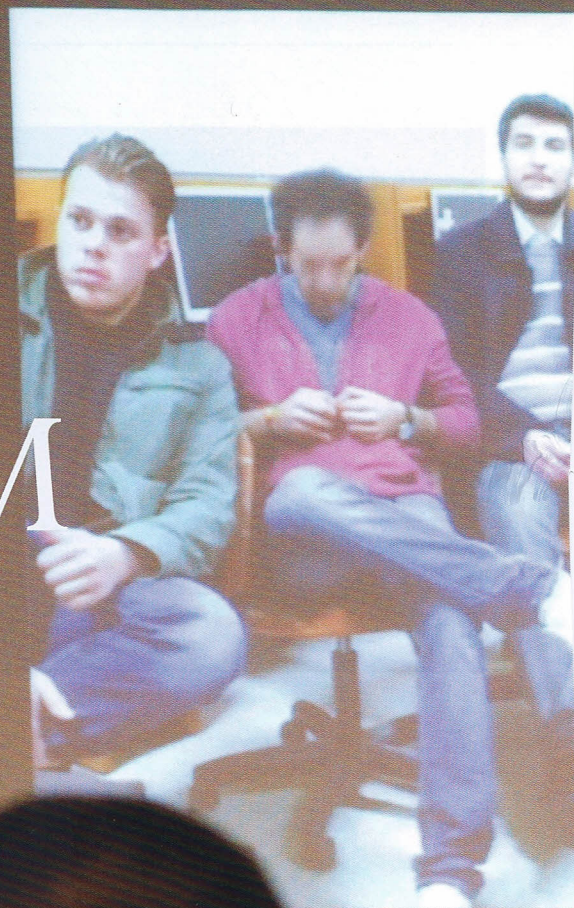


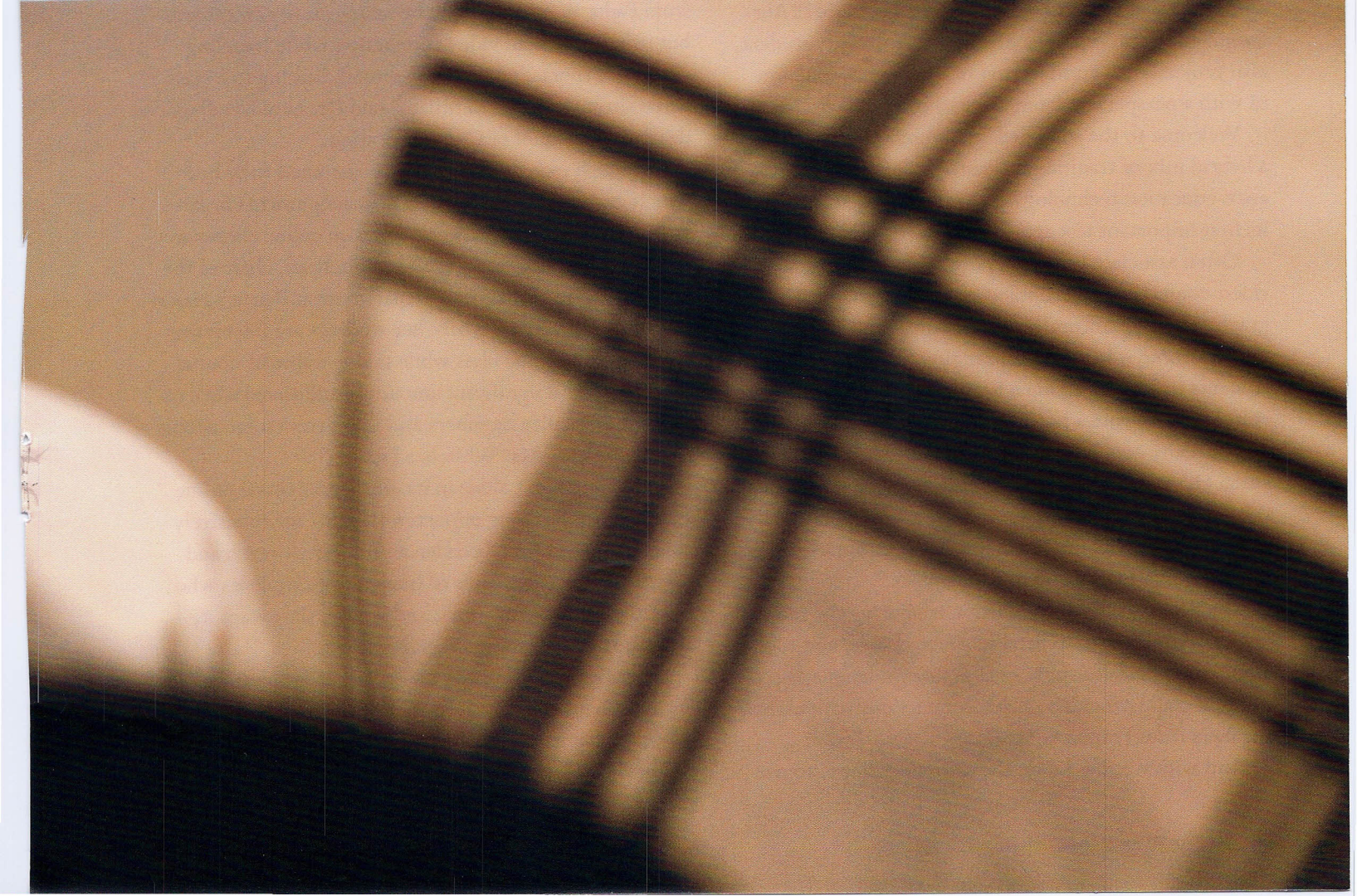
THE CLASSROOM OF THE FUTURE



Video-conferencing technology brings
the world closer to Bellarmine

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IN A CHILLY WINTER MORNING IN a Bellarmine School of Communication classroom, sophomore Sid Abramson, his backpack splayed out next to him, chewed on a pen as he listened to a fellow student discuss Muslim stereotypes in Western media.

But unlike the handful of students sitting next to him in the Peace Communication class, the student he was listening to was a Palestinian – speaking from 6,000 miles away in Beirut, a Mediterranean city long torn by religious conflict and strife.

Projected on a large screen at the front of the class, hanging next to a camera and microphone pointing at Abramson's classmates, Osamah Dabdoub and a dozen mostly Lebanese college students wearing jeans and tennis shoes exchanged ideas about religion, media and peace with the Bellarmine students.

"I've got a question for Beirut – what's it like for you all to have that type of conflict in your backyard?" Abramson asked, prompting a Marquette University student, also projected on another part of the screen, to chime in with a perspective from visits to India and Africa.

Welcome to the so-called "classroom of the future," a hybrid mix of traditional classroom learning and distance-education technology that is currently undergoing its first important test at Bellarmine.

Often associated with corporate boardrooms, the video-conferencing technology is helping to bring geographically and culturally distant voices and ideas into the classroom – in this case, ranging from Lebanese students to Middle-Eastern journalists to a Pentagon colonel who wrote a book on why youth join al-Qaeda.

"It's really cool talking to people like that," said Samantha Ortiz, a junior communication major who is involved on campus with international issues including the conflict in the Sudan. "It's so much more valuable than if it was just us talking among ourselves."

The School of Communication is piloting the technology with plans to expand to other classes, and soon after, other fields of study such as foreign languages, where it could provide valuable connections with native speakers from France to Mexico.

And within a few years, the university hopes to use

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it as a springboard to begin offering wholly online degrees – while helping transform the way on-campus students access courses.

"You could be a remote learner linked in real time from Paducah, or you might be taking classes on campus but using your iPad video connection while traveling for school sports, or studying abroad, linking to a class while sitting in a café in Milan," said Dr. Lara Needham, dean of the School of Communication.

Although many students are accustomed to online course portals where they can post assignments or have web chats, internationally collaborative online classes are still relatively rare, said Sandra Whitehead, chair of the Languages and Humanities Department at Beirut's Hariri Canadian University, where her students are interacting with the Bellarmine class while taking a similar course.

"It requires a significant amount of additional work on the part of faculty members and that deters some people from trying it," Ms. Whitehead said.

Bellarmino isn't alone in its efforts to expand online and distance-learning opportunities that inexpensively enhance instruction, broaden a university's reach and better serve the demands of Internet-age students who want their education when, and where, they want it, according to university officials.

"There's a large demand for online programming," Dr. Needham said. "Bellarmine realizes that if we don't get in the game at some level, we're going to be left on the sidelines."



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NO. OF MILES
BETWEEN
LOUISVILLE
AND BEIRUT



The roots of the project go back several years.

Ed Manassah, the retired Courier-Journal publisher who is now the director of Bellarmine's Institute for Media, Culture and Ethics, began exploring ways to better utilize online classroom technology. But rather than settling for one-dimensional online courses, he wanted "to find a way to create a more collaborative, interactive classroom."

Borrowing from business-world video-conferencing, he discovered New Jersey-based Vidyo, a company that supplied the technology for Bellarmine so that as many as eight classrooms or people could be linked together, and worked to create applications for iPhones and iPads.

It wasn't long before scholars from health sciences to business to foreign languages began to see the possibilities. Even the athletics officials began imagining traveling sports players being able to tap into a live lecture on their iPads without missing a class.

"The potential is so big," Mr. Manassah said.

After just \$70,000 bought the hardware, software and licenses, it was time to test it out – the only question was where.

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The answer seemed to present itself when Dr. Claire Badaracco, a communication professor and peace studies scholar and professor emeritus from Marquette University, moved back to Louisville to be closer to family and approached Bellarmine about teaching Peace Communication with a distance-learning element.

Officials decided there would be no more fitting course than Peace Communication, which sat at the intersection of Bellarmine's longstanding peace and social justice mission and its push to “internationalize” student education with intercultural curriculum and experiences, a major focus of its accreditation-tied Quality Enhancement Plan. Already, the university has succeeded in expanding study-abroad programs, with more than one-third of full-time students now studying abroad at programs in more than 50 countries.

“Our eyes lit up – every piece seemed to fit. We knew this would be the best class we could ever conceptualize to dip our toes into distance education,” Dr. Needham said.

Spend any time in Dr. Badaracco's class, and it's easy to see why. She blends media analysis, international news, conflict resolution and peace studies to explore how media shape ideas about cultural identity and conflict, and how these principles are used in a variety of media from documentary filmmaking to entertainment.

Students read books such as the controversial *Three Cups of Tea*, about building schools in Afghanistan, and watch films such as *Control Room*, the documentary about Al Jazeera's coverage of the Iraq War and *Budrus*, a 2009 film about a town where Israelis and Palestinians came together to use non-violent protest to save a village.

While assignments range from papers to photo projects, a key part of the class is cross-cultural communication. The class plans to meet about eight times during the semester with the dozen students at Hariri Canadian University.

In mid-January, Ms. Whitehead was patched in with

her dozen students from Beirut for their first meet and greet. Although it was early morning at Bellarmine, it was already dark into the evening in Lebanon. Introductions were made, with most of the students sitting in chairs in a computer lab, saying they were studying business and computer-science.

Hariri is a financially accessible university founded by the late Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, who was assassinated in 2005. It serves students who are Muslims, Druse and Christian, mostly from Lebanese or Palestinian descent. The campus is located in Mechref, south of central Beirut, located at the top of a small mountain overlooking the Mediterranean.

Ms. Whitehead, a former journalist and public relations specialist who taught communication and humanities at Hariri for nearly three years, called the collaboration a rare “opportunity to build cross-cultural understanding.”

The Bellarmine students were a smaller group – with only eight students enrolled in the course, a mix of communication, education and other majors. As they introduced themselves, one said she wanted to become a teacher; another, a meteorologist.

Everyone said they spent lots of time on Facebook, the Internet and similar media websites, and then Ms. Whitehead raised a controversial reality TV show they'd seen, called “All-American Muslim,” which caused uproar after Lowe's pulled its ads off the show in the wake of objections from a conservative Christian group.

“Why would such a show get opposition? The media changes images of Muslims in the U.S. by using stereotypes,” one Lebanese student said, leading to head nods from the Bellarmine students.

Alexandra Newell, the student taking the class from Marquette University, brought up the American preacher who once threatened to burn the Koran, creating a global backlash. Just as too many people in the U.S. associate Arabs with terrorism, she argued, some Arabs may unfairly judge Americans based on one person or incident.

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“I think the stereotypes can occur on both sides,” she said.

At one point the lights in the Beirut classroom went out, and Dr. Badaracco asked what happened.

“We shift from public power to the generator – it happens every day for five minutes here. But we’re back,” Ms. Whitehead responded.

It sparked laughter, but it was one of the few technological glitches during the first meeting. And after the class was over, the Bellarmine students continued to discuss the experience, abuzz about the prospect of getting to know the fellow students better on Facebook.

Many of the students, who know the region mostly from news reports about conflict, said they were struck by how much the Lebanese students were like them in terms of consuming media, being skeptical of the news and valuing peace and social justice.

“I think in previous generations, people didn’t have the direct connections to other people around the world. But our generation has a lot more connections,” Samantha Ortiz said. “And I think that changes your worldview.”

Another student, Annie Goodwin, a freshman communication major from Shelby County, Ky., said getting to know people in fragile states was especially meaningful to her. In 1997, her father, a longtime Louisville Metro Police Officer, spent a year in Bosnia training police officers as part of a larger peacekeeping mission.

“To connect directly with people who have lived

through this stuff is really interesting,” she said.

The Lebanese students were also intrigued. Nadine Alroz, 19, who grew up in Lebanon, said this was her first class connected to students in the U.S. She said it was already clear that the students had much in common and that the class would help “eliminate any misconceptions in the U.S. of how are things in this part of the world and vice versa.”

Osamah Dabdoub, a 25-year-old Palestinian – whose family had to pay \$1,000 for a taxi to take them on back roads to safety in Syria during the 2006 conflict between Israel and Hezbollah – agreed. He said the collaboration would test his ideas about the U.S.

“For once I have the chance to go directly to the source of the mentality and culture rather than getting it through media,” he said. “Technology is there to serve us and make our lives easier; this time it is being used for a good cause, and I am with it all the way.”

With the Peace Communication course showing plenty of initial promise, Dr. Needham said the university will assess how it’s worked at the end of the course and weigh lessons and changes.

She believes it will soon be enriching courses and programs across the university and beyond, as Bellarmine grows its distance education efforts.

“Now the big hurdle is passed, and the technology is in place,” she said. “But you have to crawl before you can walk.” ■

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