Developing an International Distance Education Program: A Blended Learning Approach

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Abstract

Building a dynamic international distance education program can be a complex operation. The purpose of this paper is to discuss a model for global learning that utilizes a blended learning approach. This paper will describe how a blended learning approach was implemented in an international instructional technology Master's program to the benefit of both universities and countries involved. The discussion will focus on a specific framework for developing an international, blended learning program with special consideration of cultural differences in language, teaching philosophy, and education.

Introduction

Learning in an online and distance education context is becoming a very common phenomenon in institutions of higher education. Transforming traditional learning contexts to mirror an increasingly technological world and to support a global community is critical to ensure the success for a larger cross-section of diverse learners (Hicks, Reid, & George, 2001; Williams, 2002). Moreover, given the recent evidence that indicates the opportunities of using distance learning to transform the student learner (e.g., Moore & Kearsley, 2005), there is reason to believe that using a blended learning approach, or one where a technological and a face-to-face learning component is included, can help in the development of better global, technological communities.

Changes in the world and the need for developing industry in countries that are less technological, demands that workers around the world be able to not only collaborate with one another, but also solve more complex problems, and use technology as a tool (Kerr, 2005). However, one possible hurdle to educating workers in becoming familiar with technology is the lack of trained educators within developing countries where there is very little to no technological training currently available. One way to overcome this obstacle is to establish a blended learning program that involves the inclusion of distance learning, as well as some face-to-face learning (in other words, including a more traditional learning context). Blended learning can be an advantage to some countries since the costs can be kept low and the materials can be made accessible to a greater amount of students.

Blended Learning

Blended learning, which can generally be defined as an amalgam of text-based, online technology with

face-to-face learning, is a low cost, but effective way to transmit knowledge in a global world. Researchers and educators have defined blended learning in a variety of ways (Whitelock & Jelfs, 2003). These interpretations have ranged from a supplemental addition of a web-based tool for a course to a more pedagogical blend of instructional online tools that support learning (Driscoll, 2002; Martyn, 2003; Rovai & Jordan, 2004). Essentially, the use of blended learning is a new way to both teach and learn in a higher education setting.

One of the most specific advantages of blended learning is the opportunity to quickly establish a sense of community amongst student learners (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Within the blended learning classroom, students generally meet in face-to-face instruction, and then have opportunities to communicate with open dialogue, to experience critical debate, and essentially participate in a variety of forms of communication in a "safer" setting. These opportunities can facilitate greater reflection on course content and broaden students' learning experiences.

Blended learning also may provide other distinct benefits over more traditional classrooms. Pedagogical theorists have recently suggested that lectures that only transmit information rather than focusing on learning are not very effective for students in terms of long-term retention and use (Salmon, 2000). In other words, students need to learn the material in a novel and interactive way that takes individual needs and interests into account, so that these skills may transfer into real-world settings (Derntl & Motschnig-Pitril, 2005). This may be particularly true in the field of instructional technology, where it is essential that the notions of transfer (real-world problem-solving), collaboration, and team effort (working in groups) are reinforced. Moreover, to be able to design, develop, and evaluate processes and resources for learning technology, as practitioners in the field do on a daily basis, students need to be able to learn to use technology as a tool in itself. Consequently, blended learning is not only a means of learning the subject matter, but also a way of putting the course content into practice.

Blended learning also provides the opportunity for students to not only build a connection with each other but a rapport with the instructor. Having more resources available and connections to people who are in the same field is always valuable. In addition, for students who are used to experiencing only face-to-face instruction, a blended learning approach provides room for the development of autonomy, self-efficacy, and individual organizational skills since certain pieces of the program are self-regulated. Yet, a blended learning approach also provides consistency in learning. In this type of approach, students experience new methods and ways of learning and also put into practice the familiar, traditional method of learning in a face-to-face environment. When there is no face-to-face component, as in traditional distance learning programs, students may report some isolation, and unless instructors make the distance education program interactive, students may also report a disconnect with the class, their classmates, or the instructor (Dickey, 2004; Ibrahim, Rwegasira, & Taher, 2007). The outcome may be a lower attendance rate, lack of accountability, and attrition. Newer technologies have helped to address the concern of isolation in distance education courses. Technologies such as video-conferencing, streaming video, web-logs (blogs) are now often common features of contemporary distance education classes (Dickey, 2004; Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003). However, as Hunt (2005) noted, in countries in which there is poor bandwidth or poor access to technology using these newer technologies may not be feasible. Thus, in these settings including a face-to-face component is very important to build community. A blended learning approach may also be an ideal method to utilize within an international distance education program for several reasons. It can reduce costs yet encourage rapport building, and provide consistency and the skills that transfer into real-world settings.

However, blended learning is not without its obstacles and critics. Many educators may not have the skills necessary to effectively teach in a blended learning environment. It is often both energy and time intensive. Additional pre-planning and programming is needed in order to keep a consistent flow of instruction during the course. Handouts, course lectures, assignments, etc. all need to be structured in advance. As a result, some educators may lack the time or expertise (didactic or otherwise) in using the blended learning platform as a teaching and learning tool. This may be particularly true in an international program where access to and understanding of the technology may be somewhat limited; and, where faculty are also using specific programs and technological tools for the first time themselves. Therefore, as the field of blended learning develops, a new focus on the process of blended learning in an international environment is needed.

Perspectives on Learning in a Blended Learning Technology Program

Historically, there have been several models posited on how educators should teach their subject matter. In one review, Wallace (1991) points to several philosophies in education that highlight different teacher approaches such as the applied science model (evaluating scientific "truths"), the craft model (learning from practitioner experience), and the reflective approach (focusing on relationships between knowledge and skills). Other theories focus on the behaviors or ways that individuals construct social meaning based upon educational technology. For example, Seattler (1990) notes that behavioristic theories suggest that learning comes from observing and imitating overt behaviors.

Cognitive theorists postulate that learning takes place in memory and through careful acquisition and organization of concepts and strategies (Siegler, 2005; Siegler &Alibali, 2005). Thus, in terms of instructional design and technology, materials must be organized from simple to complex. Theorists in the social constructivist tradition note that Anchored Instruction is the key to student success (Bradford, Sherwood, Hasselbring, Kinnar, & Williams, 1990). Learners construct or interpret their reality through their perceptual experiences. Specifically, a learner engages in discovery and learning linked to some central theme, but the individual is simultaneously interactively problem-solving. This last theoretical perspective serves as the basis for much of technology-based instruction in the sense that the individual learner is more responsible for his/her own learning.

Other models, specifically centered around developing distance learning programs, focus on planning and implementing distance education as opposed to being centered around learning perspectives (e.g., Escoffery, Leppke, Robinson, Mettler, Miner, & Smith, 2005; Osika, 2006). These models have included a concentration on the structural elements of distance learning such as facilities, program management, student services, and course management systems. Planning models have also focused on support for the infrastructure of distance education programs where support for students, faculty, and program administrators is critical in implementing and evaluating these types of programs. Although these planning models are useful when implementing a new distance education program, other models may be more useful when examining the learning outcomes of such new programs. When the focus is on what program administrators are learning in the process of developing these programs, it may be valuable to examine and apply learning models to program development.

One technology-learning instructional model that has been proposed in recent research has focused on how students actually applied their learning in blended learning classrooms and evaluated the subsequent results (Alonso, Lopez, Manrique, & Viñes, 2005). This model is composed of seven phases: 1) analysis, 2) design, 3) development, 4) implementation, 5) execution, 6) evaluation, and 7) review. This seven phase instructional model is useful in that it focuses on student learning objectives rather than on technological implementation (e.g., Bloom, 1956; Schulman, 2002). Moreover, this seven phase model is focused on the application of learning. So, students are learning how to apply knowledge and are given time to evaluate the results. However, when applying this model to a global context, some important additions are needed. First, in the global context of blended learning, culture and cultural differences must be taken into account. For example, there will be inevitable difficulties with language due to translation. Some languages may not have translatable linguistic terms for technology. As a consequence, miscommunication between student and teacher, and even between teacher and the country's administration can occur. Furthermore, Hofstede (1984) suggests that culture has a substantial impact on student learning along dimensions such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, nurturing/competitive learning environments and societal perspectives such as individualism/collectivism. As cultural considerations cut across all levels of the seven phase model discussed above, it is necessary when applying the model to a global context to incorporate culture as an overarching concern.

A second overarching concern when incorporating this model into a global context is the cost of program development (Rumble, 2001). Although potentially less expensive than a face-to-face learning environment, the cost of establishing a blended learning program is still dependent on the program activities. In particular, learning in an online context can be an expensive endeavor for an individual in a developing country since the cost of hardware, software, and for traveling to access the technology can be very high.

A final additional concern when incorporating this model into a global context is the consideration of the different practices within educational systems from one country to another. As distance learning continues to expand, especially if a blended learning approach is used, an understanding of different educational practices in other countries should be a part of each phase of the instructional model. Since countries have their own grading practices, course content management, and learning styles, any instructional model that is utilized needs to include a discussion of educational practices within each phase. Finally, consideration of the politics of the country and the climate of the particular university system is valuable when for applying a blended learning approach to a global context. Although this seven phase model is one that focuses on developing instructional content for a blended learning classroom, it is also a useful model to describe the process of a blended learning program's development.

Links to Globalization

Globalization is the bringing together of values and cultures that were at one time isolated to specific countries or regions of the world (Sklair, 1999; Ohmae, 1995). One can argue that economic or financial globalization is one of the most important developments in recent decades. As governments are more willing to open their markets to the global community to allow free movement of goods and materials, the quality of life for many international counterparts has improved (Simmons & Elkins, 2004). However, as critics of globalization point out, as economies are becoming increasingly global (and use of technology becomes more critical), the risk of falling behind for developing countries becomes even greater (Tschang & Della Senta, 2001).

Globalization is also noted as an "ongoing process of greater interdependence among countries and their citizens [that] is complex and multifaceted" (Fischer, 2003, p. 2). Some of the complex problems that relate to globalization are economic, others relate to aspects of life (such as social status). In general, the reality of globalization means that the consumers in one country are more likely to utilize the products of another country, invest in other countries, and earn income from other countries (Fischer, 2003). As a consequence, in order to be competitive in an international market, countries need to have access to technology as well as to workers skilled in using information technology. However, the technological consequences of economic globalization are substantial. That is, in countries with technological inequities, poverty is increasing and integration into the global economy may or may not be good for growth. Thus, there is a need for developing countries to improve their knowledge base regarding technology and to provide educators with a means to train future generations on technological issues to facilitate the country's own economic progress in a global community. Moreover, recently, there has been a push for institutions of higher education to take on this challenge of expanding these technological opportunities by moving into developing countries and providing an educational service to help these countries participate in a more global economy (Larsson, Boud, Dahlgren, Walters, & Sork, 2005).

In the 1970s and 1980s, after many countries in Latin America "…pursued inward-oriented policies, their economies stagnated or declined, poverty increased and high inflation became the norm" (International Monetary Fund Staff, 2002, para. 3). Progress has been uneven since some countries are able to integrate into the global economy at a quicker rate than other countries, and as a result, the countries that are able to integrate quicker see faster economic growth and reduced rates of poverty (International Monetary Fund Staff, 2002). Fortunately, there have been some changes in regional policies that have resulted in a rise in incomes and an important transformation in the economy that has promoted growth, development, and reduced poverty. Subsequently, some of the governmental and academic institutions of these countries have begun to seek international collaborative opportunities to improve their technological capacities and in order to be able to participate in more global, market economies.

Program Development: A Case Study in Central America

One such collaborative partnership was the one developed between a North American University (NAU) and a Central American University (CAU) in 2002. Negotiations began, in the summer of 2002, when the NAU was contacted by the CAU in order to discuss the creation of a partnership that would support: 1) a Professional Instructional Technology Certificate that would be awarded by the Instructional Technology Department at the NAU, 2) a Master's degree in education to all qualifying students completing the approved program of studies that would be awarded by the NAU, and 3) a Master's degree in Education

to be awarded by the CAU for students not able to pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). During the initial Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) discussion, the Provost of NAU, the President of the Central American country, and the Minister of Education of the Central American country were present. After the initial meeting, representatives from both universities (approximately 60 individuals representing both universities and both countries) negotiated the proposed degree and certificate offering.

A Memorandum of Agreement preceding a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was then drafted, in November 2002, between the two universities. The need for the program within this Central American country and the multiple certificate and degree offerings made available to students attending CAU was outlined within the MOU. It was also noted that this agreement can be revisited on an annual basis, modified, and revised according to the needs of the participants according to the renewal section in the MOU.

During negotiations, it was predicted that the program would be attractive to other international institutions and individuals involved in the field of educational instructional technology within the continent since it was an innovative program that would increase access significantly for individuals from various social economic statuses. There was a strong need for the program since there was no other Educational Technology degree or program of this nature available in this Central American country. Finally, capacity building was incorporated into the program so that the Central American country would have the tools it needed to integrate technology into teaching and learning in its public school programs.

Blended Learning Approach: Case Study Application

In this international distance education program, the seven phases of the technology-learning model can be clearly observed (Alonso et al. 2005). At the program outset during the analysis phase, faculty across both institutions worked together to develop the planned coursework for students, and decided how the classes would be implemented (e.g., how content would be made available to students). A critical element during analysis of what to teach in this international program was to make sure there was consistency in courses traditionally taught on campus in relation to courses taught in the blended learning program. Another element involved specifying the learning objectives. During this phase, as part of the MOU, the learning objectives were identified and the partnership between the two institutions was defined. One of the most significant challenges in defining what to teach was developing an understanding of the students who would have the opportunity to participate in the program. The students who were targeted for inclusion had many hurdles to overcome, such as difficulties accessing equipment and downloading documents in a country with very little bandwidth. In addition, although English-proficient, it was discovered that CAU students comprehended the materials more efficiently when side-by-side translations were provided in their native language.

During the design phase of program development, educators from both institutions determined how to teach the subject matter. After developing the program to meet the needs of the students, the next step administrators and faculty took in developing the cross-national program was to hire a liaison who would ensure that courses were compatible with the other university's academic guidelines. Also, the liaison checked to make sure that the process of designing the program would work across both institutions especially since they each had differing styles of education. In this phase, how course content was to be presented to students was discussed (e.g., number of face-to-face sessions, translation of materials, faculty responsibilities regarding student evaluation). Further, the road map of the courses was set to ensure consistency of learning from semester to semester. One of the largest problems faced in this step was staffing of the blended learning classrooms. CAU faculty had little to no training in technology and only some NAU faculty were fluent in both languages. Consequently, the course of programs had to be carefully chosen so that faculty from both institutions could learn the necessary skills from one another.

In the third phase, or development phase, resources and materials were prepared and shared across the institutions. Course materials were burned onto compact disc for easier student accessibility. Information regarding registration and student registration procedures were shared and negotiated. For example, students at the international institution registered once for their entire student career whereas for the new blended learning program students needed to register for each semester of involvement. This phase also

involved setting up computer labs and satellite campuses across the country. Although computers were provided to set up the main lab at the CAU, there were also 20 satellite labs that were set-up around the country to make access easier for students who had to travel a great distance. Consistency and maintenance of equipment was a challenge. The equipment that was available at each site varied a great deal. For example, one site had a working computer, but no access to the internet. Another lab had a working computer, but no printer. In addition, responsibility for maintenance of the equipment and updating software was unclear. Faculty who traveled for face-to-face instruction at times fixed equipment, but the process of maintenance was uncertain. However, each situation was resolved on a case-by-case basis.

The next phase, the implementation phase, involved learning and knowledge transfer. In this step, administrators and faculty built the translated websites for the courses (concurrent with the design phase) and began teaching the courses. Much of the student learning took place in the online environment, through online group discussion and electronic mail. However, as some research suggests, the face-to-face sessions helped to facilitate the development of the online communities (e.g., Garrison & Kanuka, 2004); and, these sessions fostered a stronger community for the students. Moreover, as some of this online discussion was meaningfully related to course content, students had the opportunity to use one another as resources in their own learning and in learning about the program in general (Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006; Moore, 1993).

During the fifth phase, execution, program administrators evaluated problems with implementation and determined how much students were learning in their individual coursework. This process was evaluated by conducting comprehensive online surveys for each course as students completed them and also by evaluating the process of communication between faculty and administrators. One issue that immediately became obvious in this phase centered around differences in educational systems. Students appeared to be processing content. However, there were challenges in submitting required course assignments. That is, it appeared that some students were learning the material yet not producing any specific outcomes or assignments as a result.

During the evaluation phase, the program and learning environment were evaluated in terms of progress towards the learning objectives. In this phase, it was necessary to investigate whether the blended learning environment was meeting the needs of the diverse learners in the program overall. In the instructional technology program, this process was facilitated by conducting a formative evaluation of the program. The evaluation provided immediate feedback to program administrators as to some of the specific problems students and faculty were experiencing within the program. The evaluation also assessed the progress of the collaboration between the two institutions.

Finally, during the last phase or review phase, the outcome of the evaluation was analyzed and the program was adapted. After reviewing individual courses and students' concerns with the program, it was apparent that communication across faculty was essential for student success (as opposed to communication with the liaison or other administrators). As a consequence, there was an effort to include more meetings of faculty across both institutions and to provide professional development opportunities to all faculty involved. In addition, in planning these types of international blended learning programs, it became clear that it was essential to ensure that there was greater understanding of students' needs. As a result, it was determined that spending more time in the analysis phase would be beneficial and produce better learning outcomes for the students.

Three Overarching Concerns: Culture, Funding, and the Structure of the Educational System

Throughout this collaboration, several cultural issues and misunderstandings were encountered that involved language, power, use of time, and student perspectives and expectations. Despite efforts made in communication and translation, misunderstandings were inevitable because of the many differences between cultures and languages. Language can convey a wealth of information other than the primary content of the message (Sue & Sue, 2003). Spanish in one country is not the same as Spanish in another country since there are many dialects and slang words used in everyday language. Local nuances were sometimes missed during communication and within the translations.

The power structure within countries was also quite different. Within the Central American country, the Ministry of Education accredits all universities, both public and private. Therefore, they were the overall entity that cleared all final program decisions within the Central American country. In addition, they paid for all students' tuition, books, and transportation costs within the cohorts; and, additional faculty meetings and some supplies needed for program development.

Furthermore, various levels within the NAU system dictated how the master's program needed to be delivered. Departmental, college, university, and state requirements prescribed the set-up of the NAU program. There was a hierarchy that had to be followed and specific requirements that had to be met in order for the program to meet all levels of requirements. During the collaboration, the requirements of both universities and countries had to be clarified. In addition, cultural nuances that focused upon cultural perspectives and ways of implementing details were discovered and resolved. Negotiations, around funding specifically (i.e., translations, software maintenance, technological equipment, etc.), continued as issues arose. Overall, both institutions highly valued the collaboration and saw it as an important initiative to support and sustain. This perspective was essential to the production of a quality distance education program (Levy, 2003).

Another concern that needed to be addressed was the course assignments. Assignments at the CAU were usually due at the end of the course. As a result, CAU students assumed the same classroom culture would apply during the collaborative program and did not turn in homework assignments as listed within the syllabus. At first, NAU faculty thought CAU students were perhaps not understanding the assignments or not completing their homework in a timely fashion. After learning about the CAU academic culture around assignments and various hardships that students were experiencing (i.e., lack of affordable computer equipment, inability to access the internet, etc.), a re-negotiation occurred and NAU faculty shifted their (academic) cultural perspectives and made some adjustments to their teaching techniques. It is crucial to have a good understanding and consciousness of students' needs and cultural expectations as well as an awareness of the educational systems that are contributing to the collaboration.

Recommendations for Developing International Programs with Blended Learning

After evaluating the program administration and learning outcomes for students, faculty, and program administrators, several recommendations for building international programs using a blended learning approach can be proposed. First, it is critical to spend a significant portion of time in the analysis phase learning about potential student needs and special challenges that students may face in an international blended context. As some researchers suggest, before delivering a program, a focus on developing a cohesive and comprehensive plan on instructional strategy to meet the needs of learners can be a strong determinant of the success of online programs in a global context (Ally, 2004). Moreover, analyzing particular problems that these learners might face especially in regards to accessing technology is an essential piece to developing these international blended learning programs. Thus, an awareness of students' technological resources such as online course accessibility (especially in countries with poor bandwidth) needs to be considered (Larsson et al., 2005).

A second recommendation is to evaluate and assess the needs of the faculty participating in the blended learning program. As Osika (2006) notes, "the core of all distance learning programs is the faculty who teaches them" (para. 6). Thus, assessing the technological competence (or providing professional development for instructors to improve their skills and knowledge regarding online pedagogy) is a central element for improving learning outcomes of students and for ensuring the success of the blended learning program. A third recommendation is to consistently evaluate progress made towards the learning outcomes and objectives of the program. Blended learning programs have different needs than traditional face-to-face programs, and these needs may be especially salient within new international contexts that focus on improving global conditions. Thus any new program needs to be evaluated at all levels from student learning to program administration (Escoffery et al., 2005). In this way, administrators can investigate whether learners are actually developing technological competence and assess whether the program is effective in meeting the needs of multicultural learners.

Finally, within international blended learning programs, developing an awareness and sensitivity to cultural and political differences (particularly prior to the implementation phase) is helpful in the

planning process and ensuring appropriate learning outcomes for the diverse students who make up these programs. As Sork (2000) describes, it is vital that the stakeholders of educational programs are sensitive to the cultural and political diversity of program administrators across institutions in order to develop effective educational programs. This sensitivity and understanding of cultural and political issues, as noted earlier, is essential in an international context where learning is being transferred from one cultural context to another.

Conclusions

The development of an international distance education program includes many factors that must be taken into consideration and addressed in all seven phases of program development. From analysis to review, one major challenge for developing countries is to obtain technological knowledge (Moore & Kearsely, 2005). Since developing countries do not have as much knowledge or resources to create higher institutional components of knowledge itself, it is essential that other institutions of higher education from developed countries provide support and seek collaborative partnerships to create programs that will meet the needs of both students and their respective countries. The two institutions that formed this partnership have continued their virtual collaboration with the goal of providing this Central American country with a stronger role in globalization. When the goals of the project have been met, it is hoped that the CAU will be able to implement a similar program on its own. True globalization requires that knowledge be shared from developed to developing countries. Through an international distance education program that utilizes a blended learning approach, knowledge can be shared, and all countries and individuals participating can learn and expand their knowledge. Overall, this appears to be an optimal situation for all parties involved.

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