

**E-Learning, Peer Interaction, and Writing Across Boundaries**  
**iPED Conference, Coventry, England, September 2006**  
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Cross-Cultural Collaborations Project Home:  
<http://www.wordsworth2.net/projects/crossculturalcollabs/>

## The Project



During Spring semester 2006, students in three classes, one at a university in Sweden and two at universities in the United States, engaged in a discussion about “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” by T. S. Eliot, using a Weblog (blog): Cross-Cultural Collaboration-Spring 2006: “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” at <http://crossculturalcollab06spring.blogspot.com>. We sought to solve the pedagogical problem of constructing an interpretative community in two classes of students from primarily technical disciplines and inexperienced in literary analysis. At the same time, for the third class, where students were M.A.-level literature majors, this activity engaged them early in discussing literature

with non-specialists. All three teachers wanted to give our students an intercultural and interdisciplinary learning experience, and the blog environment met the goals of cross-cultural learning by using online written and multimodal communication to bridge academic and cultural differences as well as foster an interpretive community of practice.

## Conclusions

- Intercultural writing and reading assignments provide a rich context for student-directed learning across a variety of boundaries (language proficiency, academic discipline and level, cultural background, and constraints of time and space).
- Letters in an electronic medium proved to be familiar and versatile, enabling students to fulfill assignment goals and develop new communities of interpretive practice beyond their individual classes.
- Multimodal expressions extend interpretive practices and enhance intercultural understanding (references to Iceland, Norway, Spain, France, Russia, China, Afghanistan, and more).

# E-Learning, Peer Interaction, and Writing Across Boundaries

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Magnus Gustafsson, Chalmers University  
Donna Reiss, Clemson University  
Art Young, Clemson University

## Overview



- Purpose and Context
- Pedagogical Problems
- Approaches and Methodologies
- Conclusions and Possibilities

## Contexts

- Magnus Gustafsson, Chalmers University
  - Elective course – ‘Fiction for Engineers’
  - MSc in engineering students with only a token humanities requirement in their university education
- Donna Reiss, Clemson University
  - General education American literature survey
  - Inexperienced interpreters of literature from a variety of disciplines
- Art Young, Clemson University
  - M.A.-level seminar in Victorian poetry
  - Advanced students of literature modeling the interpretive practices of literary scholars

## Pedagogical Problems

- Establish authentic, teacher-facilitated and student-directed, intercultural communities of practice
- Design a versatile, flexible methodology to support different purposes in the three courses
- Provide opportunities for multimodal expressions of learning

## Methodologies

- Establishing communities of practice
  - Collaboration among teachers to facilitate student communication and learning
  - Common student reading with relevance to each class: “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” by T. S. Eliot
  - Online letters responding to assigned reading and to other students

## Methodologies

- Generating international/intercultural interpretive communities
  - Clear and broad expectations for each stage of the assignment
  - Invitation to include personal and cultural as well as literary responses
  - Weblog as a multifaceted medium to bridge boundaries of time and place

## Versatility and Flexibility

- Pedagogical and curricular adaptability
- Multifaceted and accessible technology
- Varied discourse levels of letter genre
- Motivation to question, speculate, propose, and attend to varying interpretations

## Multimodal Versatility

- Offering opportunities for multimodal expression of learning using technology to communicate with text and multimedia

For my representation of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," I chose Study related to "The First Step" by Constantin Brancusi <http://tinyurl.com/rbrj7>. The shades of yellow reminded me of the "yellow smoke" and "yellow fog" that surrounds the speaker of the poem. (Justine, Clemson)



## Multimodal Expressions of Learning

*"There will be time, there will be time  
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet"*

- Variety of genres, time periods, countries, and cultures

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)



## Multimodal Expressions of Learning

*"Streets that follow like a tedious argument  
Of insidious intent"*

- Variety of genres, time periods, countries, and cultures

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 Victorian 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)



## Multimodal Expressions of Learning

*"And for a hundred visions and revisions,  
Before the taking of a toast and tea"*

- Texts, paintings and sculpture, music (lyrics and instrumentation)

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)



## Letters for Learning

- Authentic transnational audience for interpretations, queries, diverse perspectives, and consensus
- Student-generated conversation fosters community and learning about Prufrock
- Motivation through response and responsiveness
- Teacher as facilitator and secondary audience

## Letters for Learning

*"Do I dare  
Disturb the universe?"*

After reading everyone's responses, a lot of my original questions were cleared. A lot of people focused on the main points of the poem: that is, that **Prufrock** is an **extremely insecure and needy man**. However other students chose to write about topics such as the setting of the poem and try to draw conclusions from there. Erin noted that the setting reflects parts of Prufrock's personality; the settings are dark and dreary, much like Prufrock himself.

Marigrace mentioned that Eliot chose to set his poem in October, a season when nature changes. This could possibly reflect Prufrock's insecure personality. **As insecure as he is, it was evident that he was constantly questioning his decisions and worthiness**; Prufrock is as indecisive as the leaves changing in the fall.

Again, that's to all of your responses! I think we're all helping each other fully understand this poem.  
(Allie, Clemson)

## Letters for Learning

*Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets  
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes  
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?...*

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'm 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)

## Letters for Learning

*"I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.  
I do not think that they will sing to me."*

Wonderful idea, Fredick! :) "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)

## Letters as a Genre

- "Speaking" and connecting to an audience not physically present
- "Presence" through salutations and signatures that project voices and social roles while developing content

**"Dear Group, I have thoroughly enjoyed being able to read everyone's thoughts and responses to such a terrific poem. It's amazing to look at so many different perspectives and see something in the poem that you did not see before. .... Thanks for the great discussion! Kristina"** (Chalmers)

## Language of Letters for Learning

- Intercultural and interpersonal writing in an academic context

I am a Chinese with Indonesian citizenship who has been studying in Sweden for the past 2,5 years. I am now taking some courses in new subject of logistics. I have so many interests, among others, poetry since I consider myself as a romantic person. Though, I have no previous experience with poets before. The only poetic phrase I know is 'to be or not to be' which I happen to find of very much. **(I do not know if we allow to talk a little personal like this in our letters so if it is not allowed, please tell me later)**  
(Catharina, Chalmers)

My name is Malalai...from Afghanistan.... I also want to respond to Catharina in group one. **Yes, you are allowed to talk personally and indeed expressing personal feeling makes your letter more interesting and it gives your letter a variety.** I wish everybody a have a successful semester, full of joy and happiness.  
Sincerely yours, Malalai (Clemson)

## Electronic communication

- Independent of place, supporting international conversation
- Asynchronous, allowing reflection and revision
- Recognizable as business, government, and academic communication (email, IM, professional networks)
- Familiar as communication with friends and relatives (email, IM, social networks)

## Conclusions

- Intercultural writing and reading assignments provide a rich context for student-directed learning across a variety of boundaries (language proficiency, academic discipline and level, cultural background, and constraints of time and space).

## Conclusions

- Letters in an electronic medium proved to be familiar and versatile, enabling students to fulfill assignment goals and develop new communities of interpretive practice beyond their individual classes.

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My most favorite part of the blog, however, was how each of our group members felt comfortable with comparing the poem to art they felt passionate about, such as Jacob's obvious zeal for a piano suite by Sergej Prokofiev. I loved how he compared the suite to Eliot's poetry....  
(Erin, Clemson)

## Teaching Possibilities

- Student letters evolve into new genres in new contexts.
  - Journal
  - Essay
  - Test
  - Research
  - Hypertext (Website, Wiki, Weblog)
  - Portfolio
- Extend the group activities to include collaborative projects such as a Website or multimedia presentation focusing on an author or a work.

## Research Possibilities

- What student behaviors occur and recur in such online conversations, and what do they contribute to building a community of practice and disciplinary as well as intercultural understanding?
- What discourse and genre conventions operate in these international online communities and for what purposes?

# The Assignment

Dear Students,

Thank you for participating in this online conversation among students from one Swedish university and one American university, representing several academic levels and subject areas. Please read the complete directions below before you write and post your letters. We believe this letter exchange will increase your understanding of poetry, poetic language, and the various ways readers in differing contexts come to understand and appreciate poems. If you would like to read more about this project, visit the Cross-Cultural Collaborations Website.

Sincerely,

Magnus Gustafsson, Chalmers University of Technology, Gothenburg, Sweden

Donna Reiss, Clemson University, South Carolina, USA

Art Young, Clemson University, South Carolina, USA

## Project Overview

We are reading “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” by T. S. Eliot. You’ll be corresponding with small groups of students and will be able to read each other’s letters. T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) was a leading poet in the modernist movement in the first half of the twentieth century. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” was written about 1911, published in 1915, and is often viewed as one of the first and best poems of the modern period in literature. Many critics today believe the poem contains many of the themes of “modernism” (alienation, futility) and represents the modern poetic style (fragmentary, stream of consciousness). If you wish, you may find further information on Prufrock, Eliot, and Modernism at the Voices & Visions Website or A Brief Guide to Modernism at Academy of American Poets.

We are using a Weblog (blog) Cross-Cultural Collaboration-Spring 2006: “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” to communicate across our classes. When asked to identify yourself for posting your letters as comments at the blog, select “Other” and provide either your full name or your first name with last initial plus your class and university (for example, “Pat Smart, American Lit, Clemson” or “Maria L., Chalmers, Fiction” or “Chris W., Victorian Poetry, Clemson”). You do not need to provide a Webpage.

Please address your messages to each other as **informal letters with an appropriate greeting and closing** – whatever feels comfortable to you. Specific directions and deadlines for writing each letter appear below and are posted as a Guide at the blog. Compose your letters in your word processor and save them before you copy-paste them to the blog.

- Read “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” by T. S. Eliot.
- Listen to T. S. Eliot reading the poem.
- Compose and submit your letters by the deadlines.
- Questions about the blog: dreiss@clemson.edu

## Letter 1

Letter 1, approximately 250 words, addressed to everybody in your group (“Dear Folks,” Hello Group,” etc.) and submitted by January 23, 11:30 p.m. (U.S. EST) and 23:30 (Sweden CET). To preserve the conversational structure of the discussion, please provide a greeting and signature with each message, naming the group or person to whom you are writing and signing each letter.

- In this first letter, respond with personal and critical insight, focusing on the general meaning of the poem. Write about what interests you in such a way that it opens up the poem to further response and discussion by your groupmates. It is okay—even helpful—to ask questions about things you are unsure of or that you would like to hear what others have to say about.

- Some possibilities: 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 at 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.

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.

## Letter 2

Letter 2, approximately 250 words, addressed to everybody in the group and submitted by January 26, 11:30 p.m. (U.S. EST) and 23:30 (Sweden CET). To preserve the conversational structure of the discussion, please provide a greeting and signature with each message, naming the group or person to whom you are writing and signing each letter. Use either your full name or your first name with last initial and identify your class and university (for example, “Pat Smart, American Lit, Clemson” or “Maria L., Chalmers, Fiction”).

- 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.

### Letter 3

Letter 3, approximately 250 words, addressed to everybody in the group and submitted by January 30, 11:30 p.m. (U.S. EST) and 23:30 (Sweden CET). To preserve the conversational structure of the discussion, please provide a greeting and signature with each

message, naming the group or person to whom you are writing and signing each letter. Use either your full name or your first name with last initial and identify your class and university (for example, "Pat Smart, American Lit, Clemson" or "Maria L., Chalmers, Fiction").

1. First, read the second letters and any additional letters already posted by members of your group. Compose a personal response about some of the ideas and opinions presented there, citing by name at least two groupmates whose Letter 2 submissions have not already been cited by others if possible. Please respond to at least one person not in your same class.

2. 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.

3. Third, explain fully the relationship between the representation you have selected or composed and your understanding of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

## The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

T.S. Eliot (1888–1965). Prufrock and Other Observations. 1917. <http://www.bartleby.com/198/1.html> January 18, 2006

*S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse  
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,  
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.  
Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo  
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,  
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*

LET us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherised upon a table;  
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,  
The muttering retreats 5  
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels  
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:  
Streets that follow like a tedious argument  
Of insidious intent  
To lead you to an overwhelming question ... 10  
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"  
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes, 15  
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes  
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,  
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,  
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,  
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap, 20  
And seeing that it was a soft October night,

Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

And indeed there will be time  
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,  
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes; 25  
There will be time, there will be time  
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;  
There will be time to murder and create,  
And time for all the works and days of hands  
That lift and drop a question on your plate; 30  
Time for you and time for me,  
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,  
And for a hundred visions and revisions,  
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go 35  
Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time  
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"  
Time to turn back and descend the stair,  
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair— 40  
[They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!"]  
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,  
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—

<p>[They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!"]  Do I dare  Disturb the universe?  In a minute there is time  For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.</p> <p>For I have known them all already, known them all:—  Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,  I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;  I know the voices dying with a dying fall  Beneath the music from a farther room.  So how should I presume?</p> <p>And I have known the eyes already, known them all—</p> <p>The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  Then how should I begin  To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?  And how should I presume?</p> <p>And I have known the arms already, known them all—  Arms that are braceleted and white and bare  [But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!]  It is perfume from a dress  That makes me so digress?  Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.  And should I then presume?  And how should I begin?</p> <p>Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets  And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes  Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?...</p> <p>I should have been a pair of ragged claws  Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.</p> <p>And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!  Smoothed by long fingers,  Asleep ... tired ... or it malingers,  Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.  Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,  Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?</p> <p>But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,  Though I have seen my head [grown slightly bald] brought in  upon a platter,  I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;  I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,  And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,</p> <p>And in short, I was afraid.</p> <p>And would it have been worth it, after all,  After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,  Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,  Would it have been worth while,  To have bitten off the matter with a smile,  To have squeezed the universe into a ball  To roll it toward some overwhelming question,  To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,  Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"—</p>	<p>45</p> <p>50</p> <p>55</p> <p>60</p> <p>65</p> <p>70</p> <p>75</p> <p>80</p> <p>85</p> <p>90</p> <p>95</p>	<p>If one, settling a pillow by her head,  Should say: "That is not what I meant at all.  That is not it, at all."</p> <p>And would it have been worth it, after all,  Would it have been worth while,  After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,  After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail  along the floor—  And this, and so much more?—  It is impossible to say just what I mean!  But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a  screen:  Would it have been worth while  If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,  And turning toward the window, should say:  "That is not it at all,  That is not what I meant, at all."</p> <p>No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  Am an attendant lord, one that will do  To swell a progress, start a scene or two,  Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,  Deferential, glad to be of use,  Politic, cautious, and meticulous;  Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;  At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—  Almost, at times, the Fool.</p> <p>I grow old ... I grow old ...  I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.</p> <p>Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?  I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.</p> <p>I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.</p> <p>I do not think that they will sing to me.</p> <p>I have seen them riding seaward on the waves  Combing the white hair of the waves blown back  When the wind blows the water white and black.</p> <p>We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  Till human voices wake us, and we drown.</p>	<p>100</p> <p>105</p> <p>110</p> <p>115</p> <p>120</p> <p>125</p> <p>130</p>
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