

Virtual Teaching and Learning in Middle Eastern Politics

**Joseph W. Roberts
Department of Political Science
University of Utah
252 Orson Spencer Hall
Salt Lake City, Utah 84112
Phone: (801) 581-4262
Fax: (801) 581-6183
E-Mail: Joseph.Roberts@m.cc.utah.edu**

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N O T A V A I L A B L E F O R S A L E .

This is a draft copy and should not be cited without the consent of the author. A copy of the paper will be available from my "Middle East North Africa Internet Resource Guide" website at <http://www.cc.utah.edu/~jwr9311/MENA.html> in Adobe Acrobat format.

A virtual community is a “passage point for collections of common beliefs and practices that united people who were physically separated. Virtual communities sustain themselves by constantly circulating those practices.”¹ Communities are no longer restricted to particular spaces but transcend override spaces. Their reach is infinitely expanded. Communication is the key to virtual communities; and, as the techniques and technologies of communication have evolved, so have virtual communities. Ithiel de Sola Pool “presents his vision of a new world resulting from the social, political, and cultural consequences of communications technology.”² de Sola Pool’s last contribution to the literature on communications and society is a presentation of the idea of the virtual community by defining the unifying beliefs and practices as information. Harlan Cleveland, former President of the American Political Science Association, echoes de Sola Pool: “the ultimate purpose of all knowledge is to organize things or people, arrange them in ways that make them different from the way they were before.”³

Howard H. Frederick argues that world public opinion transcends the old boundaries, placed on public opinion, the boundaries of states. Frederick provides two of examples of the explosion of communication creating a particular type of virtual community, an information community:

Waterman defines internationalist communication as ‘transterritorial solidarity relations which enrich and empower popular and democratic communities or collectives by exchanging, sharing, diversifying ... and synthesizing their ideas, skills and arts.’ Rush defined global eco-communication as ‘the mutual communicative and informative relations among humans, as a species, and between them and their environment. ... an integrative, realistic, networking force among humans and their concerns for the inclusion and well-being of all planetary species’ information and communication systems.’⁴

¹ Allucquere Rosanne Stone, “Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?: Boundary Stories about Virtual Cultures,” in *Cyberspace: First Steps*, Ed. Michael Benedikt (Cambridge and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1991), p. 85.

² Eli M. Noam, “Preface,” in Ithiel de Sola Pool, *Technologies without Boundaries: On Telecommunications in a Global Age*, Ed. Eli M. Noam (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. vi.

³ Harlan Cleveland, “The Twilight of Hierarchy: Speculations on the Global Information Society,” *Public Administration Review* 45, No. 1 (January/February 1985). It should be noted that *Technologies without Boundaries* was published after Ithiel de Sola Pool died in March 1984.

⁴ Howard H. Frederick, *Global Communications and International Relations* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1993), p. 270. Frederick is citing Peter Waterman, *From ‘Global Information’ to ‘Internationalist Communication’: Reconceptualizing the Democratization of International Communication*, Working Paper Series No. 39 (The Hague: Institute of Social Studies, 1988), p. 26 (I was unable to obtain a copy of this text) and Ramona R. Rush, “Global Eco-Communications: Assessing the Communications and Information

The expansion of communication facilitates cooperation and collaboration among students and scholars. Information communities can be formed to facilitate greater collaborative learning. Collaborative learning is a jointly constructed framework of knowledge derived by interaction of students and teachers.⁵ This can be done in a traditional classroom setting by increasing discussion components or by encouraging virtual interaction among students both locally and globally. The following essay will address these areas by citing specific examples of these promising pedagogical tools. The examples will derive from the experience myself and others.

Virtual Learning: Electronic Publishing

Robert Boyle argued that the text was the most appropriate means of disseminating information and thus allowing the scientific experiments to be witnessed by others. “The technology of virtual witnessing involves the production in the reader’s mind of such an image of an experimental scene as obviates the necessity for either direct witness or replication.”⁶ The text provided a means of describing the experimental scene so that other individuals, those constituting the community of experimentalists, could believe in the process. Virtual witnessing was a way of generating trust among individuals; this remains the dominant means of disseminating scholarly information through the publication of journals and books.

One form of virtual information community is the electronic publishing community. The dissemination of scholarly writings is one of the most important aspects of academia. From the humble beginnings of Robert Boyle to the present scholarship is complete when published. However, under the current system scholarly publication suffers from two problems: slow turnaround time and incredible expense. Electronic publishing is one possible means of solving,

Environment,” Paper presented at the conference of the International Communication Association, San Francisco, 1989 and Ramona R. Rush, “Global Eco-Communication Revisited: Grounding Concepts,” Paper presented at the conference of the International Association for Mass Communication Research, Sao Paulo, Brazil, 1992.

⁵ David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson, and Karl A. Smith, *Active Learning: Cooperation in the Classroom*, (Edina, Minnesota: Interaction Book Company, 1991), pp. 1:4-1:12. See Chet Meyers, *Promoting Active Learning Strategies for the College Classroom*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993). For collaborative, or active learning strategies specific to international relations see *International Studies Notes of the International Studies Association* 18, No. 3 (Fall 1993).

⁶ Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 60.

or at least minimizing, these problems. Steven Harnad agrees that electronic publishing is a solution.⁷

Several electronic mail discussion lists provide an archival system for scholarly papers submitted by members.⁸ These systems allows others to access the scholarship in a timely fashion providing the authors with early criticisms and the readers a useful source of information for their own research purposes.

Publication of an electronic journal moves this process forward from simple archival to dissemination. “Monitors: A Journal of Human Rights and Technology” as recently begun publication of articles and projects examining the impact of information technology on scholarship on and activism about human rights.⁹ The individuals responsible for “Monitors” envision it as “a forum where the medium of the World Wide Web itself connects and enables the changing nature of information, documentation, activism, and human rights.”¹⁰

A much more ambitious electronic publishing project is “Psycology.”¹¹ Published on the internet by Stevan Harnad of Princeton University, in conjunction with the American Psychology Association. “Psycology” is a peer reviewed electronic journal devoted to discussing all aspects of psychology. Harnad notes that the goal is the publication of “brief reports of new ideas and findings on which the author wishes to solicit rapid peer feedback, international and interdisciplinary.”¹² Book reviews, commentaries and responses to research articles are also encouraged. It is seen as a means of disseminating research information in a fashion that is much timelier than the two or more years it takes to publish a journal article.

⁷ Stevan Harnad, “Implementing Peer Review on the Net: Scientific Quality Control in Scholarly Electronic Journals,” International Conference on Refereed Electronic Journals: Towards a Consortium for Networked Publications, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg October 1-5, 1993. Available by anonymous FTP from princeton.edu in the pub/harnad/Psycology directory.

⁸ Two such lists, that I am aware of, are the Political Methodology List (POLMETH), available by subscription at the address (polmeth-request@wizard.ucr.edu), and the Political Science Research and Teaching List (PSRT-L), available by subscription at the listserv address (listserv@mizzou1.missouri.edu).

⁹ “Monitors: A Journal of Human Rights and Technology,” available at the URL: <http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~monitors/>

¹⁰ Bret Benjamin, “CFP: Journal of Human Rights and Technology,” Electronic Mail Message (February 8, 1995). Forwarded electronically by Kurt Mills to ISAFP (February 12, 1995).

¹¹ “Psycology,” available at the listserv address (listserv@pucc.princeton.edu).

¹² Stevan Harnad, “Instructions for ‘Psycology’ Authors and Commentators,” Available by anonymous FTP from princeton.edu in the pub/harnad/Psycology directory.

Virtual Learning: Professional Development

Virtual information communities are also created for professional development of scholars. Barbara Bowen and others discuss computer-supported intentional learning environments (CSILE) in fostering research in scientific and scholarly disciplines. CSILE is characterized by four key ideas:

- A focus on knowledge itself and the advancement of knowledge as an objective—as distinct from a focus on tasks, projects, products, or self-expression
- A focus on problem solving—as distinct from a focus on the performance of routines
- Dynamic adaptation: advances made by members of the community change the knowledge conditions to which other members must adapt, thus leading to continual progress
- Intellectual collaboration: members do not collaborate simply to distribute the work load but because pooling intellectual resource makes it possible for the knowledge-building community to tackle more complex problems than is possible for individuals working alone.¹³

In the “Middle East-North Africa Internet Resource Guide” I list more than 50 academic mailing lists on many subjects including anthropology, data analysis, economics, history, philosophy, political science, and sociology.¹⁴ A wide range of questions are answered in these lists from the simple to the complex. I will discuss my own experiences from several of these lists to demonstrate just a sample of the possibilities available in professional development..

The History of Islam list (Islam-L) is a list that I own and moderate. Because I serve as owner and moderator I am in a unique position to examine these lists within the context of a virtual community. The goals of Islam-L are to foster scholarly discussion and debate about the history of Islam and Islamic civilization. This goal has allowed the readers of Islam-L to form a fairly tight knit community of scholars, interested individuals, and Muslims who want to speak directly about their own history. Islam-L is very much an information and knowledge community, because it serves as a reliable, consistent, and high quality forum for the discussion and debate of historical issues and historiography in the Middle East. I know of several

¹³ Barbara Bowen, Carl Bereiter, and Merlene Scardamalia, “Computer-Supported Intentional Learning Environments,” in *Thinkwork: Working, Learning, and Managing in a Computer-Interactive Society*, Ed. Fred Young Phillips, (Westport: Praeger, 1992), p. 89.

¹⁴ Joseph W. Roberts, “The Middle East-North Africa Internet Resource Guide,” Parts 1, 2, 3, and 4 Version 16 (March 1996). The official copy is available via WWW at the URL: <http://www.lib.umich.edu/chhome.html>

collaborative projects that have emerged from the Islam-L forum on issues ranging from Islamic jurisprudence, human rights from an Islamic perspective, the impact of Islamic sciences on general scientific knowledge. One of the most ambitious projects is a project to catalog an extensive archive of medieval manuscripts from the former Soviet Union.¹⁵

Two other lists that I operate, the Political-Islam list and the Middle East North Africa History List (MENA-H), are still in the developmental stage.¹⁶ Political-Islam is available only to those who agree to abide by certain restrictions designed to maintain both academic and civil dialogue. Approximately 160 members enjoy scattered postings on a wide range of topics dealing with Islamic movements. The goal is to foster collaboration and dialogue among scholars interested in the subject. In its earliest incarnation the list was plagued by polemical attacks making the list unusable. The current iteration is much better but suffers from a lack of critical mass where issues are regularly debated. MENA-H deals with all aspects of Middle Eastern and North African history. This unmoderated list has 250 subscribers but also suffers from a lack of critical mass. The list could serve a useful function for the Middle East Studies Association as it does for several members of the Middle Eastern Medievalists by providing a forum to discuss current research. More importantly both lists could serve as a source of collaborative research.

The International Political Economy (IPE) and International Studies Association Foreign Policy (ISAFP) lists have been extremely active virtual information communities.¹⁷ I have served both lists as a source of internet information coordinator. While serving in this capacity I have watched these lists grow over the course of the past four or five years. I have seen fruitful discussions of a wide range of issues raised and debated. I have seen questions asked and answered by a very knowledgeable and helpful community of graduate students, established

¹⁵ Islam-L archive. Send "Index Islam-L" command to the listserv address (listserv@ulkyvm.louisville.edu). Subscriptions should also be sent to this address.

¹⁶ Political-Islam is available by submitting a biography and statement of interest at the request address (political-islam-request@lists.utah.edu). MENA-H is available by subscription at the listserv address (listserv@ulkyvm.louisville.edu).

¹⁷ IPE and ISAFP are both available by subscription at the listserv address (listserv@csf.colorado.edu).

scholars, and interested individuals. I think a participant of the IPE list, Deborah Moore Haddad, says it best:

There are many risks to participation in a community, not the least of which is the fear of being exploited to a degree greater than the gain from participation in the community — no one wants the suckers payoff. On the IPENet, there is the risk that someone may exploit your time, divert your attentions to other areas of the field, criticize your pathbreaking insights, successfully argue an opposing perspective, unsuccessfully argue and opposing perspective, effectively cry out for edification, adopt your idea and run with it, and more. At the same time, participants gain from opposing perspectives (if for no other reason than to anticipate the opposing argument in the future!), discovery of unexplored literatures and overlooked but relevant variables, greater familiarity with the IPE audiences' and our own strengths and shortcomings, larger numbers of resources (esp. human) readily available, and so forth.¹⁸

I have also seen collaboration on research projects, including several projects of my own.

Professional development through collaborative research projects is one of the most promising aspects of the virtual information community. As a result of my asking questions for another essay on the dynamics of virtual communities in Middle Eastern cyberspace, a dialogue about a collaborative research project was initiated between myself and psychologist in Moscow.¹⁹ Through electronic correspondence in a variety of electronic forums of mutual interest we have developed a detailed plan to pursue several research questions relating to technology and culture; this kind of collaborative effort between us could never occur without the community created in electronic forums. Our project entails a multi-cultural and interdisciplinary examination of the cultural factors hampering communication in virtual communities. Five scholars from Russia, Hungary and the United States are engaged in the project which is currently under review by the Soros Foundation for funding. I do not speak Russian nor am I able to travel to Russia for research purposes but the many electronic forums has allowed this project to develop.²⁰

¹⁸ Deborah Moore Haddad, "Risk of Community — Ethnocentrism," Electronic Mail Message to IPE Listserv (August 16, 1995).

¹⁹ Joseph W. Roberts, "Virtual Communities in Middle Eastern Cyberspace," prepared for "The Information Revolution in the Arab World: Commercial, Cultural, Social and Political Dimensions," the 20th Annual Symposium at the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University to be held April 20 and 21, 1995.

²⁰ Olga Marchenko, Private Electronic Mail Messages (April, 1995 - Present) and Dimitri Bayuk, "Project Proposal," Private Electronic Mail Message (October 18, 1995).

A project that I am currently pursuing is to expand the understanding of electronic collaborative research by conducting e-mail surveys. Currently in development, these surveys designed to gauge the use of computer mediated communication systems for academic dialogue and debate, collaborative research projects, and scholarly publishing. The primary emphasis of the surveys will be in two subject areas: international politics, generally, and Middle East politics and history, specifically.

Professional development is greatly facilitated through scholarly communication. Scholarly debate regularly occurs within departments. Virtual information communities allow scholars to expand the range and diversity of this debate. Everyone comes out better for the experience. Collaborative research projects enhance this process by opening new doors for research and new means of conducting interdisciplinary and multi-cultural research. This provides unique perspectives and ultimately, I think, rich theoretical and empirical additions to collective knowledge.

Virtual Teaching: Network-Based Classrooms

The most relevant virtual information community, the network-based classrooms, is a reality now. My own experience teaching in a virtual classroom involved a course on the media and foreign policy in the United States.²¹ One of the goals of the class was to demonstrate the diversity of media coverage of foreign policy problems. Groups of five students were asked to monitor a particular media coverage (radio, television, newspapers, weeklies and quarterlies, or the internet) of an issue and to present the findings orally. Two different media were assigned to each issue so that contrasting images would emerge from the oral reports. The internet was also used to facilitate discussion among each group and myself to help solve problems that emerged. Not surprisingly, the internet provided the most information on given issues because the students utilizing the internet as a media source had access to much of the other media forms as well. There were also problems with the internet as source. The quality of information was in some

²¹ J. Greg Merritt and Michael G. Schechter, "When Navigating the World, Don't Give Them a Few Wonderful Sites: Reflections on Teaching, Learning, the World Wide Web and the International Studies Curriculum," *International Studies Notes of the International Studies Association*, 22, No. 2 (Spring 1997), pp. 26-27 report on a similar course offering at Michigan State University.

areas of dubious quality. This is a problem that has long plagued the internet and to which there is no easy solution. My standard piece of advice here is to examine the source of the material carefully. Four key questions must be asked: who is the author? What is the author's affiliation? What are the author's credentials? What are the credentials of the organization that employs the author? The material should also be verified by a second source, if possible. For this particular course I also reviewed what the net-centric groups were doing on a regular basis and to evaluate the material and provide additional guidance (this was all done electronically). However, in one case the group refused to heed my advice and relied on the dubious material for both the oral and written components of the work. This one experience was rather limited in scope because of the limited control that a teaching fellow has in the classroom when serving as an assistant to a professor.

Barbara Welling Hall describes her experiences using USENET newsgroups in the classroom to foster discussions among her students in two courses: The Politics of Global Problems and Feminist Readings in International Relations.²² Hall had mixed results in the two courses ranging from very good productive discussions when incorporated into the final grade in a course of 13 students (Feminist Readings) to limited use and apathy in the general education course of 85 students (Global Problems).²³ Ultimately, Hall concludes that the network classroom is a useful, but limited, tool for teaching. I disagree in spite of my more limited practical experience.

Bertram Bruce and others describe the Electronic Networks for Interaction (ENFI) classrooms for teaching writing.²⁴ The network based classroom in the ENFI project was designed to "blur social distinctions in the classroom. The role of the teacher would shift, from lecturer and director of discussion, to collaborator in writing, and student participation would be more equally distributed."²⁵ The participants largely believe that these goals have been met.

²² Barbara Welling Hall, "Electronic Newsgroups in the Liberal Arts Classroom," *International Studies Notes of the International Studies Association*, 20, No. 1 (Winter 1995).

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-13.

²⁴ Bertram Bruce, Joy Kreeft Peyton, and Trent Batson, *Network Based Classrooms: Promises and Realities*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

An even broader vision of the network based classroom is the Virtual Seminar on Global Political Economy hosted by the University of Guelph in Canada and operated by Lev Gonick from Arizona.²⁶ Participants in the virtual seminar came from at least seven schools in the United States, Canada, and Europe. Faculty and graduate student facilitators, including myself, included individuals from across the globe including the Netherlands, France, the United States, Japan, Mexico, Brazil, Israel and Australia, to name but a few. My role in the seminar was to facilitate discussion on the political economy of the Middle East and North Africa. Some of the discussion issues that arose were the impact of oil on the world economy, the relationship between oil and violence in the region (including the Second Gulf War), the role of Islam in the economic relations of the region, and finally the prospects for peace and the impact this would have on the regional economy. Many of the students would never have had the opportunity to discuss these issues without this internet based seminar. Many of the schools lack the resources to teach in many of the areas of the seminar, particularly those dealing with the Middle East. Interaction among students and the facilitators was productive in both directions. I have had continued correspondence with several of the participants and learning continues in both directions.

The International Communication and Negotiation Simulation (ICONS) project from the University of Maryland and a smaller but similar project focusing on the Middle East from the University of Texas at Austin, Georgetown University, American University of Cairo, and Macquarie University (Sydney, Australia) are additional collaborative learning projects. Both projects are simulations of reality designed to give students a sense for the policy making process in a much more fluid forum than traditional lectures.²⁷

²⁶ The Virtual Seminar has been conducted since 1994 from the Center for Sustainable Future (CSF) at the University of Colorado. For more information check the CSF WWW server at the URL: <http://csf.colorado.edu>

²⁷ For the ICONS project see Jonathan Wilkenfeld and Joyce Kaufman, "Political Science: Network Simulations in International Politics," *Social Science Computer Review* 11, No. 4 (Winter 1993); Brigid A. Starkey, "Negotiation Training Through Simulation: The ICONS International Negotiation Seminars Initiative," *Educators' Tech Exchange* (Spring 1994); Vernon J. Vavrina, "Poughkeepsie to Persian Gulf Revisited: ICONS, the Internet, and Teaching International Relations," *PS: Political Science and Politics* (December 1995); and Brigid B. Starkey and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, "Project ICONS: Computer-Assisted Negotiations for the IR Classroom," *International Studies Notes of the International Studies Association*, 21, No. 1 (Winter 1996). For the Middle East Simulation see Clement M. Henry, "Interactive Learning and Cross-Cultural Experiences Through Cyberspace," Paper presented at

J. Greg Merritt and Michael G. Schechter provide a useful guide to incorporating the internet into the curriculum. Their experiences provide a useful list of do's and don'ts that each of us could benefit from. Most will sound common sense but bear repeating here in abbreviated form. Hands on instruction on using the web, conducting searches, evaluating material, copyright issues, and citations should be done early in the course.²⁸ More important than the introductory session concerns how to incorporate the internet into the classroom. The authors see two approaches as possible. The first is what they term conservative where the student is guided to specific materials that the instructor deems important to the subject at hand. The conservative approach provides the student with additional data to use but does not require extensive work locating useful material.²⁹ The second is what the authors term the constructivist approach which allows the students great flexibility. The constructivist approach forces the student to be responsible for the material that they use but has the potential to raise a number of problems with quality (some of which have been discussed above).³⁰ Assessment is also a critical area that the instructor must give thought to. Merritt and Schechter use two approaches. The first, appropriate for the conservative approach, is the "one-minute paper" where students answer the questions what was learned and what remains to be learned about a given subject. The second, appropriate for the constructivist approach, is the "Documented Decision Making" approach where students tabulate the reasons they followed a given link, used specific material, or otherwise made a decision about the material that they have accessed.³¹

Conclusions

A virtual community is a very special type of community. It transcends space, time, and issues. A virtual community brings together people from all parts of the world who share common ideas, beliefs, and interests. A traditional community also brings people together in this way but the geographic range of the traditional community is very limited. Virtual communities

the Annual Symposium of the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University entitled "Information Revolution in the Arab World: Commercial, Cultural, and Political Dimensions" in 1995.

²⁸ Merritt and Schechter, "When Navigating the World," pp. 23-24.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 24-25.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 25-26.

are a new means of facilitating global interaction. It might be overly optimistic, but it is certainly possible that the future of the planet depends on virtual communities.

The purposes of the virtual communities range from those which seek to promote particularistic visions of a new socio-political worldview to those which seek to foster a global civil society based on mutual respect for greater tolerance and justice in the world to those which seek to protect existing communities through new means of communication to those who seek to expand knowledge and information about particular interest areas. Ithiel de Sola Pool and Harlan Cleveland were correct in noting that information and knowledge was the key to creating communities. Students and researchers use the internet as a means of conducting research and communicating with colleagues about the subjects that interest them. Equally important is the role the internet plays in teaching. Robert Boyle in the mid-1600s spoke of virtual witnessing arguing that this was the way that scholars could keep up with what others were doing and to verify the results of others. In 1997, virtual witnessing has truly gone virtual!

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