

# Collaborative Approaches to the Digital in English Studies

<b>CHAPTER</b>	7
<b>TITLE</b>	From Local Seminars to International Teaching and Learning Exchanges: The Cross-Cultural Collaborations Project
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<b>OVERVIEW</b>	This chapter describes the Cross-Cultural Collaborations project, an international teaching partnership and an evolving cross-cultural, collaborative, and multimodal learning environment whose participating members—scholar-teachers and students—collaborated across institutional, international, and disciplinary borders. The project involved an exchange where students at universities in Sweden and in the United States read, interpreted, and analyzed poetry collaboratively in cross-cultural groups. Central to the chapter are discussions of theoretical and methodological issues related to how informed design and use of virtual environments can make possible communication across the globe and enhanced learning experiences not easily facilitated in traditional environments.
<b>TAGS</b>	collaboration, collaborative, communication, cross-cultural, blogs, exchange, international, letter, literature, learning, networked, poetry, writing
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	<p>TCC she directed the Writing Center, Writing-Across-the-Curriculum, and Online Learning and won the Cowan Award for teaching and service. Academic presentations and workshops in the U.S. and abroad have focused on electronic communication and multimodal projects for active learning in online and mixed-mode classes. Publication topics include reflective electronic portfolios and computer-mediated communication for writing, literature, and throughout the curriculum.</p> <p>Art Young is Robert S. Campbell Chair and Professor of English Emeritus at Clemson University. He is the founder and coordinator (1990-2009) of Clemson's communication-across-the-curriculum program, a university-wide initiative to improve the communication abilities of all Clemson students. In 2002, Art received the Exemplar Award from the Conference on College Composition and Communication for outstanding achievement in teaching, research, and service. In December 2004, he received Clemson's Class of 1939 Award for Faculty Excellence. Art is the author of <i>Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum</i> (Prentice-Hall, 4th edition, 2006). He is co-editor of five books on writing across the curriculum: <i>Electronic Communication Across the Curriculum</i>, 1998; <i>Programs and Practices: Writing Across the Secondary Curriculum</i>, 1994; <i>Programs That Work: Models and Methods for Writing Across the Curriculum</i>, 1990; <i>Writing Across the Disciplines: Research into Practice</i>, 1986; <i>Language Connections: Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum</i>, 1982.</p> <p>Linda Bradley is a Ph.D. student and lecturer in the Division for Language and Communication, Chalmers University of Technology, Göteborg, Sweden, where she teaches language and communication courses for computer science and software engineering. Her current research focuses on language learning and technology, investigating engineering student interaction, communication, and linguistic production in Web-based environments within higher education. In addition to studying student collaboration and intercultural learning on Web-based platforms, Linda has a general interest in self-directed learning on emergent mobile devices.</p>
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## **From Local Seminars to International Teaching and Learning Exchanges: The Cross-Cultural Collaborations Project**

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**Donna Reiss**

**Art Young**

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Increasing attention to globalization and technology in the higher education arena, especially as these topics relate to the international exchange of information and to distance learning, leads to new opportunities for cross-cultural, collaborative teaching and learning. Teacher-scholars as well as students are no longer limited to teaming with peers in their departments, on campus, or in the same geographical vicinity. They are able to use the Internet to share responsibility for planning and implementing or for pursuing interactive, multimodal learning activities for enhanced learning and communication across the globe.

The Cross-Cultural Collaborations project—a poetry-focused electronic discussion activity that we have used in our courses for over five years—offers a representative example of an international teaching partnership and an evolving cross-cultural, collaborative, and multimodal learning environment (Figure 1). The assignment involves an exchange where students read, interpret, and analyze poetry collaboratively in cross-cultural groups set up to include students of Magnus Gustafsson at [Chalmers University of Technology](#), Göteborg, Sweden; students of Art Young at [Clemson University](#) in South Carolina; and students of Donna Reiss at [Tidewater Community College](#) in southeastern Virginia and at Clemson University.



**Figure 1.** Screenshot from [Cross-Cultural Collaborations project Web site](#).



The exchanges are designed to increase student understanding of poetry, poetic language, and the various ways in which different contexts—including digital ones—help promote communication about and insight into poetry. This increased understanding is reflected in the students' ability to discuss the assigned poetry within an online community of readers. The guiding idea behind these exchanges was our observation that, regardless of their home country or native tongue, students tend to be hesitant about discussing poetry and many students perceive poetry as difficult and foreign. This seems true for classroom discussions as well as for the written work students produce when analyzing or interpreting poetry.

Our guiding pedagogical method has been to provide a comfortable online writing-to-learn space, initially with a learning management system and later with blogs, where poetry can be discussed in an informal yet structured way. The asynchronous online forum provides an opportunity for students to construct a written argument about poetry for an audience of peers and to generate a body of text that can serve as the first step in a writing process leading toward a more formal and traditional approach to analyzing and interpreting poetry. It has been especially important to us that students are provided with a social context for exploring poetry, emulating, as it were, the knowledge production of a literary community. A secondary purpose for the exchanges is that they begin to prepare students for life beyond the university, where an understanding of the complexity of diverse cultures and an ability to communicate cross-culturally, particularly through new technologies, is becoming increasingly important (Levy, 2007).

The Cross-Cultural Collaborations project covers five years of exchanges between 2004-2008, and one additional exchange in 2010, among teachers and students at the three diverse educational institutions mentioned previously. While we all have backgrounds in literature, we met first in contexts of writing and educational development geared toward improving student learning and writing across the curriculum as well as within the disciplines. Hence, there has been a central connection between, on the one hand, a desire to experiment with ways of improving student writing in combination with discussing and analyzing poetry and, on the other, a desire to take advantage of opportunities for online and multimodal composing.

The Cross-Cultural Collaborations project is designed to meet our team's unique goals, but we hope that our meta-description communicates the project's essential components in ways that are relevant to readers who might want to use similar assignment designs in their own English studies courses, where poetry may or may not be a central focus. We particularly try to emphasize the

importance of establishing a shared teaching culture among the facilitators, selecting a flexible and comfortable genre through which students will communicate, and carefully choosing prompts and setting up groups. We also believe it is significant that the three of us were never part of the student conversations, and we want to emphasize that students need to take ownership of the exchange activity by participating actively and sharing responsibility with group members. This type of collaborative peer-learning effort appears to enhance the learning experience.

## **STARTING POINTS**

While we are not aware of projects comparable in character and methodology to the Cross-Cultural Collaboration exchanges, pedagogical and methodological literature informed the design of our framework. For example, Boud, Cohen, and Sampson's (2001) work on peer learning and Starke-Meyerring and Wilson's (2008) work on "globally networked learning environments" has been influential. Additionally, a fundamental dimension of the exchange activity—its constructive alignment—was shaped by the work of John Biggs (Biggs, 1999; Biggs, 2003; Biggs & Tang, 2007).

When designing the exchanges for our Cross-Cultural Collaboration project, we were familiar with the literature on electronically mediated peer learning. For example, research suggests that the choice of peer learning environment affects the learning outcomes of a specific peer-oriented activity (Warschauer, 1997; Thorne, 2003; Levy, 2004; Dippold, 2009). Furthermore, participants in online forums tend to generate more feedback (Schultz, 2000; DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001; Ware & Warschauer, 2006), and electronically mediated peer learning may generate greater task focus (Ware & Warschauer, 2006). However, while the effects of pedagogy and the learning environment are discussed in the peer learning literature, what does not seem to be frequently discussed is how genre affects peer learning activities. Overall, the focus has tended to be on peer review and essay or report feedback. Exceptions here often refer to learning environments and activities that are part of larger collaborative learning environments (Artemeva & Logie, 2003; Gunersel & Simpson, 2009). Our discussion of the Cross-Cultural Collaboration learning exchanges offers an additional perspective to the literature by focusing attention on a more multifaceted peer writing activity and another genre, the letter.

Our particular interest in global rather than local electronically mediated peer learning activities led us to research related to "globally networked learning

environments” (GNLEs) (Starke-Meyerring & Wilson, 2008). The GNLEs we have encountered in the literature so far have been international exchanges involving two or more groups of students and countries with shared learning outcomes for the GNLE activities (Starke-Meyerring & Andrews, 2006; Paretti, McNair, & Holloway-Attaway, 2007; Herrington, 2008). One important point made in this literature is that teachers are advised to be more specific in their instructions when the learning environment is a collaborative globally networked one (Paretti, McNair, & Holloway-Attaway, 2007).

Similar advice regarding teacher task or instruction design is also articulated in the Weblog literature. Blogs lend themselves to collaborative work, but Murray and Hourigan (2008) advise that, due to the wide variety of potential educational applications for blogs, “the question of task creation and design lies firmly in the hands of the teacher” (p. 85). So, mere learning by doing in GNLEs or blogs is insufficient. Reflective meta-knowledge is necessary for successful GNLEs.

Starke-Meyerring and Andrews (2006) claim that “success in an intercultural team project very much depends on the extent to which students are able to build a shared learning culture that facilitates sharing of knowledge. To facilitate the development of such a shared learning culture among students, faculty first must develop a shared teaching culture themselves” (p. 45). In our interpretation of Starke-Meyerring and Andrews’s framework, the emphasis on a shared teaching and learning culture is crucial and one important but implicit dimension of it is its articulation as “[constructive alignment](#)” (Biggs, 1999; Biggs, 2003; Biggs & Tang, 2007). Biggs’s description of constructive alignment as the effort to enhance intended learning outcomes by ensuring that learning outcomes, learning activities, learning criteria, learning assessment, and learning feedback are all aligned with the student profile requires the teacher-scholar to re-assess the entire learning environment. This is a demanding task in an isolated campus-based course and increasingly so if we fully consider the potential of GNLEs and Web technology to enhance students’ learning. In short, constructive alignment becomes even more important, and possibly more demanding on the facilitator, in a Web-based global learning environment.

## **OVERVIEW OF PROJECT EVOLUTION AND INSTRUCTOR COLLABORATION**

Over the years, the Cross-Cultural Collaboration project has varied slightly and the student groups as well as the courses and poetry selections have changed. On the American side, the participating students have come from various

subdisciplines and educational levels within English studies, teacher education, and engineering programs, whereas on the Swedish side there have been only engineering students from a technical university, most of them Swedish but some international master's students. The Swedish group has been part of an elective [Fiction for Engineers](#) course, which students tend to take in their third or fourth year at the university. The course contexts for the U.S. students, however, have varied more. The cross-cultural nature of the exchange has been enhanced not only by participants from Sweden and the U.S. but also by the presence in our classes of students from other countries such as China, Spain, France, Germany, Poland, and Afghanistan.

The most immediate background for the first five years of this ongoing project is that the three of us recognized how most of our students, including those taking Young's master's degree courses in literary studies, struggled with poetry. Not surprisingly, the general education students in Reiss's sophomore literature classes and the science and engineering students in Gustafsson's class on literature for engineers similarly found poetry more challenging to read and interpret than prose. So, we were all seeking ways to give students experience with as well as an increased understanding of poetry. With this purpose in mind, for their first discussion we selected three poems by a Swedish poet, [Tomas Tranströmer](#), who is often anthologized and well translated. Tranströmer's poems not only invited students to collaborate around interpretation of meaning; they also facilitated a discussion of translation from Swedish to English, which included close reading, careful analysis, and the added dimension of cultural distinctions between words and phrases in Swedish and English. Hence, the first exchange was formed around issues of the interpretative act of translating poetry while maintaining a perfectly authentic peer-to-peer audience situation.

From the beginning, we recognized the potential for the Internet to facilitate our collaborative planning and our students' discussions. In particular, we were interested in utilizing online environments to generate authentic audiences for reading and writing about poetry. In the first couple of years, the virtual environment was a Web-based forum in a learning management system at Chalmers University of Technology. In subsequent years, we used a free blog site so that the discussion would not be tied to any one educational institution and would be more open and available, even after the semester ended. In fact, some of these blog sites and the overall Web site for the project remain [online](#). Students found it easier to access the blog and to use it to share their writing with others. Additionally, we took advantage of the wealth of online resources to ask

students to share their responses to poetry not only with words but with multimodal compositions as well.

Although the exchanges have changed shape with regard to the poetry discussed and the virtual environment used, the format of the exchanges has remained similar over the years. Each exchange has run over a short, intensive period ranging between one to two weeks and has been shaped by a series of three or four short letters ranging from 250 to 350 words per letter exchanged by students in asynchronous environments. There is also a set of readings with some supporting online material through links to external or internal Web pages. Approaches to introducing students to the assignment have varied from hardly any introduction at all beyond a presentation of the setup and the assignment objectives to more sustained workshop sessions and references to exchange work in previous courses.

The first two years of the poetry exchange ([2004](#), [2005](#)) established the basic framework for all subsequent years: an informal exchange of short letters over a limited period of time. We were also able to design the first version of the prompts necessary to generate discussion among U.S. and Swedish students of different disciplines. The first two exchanges helped us decide future group setup and management strategies, including the amount and type of writing to be expected. Regardless of the specific technology used, the exchange relies very heavily on the students' own writing. That being said, the choice of technology does affect how accessible the exchanges are to students and how smoothly they proceed.

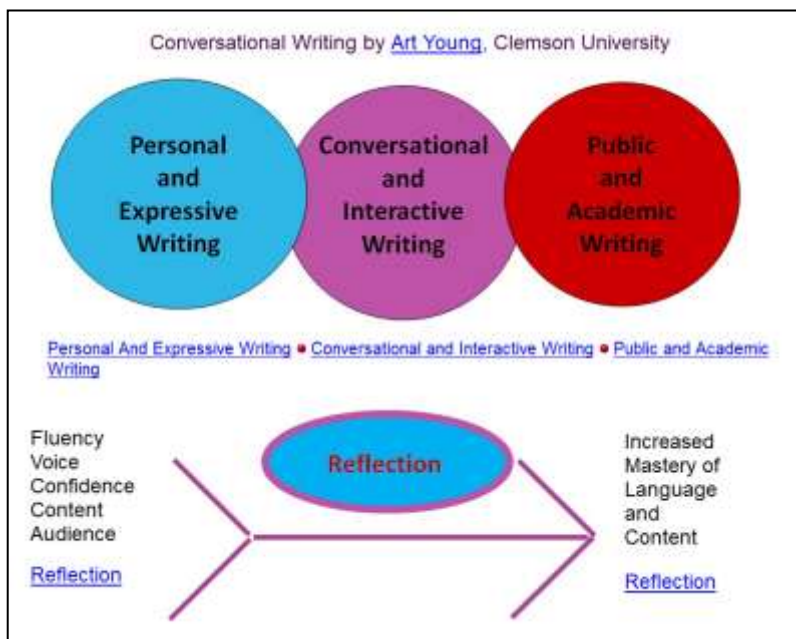
For the next three years of the project (2006-2008), both the content and the form changed as the exchange moved to a blog environment and to completely different selections of poetry. In [2006](#), we selected "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T. S. Eliot. From having at first worked cross-culturally with poetry and translation of poetry, the exchange now focused on the long poem by a native English speaker with connections to his birthplace in the U.S. and his adopted European home in England. Although there was no longer the element of translating poetry, there was still a cross-cultural component in the poetry with its British English usages—and Eliot's "Prufrock" is perhaps less immediately associated with the U.S. than Emily Dickinson, whom we turned to for the exchanges in [2007](#) and [2008](#).

During the 2007-2008 exchanges, we also made some changes in the structure, since Reiss relocated from Tidewater Community College in Virginia to Clemson University, resulting in an exchange between two universities but still with three

quite different courses and student populations involved. At the same time, Young taught a different course at Clemson, where discussions of Eliot's poetry were less closely connected to the curriculum; as a result, the team decided to use poetry by Emily Dickinson instead. The 2008 exchange was also different from the others because there were only two groups of students involved due to Reiss's retirement: Gustafsson's Fiction for Engineers students at Chalmers and Young's master's level students of Victorian poetry at Clemson.

The complex nature of the project and the need for diverse expertise and technical abilities made a partnership essential. We shared backgrounds in literature and interest in Web technologies, but each of us made unique contributions to the exchange setup. Reiss and Young were familiar with online writing exchanges in higher education and were editors with Dickie Selfe of [Electronic Communication Across the Curriculum](#) (1998).

Reiss had extensive experience conducting entire classes online and has experimented with various forms, technologies, prompts, groups, and assignment types. Young's work in communication across the curriculum also influenced the exchanges in another way, as his "[Classroom Discourse and Communication Across the Curriculum](#)" chart and "Conversational Writing" guide (see Figure 2) are central to the type of informal writing assignment that was developed.



**Figure 2.** Young's "[Conversational Writing](#)" guide.

Gustafsson provided a background first in working with literature and poetry in the context of engineering education but perhaps more importantly in working with texts in a foreign language. Although his class was conducted in English, only very rarely have there been native English speakers in the courses at his university. Additionally, he brought to the project an understanding of students from a wide range of cultures, not only from Sweden but also from Asia and Central Europe.

Our shared goals have meant that the work has been collaborative in nature even when we have assumed individual responsibilities. For instance, Reiss developed the project Web site and blog sites, and she was responsible for the communication of the letter prompts as well as the choice of linked background material. Gustafsson was responsible for setting up the 2004 and 2005 learning platform to share documents and spaces for interaction as well as strategies for setting up groups. Young has been influential in the design of the assignment and the choice of poetry along with the writing-to-learn emphasis of the prompts. Naturally, emphases have changed over the run of the project and all decisions about these changes have been collective.

We first considered the possibility of a student exchange during a conference hosted by Gustafsson at Chalmers in 2003, where we discussed our common interest in the ways online communication can strengthen both writing and learning throughout the curriculum. Subsequently, we developed the first version of the exchange via e-mail correspondence and Skype conferences together with a few exchanges of comments through the learning platform that was eventually used for the student exchange. Almost all team communication and planning has been conducted asynchronously online.

### **CONTINUOUS DEVELOPMENT FOR CONSTRUCTIVE ALIGNMENT IN A GLOBAL WRITING-TO-LEARN EXCHANGE**

The ongoing development of the exchange has been a shared project involving the three of us reading and re-reading the exchange each year to assess to what extent the student work matches our general and shared learning outcomes as well as the specific learning outcomes set by each facilitator. The exchange has been scheduled at different parts of the term, which has affected the amount of reading experience students bring with them into the conversations. Similarly, the exchange has affected how each of us used other subsequent assignments in our specific courses since it was possible to refer back to the learning outcomes of the exchange.

In short, the central tenets of constructive alignment—aligning outcomes, activities, and assessment against student profiles—have constituted the recurring development challenge of the exchange for the three of us. Our alignment efforts have focused on the use of the technology, the design of and revision of the prompts, and the group setup for the exchanges. We have not spent a great deal of effort, as a team, on revision of specific learning outcomes or on assessment of the exchange and the learning outcomes, as those dimensions of the exchange have been specific to each participating course. We did, however, align our three courses and our understanding of the educational contexts in terms of shared learning outcomes, results we all wanted the exchange to promote.

### SHARED LEARNING OUTCOMES: THE STARTING POINT

We agreed upon shared learning outcomes for all the students in the Cross-Cultural Collaboration project, even though the project played a somewhat different role in our courses each year, since each course had a different topic and student audience. It is important, we believe, that the exchange methodology has this dynamic dimension of allowing slightly different course objectives and learning outcomes among the participating courses. There must be agreed upon learning outcomes for all students (such as to experience close reading of poetry in our case), but there may also be specific and different learning outcomes for each participating class.

Here is an annotated list of our shared learning outcomes:

1. To read literature carefully, attentively, critically, and imaginatively by also connecting literature to other artistic expressions in the visual and performing arts

*We think we accomplished this for most students in all three groups and we guided the learning activities with [written directions](#) to students.*

#### **Example of prompt to get students to focus on the text:**

You might begin by discussing the title in the context of the poem. You might mention two or three words or short phrases that seem to be central or quite important to the poem. For each word or phrase you select, write a few sentences of your own referring back to the poem in order to explain why you think they are important. You might even want to look them up in



a good dictionary to further your understanding of how poetic language works.

2. To discuss new understandings and perspectives about how literature works

*Many of our students admitted to not reading much literature and even more to not reading or studying poetry. The setup of the exchanges addressed this well by providing a low-stakes environment for exploring poetry and by bringing students into conversation with one another.*

**Example of prompt designed to include the entire group in the conversation and encourage collaboration:**

Before you compose your Letter 2, read all the Letter 1 submissions and any second letters already posted by members of your group. In your Letter 2, addressed to your entire group, refer specifically to at least two members of the group by name, attempting to cite at least two groupmates whose Letter 1 submissions have not already been cited by others if possible. Please respond to at least one person not in your class.

In your Letter 2, identify and explain how one or more keywords and reflective comments by groupmates contributed to your understanding of the poem. Comment on ways in which their interpretations are similar to and/or different from your own. This response can also be personal, connecting your own understanding and experience with what you learned from reading the poem and from your group. Don't hesitate to quote briefly from your groupmates' letters and from the poem.

3. To articulate how they experience and observe the way people from different cultures respond to the same text

*We think the discussions demonstrated cultural differences. These differences were addressed, for example, in the multimedia choices the students made but obviously also in their interpretations of metaphors and their understanding of setting and scenery.*

**Example of cross-cultural references and close reading of Tomas Tranströmer's "Breathing Space: July" from a student conversation:**

Thank you especially to Cheryl and Sandra for you[r] references to slowing down and basking. I failed to see that when I initially read the interpretations. Sandra's remarks about the "forever longed for Swedish summer" helped put it in perspective. With the very mild winters and the summer heat and humidity we have here in South Carolina (and in Tidewater Virginia as well), I failed to see the appeal that July would have in Sweden. For those of us that don't like the oppressive heat, "July" hardly evokes a time when we could slow down and breath[e] easy. Only serves to illustrate that not only the author's context, but the reader's context, will affect the interpretation of a work. [Karen, Clemson]

4. To define and negotiate disciplinary considerations such as the intention of the author, effects of translation where relevant, personal response, and critical response

*For instance, some students said "Prufrock" made them "sad," while others critically examined the use of time in the poem. Some students reacted to specifics in Tranströmer's work, whereas others focused on the confusion regarding pronouns in the translation. Sometimes the same student responded in both personal and critical ways.*

**Examples of defining and negotiating interpretation from students' conversations:**

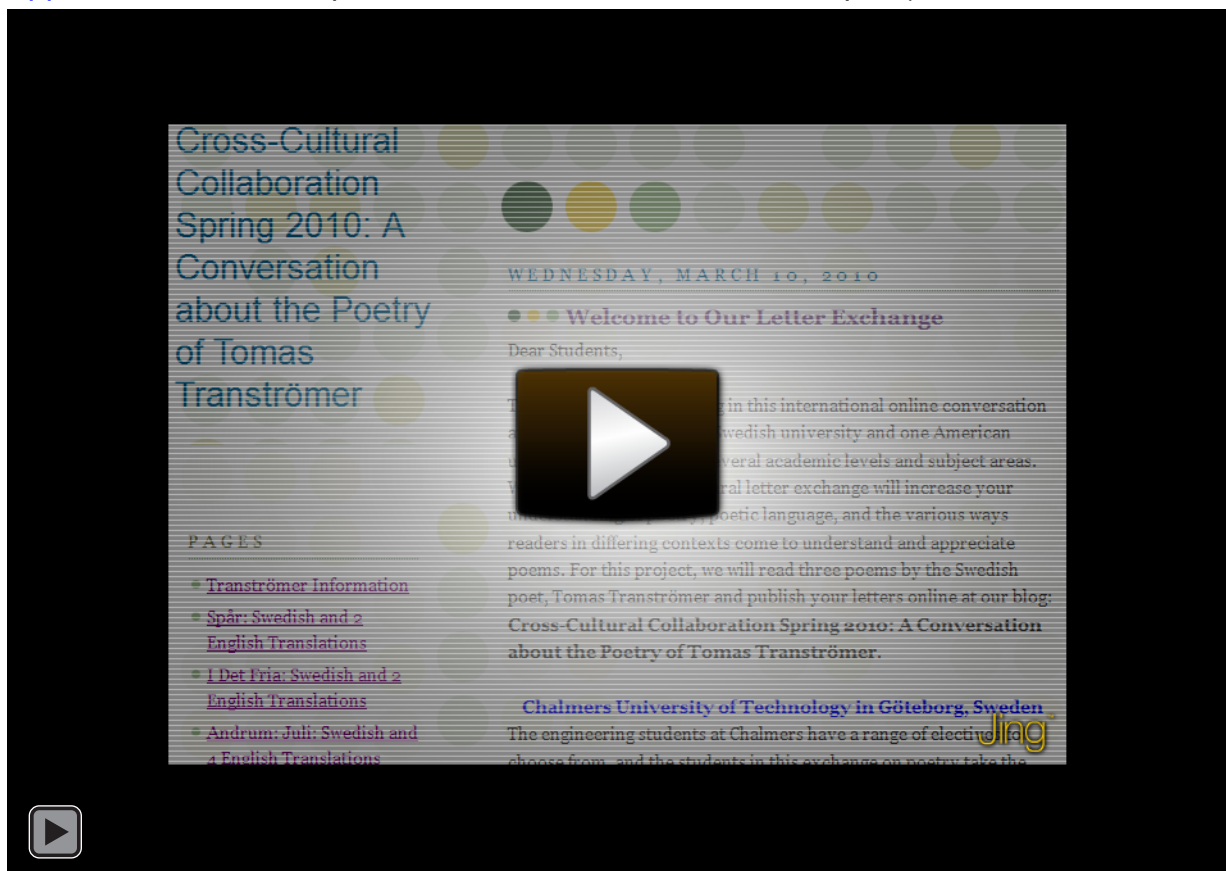
Hello group! Thanks for your feedback.... : ) I am glad that Matt found my thoughts, on the "In the room women come and go talking of Michelangelo" verse, rather good. I've been thinking a lot about that verse. I think that the use of mermaids and the fact that they will never sing to him, also might suggest that he feels very separate from society. He can't get that magical love and freedom, which mermaids have. The idea that he is not "one with" society does seem to exist within the poem. For another example he only "watches" the lonely men smoking, indicating that he is not even a part of that group. He feels like he doesn't belong anywhere.

I hope you all will have a great week! Best regards, Ana-Marija [Chalmers]

Wonderful idea, Fredrick! : ) "I am quite sure though, that it has quite little to do with love to some woman or person. I think it more has to do with love to writing . . ." . . . But what really caught my attention about this statement is your comment about the poem really being about writing itself (or more specifically the writing of poetry). Then more I think about it the more it makes sense.

What if the mermaids who won't sing are actually the muses of his poetry? What if what he really is worried about is that the "muse of poetry" might leave him and he will be unable to write great poetry? What if this is a love song to the "muse," more like a plea to the "muse" to come and visit him? . . . I'll have to think on it more to get a better idea of how Prufrock's (Eliot's?) fear of losing his skill or talent or gift of writing great poetry. [Amanda, Clemson]

The following video about the blog-based letter exchange offers a representative example of and a student perspective on these first four learning outcomes. (See [Appendix A](#) for transcripts of the videos included in this chapter.)



5. To develop and share personal and interpersonal connections to the literature they are reading and express their own voices and perspectives

*Individually and collectively many students discovered their own voices, such as when one student played Prokofiev's Romeo & Juliet (his favorite), shared it with his group members, and connected it to "Prufrock."*

**Example of developing and sharing personal connections from a student conversation:**

In 1937 Sergej Prokofiev wrote a piano suite from his ballet "Romeo and Juliet". In the beginning of the suite the feelings portrayed are of pure love, but gradually the theme moves closer to death and pain of lost love. So this is one thing that could be related to Prufrock, although it is pretty dark from the beginning. In the tenth and final piece of the suite ("Romeo with Julia before parting" the feeling has grown very eerie and tragic. If you listen closely you can hear the time running in the first bars. As I interpret it, Romeo and Juliet have a last moment together, and they remember their happy times (2:34, 4:44), but constantly the darkness of the moment interrupts (as dark tolling octaves in the bass, 03:47). In Prufrock this can be related to him remembering moments of "tea and cakes" etc....It's interesting to see that some ways of expressing evolved their counterparts in different types of art at approximately the same time. Both Eliot and Prokofiev were groundbreaking, and both used "classical" art as a basis and augmented it with new "twisted" ideas....I am quite fanatical about this piece and I am practicing it now. [Jacob, Chalmers]

6. To reflect on their learning and their rhetorical and intellectual growth

*The exchange always had prompts to get students to reflect on the nature of poetic interpretation, poetic language, and on the online cross-cultural learning environment. The single most frequently recurring piece of reflection is probably the negotiated character of poetic interpretation and the nature of the interpretive horizon.*

**Examples of student reflections:**

I also found the discussion about different translations inspiring. It made it obvious how written language really is a two-part way of communication and the message is only transferred after being “translated” by both the writer and the reader. [Erik, Chalmers]

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Poetry as a visual art has never been so real to me as it is now, after reading the third letters. [Meredith, Clemson]

7. To build fluency, confidence, and respectful approaches in writing to distant and unfamiliar audiences and thus learn to behave as scholars in the community of readers
8. To actively participate in an ongoing academic conversation about literature in which expertise is developed, shared, and valued within the group by suggesting individual and communal interpretations supported by textual evidence from the poetry as well as from the community of readers

*Learning outcomes 7 and 8 focus on the learning-to-write outcome we hoped for. In this sense, they are different from the other six outcomes. The focus of these outcomes, unlike the previous ones, is on effective writing and conversing rather than effective reading.*

**ALIGNING THE TECHNOLOGY**

Naturally, the choice of tool also affects the outcomes of peer learning activities such as our poetry exchanges. Since the project is conducted entirely online, a key concern over the years has been the choice of technology and the effects technology has had on the exchange itself. Warschauer (1997), Godwin-Jones (2003), Thorne (2003), Levy and Kennedy (2004), and Dippold (2009) all show how computer-mediated tools have specific effects and that they can thus be used suboptimally. So for instance, Dippold’s (2009) case study shows us how the blog format lends itself to structural and content-oriented concerns but may be less effective for later order concerns such as mechanics and grammar. Even more important, though, are the affordances inherent in the technology and the learning curve students face when they first start using the tool. As Sotillo (2005) and later Dippold (2009) show in their studies, understanding the tool takes time and may have to become part of the assignment.

On a similar note, Ware and Warschauer (2006) add that the instructor's view of the tool can also enhance or subvert the activity. The importance of the instructor is also described in many studies related to computer-aided language learning (CALL). Such studies have highlighted risks of Web 2.0 technology in terms of negotiation of meaning as well as the negative effects of overlooking the inherent sociocultural component of Web 2.0 interventions (Ware & Kramsch, 2005; Blake, 2007; Thorne & Black, 2007). However, in the same way that Starke-Meyerring and Andrews (2006) have stressed the importance of articulating a shared learning philosophy for GNLEs, Thorne and Black (2007) have argued that Web 2.0 CALL interventions "necessitate a responsive and proactive vision of educational practice" (p. 133). This new practice calls for new roles for facilitators and by implication a renegotiation of assumptions about learning. In other words, the choice and use of technology is tightly coupled with design considerations of how the students are meant to negotiate and interact in relation to the instructions we provide. Such design ideas, in turn, are informed by the learning culture of instructors. The fact that we did not intervene in conversations is but one example of this practice.

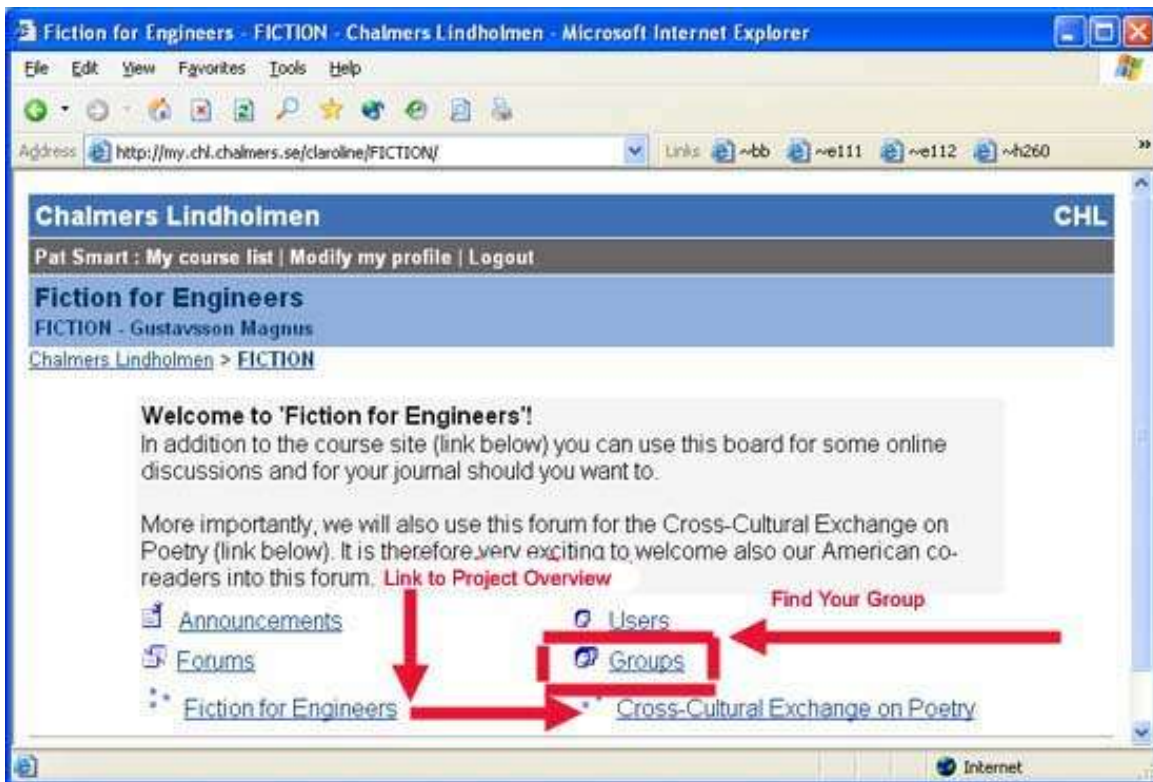
No matter which Web technology facilitates the exchange, it should be possible for students and instructors to trace the interaction's development within the groups based on the guidelines given, from introducing elements to be analyzed in a poem, to presenting strategies for discussing and interpreting poetry, to referring to the outcomes that promote new insights. Collaborative development of assignments required flexibility to ensure that student learning outcomes would take priority over technological experimentation and that disparate groups of students would profit from each exchange.

That being said, the role of technology—and the importance of tool choice—deserves attention. Appropriate Web-based tools can facilitate collaboration among teacher-scholars and among students, and tool choice can support or undermine objectives. An exchange involving interpretation and analysis may be achieved through e-mail or a listserv, and some exchange projects using such technologies have been successful. For example, writing about an interdisciplinary exchange between students at urban, predominately African-American Howard University in Washington D.C. and students at rural, predominately Caucasian Montana State University, Teresa M. Redd (1998) concluded that "the personal yet faceless nature of e-mail encouraged students to write candidly.... it transformed some of my procrastinating essay writers into prolific e-mailers. The frank and frequent exchanges opened several students' eyes, minds, and hearts" (p. 140). Similarly, University of Rhode Island students

engaged in e-mail exchanges with students from University of Bilkent in Turkey and Technical University Braunschweig in Germany (Shamoon, 1998). E-mail was perhaps the most technologically convenient way to structure an exchange in the 1990s, before the advent of widely available user-friendly social networks, but we did not attempt the e-mail solution since it struck us as cumbersome and did not provide the type of interaction we believed would be most beneficial to the Cross-Cultural Collaboration project.

Instead of e-mail or a listserv, we chose, first, the discussion forum feature of a shared learning platform and, then, a blog for the exchange experience. Discussion forums and blogs both allow for the kind of dynamic interaction and content synthesis we wanted to facilitate. In the end, the forum environment we first used for the exchanges proved cumbersome, as we will discuss in a moment, and Weblogs proved to be the more technologically efficient and effective option.

The first technology we tested was an open-source e-learning platform, [Claroline](#), set up on one of the servers at Chalmers University of Technology in Sweden, where it was already used in other courses (see Figure 3). We used this platform by registering students and setting up groups and thus getting past restrictions normally imposed on guests in the system. There were only minor issues to be decided on in terms of the platform, such as whether or not the many fora were to be open in order to permit posting and viewing by all participants. We decided against opening the fora and instead set up closed groups to minimize the amount of possible confusion and the risk of losing track of misplaced letters. We did decide, however, to open the fora after the last deadline and add a general forum for possible joint discussions.



**Figure 3.** Claroline page from the 2004 Cross-Cultural Poetry Exchange. The page was part of Fiction for Engineers and the U.S. students were invited as guests.

Predictably, there were some technology-related issues, such as [login problems](#) and students having difficulties seeing the structure of the fora and being unfamiliar with posting to threads. So, in a few instances, we had to intercede and move posts between threads. This did affect the exchange and seemed to turn student attention away from the exchange objectives and toward the technology (cf. Sotillo, 2005; Dippold, 2009). Secondly, it required a fair amount of administrative work to get around firewalls and arrange groups. Thirdly, this approach did prioritize one university over the other two and the U.S. students were literally “guests” in the system (cf. Starke-Meyerring & Andrews, 2006, who highlight very similar reasons for abandoning university-specific platforms for exchanges such as these).

We needed a more efficient environment, one that provided students with a more immediate view of how a discussion evolves and one that increased the sense of interaction and audience immediacy compared to threaded messages. For the 2006 exchange, we used another platform for the writing-to-learn activity. The institutional learning platform environment was abandoned and a blog was tested instead, using Google’s free Blogger publishing tool (see Figure 4). We found



that blogs provide an easy way to open an online discussion to an audience beyond a single classroom.



**Figure 4.** Cross-Cultural Collaboration [project blog](#), 2006.

We were in charge of our own technical support, so a simple blog platform was a good alternative to the course management system. The blog provided students with easy access and reduced our workload in terms of arranging groups.

Students simply added their comments to the group they found their names in and we did not have to set up group associations. The blog also meant that it was possible to invite but not require cross-reading between groups and we did see some signs of such skimming of other groups' exchanges.

In addition to these group-related effects, the public nature of the blog increased the sense of audience as anyone might happen upon the blog even if the primary audience was still the group members. Although no "outsiders" ever entered the blog, students recognized the medium itself as public, in contrast with password-protected and university-sanctioned course management systems. We informed our students that the project site was open to Web searches and that interested non-students had the ability to both read and join the discussion. Each student signed a form stating that he or she understood the public nature of blog contributions; the students' audience awareness and their privacy were important to us and to them. At the same time, students faced the challenge of writing to more than one audience: teachers, classmates, groupmates in other classes and

countries, and potentially non-affiliated readers who happened upon the blog because of an interest in the discussion topics.

Like the editors of *Into the Blogosphere*, we expected the blog interface to “allow for the possibility of developing new cultural practices of online communication in relation to previously established modes of ownership, authorship, and legitimacy of content and access to information” (Gurak, Antonijevic, Johnson, Ratliff, & Reyman, 2005). Additionally, whether or not students had used the blogging platform before, the interface was similar to the shared multimedia online writing environments familiar to most twenty-first-century students and therefore felt more comfortable to them.

Although we changed environments, we continued to use the letter genre as the students’ mode of communication. It could be argued that we did not use the blog affordances completely, and other educators planning cross-cultural exchanges may decide to take a different approach depending on their pedagogical goals. In our case, however, our goal was to use the blog platform’s flexibility to facilitate the activity and promote the learning outcomes we already had in place. We did not want to revise the assignment or learning outcomes when we moved to the blog since we believed (a belief that was subsequently confirmed) that the poetry-related learning outcomes would continue to be met with the letter format.

## **ALIGNING THE PROMPTS**

The single most decisive feature of the exchange is the mechanism of the letter since that genre provides ample opportunity for students to engage in close reading not only of each others’ writing but more importantly of the poetry as they revisit it to pursue their own or someone else’s interpretation. In selecting the letter format, we chose a genre that was familiar but that also engaged students in the full spectrum scholarly discussion and emphasized the social nature of writing (Bazerman, 2000). We found that the unproblematic form of the letter increased the probability that students would focus on content and learning objectives rather than on adapting to a partially new or less known format, and it allowed students to write their comments in a low-stakes environment and style. In other words, the choice of genre and our decision to enact an “epistolary pedagogy” (Reiss, 2000) increased the immediacy of the exchange and promoted writing-to-learn outcomes.

Framing the exchange as a series of letters helped promote collaboration among peers. By including informal greetings and closings, the posts anticipated an

audience and invited a response. The fact that we, as facilitators, decided to remain outside the exchange also contributed to the peer-directed collaborative atmosphere. Throughout, we were only visible online through posting the prompts and taking care of administrative tasks. We did not participate in the exchange; the writing done in the exchange, therefore, was not oriented toward reporting to teachers but toward collaborating with fellow students. After we addressed some initial student uncertainty regarding audience and level of formality, the students quickly established a shared conversational register. This more informal and conversational but highly informative writing to a genuine audience was purposeful enough that as facilitators we never had to intervene.

Once we arrived at our shared understanding of what the exchange needed to achieve for the three courses, work started on the prompts for the three or four letters. As the prompts reveal ([Tranströmer prompts](#); [Eliot prompts](#); [Dickinson prompts](#)), we first asked students to introduce themselves in order to make the exchange more personal.

**Example of personal introduction prompt:**

Here is an example of a prompt from 2007 (Letter 1): “Include within your letter one or two sentences to introduce yourself to the group, for example, your name, which class you are taking, which university, and your academic interest or emphasis. You can say something about your previous experience with poetry as well, if you like.”

We also asked students to focus on keywords—important words or short phrases from the poems—in order to highlight each student’s individual close reading experience. By requiring participants to connect to keywords supplied by other readers and explain how those keywords had contributed to their understanding of the poetic text, the second letter emphasized the effect of being part of a reading community. Specifically, we asked participants to comment on posts that had not already been commented on to ensure that all participants received a response to their writing and to minimize repetition. A key point here is that all students participate in the conversation, which often is not true in face-to-face classes. The asynchronous setup also affords students time to compose and revise responses instead of quickly writing the first opinion that occurs to them. To some extent, the prompts for the first two letters also invite students into a type of discussion similar to scholarly conversations in terms of close-reading and collaborative interpretation with textual references.

An additional component of the exchange called for students to relate their poetry reading to creative expressions in other forms.

**Example of multimedia learning prompt:**

This example from 2007 (Letter 3) shows how we introduced multimedia learning connections into the poetry exchange: “Second, either create or find another representation of the theme or mood of ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,’ for example, an illustration or music or another poem. You will need to locate or post this additional representation online so your partners can access it on the Web. Third, explain fully the relationship between the representation you have selected or composed and your understanding of ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.’”

As Kress (2003) has aptly articulated, “language alone cannot give us access to the meaning of the multimodally constituted message” (p. 35), and we believe that adding this multimodal component promotes a more comprehensive interpretation of the poetry. However, as a recurring and central characteristic of these exchanges, it was crucial that this prompt not merely result in a list of links or pictures and no interaction. The prompt therefore required students to relate to other readers’ choices of complementary media and explain how the expressions affected their reading and understanding.

**Examples of multimodal expressions of learning (student conversations):**

I’ve always admired the painting by Salvador Dali: The Persistence of Memory. I think it is representative of The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock by the melting away of time. The entire poem reflects on time in some form. The word is seen 11 times in lines 23-48. Also, in the song Time by Hootie and the Blowfish the question is asked: “Time, why you punish me? Like a wave bashing into the shore, you wash away my dreams.” The song personifies time and its overwhelming presence. Time, in a sense, controls everything and we must learn to make the best of what little we have. Prufrock does not understand this—he is unable to take a stand and do something about his situation. [Marigrace, Clemson]

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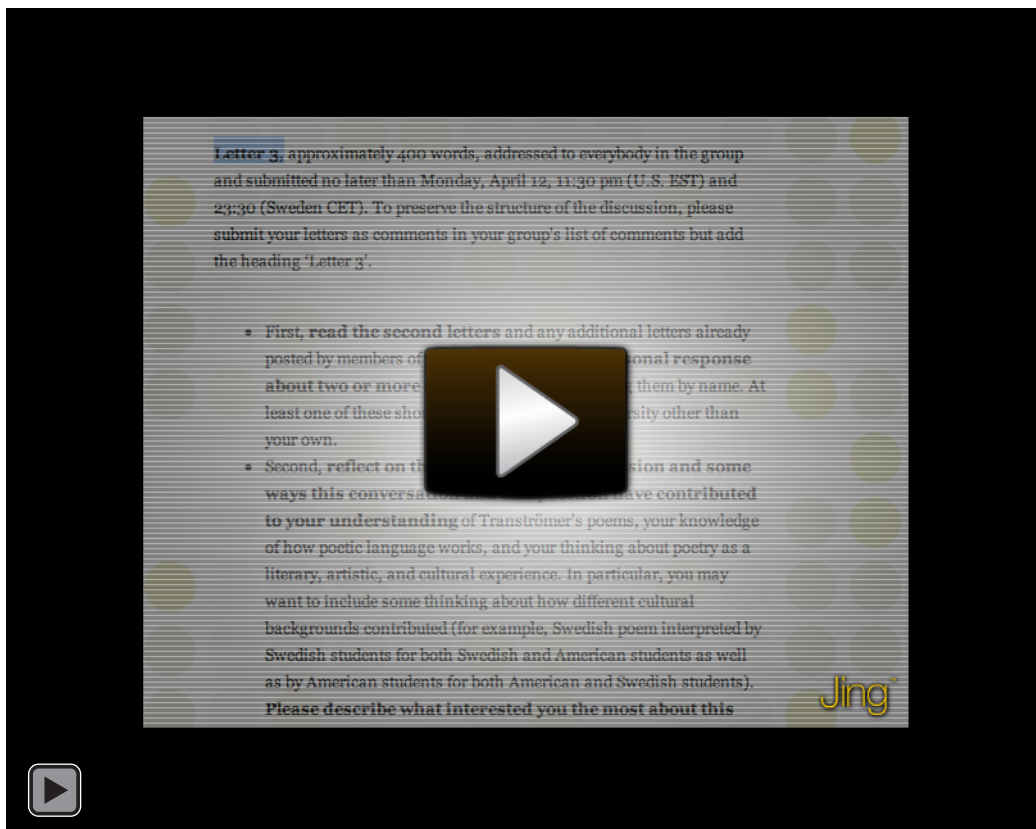
The work I selected to reflect themes of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is M.C. Escher’s “Relativity.” The painting . . . is a simple pencil work with no color. Figures are wandering around in a maze of a house. The house is kind of Mediterranean in terms of architecture, with trees and light (like the pleasant

homes of Eliot's . . . England) but the figures are faceless, moving about in the house without destination or visible purpose. I feel the painting connects with the theme of bleakness and flatness that is conveyed through Prufrock/Eliot's apparent disparity over himself. Prufrock/Eliot, like the figures in Escher's "Relativity," wander without destination or purpose, barely aware of each other and alone in their own little seemingly pleasant world (house in Escher's case). [Erin, Clemson]

The artwork I picked really corresponds more to the second stanza of "Breathing Room" than the entire poem. "Monk by the Sea" is by the Romantic artist Caspar Friedrich, and I think it embodies that feeling of the hugeness and vastness of nature. The monk in the painting is like the man described by Tranströmer who is "Standing down by the jetties [as] he squints across the waters."

The waters are so vast that he cannot see the other side. When looking at the poem alongside the painting, the waters may be seen as literal water or as symbolic of life. [Michele, Clemson]

The following video, in which a student reflects on the multimodal component in the exchange and the effect it had on her reading, provides another example of re-interpreting the poetry through multimodal expression and the student conversation involved in this work.



The final dimension of the exchange has been the reflective component. A fourth letter prompt, in the exchanges where it was used, called for a retrospective look back over the exchange.

**Example of prompt to get students to reflect on the exchange:**

“Second, reflect on this cross-cultural discussion and some ways this conversation and composition have contributed to your understanding of Tranströmer’s poems, your knowledge of how poetic language works, and your thinking about poetry as a literary, artistic, and cultural experience. In particular, you may want to include some thinking about how different cultural backgrounds contributed (for example, Swedish poem interpreted by Swedish students for both Swedish and American students as well as by American students for both American and Swedish students). Please describe what interested you the most about this discussion, or surprised you, or troubled you” (2004, Letter 4).

In this letter and the related discussion, students articulated the cross-cultural learning and insights into poetry achieved through the exchange.

For various reasons the prompts have had to change superficially over the course of the Cross-Cultural Collaboration project. We have had to update them to reflect new poetry selections but perhaps more importantly to adjust for dates and deadlines in view of other course contexts and workload. The discussion of dates and timing as well as that of learning outcomes eventually led to the decision to leave out the fourth letter of the exchange and leave that to be used as a separate reflective assignment in the individual courses. This was partly for workload reasons, as the students had very intensive readings in the beginning of the term in all three courses, but also, and perhaps primarily, because it created opportunities to see specific ways of using the fourth letter assignment for special purposes inside each of our courses. In other words, each of us could adapt the fourth letter to the assignment scheme of our respective courses (e.g., term paper, portfolio, structured classroom writing assignment).

**ALIGNING THE GROUPS**

Given the varied student profiles, cultures, and educational levels, determining group setup has been a recurrent challenge over the years of exchanges. One key administrative decision has been how to set up the groups in terms of size and thus number of groups. To maintain collaborative dynamics in the groups and some sense of familiarity, we decided that there would be at least two

students from each course in each group. Consequently, there were groups of at least six students and a total of up to seven groups. This decision is not a trivial one, as the larger the group, the more reading each student is required to complete in addition to the poetry and, in some cases, translations. Adding a student to a group adds approximately 1,400 words of reading not to mention all the interpretative avenues.

Each of us has had to consider the dynamics of the exchange groups in terms of how the two students from each class can be expected to contribute and what type of emphasis might be created given a certain set of two students. Even if the students are contributing individually to the exchange, familiarity with the context of the other representative of the course might help in clarifying, making sense of, or adding to statements. For the non-native speakers, for instance, it may be necessary to support less proficient students by partnering them with a more articulate peer from the same course to maintain the exchange group dynamics. Distribution of students has been a challenge in other ways as well. In 2006, one of the American courses was considerably larger than the other two. With an unequal distribution of students in the groups, there was a risk that there would be a very strong presence in all groups from that course and, as it were, of American students relative to Swedish students in all groups. These factors jeopardized the cross-cultural component of the exchange. One alternative would be to invite an additional international partner. In our case, efforts to establish such contacts were made, but without success. As an experiment, we therefore decided to set up five international groups with equal distribution of students from the three courses and then add two American-only groups with students from the overrepresented U.S. course. Students compared the exchanges in retrospect to see what the distinguishing differences were in cross-cultural and American groups respectively.

In a similar fashion, a dynamic collaborative exchange requires a certain number of students. For the 2008 run of the exchange, there were only two courses with twelve students in each course. It was possible to break students up into various sized groups, and our decision would affect the dynamics of the discussions. Small groups risked becoming too restricted, while large groups would become too demanding in terms of workload and synthesizing the numerous perspectives. There was also a risk of subgroups developing within groups since there were only two participating courses. We decided to run the exchange with groups of six students, maintaining dynamics as well as keeping tasks manageable in terms of reading and interpretative avenues. The exchange worked well, and diversity and dynamics were maintained in the discussions.

## **SIGNS OF A SUCCESSFUL GLOBALLY NETWORKED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

The primary objective of the Cross-Cultural Collaboration project has always been to generate a learning environment characterized by a genuine cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary writing-to-learn focus on engaging with poetry. Therefore, the success of the exchanges—and of our choices regarding technology, group set up, and prompt design—has to be assessed in such terms. The most obvious cultural dimension of the exchanges remains the poetry itself. Over the course of the project, exchanges have taken U.S. readers into the Swedish context of Tranströmer's poetry in translation; engaged students in analyzing Eliot's very culturally specific poetry, which was possibly mutually foreign for both groups of students; and introduced the non-U.S. participants to a central voice of American poetry in Dickinson's work. It was also the poetry that gave rise to the many cross-cultural voices incorporated through the sharing of multimedia.

In the exchanges dealing with the Swedish poet, the interpretation of the poems for two-thirds of the students in the exchange (i.e., the American students) was shaped by the translations offered and not by the poet's original phrases, offering the cross-cultural groups a rich topic for discussion. In the case of the American poets, on the other hand, all students understand the English words, even though native speakers have an advantage in being more familiar with subtleties and ambiguities in the English language. (See [Gustafsson, Reiss, & Young, 2004](#) and Young, Gustafsson, & Reiss, 2006 for discussions of some of the cross-cultural insights the students have enjoyed through the cross-cultural collaborations; see also [conference proceedings from EATAW2005](#).) As we intended, analysis, inquiry, conversation, and consensus building surrounding the above-mentioned issues as well as other topics characterized the collaborative, peer-directed exchanges promoted by the Cross-Cultural Collaboration project.

It is possible to see the impact of national and disciplinary culture in the content of the students' exchanges. The students involved in the exchanges belong to different disciplines in their countries and home institutions; they also belong to different nationalities with different language backgrounds. In various places in the postings (see Example 1 below), their cultural as well as disciplinary identity is revealed, offering a meeting between initially very contrasting groups. The exchange design as well as the choice of forum serves to bridge the distance between participants (see Example 2). Therefore, the groups established a



community for themselves within the exchange to promote understanding of the poetry and of various interpretations of it.

Over the course of the exchanges, we noticed a shift in the style of writing among the students. As the exchange went on, the style students adopted moved from a more formal style to a more conversational one normally found in a forum or blog (see Example 3 and Example 4). This shift occurs as the students become more familiar with the potentially new communicative situation of writing coursework directed not at teachers but at an audience of peers. The change in style suggests that there is a dimension to the exchange that helps students move between the different communicative environments in which they find themselves. So unlike students struggling with the negotiation of disciplinary expectations in other higher education contexts (cf. [Russell & Yañes, 2003](#) for an example of a journalism student struggling to accommodate new disciplines and genres in a history class), the students in the exchanges seem to have been empowered in their writing and their learning through the use of the letter genre, the prompts, and the online environment.

### **Example 1**

For instance, the group's diversity comes across strongly when the students introduce themselves in the first posting.

*"I am studying chemical engineering at Chalmers University of Technology. I am taking the course 'Fiction for Engineers' because I would like to get some non science into my life."*

*"I am enrolled in Clemson University as a Master's of Arts in English program. I am currently taking a Victorian Poetry seminar. I am not scientific in the slightest, so it looks as though I may be in for a treat with all the science folks. I am studying to become a Literature professor; I love to read and to write all kinds of literature, both creative and scholarly."*

These introductions reflect disciplinary differences, but as the exchange continues, disciplinary differences tend to be less pronounced.

### **Example 2**

Continuing the disciplinary focus, the engineering students encountered other cultural obstacles. Initially, they were expressing anxiety about their capability as interpreters of poetry.

*“First I have to admit that I was a bit intimidated when I realized that so many of you American students were literature students. I thought for sure that I was going to be totally ripped apart for my silly attempt to analyze these poems, since I have very limited experiences with reading poems and even less experience analyzing them.”*

However, during the exchange, the distance between participants tended to shrink. The disciplinary identity of being either a literature student or an engineering student is less visible toward the end of the exchange.

### **Example 3**

Examples 3 and 4 demonstrate a shift in the style of two postings by the same person. In the beginning of the exchange, the American student, a native speaker of English, starts out with academic language that fits her interpretation of what is expected of a literature student.

*“The use of personification creates an image for the reader. The metaphors allow the reader to imagine looking toward the sky and seeing the natural windows that the trees make in relation to growing next to each other with the moon light shining in. In many ways I can picture myself walking through the woods viewing the many elements of the woods that the author defines.”*

The student uses nominalization (“personification”) and comparatively complex sentence structure as well as making sure to include keywords such as “metaphors,” “personification,” “reader,” and “author.” This style might be the student’s way of trying to meet the instructor’s expectations.

### **Example 4**

In comparison to Example 3, the student’s style changes to one that better suits the medium and the nature of the exchange activity. In Example 4, the student has applied a more casual style with the less demanding sentence structure and vocabulary normally found in online environments.

*“The art work that was chosen to represent the poems was great. I enjoyed viewing them. I truly enjoyed Jessica’s picture for the poem ‘Track.’ I believe the picture is a true presentation of the poem. It creates a great visual!”*

Our interpretation of this change in register is that it is indicative of how the

exchange promotes a shared interpretative community among the participants.

## CONCLUSION: LESSONS LEARNED

Starting with the very first exchange, we have continuously learned from one another and from our students as we have planned and implemented the exchanges. Our most immediate lessons learned from this set of exchanges are that blogs offer a multifaceted, accessible medium to bridge cross-cultural boundaries of time and place and to support intercultural academic conversational communication. No doubt, learning management environments can also be used, but we found that they restrict the conversation in some ways and require more administrative involvement. The asynchronous nature of the collaborative poetry exchange means that students are encouraged to revise and reflect in order to use writing to build on one another's knowledge through extensions, questions, reflections, and careful attention to audience, diction, register, and discourse conventions. By also incorporating the addition of multimodal discourses and inviting students to share multimodal expressions, the asynchronicity of the exchanges extends interpretive practices and enhances intercultural understanding (e.g., references to Iceland, Norway, Spain, France, Russia, China, Afghanistan, and more).

The exchanges have also shown us that the letter genre proves to be familiar and versatile, enabling students to fulfill assignment goals and develop new communities of interpretive practice beyond their individual classes. This epistolary protocol encourages students to respond to people as well as to the texts, thus personalizing electronic communication, fostering a participatory community of learners, encouraging thoughtful writing to diverse, authentic audiences, and expanding the interpretive possibilities for analyzing literary works. The letter genre also promotes conversational language and interaction with others, which contributes to an appreciation of multiple perspectives and of the complexity of literary analysis as students adjust interpretations, deal with disagreements, and develop further conversation and consensus building.

Another lesson learned is that the Cross-Cultural Collaboration project offers an example of how GNLEs can be thought of as sequenced. The writing to enhance learning that is central to the exchange allows for and draws on the cross-cultural. And the decreasing distance between cultures and disciplines can also be recognized as the intercultural inquiry Starke-Meyerring (2005) sees as an effect of GNLEs. She suggests that since current technologies make audience analysis more exact and most media more interactive, it is possible and

necessary to pursue an intercultural inquiry in each global communication instance. In other words, our students need to become more well-versed and versatile in global communication, and it is important to set up learning activities that bring globally distributed students together and offer practice in this competence. Sometimes the learning outcomes are articulated with a focus on the collaborative project result and the inquiry is assumed. Our more informal exchange begins with the inquiry and uses the joint effort of interpreting poetry as the content vehicle.

Yet another lesson learned is that instructions for a GNLE, like instructions for any other learning activity of course, are effective only if they are aligned to the environment, the task, the student profile, and the learning outcomes. As Paretti, McNair, and Holloway-Attaway (2007) have advised, teachers need to be very specific in their instructions in GNLEs. We have been successful in the exchanges with specific instructions aligned to the technological platform and the logistics of the exchange, such as firm deadlines, word counts, reading requirements, and the group exchange process, but with fairly open instructions about the inquiry and the poetry. Our open invitation to discuss the content under study provided students with the freedom to approach their interpretative and communicative tasks from various perspectives, and this generated the learning activity we wanted. A crucial difference here might be that our exchanges are oriented toward writing to enhance learning rather than learning to write or to present/document a project.

This methodological dimension of GNLEs is more thoroughly theorized by Starke-Meyerring (2005) as she describes a possible framework for GNLEs. Starke-Meyerring's suggested framework, with its focus on shared learning cultures, provides a possible structure for future GNLEs, and it is our hope that our analysis of five years of our Cross-Cultural Collaboration exchanges contributes to the joint construction of such a framework. More particularly, we believe that our exchanges exemplify how two aspects of GNLE blogging—the expressivist and the socio-cognitivist (Murray & Hourigan, 2008)—can be successfully combined with careful design of a learning environment that enables a “collaborative, social process of meaning making, [in] a social environment where anxiety about the teacher and of school writing is reduced” (Lowe & Williams, 2004).

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## APPENDIX A: VIDEO TRANSCRIPTS

### Video 1

Hi my name is Suvi, and I am a student at the Chalmers University of Technology in Göteborg, Sweden. I am here today because I want to show you how I have been working with a letter exchange which I did when I took a course in 2010. The letter exchange was between Chalmers and the University of Clemson in South Carolina in the USA. It was about the poetry of Tomas Tranströmer. It is good to have it in this blog format. Otherwise it would be difficult for us to read. All the information; we have the same information because it is all on this blog. We have some background information on Tomas Tranströmer. We have one, two, three poems of Tranströmer in Swedish with English translations. We have also the letter guidelines, so we have the same assignment.

There are three letters in the assignment as a whole, but I will focus on the first letter. It was about reflecting on how different words and phrases can affect the meaning of the poem if you change it. Before getting into the task I took a look at the background information on Tomas Tranströmer and what I found interesting was this: That his work is a lot about the unknowable and searching for transcendence.

I didn't know too much about Tranströmer before, so it is good for me to have a clue about what he is all about. I read through the poems but I decided that I wanted to look deeper into the "I Det Fria," which starts in a maze, late autumn maze. Some sentences caught my eye more than others and this was one of them: *Vald kanns överklight en kort stund*, which I would translate into *violence feels unreal for a brief moment*. But I am not a translator, so let's see what the translator said. May Swenson says that "Violence for a moment feels unreal." Already here we see a difference because Tranströmer says first that violence seems unreal and then but only for a brief moment, but here Swenson reveals to us that the safe feeling will be over in just a moment. Robert Bly has a different translation: "Violence seemed unreal / for a few moments." So we have the same kind of feeling as Tomas Tranströmer does and maybe it is due to them being friends, Bly and Tranströmer; I don't know. Anyhow it seems as if Swenson has a different interpretation. She doesn't have to translate it literally.

So, these are some of the comments that I took with me when writing my first letter. But there was something else I thought a lot about also. We are in the maze, as it said in the beginning of the poem, and dusk is coming and we have

to find and see our landmarks again. Swenson, she writes, “It’s a matter of finding the way out / and locating some landmarks.” Then comes the specifics, but here it sounds like some landmarks, any landmarks. Whereas Bly writes, “to find the landmarks again.” To me I felt like the original said that. We are lost and we have to get out. We know that now it’s time; we have to find sanity again and we know what a good path for us could be. To me Bly says this better than the original version, at least for me. This is something I wouldn’t have thought about if I hadn’t read the different translations or interpretations.

I took this with me and I put it in my letter which you can see here. We read each other’s letters and it was so interesting for me to see how different words can change the feeling of a poem. I really got some new insights. Thank you for listening and I hope you got some insights too.

## Video 2

Hi again. It’s Suvi from Göteborg, Sweden. I would like to share some of my thoughts on the third letter of the letter exchange. And in particular the part of the letter where we are to express our understanding of the poetry in some other way than just writing; with for instance music or illustrations. Some writing has to be done because we have to motivate why we have chosen the artwork. And here is a part of my motivation which is in my third letter. Here I write that my feeling of Tranströmer is nostalgia and also I got some . . . it kind of reminded me of my own Swedish summers. And therefore I took a photo that looks like this. It is of a Swedish summer day.

I have a woman in the photo. That’s because during the letter exchange we had some discussions on gender. In Swedish when we write about a general human being, “en manniska,” you write about this person as a female. So, you use female gender. Whereas when you write about a man in English you call this man a “he.” So when Tranströmer shifts between *she* and *he*. This nuance is lost in translation because all the *shes* are turned into male gender. I just wanted to make a comment on that with my illustration. So that is why I chose to do the picture as I did.

One of the other girls, she used a painting that she says reminded her of the poem “Tracks.” It is kind of about chaos in the middle of tranquility and she chose this painting by Massachusetts painter Joshua Meyer. You can see here it is quite chaotic but still there is something serene in it also. I have never heard

about the painter Joshua Meyer, so for me it was really great fun to get to know this artist.

We had to do some thinking outside the box and it was great fun to get to know how students in the United States think regarding music and stuff like that also. So, I hope you had some use of this footage, and thanks a lot for listening. Goodbye.

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