USING ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS TO INTERNATIONALIZE THE CURRICULUM

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ABSTRACT

The increasingly globalized environment in which firms operate, as well as recent changes in accreditation standards for business schools, require that educators prepare students for international business issues. A semester-long project pairing American undergraduate finance majors and Macedonian undergraduate business majors online was intended to allow students to experience both an international learning environment and internationally divergent perspectives of business issues. The project would also allow us to investigate both 'dissemination' and 'distance learning' scenarios given its international online learning environment. In the end, the project yielded different but equally valuable lessons for faculty and students in both countries regarding their international collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

Accreditation and the Globalization Trend

In January of 2009, the main accreditation body for business schools, Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSBI), proposed changes to three of its standards to emphasize the need for including global perspectives in curricula, calling for them to become effective in July 2009. These changes requiring global content are in addition to those made in 2003 when AACSBI widely revised its standards in acknowledgement of the growing importance of international issues (AACSBI, 2009; Trapnell, 2009). All of these requirements simply reflect the continuing trend of globalization, which requires educators and students to improve their international business knowledge.

While many institutions include an overseas learning component in their curricula, e.g., a study abroad or faculty development trips abroad, this option may not be feasible for all students or all schools given the costs and potential disruptions to work and family commitments. Providing an online connection between groups of students in different countries and cultures offers an appealing alternative. In addition, using international teams could produce economies of scale that then allow universities to specialize in their programs, or create synergies that improve general programs (Goralski, 2008). Establishing a distance learning model through an online

connection provides one solution to the accreditation challenge of increasing the global presence in the university curriculum.

Online learning environments

As a pedagogical benefit, online connections can enable the formation of a community-learning environment. Research has shown that learning is most effective when it is shared in a community environment (Kowch & Schwier, 1997; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Meisel & Marx, 1999; Rovai, 2002). The array of internet-based technologies such as Blackboard and Facebook makes creating a community for students in which to share their knowledge easier. Also, students can interact using a variety of telecommunications methods, from asynchronous threaded discussions to real-time chats.

However, while online learning communities are available, many undergraduate students are challenged for time to interact since an estimated 77% of college students are working and 26% of those are working full-time (Block, 2003). One result of this lifestyle in which students are going from class to work to home during a day is that there are limited opportunities for focused, concentrated online interactions. The student interactions, riddled with disruptions, can lead to disjointed exchanges and flawed decision-making (Kenway & Bullen, 2000; Speier, Valacich, & Vessey, 1999; Speier, Vessey, & Valacich, 2003). These interruptions and distractions are not unlike a work environment where an employee faces multiple projects and interactions taking place simultaneously. Learning to collaborate in an online learning environment prepares students for the future of virtual management teams.

Adding an international dimension can help prepare students to interact in a global economy. This is particularly important for business student preparation since many businesses have a global presence (Healey, 2008). Furthermore, international online learning communities not only promote interactions outside a student's "home borders" (Higgitt et al., 2008), but also cross-border communities can improve the quality of case discussions (Bonk, Hara, Dennen, Mailkowski, & Supplee, 2000), a pedagogical approach often used within business school curricula. Indeed, in their comparative analysis of learning effectiveness via three forms of electronic communication, Yoo, Kanawattanachai, and Citurs (2002) found the form of electronic communication mattered less than the number of people collaborating on the quality of a case analysis. Thus, they propose that technological evolution will go beyond just reducing geographic distance and provide opportunities to enhance knowledge because of the easier exchange of diverse perspectives.

Research into online learning environments reveals, however, that it can be useful to implement them within a set of parameters to mitigate challenges arising from cultural differences, e.g., one culture may be generally more comfortable with debating concepts than another. (See Casamayor, Amandi, and Campo (2009) for an overview of general challenges students face in online learning environments.) Weinberger, Clark, Häkkinen, Tamura, and Fischer (2007) review two common environments, the dissemination scenario and the distance learning scenario, and analyze the role of external scripts, or guidelines, to promote effective interaction in either environment. The authors propose that further study would improve our understanding of the roles of the learning environments vis-à-vis different countries' cultures in producing

collaborative learning or project outcomes. Our project contributes to the literature then by using a "single, specific environment" – invoking the dissemination scenario – to investigate the communication interactions of culturally diverse and culturally similar groups – invoking the distance learning scenario – while using a partially-scripted set of guidelines.

Distance learning research finds many advantages exist (Offir, Lev, & Bezalel, 2008), but it also identifies several factors that influence outcomes to courses taught entirely online. Rovai (2002) reviews and summarizes the factors into seven areas: transactional distance, social presence, social equality, small group activities, group facilitation, teaching style and learning stage, and community size. Because attending to these elements can help promote the community aspect of an online learning environment, we took steps to address each of these factors (discussed below).

To both provide an online international community-learning environment—at an AACSB-accredited college with limited resources—as well as explore the interactions and decisions made by undergraduate business students when collaborating in culturally diverse groups, we developed a project that matched U.S. undergraduate finance students with undergraduate business students from Macedonia for online asynchronous communication. We next provide further context for learning communities and describe the project. We then discuss our experience with the project and its outcomes. Finally, we share some concluding thoughts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Virtual interactions occur on a daily basis. The internet allows us to send a message to someone down the hall or around the world. The dynamic nature of networking allows us to reach geographically in real time or asynchronously to expand our level of knowledge. Building from Wenger's (1998) communities of practice, Wasko and Faraj (2005) suggest an electronic network of practice where knowledge-sharing occurs primarily through computer-based communication and with a loosely connected group.

Such shared information can be a valuable resource for organizations. Even more important is to learn how to share that information by collaborating with others and making meaning of the information (Carlsson, 2003). Internalizing the shared information enables employees to create tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is the most valuable type of knowledge to an organization because it represents expertise (Heaton & Taylor, 2002).

An environment where students can interact and share information leads to the creation of tacit knowledge. Students have the opportunity to construct meaning from the content in an online community atmosphere by sharing dynamic information (Smith & MacGregor, 1992). This sharing of information in a university setting is considered a learning community whereas in a work environment the term used is a community of practice (mutual engagement in a shared practice) (Lesser & Storck, 2001; Wenger, 1998). Although similar concepts, the community of practice assumes a core base of knowledge. In other words, participants must develop a shared practice which directly influences the behaviors and abilities of other participants. By sharing information within a forum and contributing to others' understanding, participants create a community of practice – translating collective learning into social practices. The primary purpose of a community of practice is to develop knowledge and share that knowledge among

participants through insightful, efficient means. A learning community may not have a shared base of knowledge, but students can share, debate, and interact on information learned during a course to help prepare for the workplace.

Shared knowledge and the experience in creating it have become increasingly important in the last several years due to what Thomas Friedman calls the 'flattening of the world' (Friedman, 2005). Being aware of neighboring countries' differing cultures and regulations can positively affect interactions and cooperation (Ackerman, Gross, & Perner, 2003). Indeed, one could argue that companies in other countries have typically operated in awareness of the differing cultures and regulations to compete in larger markets whereas U.S. companies, already participating in the largest market, usually did not need such awareness until more recently. Stated another way, because of globalization, companies will be seeking competitive advantage over companies not previously considered "one of the major players" (Sirkin, 2008). Therefore, it is particularly important that U.S. businesses increase their exposure to international business issues. It is for reasons such as these that the AACSBI revised its accreditation standards to require more international exposure.

Although there is a push towards exposing students to cultural and procedural differences internationally, not all college students get the opportunity to see these differences firsthand. Creating a connection between students from different countries using online technology provides the opportunity to experience electronic networking and online learning communities while exposing them to international issues.

THE PROJECT

Outline

Capitalizing on the electronic network of practice, we taught two undergraduate business courses, geographically dispersed, in the fall of 2007. One course is an upper division capstone for senior finance majors at a medium-sized U.S. university. The other course, taught by a U.S. faculty member participating in a Fulbright fellowship to Macedonia, covered managerial accounting for second-year business students fluent in English (colleges in Macedonia are often three-year programs).

The capstone finance course implements a case study framework, primarily based on a seminar format. The students, during the semester, reviewed and examined seven cases focusing on different areas of finance (the cases originated from Bruner, 2002). We divided the class into seven groups, each group assigned to a specific company case. The seven parts of the course contained the same general format. The instructor began with a lecture on the finance material related to the specific case. The instructor then initiated discussion among the students regarding the details of the case, including the situation facing the case protagonist and the objectives of resolving this situation. The class typically included one course session to complete the assignments corresponding to their group. The *case group*, the student group assigned to the case under review, was responsible for a written case report, submitted to the instructor, and a formal presentation in front of classmates. The *brief groups*, the student groups not assigned to the current case under review, were responsible for a summary case report, submitted to the

instructor, and a list of prepared questions for the presenting case group. Each case study entailed three to four class sessions, or approximately two weeks of calendar time, for discussion, preparation, and presentation.

To create the electronic network of practice and develop a distance learning scenario, we paired U.S. students in their case groups with Macedonian students in the managerial accounting course. We added questions to each of the cases to incorporate an international perspective. Appendix A provides the handout given to the U.S. students, which was our form of an external script. The purpose of these added questions was to initiate interaction between the U.S. and Macedonian students. The questions follow the general topic of each case. However, since the Macedonian students did not have access to the specific case study text, the additional questions covered basic subject matter intended to elicit their perspective as Macedonians. For the dissemination scenario aspect, each case group was required to initiate and develop discussion with the Macedonian students using a single common environment, Microsoft's SharePoint Service. By using SharePoint, the students could post documents for each other, collaborate asynchronously or synchronously, and exchange messages with each other. This single environment would allow us to track and capture all interactions between the U.S. and Macedonian students so that we could conduct basic content analysis (Carney, 1972).

Experience

A difference in the timing of the semesters created an immediate challenge, an issue also raised by other researchers (e.g., Wresch, Arbaugh, & Rebstock, 2005). As is typical in the American education system, the U.S. university started in late August and met for approximately 16 weeks. Macedonian universities start fall semesters on October 1 and last 12 weeks. We allowed a couple of weeks for establishing a rapport between the Macedonian students and their new U.S. faculty member, after which time an introductory session to SharePoint and the project was held for them; thus, by the time we initiated the project the U.S. students were well into their semester. This resulted in a few of the U.S. groups having their case presentations due very soon after connections with their Macedonian counterparts were made. These U.S. students, trying to complete their presentations, would send very detailed and long messages in an effort to gather information more efficiently, which often overwhelmed the paired Macedonian students. On the other hand, while the remaining U.S. case groups had more time, they were well into their semester and other courses, so they did not always reply quickly to the Macedonian students who had sent a message introducing themselves, making it difficult for some of the Macedonian students to remain engaged in the project.

A second immediate challenge to the project was having enough Macedonian students participate. By Macedonian law, university students must be given the opportunity to take a comprehensive final that for all practical purposes replaces any grade earned in the course during the semester. As a result, there is little incentive for students to attend class regularly or do assigned projects. For example, while the Macedonian class had 27 students officially enrolled, 48% took the first exam, 33% took the second exam, and 19% took the third and last exam.

An ongoing challenge was differences in access to technology and attitudes towards using it. The U.S. students use many electronic forms of communication, with email and various message

boards, i.e., SharePoint and Blackboard, being primary forms of communication. This lies in sharp contrast with the Macedonian students, who rely almost exclusively on mobile phones and their text messaging capabilities. In addition, computers and laptops are not as common throughout Macedonia as they are in the U.S. With access hindered, a mind-set of checking and sending emails or posting messages is not as well developed in Macedonia as it is with the U.S. students. Therefore, even though the Macedonian college had a computer lab, the students were not habituated to use it. Thus, when the U.S. teams did post messages in SharePoint, often there was a long delay before the Macedonian teams would reply. These long delays made it difficult to remain engaged.

In an effort to counteract these issues, we took steps to promote the development of an online community, attempting to address Rovai's (2002) seven influential factors mentioned above. To reduce transactional distance, which increases with more instructor control but decreases with more student control via discussion, we did not dictate when or how many interactions had to occur. However, we did follow the researched recommendation to make participation a graded component. To encourage social presence yet not affect transactional distance, both faculty made a point of asking nearly weekly how many students had posted messages and showing interest and excitement in the project itself.

Social equality was somewhat more complex to address given not only the typical gender and cultural differences, but also differences in comfort levels with the English language. Besides holding frank discussions to make both the U.S. and Macedonian students simply aware of this issue, we reinforced it with written guidelines (see Appendix A). In addition, the Macedonian students were given time and encouragement during the introductory session to work together and co-write their initial messages to their U.S. counterparts.

At the start of the project, we believed we addressed having small group activities by pairing each U.S. team, which ranged in size from 3 to 4 students, to a Macedonian team of 3 to 4 students. However, it became clear after a few weeks that there were not enough Macedonian students attending class consistently to do this, and so this factor became difficult to address. Eventually, the pairings had only one or two Macedonian students assigned, and sometimes an individual Macedonian student tried to field questions from two U.S. teams.

To support group facilitation, especially as the project progressed and the challenges became clearer, we tried to follow common recommendations, e.g., re-configuring the Macedonian teams to better allocate responsibilities and encouraging those students playing key roles such as 'standard setter' and 'compromiser.' We also risked increasing transactional distance by taking time in classes at one point to have the students log in to SharePoint and post or reply to messages.

On the one hand, the factor teaching style and learning style did not apply directly since this project was intended to have the students communicate rather than learn course content as is done in a regular, complete distance learning course. On the other hand, it could be argued that even for such a relatively small project, it is precisely due to differences in the traditional Macedonian teaching and learning styles as compared to the U.S. styles that the project was a challenge to implement. As one example, the U.S. students were entirely comfortable with the

self-directed style of the project, in which they needed to initiate and compose messages to gain information from another person. In contrast, the traditional Macedonian education system is hierarchical and authoritarian. The students were unfamiliar and thus, uncomfortable, with being empowered and entrusted to write their own thoughts in their own way. While the Macedonian college is new and was started by faculty specifically to provide an alternative to this traditional education system, the students were beginning only their second year and found it hard to adapt to and adopt this new independence.

Another factor we were unable to address was community size. Research indicates a minimum of eight to ten participants can be adequate to develop communicative interaction. Given the other differences that existed, we were unable to reach a critical mass to create an effective international online learning–community.

Concluding Remarks

Research suggests that establishing an effective international electronic network of practice has significant potential in enhancing the international exposure of a university curriculum. It can provide value to many undergraduate students otherwise unable to have an international experience. Such an online learning–community environment can also leverage existing university programs at both the U.S. and international institutions. For example, it allows faculty already involved in international activities the option to incorporate international perspectives without the semester-long commitment that comes with formally enrolling the distant students. However, while extensive research exists suggesting "best practices" for developing and managing virtual teams, in our project we found a few obvious but non-trivial basic institutional issues that need to be considered along with those positive controls. We believe these are important considerations when educators and institutions are looking at creating an international experience.

Different start and end dates to the semesters for the collaborating institutions as well as the timing and number of national holidays observed can significantly compress the actual usable timeframe for developing, working within, and reflecting upon the online learning–community environment. A collaborative project can wind up allotted only several weeks rather than a few months. The different semester and holiday schedules can also impact the attention and time given to the collaborative environment by students so that they are mismatched, such as when one institution's group is approaching mid-terms but the other is still early in the start of its semester.

A more striking difference in the educational systems that caused challenges is in assessment or examination policies. Students anywhere are often motivated to do various activities, e.g., projects, homework, and chapter readings, by grades. While the policy is slowly changing, in many European countries a single end-of-term exam is commonplace, with little value placed on attending lectures. When the collaborating institutions have significantly different methods and timeframes to their evaluations, student motivation to engage in the learning–community can differ by timing and magnitude, hindering the development of the project. Understanding how the educational system works and then being able to create an incentive system would enhance the interactions.

Last, while the communication tool used may not influence the interaction, Yoo et al. (2002) suggest that the quality of interaction may improve with a stronger initial relationship among students. Thus, while working within the constraints above, allowing time for more personal communications prior to course-related discussions could improve the rapport between geographically diverse student groups as well as establish a better communication link once the discussions commence.

Although the rationale, infrastructure, and several best practices for creating an international online learning-community environment were in place for the virtual interactions, our electronic network of practice crumbled. Granted, a limitation to our project is that we were unable to formally capture student perspectives and hence, this is a relatively exploratory study. However, an arguably positive outcome was that students in both countries experienced first-hand how cultural issues related to education differences and attitudes towards technology can impact project outcomes. As the students gain knowledge of and experience in a more professional setting, this project should provide perspective that cultural differences are not trivial matters for businesses to deal with when operating in a global economy

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APPENDIX A: PROJECT GUIDELINES HANDOUT PROVIDED TO U.S. STUDENTS

Discussion points for Bus 409-Macedonian (MK) student teams

NOTE: Where appropriate share your perspectives on the following questions and topics as you ask them of the MK students. Also, understand that you will most likely have to alter the wording of the questions and points you are trying to get across to accommodate differences in language, therefore, <u>do not</u> simply "cut and paste" the items below into SharePoint and ask for responses. Engage in meaningful chats. And lastly, feel free to let the conversations flow and expand as the opportunities arise. You have a chance here to chat with another university business student in a foreign country. Make the most of it!

Case 1: The Body Shop
- The CEO stresses The Body Shop's focus on social change and action.
    o How much importance should firms place on social issues? How should social activism rank compared to increasing shareholder value?
    o How might this view change for entrepreneurs and small businesses?

- The Body Shop needs to forecast its financing needs in the near future. Discuss your perceptions of how easy or difficult it is for small businesses to obtain financing for their operations. What sources are available in the U.S. and Macedonia for entrepreneurial financing?

Case 2: Coke vs. Pepsi
- Besides Coke and Pepsi colas, are the MK students familiar with the other products each firm sells, e.g., Coke's Nestea line of products?
    o Where do they buy them (the other product lines or the colas), i.e., grocery store, convenience stores, vending machines in schools, etc.?
    o How and where are they advertised, e.g., TV, radio, flyers, sport team sponsors?
    o How are they perceived by little kids versus college students versus adults, i.e., as "cool", too American, for older people only, etc.?

- What are the most popular similar products, i.e., if not Minute Maid OJ then what firm/brand (and located in what country) sells the popular line of OJ?

- p. 206 discusses changes in the beverage industry: Each side is to share what they feel are the most important or popular drinks among kids vs. college-age students vs. adults.

- Each side is to share how they think an entrepreneur or small business that wishes to get into his/her respective home market with a new drink or product that would compete against Coke and Pepsi should go about it. Be sure to address issues such as target customer profile and price-place-promotion components.

- In general, try to determine the challenges and opportunities Coke and Pepsi face now and maybe in the future as they try to have a presence in MK.

Case 3: Euroland Foods

- p. 305 mentions the firm going public: Each side is to describe their perceptions of how easy or difficult it is to list a firm on an exchange.
  - ○ Which stock market in the world is perceived to be the "best" or most prestigious?

- p. 307 mentions stocks, bonds, dividends: Each side is to describe the roles of these securities and dividends in the general public's wealth and retirement plans.
  - ○ In addition to or instead of using the capital markets for creating and managing wealth and retirement, what does the general public use and rely upon (in USA and in MK)?

- How do the MK students expect their answers to the above questions to change when MK joins the European Union?

- In general, try to compare and contrast the roles of the financial markets in USA and MK.

Case 4: Rosario Acero

- p. 430 mentions the role of relationships in the different businesses: Each side describe the role of relationships, family, networking, 3rd-party recommendations, prior relevant work experience, school pedigree, etc. in doing business and advancing in business or simply getting business done.

- p. 432 describes work hours, pay, and unions. Each side describe these, e.g., what is typical pay, hours in a work week, the role of unions, public perception of unions, etc.
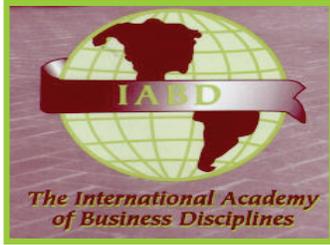
Case 5: Carrefour

- Have MK students share their perceptions of whether joining the EU is worthwhile, how it is influencing what is happening in MK and businesses there, whether the original concept of the EU is "working," and what role the euro has in MK society.

- Each side describe the role the foreign exchange market and its quotes play in their day-to-day lives.

- In general, try to understand better the influence the EU has "over there" and the impact foreign exchange markets have on MK.

Case 6: Enron

- The case is about the role of weather: Each side describe the weather in their area, the role of A/C and heat and gas/electric supplies, e.g., how reliable is each, who receives it (Firms? Residents? Government offices?), how expensive is each?

- Each side describe attitudes about global warming and the role, if any, business (and individuals) is taking to address it.

Case 7: Yeats Valves and Controls
- p. 586 describes the role of foreign customers and markets: Each side describe the role of and debates surrounding 'outsourcing' in their respective economies.
    - What are the perceptions of the general public towards foreign-made products?
    - What are the predominant industries around Idaho vs. MK?
    - What are some emerging industries?
    - What are job prospects like for college-age students?

- How important is intellectual property in the USA vs. MK, i.e., is it protected by laws, do people 'trust' the 'system/markets' to protect them?

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