno, 2007; Inception, 2010), who returns to her rustic “hometown” of Lunenburg, Nova Scotia to find that while she has been away in Tinseltown, her fellow townspeople became experts in modern communications technology. In one ad, Page visits her old elementary school, whose children report that the class was just about to go on a field trip… to China! “Wow,” responds Page sheepishly, “when I was a kid, we would just go to the farm,” while a scene of children being intimidated by a barnyard animal plays. “No, seriously, where are you guys going?” The students point to a large monitor at the front of the room where a classful of white-shirted, red-scarfed Chinese children burst out of their seats waving and shouting: nǐ hǎo! “Nǐ hǎo!” the youthful Nova Scotians shout back, and the commercial ends with the company’s tag: “The new classroom. See it. Live it. Share it. On the human network. Cisco.” The ads are light and humorous, but the real cleverness in them resides in something more urgent and unsaid. They play on the premise that, even in bumpkinville, people can be connected in ways that make them more knowledgeable and worldly, so those of us in more civilized locales have no excuse. “See how video on the human network is changing the way we live,” the company’s website chirps, “[o]ne town at a time.” It might have added “or get left behind.”

As a cultural artifact, the ad campaign resonates with people like me who teach and write about Canadian-American relations. Little Lunenburg (pop. 2,317) is caricatured by a large American corporation as the essence of quaintness, its people a collection of harmless, well-intentioned rubes with funny accents. A small Canadian town becomes Anywhere, America to convey how easy it is to operate the “human network.” For me, the Cisco education ad looms largest because of what it says about students. It champions video conferencing as a window on the world, the way through which North American students can discover others. The students are the active agents and there is no going back to Page’s day, when a passive farm tour constituted discovery. “How ya gonna keep ‘em down on the farm, after they seen Paree?” or Beijing.

Via high technology, or not, students have been doing this for a long time. Long before the days of “connectivity” or “human networks,” students have been our most prodigious ambassadors, conducting their own public diplomacy, describing and explaining their own countries to their fellows internationally through formal student exchanges and conferences and informally through their own travels. There is no scholarly study of Canadian or American students abroad, but maybe there should be. Folks like me have credited diplomats, businessmen and NGOs perhaps too much as our nations’ public faces. Popular diplomacy has always been conducted at a more grassroots level. At least two groups of Canadian and American students provide good cases in point.

Then

More than half a century ago, scholars from two little schools in the middle of the continent lamented how little Canadians and Americans really knew about one another. Invited to a routine meeting of business and professional men from Winnipeg, Manitoba and St Paul, Minnesota in spring 1939, Arthur Lower, then Chairman of the History Department at Winnipeg’s United College and Charles J. Turck, President of St. Paul’s Macalester College gravitated toward one another. As Turck recalled, “Dr Lower came to my home and we talked about Canadian-American matters… ‘If business and professional men from our two countries should talk about these matters, isn’t it more important to get young people in college to talk about them?’”

So we decided to press for a student conference.” Founded in 1941, the Canadian-American Conference (CAC) was an annual colloquium that brought together students and faculty members from Macalester and United (now University of Winnipeg) for an impressive run of thirty-one years.

The conferences rotated between Winnipeg and St Paul, a 12-hour trip by train. Discussion topics, determined by student leaders, were remarkably wide-ranging, sometimes focusing on Canadian and American history and foreign policy, but often addressing events further afield, in Africa, eastern Europe and southeast Asia. Keynote speeches were delivered by prominent journalists, statesmen or scholars. Students were billeted with host families and there
were grand banquets and dances. Every autumn, United and Macalester students engaged each other in informed public debate, which was sometimes reported in newspaper stories and broadcast in radio debates. The exchanges were cordial, but always vigorous and shaped by the contexts of World War II and the Cold War, which placed Canadians (sometimes uncomfortably) within the new American empire. By 1971, as the Vietnam conflict heightened, the conference series ended amidst waning interest and, one suspects, a concern that the tone of the deliberations had become unacceptably shrill.

Discovering the “other” was the central goal for Canadian-American Conference participants. What is most striking is the earnestness, even urgency, of their commitment, and the documents on the CAC collected and preserved at Macalester and the University of Winnipeg (conference programs, private correspondence, newspaper clippings and other notes) reflect this well. What they really did discover about each other is harder to get at, but some evidence is revealing. Without doubt, Winnipeg and Macalester students learned from one another something about the substance of the issues they debated – about diplomacy and economics in the Pacific theatre, for example, or the power dynamics within the United Nations. But they also learned together something about the spirit of scholarly inquiry and the thrill of academic endeavor. “It scarcely seems possible that the Canadians have come and gone already” Macalester student Corinne Tibbetts wrote to her faculty supervisor J.H. Dupre in mid-November 1952.

“I felt, as I know everyone did, the deepest feeling of unity among the group. It seems incredible that such a bond could spring up in so short a time. But something else impressed me, and that was, if I may use a trite phrase, the intellectual challenge. It was people living and using knowledge and minds, caught up [in] the passion of a purpose outside themselves. I feel as if I have a CAC hangover, but it’s the kind I hope will never leave me.”

But clearly the most enlightening “take away” for these students involved perspective: how even neighbors as close as Canadians and Americans could see the world differently. The exchanges were generally reciprocal but asymmetrical. Macalester students discovered that their United College counterparts
knew a great deal about the U.S. and had decided opinions about it. To one observer of the 1958 conference, it felt odd to hear Canadians “telling Americans the reasons for the nature of the American Revolution.” In this, he continued, “Canadians showed broad tolerant understanding.” But as the 1960s progressed, Canadian students used the CAC to voice concern about American Cold War foreign policy, which made their knowledge of American affairs less flattering and these gatherings less comfortable. For their part, Macalester students struggled to understand the perspective of their Canadian neighbors. They scrambled to learn as much about Canada as they could in the months before the conferences took place and they presented creditable historical and position papers. But the documents betray a lasting frustration with the inscrutability of the Canadians – the familiar, “unexotic” other who, for example, could willingly fight alongside Americans in World War II and Korea, but sit it out in Vietnam. In the end, this recognition of difference (and not necessarily its reconciliation) was what the CAC was really all about.

and I had a good idea in early summer 2008. Though I had known of Dr. Bangarth’s scholarship, our paths had just crossed for the first time in Scotland, when we presented separate papers at a conference on migration at the university’s Centre for Canadian Studies. Loath to let the changing of sessions end our discussion, we resolved to carry on at a local establishment, and least until we were each due to meet our respective supper arrangements. We each teach courses on Canadian-American relations and our talk turned, perhaps inevitably, to our students. The problem with my students, she offered, is that they think they know a lot about the United States and have formed some pretty rigid ideas; the challenge with my students, I responded, is that they haven’t been exposed much to Canada, and

American Cold War foreign policy, which made their knowledge of American affairs less flattering and these gatherings less comfortable. For their part, Macalester students struggled to understand the perspective of their Canadian neighbors. They scrambled to learn as much about Canada as they could in the months before the conferences took place and they presented

Now

There’s a little pub not too far from the University of Edinburgh called William McEwan’s Ale House, whose doors have probably been darkened by more than their share of professors seeking respite and refreshment. Like many British pubs, it is dark (and a little sour), but well stocked with a variety of libations. It is there where Stephanie Bangarth
don’t seem to care to be. Talk about a match made in hell. Naturally, we concluded that we have to get them together. So we decided to press for a student conference. How? Funding and distance prohibited any in-person meeting, but Stephanie suggested some simple technology: a web camera and Skype. We could have our own “webinar.” The possibilities opened up at William McEwan’s pub, and we promised to take some concrete steps as soon as we each returned to North America.

For the past two and a half years, students in my upper-level Canadian history courses at Bridgewater State have taken part in a precarious but continuing experiment in Canadian-American student colloquy. Since Spring 2009, my Canadian History classes have each semester been linked via the internet, Skype and a web camera to Dr. Bangarth’s classes on Canadian-American relations at King’s College at University of Western Ontario for one or more sessions. Both classes have read the same sets of scholarly articles to prepare them for the discussion. We have devised a roundtable format: Canadian students first ask BSU students a question; then vice versa, followed by an open floor, when any student could approach the camera and offer his or her ideas. Five or six rounds of questions make up the roundtable, covering normally two hours of discussion. Stephanie and I act as moderators, though very little intervention has been needed.

From that first pilot session in Spring 2009, we have spawned others. In September 2009 and March 2010, we repeated the experiment with our respective classes. The first webinar in Spring 2009 discussed “the Melting Pot versus Multiculturalism;” since then we chose more focused subjects, the War of 1812 (which polite Canadian historians assert that both sides won) and French-Canadian identity. In Fall 2010, we wove into our respective classes three webinar sessions, reprising the War of 1812 session and adding two new subjects—Canadian-American Relations during World War II and Sport and North American nationalisms. In all of our sessions, the students performed very ably and asked to continue the discussion beyond our planned schedule so that they could talk informally about a variety of subjects, including the recent health care debate in the U.S. and the Canadian model. In Fall 2010, Dr. Bangarth suggested that we add an online, post-webinar Message Board so that all students can follow up our classroom colloquy with online chat. Early observations showed us that our students have much more to say about these subjects than our webinar schedule permits; and the Message Board allows for students of all participatory comfort-levels to contribute.

Here, as in Winnipeg and St. Paul so many decades ago, the goal of these webinars is to allow our students to discover the other. There are key differences, of course. The internet has replaced the train as the technology that enables these meetings. They are virtual, moreover, and cannot replace the immediacy of face-to-face colloquy. And yet, it is clear that our students’ “take away” is very similar to those involved in the CAC. I am too close to the experiment just yet to draw objective conclusions, still the students’ responses to assessment questionnaires circulated after every webinar session are telling. They, like the United and Macalester students, are enthusiastically positive about the experience. One of them, BSU’s Tim Brown, echoed Ms. Tibbetts’ sentiment of 60 years ago: “The webinar is worth doing again…and again…and again,” he noted. “It was exciting and encouraging to be involved in a classroom that was so actively thinking, contributing, and listening.” But most revealing to them were the differences in perspective. Almost all of the respondents found the experience both jarring and enlightening. In response to a lively webinar segment on the World War II-era internment of those of Japanese descent in both Canada and the U.S., one respondent remarked: “Not only did people have very different views of things such as racism and nationalism, but each class was also able to teach the other more about their own cultures and politics.” Among our BSU students, most were surprised to find out how much interest Canadian students had in U.S. and American history and how much more there is to know about their neighbors. And as I write this, our Can-Am Message Board is abuzz with entries about Roosevelt, Mackenzie King and World War II, the future of the Canadian oil sands, and the merits and faults of hockey fights! And now I think I understand what Professor Lower and President Turck knew. I am humbled by the students’ intellectual curiosity and by their drive to be active agents in their own discoveries of “other.”

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