

'In Real Time'

Hong Kong Virtual Exchange Erases the Miles

BY MARY PRICE

As part of an effort to bring cultural exchange to his cadets without incurring the expense of foreign travel, Lt. Col. Howard Sanborn IV recently set up the first virtual exchange program in the history of the international studies department at VMI.

On Oct. 24, a group of 15 cadets enrolled in Sanborn's Politics of East Asia course linked up via Skype with a group of students at Shue Yan University in Hong Kong. To accommodate the 12-hour time difference between Lexington and the former British crown colony, the exchange began at 9 p.m. for the cadets, which was 9 a.m. the next morning for their counterparts in Asia.

"The greater goal is to get [cadets] thinking about another culture," said Sanborn, associate professor of international studies. He went on to say that while he wishes that each cadet at VMI could study abroad, he's well aware that financial limitations make that impossible for many.

"[The virtual exchange] is a cost-effective means of giving students at least the flavor of another culture," noted Sanborn, who is planning to lead cadets on a trip to Taiwan and Hong Kong next summer.

Sanborn had long been interested in using technology to create cultural exchange opportunities with students in other countries, but he hadn't made a formal plan for such an exchange until he attended an Asian studies development conference in Houston in March.

There, he met Amy Wu, a former journalist now teaching at the University of Maryland. Wu had contacts at Shue Yan University, a private school in Hong Kong, and it was she who suggested that Sanborn make inquiries there. Over the summer, Sanborn traveled to both Hong Kong and Taiwan, and while in Hong Kong, he was able to visit Shue Yan and meet professors there.

Because Sanborn's own research focuses on the development of democracy, he chose to make that form of government front and center to the cultural exchange. Working in small groups, cadets took the viewpoint of one of four nations – Japan, China, Taiwan, and the United States – and produced videos about how the nation they're representing views recent student protests in Hong Kong, a city that has been a part of mainland China since 1997.

For the past two months, students in Hong Kong have been conducting public demonstrations in favor of electoral reform and thus greater autonomy from Beijing. An election to select a new chief executive for Hong Kong is currently set for 2017 – but with a pool of candidates to be pre-selected by the central Chinese government. It is that aspect of the system that has fueled the student protests.

The goal of the video assignment, explained Sanborn, was for



Cadets in the Politics of East Asia course Skype with students at Shue Yan University. – VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.

the cadets to understand and be able to explain to others why different governments in Asia would have differing views of the youthful protesters. The Hong Kong students, meanwhile, produced similar videos from the viewpoint of their city's residents, presenting views both in favor of and against the protests.

In addition, Sanborn required each cadet to write a brief reflective essay on what democracy means to him or her. "When I teach about democracy, part of my goal . . . is to help my students better appreciate

their own democracy," noted Sanborn, who won the 2014 Jackson-Hope Prize for Excellence in Published Scholarly Work. In the future, Sanborn would like to teach a class on democracy in East Asia.

Said Sanborn, "There's no better way to understand your own democracy, which is old, than from studying democracy in a place where it's all new."

Two cadets participating in the virtual exchange said they'd both learned quite a bit from the experience, not only during the hour-and-a-half long exchange itself, but also from doing the research to produce the videos.

Cadet Killian Buckley '15, who was part of a group representing the United States, said that she'd found herself and her fellow U.S. team members having to walk a fine line in their response to the protests.

"The U.S. doesn't want to take too much of a stance in China's internal politics but the U.S. does want to support peaceful protests and democratization throughout the world," she explained.

Cadet Mike Piemonte '16, who represented China, could see that while that nation may be the source of the problem, at least in the protesters' minds, it will also ultimately have to be part of the solution.

"Any gains that the protesters make will be ultimately made through China," he observed.

Both Buckley and Piemonte noted that their Hong Kong counterparts had sharply differing views of the protests. "You could see how divisive it was," said Buckley, who explained that the Hong Kong students weren't shy about letting their classmates know when they disagreed with them.

Both cadets said that the chance to interact with their peers from across the globe more than made up for a Friday night sacrificed.

"Being able to Skype with another college class in another country was a really interesting experience," said Buckley.

"This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Piemonte noted. "This is a politics in East Asia class and this is happening right now, . . . and it's a [civilizations and cultures] credit, too. We got to talk to our counterparts in another culture face-to-face. This is happening in real time."