

Around the World in 30 Minutes: Using Skype to Engage Students in Cross-Cultural Exchanges

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by

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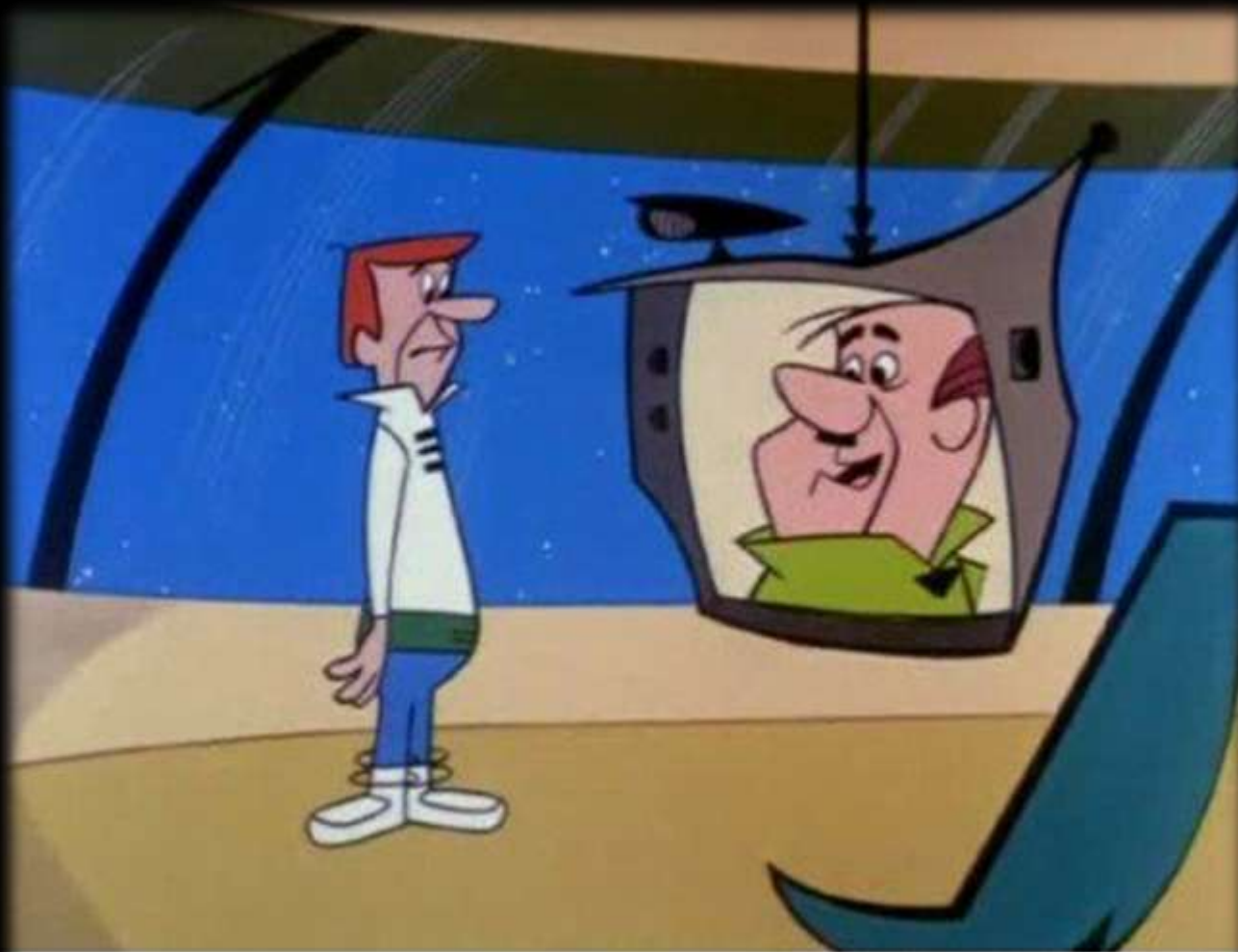
Wouldn't it be great if all of our students were able to participate in study abroad programs? Wouldn't it be just wonderful if every student in our classes had spent time in another country meeting people and learning about cultures in another part of the world?



In a perfect world, money is no barrier to study abroad, students do not have family obligations, and there is not a culture of fear attached to traveling outside of one's country. But we do not live in a perfect world and the reality is that the overwhelming majority of students will not study abroad. ☹️



But that does not mean that our students will not have the opportunity to visit other countries virtually. Because today, we have the gift of Skype! Skype is a software application that allows users to make voice and video calls over the Internet. Calls to other Skype users are free.



Hanna-Barbera/failoften.net

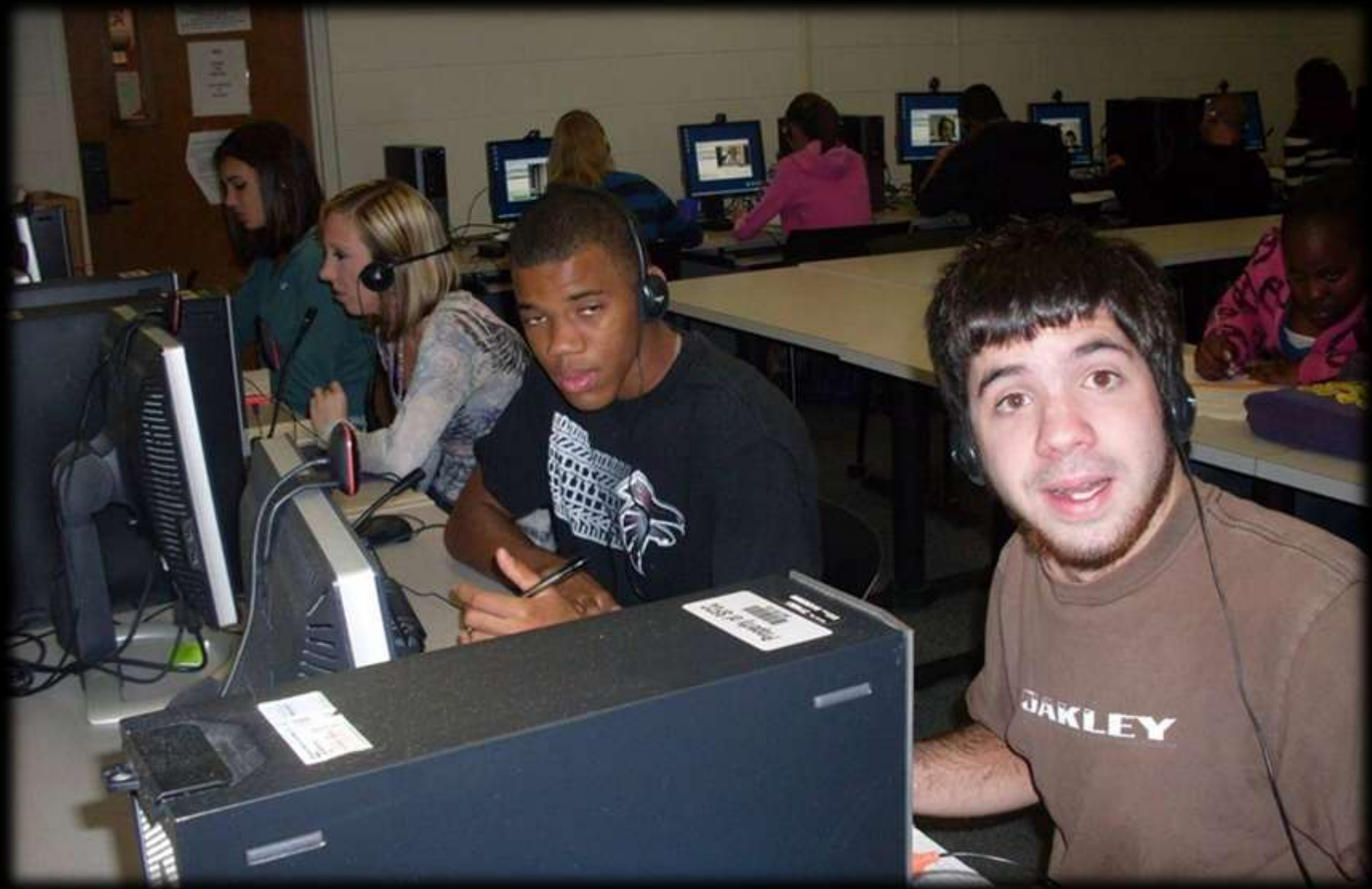
As a child, I watched the Jetsons and I saw George Jetson and his family using video communication technology. I really expected that I would see it come to reality in my life-time and now it is here!!!



Skype currently has 663 million registered users. If you are not yet registered, it is time for you to get on the Skype bandwagon and bring your whole educational institution aboard.



This technological advancement provides an internationalization opportunity for each and every class on your campus. Skype is a peer-to-peer system and the original name for it was: Sky peer-to-peer.



Peer-to-Peer means that it gives you the capability to connect individual students in a classroom on your campus with individual students in a classroom in any country in the world. They can talk to one another, see one another, and show one another things live and in real time. Imagine the possibilities for cultural exchange. They are infinite!!!



In the fall of 2005, I met a teacher from Sweden who was visiting the United States with his family. He had the brilliant idea to engage our students in dialogues about cultural similarities and differences. He returned to Sweden and we communicated by e-mail for two years, before we finally developed a plan to use Skype to connect our students.



We had our first connection in the Fall of 2007. As the project has matured, we have been able to knock some of the kinks out and we have also been able to expand it to include study abroad. In fact, in 2010, my partner from Sweden brought over 2 students, a faculty colleague and the chair of his department. And in 2011, they visited with 8 in their group, including 5 students. I have visited Tullangskolan twice since then and I am planning a study abroad tour there for May 2012.

12 STEPS

Now I'd like to share 12 steps for incorporating Skype in your classes.



1. Find a partner in another country. Think about places where you know educators or places where people who you know might know educators. Put some feelers out there and I am sure that you will get a bite.



2. Establish the goals of the interaction with your partner. You do not have to have the same goals as your partner. I teach sociology courses and my primary goal is for my students to gain a cross-cultural perspective on the social world that we live in. My partner's teaches technical communication and his primary goal is to have his students practice English with Americans.



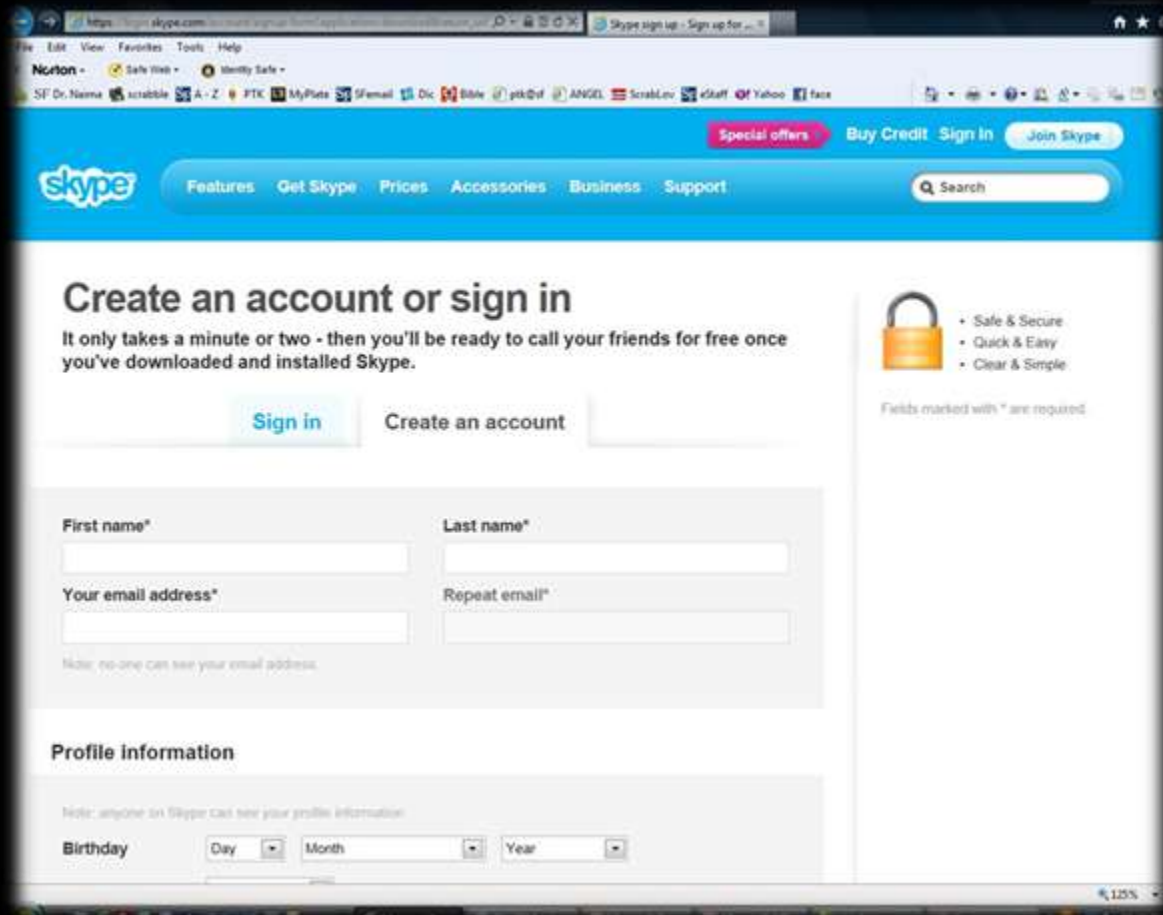
3. Find a time that will suit both of you. Without a doubt, you are going to be in different time zones. For my project, I connect my 8am class to my partner's 2pm class.



4. Write a proposal for your institution explaining the rationale for engaging in this cross-cultural project and discussing the resources that you will need. You are going to need a firm commitment from your school to make the project a reality.



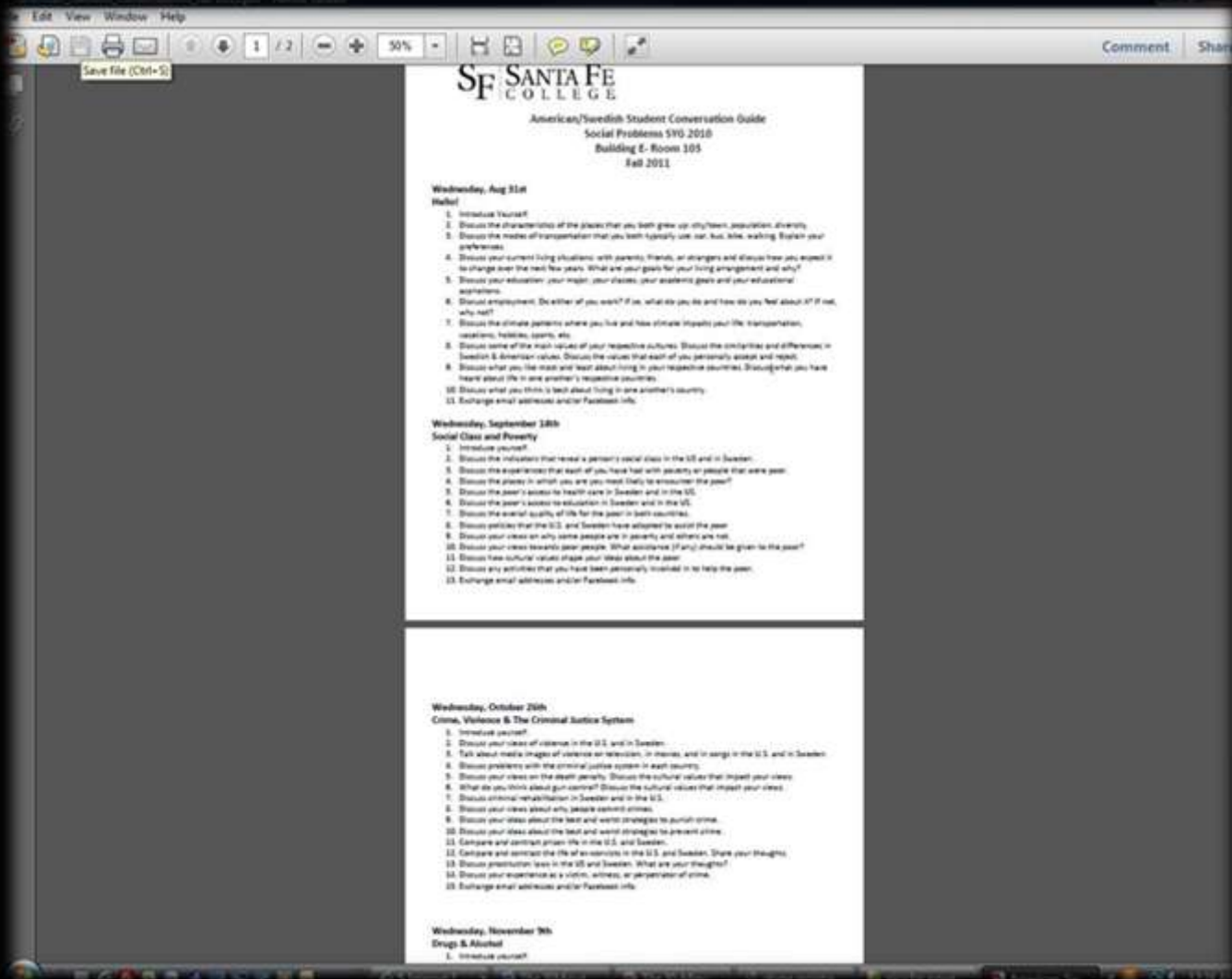
5. Locate a computer lab on your campus that can be reserved during the set time and have your technology department download Skype on to all of the computers.



6. Go to Skype.com and create simple usernames that you will use for your project. The lab that we use has 20 computers so I created 20 accounts. santafecollege1, santafecollege2, etc.



7. Purchase the necessary equipment: plug and play webcams, plug and play headsets with microphones ,and a storage cabinet that locks. This way, you can maintain the security of your equipment when you are not in the lab.



8. Develop a conversation guide to assist your students. The guide helps direct the student conversation to the topic of interest and also helps them become more comfortable talking with one another. Provide each student with the guides for the entire semester on the first day of class. This way, they have an opportunity to think about and plan for their conversations.



9. Always arrive at the computer lab one hour before the class begins. You will need to power the computers on, attach the webcams and log in to Skype.



10. Give the students a motivational talk before each session to put them at ease and emphasize the benefits of the interaction. I mean, my goodness, we are connecting to people in another part of the world to gain an understanding of their lives. Outside of getting on a plane and going over there, it does not get any more exciting than this!!!



10. Allot 20-30 minutes for students to engage in a dialogue with their foreign partners. Invariably, some students will want to talk for longer periods and some will want to talk for shorter periods. By walking around and listening, you get an idea about the natural level of curiosity among the students.



12. Debrief your students about their experiences. Explore the patterns and anomalies as a class so that everyone can learn from what the others have learned.



The Benefits of Using Skype In Your Classroom

1. It opens students up to completely different perspectives that are developed by a completely different culture.
2. The students see that there are many similarities and cultural universals in different societies.
3. The interactions help students overcome stereotypes about people in other parts of the world.
4. Connecting with others using Skype helps students to think globally
5. It helps students to develop and improve language skills.
6. The interactions encourage students to study abroad.
7. The interactions help prepare students for study abroad.
8. It helps students develop an international network of associates and friends.
9. This is a relatively low-cost way to take your students to another part of the world.
10. The project is done during class time so students do not have to make any extra efforts to participate.

Challenges & Considerations To Keep in Mind



- Remember that Daylight Savings Time is not the same around the world
- Be sure that you contact your partner by email a few days before to confirm every meeting
- Work with your technology department to overcome firewall issues.
- Check your lab the day before to make sure everything is as it should be.
- Check on bandwidth issues on your campus.
- Recognize that students may be uncomfortable in the beginning
- Always have backup headsets and webcams.
- Avoid microphone stands or else your partners will hear your entire classroom.
- Use a Skype name and password that is easy for you to remember.
- Work with your department chair to schedule your class for the same time each semester.
- Be careful of timing issues when you attempt to expand the project to other users on campus.
- If you have an option, use your longer class time.
- Set your calendar for the upcoming semester well in advance.
- Consider the pros and cons of assigning one student to another for the entire semester.
- Keep a line of communication between faculty open during all interactions..
- Be mindful of student absences.
- Anticipate technical difficulties.



And now click on this link for a video message from my Swedish partners about our Skype connection. <http://youtu.be/6WucT1jViyM>

Thank You!!!!