Educational partnerships on-line:

Global collaborative learning through an on-line student exchange programme

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Abstract: Deakin University and the University of Calgary have used the internet to provide workplace-based learners with the possibility of a student exchange programme which does not disrupt their careers, lives or families. The programmes involved in this on-line exchange were both developed in response to the needs of workplace learners and are representative of the role of universities in the field of life-long learning. This paper describes the first phase of the exchange and discusses the shared pedagogical philosophies and shared implementation of on-line groupware which provided a rationale for the exchange. The paper will explore the cross-cultural implications of the educational experience and the possibilities such an exchange opens up for life-long learners.

Key words: life-long learning, on-line learning, educational partnerships

1. INTRODUCTION

Sharing global perspectives of issues, and learning collaboratively in cross-cultural groupings, has been a potential of the internet since it was established. The possibility of educational partnerships in a world connected by ever advancing information and communication technologies (ICT) has been discussed and predicted as networked learning became more pervasive, and both informal and structured on-line communities developed (Harasim, 1993; Pratt, 1999). The cultural, social and administrative issues to be resolved in order for such global partnerships to be established have been explored and piloted in an educational partnership described in this paper. The partnership was between two geographically diverse universities which

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provided their students with the opportunity to participate in an exchange programme that occurred completely on-line.

During the first half of 2001 (beginning in Canada's winter and Australia's summer) the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada, and Deakin University in Victoria, Australia, after signing a formal, three-year Memorandum of Agreement, piloted an institutional on-line exchange. The programmes involved in the exchange were the Master of Continuing Education: Workplace Learning and Leadership Development (MCE) at the University of Calgary and the Master of Professional Education and Training (MPET) at Deakin University. Both the MCE and MPET programme structures and both institutions' use of FirstClass as a central course communication software, mean that students in diverse geographic locations globally and within each programme's structure, may work at their own time and location while maintaining full-time employment. Through the course sharing exchange established, North American and Australian students have access to knowledge and expertise in workplace learning related topics not available within their own programmes.

2. PEDAGOGICAL RATIONALE FOR EXCHANGE

The courses piloted in this exchange were underpinned by similar approaches to on-line pedagogy. They were courses designed with a constructivist philosophical approach to adult learning which assumes that learners construct their own meaning, their own unique view of knowledge, and are active, not passive: not just absorbing knowledge from an expert teacher but actively creating their own understanding. The course teachers viewed learning as interactive and developmental (Pratt, 1999) with a need for social interaction so that the learner can explain understandings and receive feedback, to clarify meaning and reach a group consensus. This pedagogical philosophy underlined the necessity for collaborative learning as a means of providing multiple perspectives to concepts being learned. There was a perceived need to see an issue from different vantage points and to understand alternative views with computer conferencing providing the medium for this discussion. Cognitive psychologists such as Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner, have emphasised the social nature of learning, particularly when learners are confronted with problems which they cannot solve on their own without the resources of a group. More importantly, the process of discussion, listening to other group members and receiving feedback on ideas, provides the cognitive scaffolding that constructivists see as essential to higher-order thinking (Stacey, 1999). Sharing similar

pedagogical philosophies in each institution's programme made the exchange project feasible.

The potential of global networking for cross-cultural education had been identified from early stages in the use of ICT. Ishii (1993) suggested that "The ability of telecommunication and computer-based technologies to overcome time and space constraints seems to be an essential foundation for tools to promote international collaboration in a variety of fields". He emphasised the importance of developing groupware tools that facilitated cross-cultural communication. The use in both universities of the same institutional groupware, FirstClass, for similar pedagogical purposes in postgraduate coursework, was one of the initial links of similarity identified by staff in the two programmes and made the exchange programme much easier to establish technologically.

McLoughlin (2001), analysing the use of web technology for effective cross-cultural pedagogy, suggested that "The notion of belonging to a global learning community enables students to acquire critical awareness of how they construct their own understanding, and to identify their own (often ethnocentric) ways of thinking". She used the community of inquiry model to define an effective cross-cultural learning environment as a social network of distributed learners sharing their perspectives and expertise through a communicative, collaborative cross-national dialogue with an appreciation of the diversity of the community. Her criteria for effective cross-cultural on-line learning included components in the constructivist design of the courses exchanged in this study which inclusively respected potential differences in cultural approaches between Australian and Canadian universities.

Though the cultures represented in an English-speaking Canadian university and an English-speaking Australian university are not as culturally different from those described in other studies (Gunawardena et al., 2001), Goodfellow et al. (2001) teaching from the UK Open University to a culturally diverse group of postgraduate students described factors of "cultural otherness", a sense and expression of cultural and linguistic differences and "perceptions of globality", an inclusion of a range of national contexts and global coverage, which were anticipated in the study and were included in interview questions directed to the exchange students.

The feasibility of establishing the exchange programme was therefore based on: 1) shared learner-centred pedagogical philosophies between the two programmes; 2) shared cultural/social values and approaches to adult teaching/learning; 3) shared institutional groupware, FirstClass.

3. METHODOLOGY

The approach to researching and evaluating the pilot project was 'participant-oriented' (Worthen et al., 1997) in that it involved input from a number of stakeholders: students, teachers, and administrative support staff. It combined both quantitative and qualitative data gathering methods within an interpretive research paradigm (Sherman and Webb, 1988). The data were collected by the course instructors (student marks, critical incidence question responses, instructor reflections, administrator/staff feedback, FirstClass system feedback), administrative support staff (end-of-course evaluations), and a researcher external to the project who was employed to gather data anonymously and independently of the course administration (post-course telephone interviews). This paper will focus on describing the student perceptions and outcomes.

3.1 Project population

Table 1 below shows the numerical distribution of the student population in the pilot exchange project.

Course	Total	Canadian	Australian
CTED 643	4	2	2
CTED 645	12	8	4
EXC 703	11	1	10
EXC 709	17	4	13
Total	44	15	29

Table 1. Summary of student population

The Deakin University group studying Canadian courses was drawn from a volunteer group and all were female (one took both Canadian courses), achieving in the MPET at varying levels. Three of the Canadian students (all female) were from the same cohort in the MCE, were all from eastern Canada and had met face to face during their intense three week summer school, and the one male, living in western Canada, was a doctoral student selecting coursework units as electives from the masters programme. Demographic information gathered during the telephone interviews portrayed a diverse set of students: 30% were between the ages of 31 and 40, 30% between 41 and 50, and 40% between 51 and 60. The number of on-line courses that respondents had previously taken ranged from 1 to 10,

with the average being 4.5; the number of years of computer experience among students ranged from 3.5 to 20 years, with the average being 10.6.

Courses involved in the exchange project are shown in Table 2 below.

<i>University of Calgary, Canada</i>	<i>Deakin University, Australia</i>
CTED 643 Career Development in Organizational Settings	ECX703 Media, Text and Technologies in Open and Distance Education
CTED 645 Multicultural Issues in Adult Education	ECX709 Teaching and Learning with CMC

Table 2. Courses involved in the exchange project

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overall the project participants were satisfied with the exchange experience, though critical of one unit which had provided less instructor participation (see Table 3 below). When asked to respond to critical incidents midway through the semester all groups identified difficulties only with the administrative problems involved at the beginning of the pilot, when the universities tried to establish new enrolment procedures, on-line access and material distribution for students who did not fit their usual administrative arrangements. However, once these operational issues were addressed, the actual educational exchange was viewed very favourably by all participants though both groups of students perceived their own institution's courses as superior and of a higher standard. However, both groups appreciated the stimulus of the cross-cultural exchange and the different educational experiences the project provided, and were excited by the diversity of cultural perspectives.

Course	Response rate	Course content & organisation	Instruct or rating	Assignments	On-line learning environment
CTED 643	100%	4.13	4.78	4.67	4.63
CTED 645	30%	2.42	1.89	1.5	2.53
ECX 703	70%	4.71	4.71	4.01	4.71
ECX 709	69%	4.71	4.8	4.58	5

Table 3. Summative evaluation (rating scale 1=poor to 5 =excellent)

Though the students had a perception of "cultural otherness" (Goodfellow et al., 2001) there was little consensus about what the differences were, and they discovered that many similar issues and trends were current in education and human resource development in both countries. There was a sense of seasonal timing disorientation described by teachers and students as Deakin started the exchange at the beginning of their academic and calendar year (mid-summer in Australia) when there are also a series of Australian public holidays (Easter was the only shared holiday over the time period of the exchange). These two factors combined to slow the initial pace of Australian on-line interactivity as they took advantage of good weather for outdoor recreation at weekends and holidays while the Canadians were suffering the bitter cold of a northern hemisphere climate which suited on-line weekend interactivity and would reflect similar interaction patterns during the beginning of the second semester of the academic year in Australia.

The constructivist approach and the collaborative learning encouraged in the courses were perceived as the strength of the programmes by the students. Many students from both Australia and Canada mentioned the affirmation of the on-line interaction, "there is a real sense of camaraderie between us," with the supportive sharing of ideas and assignments being acknowledged. Both cultures share a valuing of group interaction and collaboration as evidenced in the similarity of course structures on-line, so there was a ready acceptance of this mode of interaction. The Calgary course provides an intense three week face-to-face session with each cohort, which provides a basis for grouping not available to the Deakin students or to groups in this exchange. This made the on-line collaborative grouping experience and the instructors' roles in facilitating this even more important to the exchange. Students commented on the course structures positively: "The interactions and sharing of peoples' vast knowledge"; "The collective 'feel'"; "The manner in which the design of the unit brings relevancy, immediacy and engagement to me as a learner"; "I like the unit, the people and the interaction".

The use of FirstClass was more than just a commonly shared communication software. In the pilot project, the conferences operated as separate entities with no common collective space, so students were unaware of exchange students in other courses unless they were enrolled in the same course. However there was a shared culture of the groupware, FirstClass, with an interface that provided a shared purpose for group discussion. Both Canadian and Australian students suggested ways they used aspects of the software as ways for the group to communicate. On-line socialisation and information exchange were an important ongoing focus of the cross-cultural

exchange. Students in this early phase commented: "The short time so far has surprisingly forged strong links between the students and I think this is a great benefit of this medium"; "I am surprised by my own sense of 'groupness' - commitment to the group... using cmc like this is a revelation". The ability of the group to socially construct knowledge was evident in the student discussion of their on-line experiences: "the ease with which everyone is sharing ideas and opinions is a testimony to the collaborative nature of this unit".

Cross-cultural differences were anticipated but not significantly found, while the commonality of ideas throughout both groups' differing perceptions, and the discussion of their different contexts, did provide students with perceptions of globality (with students responding negatively to a perceived North American focus in the course with low evaluation scores) (see Table 3). Language differences were colloquial only and students were prepared for these and discussed them as a positive experience. "This cultural exchange/interaction is very positive and life enriching. Picking up your local slangs, jokes and what 'Anzac Day' is all about has been a wonderful experience".

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The on-line exchange was a successful educational programme for the students involved as it was firmly based on shared pedagogical approaches to adult teaching/learning as well as shared cultural/social values between the two institutions. The use of the same computer conferencing groupware also provided a familiar common communication space which enabled the ease of communication of multiple perspectives on workplace and pedagogical issues between students. As life-long learners involved in studying while working, the students gained a wider global perspective on the issues they studied, while becoming aware of the commonality of these issues worldwide. The capability of being able to undergo this experience without disrupting their lives, families and careers through a traditional student exchange programme underlines the importance of such educational partnerships for life-long learners. The sense of 'cultural otherness' was based on minor differences and such information was integrated into preparation for future semesters to prepare students for any differences of practice. The on-line exchange can in the future emphasise a more global view so that the 'perceptions of globality' of the students are satisfied. In a world too often pulled apart by differing perspectives, the potential of the internet for educational partnerships which encourage understanding of such differences should be considered in many educational sectors.

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BIOGRAPHIES

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