



Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc

Engaging Communities

Proceedings of the

31st HERDSA Annual Conference

1-4 July 2008

Rotorua, New Zealand

Bell, M. (2008) Internationalising the Australian higher education, in *Engaging Communities, Proceedings of the 31st HERDSA Annual Conference, Rotorua, 1-4 July 2008: pp 71-81.*

Published 2008 by the
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 27, Milperra, NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN: 1441 001X
ISBN: 0 908557 73 6

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Internationalising the Australian higher education

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This paper discusses a case study of an innovative higher education course that involved students from universities in Australia, Ireland and America using a ‘global learning’ approach. The key pedagogy discussed is cross-institutional international discussion using videoconference. Student responses to the learning environment are explored. The issues covered include the strengths and disadvantages of videoconference as a medium for international student discussion, the importance of facilitation in developing the dynamics and outcomes of discussion, perceived cultural differences in communication styles, and the dangers of superficiality stemming from the relatively mono-cultural nature of the universities involved.

Keywords: Global learning, videoconference pedagogy, internationalisation of the curriculum

Introduction

In response to globalisation pressures and influences the higher education environment is increasingly becoming competitive, de-regulated and exposed to market forces (Dale & Robertson 2003; Kell, Shore, & Singh, 2004; Luke 2005; Marginson 2006; Pick 2004; Sanderson 2003). As in Europe and North America where commercial and financial interests threaten to displace the less utilitarian but equally valuable aspects of internationalisation (IAU 2000) the Australian rationale for internationalisation of higher education is economic, framing education as a commodity existing within the ethos of trade agreements (Allport 2004; de Wit 1997; Kell et al. 2004; Knight 1999, 2004; Knight & de Wit 1995; Pick 2004, 2006). An inevitable result of, and contributor to, the market discourse of internationalisation has been the cross-border flow of students. The global education environment, in which students from low-income countries with the required financial capacity make border crossings in order to purchase a ‘western’ educational experience, provides large numbers of fee-paying students to western universities. In 2006, 23% of all tertiary students studying in Australia came from overseas countries (DEST 2007) and generated \$10.1 billion in revenue in the 2005/6 financial year (Bishop 2007).

Australian students too are encouraged to join study abroad programs, yet the flow is one-way. In 2003 less than one percent of Australian students were travelling abroad for study (Nelson 2003) and by 2006 it was still the case that few Australian students were studying abroad (Bishop 2006). The practice of “engaging ... students with their international peers in the mutual construction of international knowledge deserves recognition as a central pillar of an internationalizing methodology” (Whalley 1997, p.

1). Where study abroad is not feasible or attractive to Australian students 'global learning projects' may provide a form of 'virtual' contact.

This case study provides an example of the recent emergence of 'global learning projects' that utilise communication technologies for international student collaboration (Global 2004). 'Global learning' aims to facilitate the development of internationalisation perspectives through cross-cultural experiential learning using a social constructivist and project-based learning approach (2003). The course that is the subject of this study is described as a 'global learning course' as it meets these criteria offering a form of 'virtual' study abroad for Australian students through cross-institutional international engagement using the medium of videoconference. Few studies of global learning exist as yet however some global learning projects have been reported as improving pre-service teachers' ability to teach in diverse classroom and develop multiple perspectives (Gibson, Vialle, & Rimmington 2003; Gibson, Watters et al 2003).

The case

This paper explores a case study of a pilot 'global learning' science course at a medium sized university in a small provincial city in Australia (referred to as 'Australian University' in this paper). Five science students were enrolled in the course at Australian University while eight students from an American university (referred to as 'USA University') and three students from an Irish university (referred to as 'Irish University') also took part. The Irish and American students were not part of the case study for reasons of access, although some of the USA University students responded to an online questionnaire after the course and this data is referred to where relevant. On the Australian campus classes were held in a videoconference suite and because of the international time differences between Australia, Ireland and the USA, most classes were timetabled either late at night (11pm) or early in the morning (7am).

Data collection

Qualitative data was gathered for the case study from all of the Australian students through interview and questionnaire. Field data was gathered through classroom observation and all involved academics were interviewed. Illustrative quotes from students in this paper are coded according to the source of data (university – 'Australian' = P, 'USA' = U; data source – interview = I, questionnaire = Q, and each student has been allocated a number). Quotes from staff indicate their generic position. Grammar, syntax and punctuation are not corrected in quotes from student interviews and questionnaire responses.

Background to the case

In contrast to the economic rationale for internationalisation described above, both the Australian University and USA University course coordinators, as scientists and ecologists, saw themselves and their research collaborators as part of an international research and teaching community and explained a disciplinary vision that was, to them, inevitably international.

“... these questions are in the forefront of ecological thinking of global questions to do with climate change, sea level, precipitation patterns.” (USA University coordinator)

This international perspective led them both to the view that science students should be equipped to work within the global science networks to seek solutions to ecological issues affecting the planet and have:

“ the capacity ..., to be engaged as international citizens.” (Australian University coordinator)

It was this international vision of science that led them to design the course as a pilot for a broader international degree program.

Findings

All of the students appreciated the opportunities for videoconference engagement with students from America and Ireland, overcoming difficulties with accents, the time delay in communication, time differences, connection problems and sometimes some serious technical difficulties that caused one videoconference to be aborted after half an hour of transmission difficulties and another to be cancelled because the USA University students were unable to gain access to a locked building for an after-hours class.

All of the students indicated the course supported them in developing understanding of the global perspectives of the debates around global warming and genetic modification, and on the positions taken within and between the three different student groups.

“This made me appreciate just how small the world really is and that such issues do affect us on a global scale and do need a global solution.” (PS1)

Although one student felt a high level of anxiety in the videoconference environment that only abated towards the end of the course, all the students reported the videoconferences as both challenging and effective in enabling discussion with students from the other universities.

“I think it was an exciting concept to experience, the idea of video conferences was an amazing and effective way to have direct conversations with the other universities.” (PQ1)

As the group became more confident in using the technology and meeting with the other groups the communication difficulties diminished to some extent and students became more comfortable in the discussions.

“After the first meeting the group became more confident and I found that I was comfortable and could voice my opinions with ease and I was not intimidated in any way.” (PQ3)

One of the Australian University students explained that the videoconference offered more than the face to face tutorial.

“I think it’s really cool ... I feel that I get so much more out of it doing it this way, because you are aware that there are just so, a much great diversity of people, and so what they say is so much more important, because, so different and exciting.” (PII)

In contrast, two of the USA University students who responded to the online questionnaire did not find the videoconferences so exciting, one writing that they were:

“pretty impersonal since we had no idea of anyone’s background, just faces (and fuzzy ones at best)” (USAQ1)

While the Australian students reported positive outcomes a number of significant issues of arose that relate to teaching and learning within the videoconference environment. Those discussed in this paper relate to (i) the level of discussion that developed and the effectiveness of facilitation, and (ii) student perceptions of the communication style of the USA University students. These issues are now discussed.

Levels of discussion and facilitation

Early in the course the science students were uncertain about what was expected of this type of subject in which they were expected to express their opinions, and they were uncertain if they were expected to reach agreement with the other groups. The following quote captures the students’ inexperience in debating and discussing perspectives on controversial topics, the absence of firm facilitation and guidelines for participation, and their sense of the formality of videoconference compared to face to face tutorials.

“You can get to the point where you feel very passionate about something, and you are wanting to have that one on one with a person, but the environment you are in, it’s just, is such a formal structure ... when you’re sitting in a room with a video, and then, you feel very kind of, a bit threatened by the process, so you withdraw yourself ... because we’re all sitting there, and we have something to say, but we’re also, like, would you like to speak now? Oh no, go ahead, you talk.” (PI3)

One of the USA University students who responded to the web questionnaire commented on the level of debate as related to minimal diversity and facilitation.

“Sorry... it was 6 well-educated white middle-class people spouting personal opinions ... There was no real direction to the discussions. It was ‘know something about...’. If there were a way to specify discussion and therefore research it would make it a lot more of an informed, lively discussion.” (USAQ2)

Another suggested the level of discussion was too shallow to enhance inter-cultural understanding and that study abroad was more effective.

“Personally, as a descendant of native americans, I felt the topics discussed were brushed over but no one who knew what they were talking about or who had done much to embrace the culture said anything intelligent ... first one must realize that their are other cultures with differing opinions out there and

I only accomplished that by going to Europe the summer prior to this class.”
(USAQ1)

One wrote that the videoconferences:

“lent to parrying, as in dividing discussion to sides instead of a classroom.”
(USAQ2)

The Australian coordinator explained that while the UAS University coordinator would act as tutor and facilitate the discussion he expected the Australian students to develop discussion skills experientially and to develop their own ground rules for discussion. The only male student quickly took on the role of chair on the Australian side, while the USA Coordinator chaired the videoconference. The students thought that the dynamics of videoconference discussion were strongly related to the presence or absence of lecturers, their facilitation style, and the seating arrangements.

“The fact that [the USA University students] are a real mixture, should kind of stimulate a long conversation I would have thought, but it’s the opposite ... I think ... the Americans seem to be a combination of their ... structural arrangement ... [the USA Coordinator]’s presence ... and them being purely dependent on [the USA Coordinator]’s conversational directions.” (PI5)

Thus the level of discussion which was perceived to be of low quality at times was dependent on the expertise of the videoconference facilitator.

Styles of communication

The students perceived a difference in communication style with the USA University students in the acceptance and acknowledgement of their points of view.

“There was no acknowledgment about your point of view ... which I think is really, really disgusting in arguments ... it really threatens a person, prevents them from interacting in discussions later on.” (PI3)

Some of the students experienced the USA University group as being forthright in their opinions and they deferred to the USA University students, particularly on matters of America’s global involvement in world affairs.

“We all backed down on their, like, [international aid program] if we sort of say, you know, we’ll use the US example, and we’re talking, it’s like, it’s possible that they know more about it, like, of what their country’s done than we do.” (PI1)

Another student had felt the need to treat interactions with the USA University group with special care.

“I had to often be 'diplomatic' and 'careful' about my approach to asking contentious questions to the Americans.” (PQ4)

Several found their interactions with Irish University students easier. One student thought that might be because their views were more closely aligned than with USA University students.

“I feel more comfortable speaking to the [Irish University students] ... I’m like, oh we’ve got a meeting with America today.” (PI2)

One of the USA University students provided a perspective on the Australian University students’ discussion skills:

“they did not have too much to say and I feel like they took the middle of the road a lot.” (USAQ1)

While the videoconference discussions provided the opportunity for communication across national boundaries the Australian University students felt uncomfortable with the USA students’ style of communication and some divisions between USA University and Australian University students were evident to the observer. At the same time stereotypical views of ‘other’ seem to be broken down to some extent and according to one student:

“It was interesting to note that the American perspective was very similar to the Australian perspective, which I was not anticipating. The media tends to present an extremist American point of view, were as I learned a lot more about the common consensus towards these views through the discussions.” (PS1)

Thus a perception of cultural differences between American and Australian communication styles was built while at the same time a stereotype was demolished with the realisation that the American students held diverse views on topics of national significance.

Student discussion

As the student groups faced each other across the videoconference space, as an observer I felt a continual sense of the distinctness of the groups and from my perspective the USA Coordinator perhaps inadvertently set up an oppositional environment by naming them by nationality, for example, “*What does the Irish group think?*” The students too referred to “*the Americans*” rather than the USA University students in their interviews and survey responses. My observations support the Australian University students’ comments that they tended to defer in the face of USA University students’ arguments and were sensitive about commenting on America’s global involvement in world affairs.

At the same time I observed the tendency noted by the USA University student above, for the Australian University students to take the middle of the road in any discussion while the USA University students took a clear stance and presented forceful arguments. I also observed the tendency noted by the Australian University students, that the USA University students did not tend to modify or change their views. On the other hand it seemed the Australian University students rarely offered an argument that might have swayed the American University students’ views.

My observations indicate that within the Australian University group students participated in videoconference discussions at different levels. For example, in the first videoconference there was a student who only spoke once — at the very end when asked for a comment — and that same level of participation was in evidence over the course for that student. Participation in class discussion relates to a variety of student and situational characteristics, including the level of preparation students have undertaken through reading and thinking around the topic which helps to give them confidence to speak, their skills in preparing a point or forming syllogistic argument, their personal style and confidence to seize an opportunity and take the floor, as well as the style of facilitation, feedback on their contributions, and their level of comfort within the large group.

Effective discussion processes such as developing and articulating a structure for the group dynamic, providing feedback on the quality of student discussion and summing up at the end of the session may be needed in the videoconference environment. Some of the communication/discussion tools that are in use within face-to-face discursive tutorials might have been useful here, for example buzz groups, brainstorming, round-the-room comments (see for example Gibbs, Habeshaw, & Habeshaw 1988) and may have supported greater involvement by the quieter students. Perhaps more time for socialising would have helped build a warmer educational climate, and the use of web-based discussion tools would support cross-institutional group work.

Some reputable studies (Chalmers & Volet 1997; Devos 2003) indicate that negative stereotypes, interactions and outcomes occur amongst local staff and students where internationalisation of curriculum is attempted through inclusive pedagogy. As far as cultural stereotypes are concerned, it seems that stereotypes may have been both dismantled and developed. To some extent the students developed a sense of ‘otherness’ of the USA University students as a group, while their sense of the USA University students as individuals was a development they welcomed.

One of the lost opportunities in this course was the chance for students to explore their own prejudices and stereotypes. As Otten (2003) has remarked, inter-cultural contacts do not necessarily lead to intercultural competence and without carefully nurtured inter-cultural interactions within a reflective learning framework cultural stereotypes may be developed and even matured.

Curtailed international engagement in ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ cross-border pedagogy

Videoconference offers a ‘virtual’ study abroad experience in an environment safe from the possible physical dangers, risks and inconveniences of real study abroad. Yet it is from these dangers, risks and inconveniences that transformative learning often results (Grunswieg 2002; Hoffa 2002; Jackson & McEllister 2003; Stephenson 2002). Grunswieg (2002) argues that study abroad programs that protect students from risks and inconveniences reduce learning opportunities that derive from experiencing the disequilibrium produced by direct interaction with the foreign environment. It is worth questioning what kind of international skills and understandings might develop within the videoconference environment, and through what mechanisms.

Singh (2005) refers to Australian universities as zones of multiple ethnic contacts however in this case we see a relatively culturally homogenous learning environment, the American, Irish, and Australian students and academics sharing the same language and Western heritage. It is therefore not possible to assume that internationalisation of the curriculum can be brought about through cultural inclusivity of a diverse local student group. The inclusion of universities from non-English speaking countries would break down the superficial nature of western mono-cultural interaction in addressing international perspectives; however, the absence of a common language would present a major challenge. The inclusion of universities from countries such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia or Fiji where English is commonly spoken would significantly enhance the international scope of the program if logistical barriers could be overcome however it could be argued that this approach is exclusionary. The decisions about partner universities were based on existing research/teaching linkages and while linkages may provide the basis for global learning courses they also limit internationalisation opportunities to English-speaking cultures.

In the Australian University case the perceived differences in communication style between the Australian University and USA University students, and the sense of distance imparted by the videoconference technology, suggest that the development of international teamwork via this medium would benefit from a strategic approach to exploring differences in communication styles, cultural and personal factors, stereotypical views of 'other' as well as the most effective ways to take part in discussions. Brown & Atkins (1996), Caspersz, Skene & Wu (2006), Exley & Dennick (2004) and others document the importance of preparation and guidance in process for groups in both key functions of task and process. A more structured intervention within the videoconference environment that has students reflecting on what they have learned, perhaps selecting team members with mutual interests and the development of challenging tasks and processes that allow the students to learn from each other's cultural perspectives as documented in the work of Smart, Volet, & Ang (2000), might provide a more functional and productive inter-cultural experience.

Conclusion

While this case study involved a small student of numbers, the findings point to significant issues for consideration in the development of 'global learning' environments as an emerging teaching and learning strategy and a powerful medium for internationalisation of the curriculum. Means to build the international student learning community, effective facilitation of videoconference tutorials, addressing cultural stereotypes, and the inclusion of students from Asia-Pacific universities, are all issues that need to be addressed.

As a teaching strategy for internationalisation videoconference is as yet unproven and courses such as this one, where global connections are predominantly monocultural, are classified by McNaught & Vogel (2004) as only the first stage of innovation and change in global projects. Videoconference as the key teaching and learning activity displayed both strengths and weaknesses in this case, providing a vehicle for cross-institutional international discussion through technology that sometimes failed to deliver, and a

learning environment that was seen as both impersonal, exciting and developmental by the Australian University students and somewhat hollow and facile by some of the USA University students.

The potential for international learning and growth from courses/programs offering international cross-institutional engagement for students through global learning seems undeniable; however, educators and educational administrators cannot simply rely on videoconference propinquity to bring about international education outcomes for students. Mestenhauser (2002) argues that few international education programs integrate international knowledge with mainstream knowledge or develop the intellectual skills needed to evaluate the new knowledge. Engle and Engle's (2002) question "how to create an academic and cultural environment in which students are motivated consistently to penetrate the surface of their host culture enough to apprehend meaningfully and respect a world not habitually their own" (p. 37) is just as important but even more difficult to answer in respect to global learning where engagement with another culture is 'virtual'. Like study abroad courses, global learning need to "help coax into being the openness and empathy that is necessary for successful cross-cultural experiences [through] mechanisms for meaningful, regular cultural contact and reflection upon that interaction" (Engle & Engle, 2002, pp. 33-34).

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