

Trans-National Online Activities For Students – A Pragmatic Approach

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ABSTRACT

E-learning has opened up additional opportunities for internationalising the curriculum in Higher Education, an endeavour that has many dimensions, including those of culture and pedagogy. Graduates' need to operate effectively in multi-cultural societies and global business environments is relevant to many disciplines, and to campus-based as well as distance learning students. We examine the drivers for internationalising the curriculum within the context of the growth of the Internet and the increasingly global market for Higher Education. We present a pedagogical model and a set of guidelines that can be used to design trans-national online student collaboration, and discuss how these can be operationalised in a selection of scenarios for internationalisation of the curriculum. Lastly we encourage colleagues at Institutions across Europe to build on our work by adapting and refining our model and guidelines, and integrating activity-based approaches with broader strategies for internationalisation of the curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

The potential of Internet based information systems to transform business sectors is particularly relevant where the primary activities of the business are information-intensive, as in Higher Education. Global competition presents threats and opportunities to UK Universities, who are working hard to expand their markets globally by attracting international students (often using Internet marketing) to their campus-based programmes; and by offering distance learning programmes, whose curriculum and support can be wholly or partially delivered via the Internet. For example, Australia has been highly successful in the export of Higher Education services, with more overseas students per capita than the USA, the UK or Canada, an export trade that generated \$3 billion in 1996, (Currie & Vidovich, 2000).

However, marketisation of education may also be understood, within the context of education for the private and public good, as a coping strategy that emerges from the grass roots as a response to changes in funding, (Kwong, 2000). The commodification of Higher Education can be observed in national as well as institutional policies, but it is important to balance the development of international markets with improvement of the quality of provision via internationalisation (Knight, 1999). Universities may also engage in partnerships with educational providers at home and overseas to attract students and to enrich the range and content of their programme offerings. Thus, the supplier can benefit by retaining or expanding the market for their existing campus-based programmes, and by offering new services, such as distance learning programmes. From the customer perspective (students and their sponsors), there are benefits in improved choice of campus-based programmes, in lower costs of distance learning programmes, and in support for selection of programme. Therefore students can find a programme suited to their needs that may be offered by a University in another country. They can investigate potential programmes using marketing information supplied by the Universities and third party information such as Teaching and Research Quality Assessment information that is now made available through the Internet. If students do not wish to study abroad, for personal or financial reasons, they may be able to study the programme by distance learning. Educators are also aware of the need to enable their graduates to operate effectively in multi-cultural societies and global business environments.

The relationship between globalisation and internationalisation is captured in the following quotation:

“Globalisation is the flow of technology, economy, knowledge, people, values, ideas ... across borders. Globalisation affects each country in a different way due to a nation's individual history, traditions, culture and priorities. Internationalisation of higher education is one of the ways a country responds to the impact of globalisation yet, at the same time respects the individuality of the nation”, (Knight & de Wit, 1997).

Knight offers a typology of approaches to internationalisation: activity, competency, ethos and process. Early work in international education focused on *activities* that today include international students, development assistance and academic mobility. The *competency* approach looks at the impact of internationalised curricula on the competencies developed by students, faculty and technical/administrative/support staff, involved in these curricula, and has led to a lively debate on the definition of international competencies. In the *ethos* approach, the emphasis is on developing a culture with an explicit international dimension, whilst the *process* approach stresses the integration of an international dimension into the guiding policies and procedures of an institution, and hence into academic programmes, with an emphasis on sustainability, (Knight, 1999).

E-learning has opened up additional opportunities for international activities in Higher Education. Whilst computer-mediated communication (CMC) is no substitute for the rich cultural experience offered by student exchanges, it can complement exchanges and visits for students who travel abroad or host visiting students as part of their programme. CMC can also offer an opportunity for trans-national collaboration to those who may not otherwise experience it. Since online learning is less constrained by time and space, students and lecturers have the opportunity to expand the learning community, even across national borders and time zones, without incurring the time and financial costs of student and lecturer exchanges, (Slavin, 1990). CMC offers additional opportunities for progressing staff networking from contacts made, usually in face to face meetings at conferences or via exchanges.

In this paper, we use the findings from two years of Action Research to explore how this work may inform trans-national collaborative activities as part of a wider programme of internationalising the curriculum. In relation to Knight's typology, our work was focused primarily on activities, but the pedagogical model used includes learning outcomes that could include competencies related to internationalisation. The further capacity for these activities to contribute to developing an ethos, and be part of a process for internationalisation lies elsewhere. The research explored the outcomes of the online discussion and exchange of feedback between groups of students from different countries, and with different experiences and learning goals. The outcomes were guidelines to assist those engaging in such an activity and a rich case study, (Whatley & Bell, 2003). In the second section, we discuss the pedagogical issues raised and present the adapted networked learning model that can be used for trans-national collaboration. Then, in the third section, we introduce the case study and the findings from the Action Research, followed in the fourth section by a discussion of how these findings and the pedagogical model could be used to design trans-national collaborations as part of broader strategies for internationalising the curriculum.

PEDAGOGICAL ISSUES

In designing the trans-national collaborations, we reflected the recent shift to constructivist approaches to learning, (see Figure 1, (Goodyear, 2001)). Whether one is viewing reality subjectively, as socially constructed, or objectively as being independent of observer or social context, affects the way one understands learning and designs tools for its support. In practice, it can be difficult to be completely faithful to a constructivist approach, particularly in the complex situation presented by trans-national collaboration. Our approach was pragmatic, seeking to make the collaborations "work" for all stakeholders.

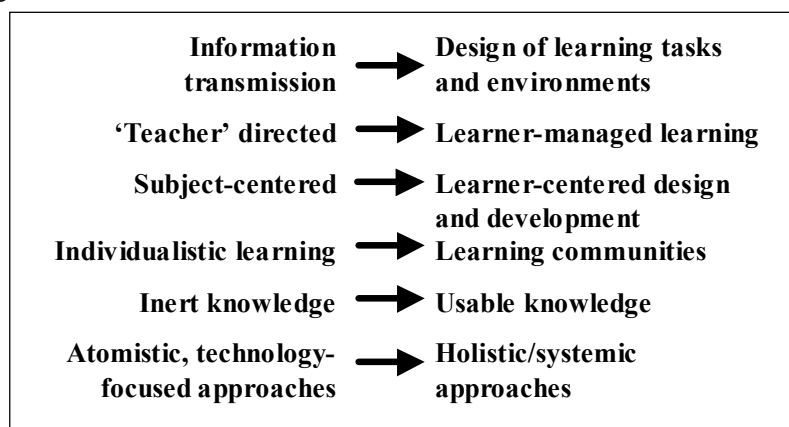


Figure 1 - The Constructivist Shift, after Goodyear, 2001

Goodyear et al's pedagogical model for networked learning can be used to inform networked learning projects of varying scope, (Goodyear, 2001). The model has three main elements: pedagogical framework (covering philosophy, pedagogical strategy and tactics), educational setting, and organisational context. Since each of these differed for the different groups in our collaboration, we adapted the model to accommodate trans-national

collaborations of students studying different subjects and with different desired learning outcomes, as in our case study. Figure 2 highlights that two groups of students can share a networked learning activity in a shared technical environment but pedagogical framework, tasks and learning outcomes can all differ. This allows us to stress the interdependence of the different groups of students.

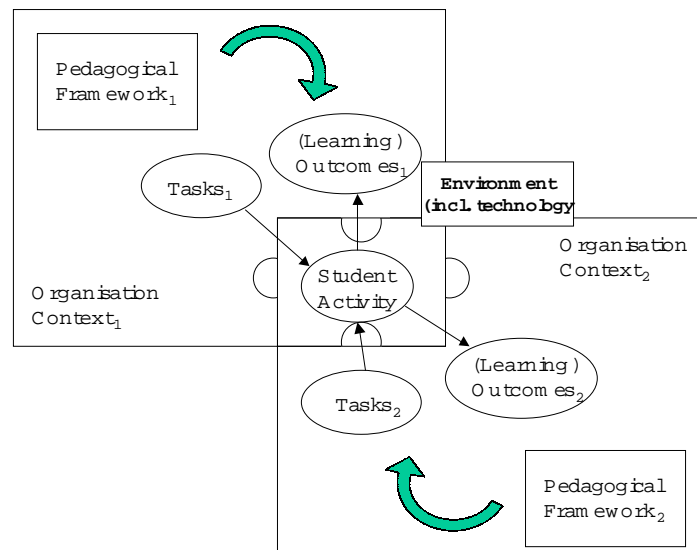


Figure 2 - Pedagogical Model for Trans-national Collaboration

Asynchronous media, such as computer-mediated conferencing systems, offer increased opportunities for reflection and evaluation, including reflection on practice, (Goodyear, 2001), (Manheim & Watson-Manheim, 1999). Since contributors have time to reflect on the contributions of others and time to compose their own contributions, the interaction can be richer, (Goodyear, 2001). Slavin identifies the promotion of cross-cultural relations as one of the benefits of cooperative learning, (Slavin, 1990). Assessed tasks tend to be more structured than totally learner-managed ones, and may inhibit the development of a learning community but we should seek to achieve 'facilitative' rather than constraining structure (Morgan & O'Reilly, 1999).

CASE STUDY AND FINDINGS

Action Research is a cyclical approach that can simultaneously create organisational change, and study the process of that change, (Avison, Baskerville, & Myers, 2001). It allowed us to identify twin cycles of problem-solving and research in order to clarify validity claims, (McKay & Marshall, 2001). The research covered two cycles of action and reflection in trans-national student collaboration between students from the Information Systems Institute (ISI) at Salford, Instituut voor Information Engineering (IvIE) at Almere in Holland, and University of Applied Sciences – Hochschule der Medien at Stuttgart in Germany. The collaboration was initiated from lecturers who met at a conference and discovered that they shared an interest in critical reflection, and was later extended to include a University whose students had visited the ISI.

We shall use as examples two student groups from one of these cycles to illustrate how the pedagogical model, see Figure 2, illustrates the learning activity from the perspective of each group, and allows activities to be set up without major overhaul of the curriculum of each student group. The first group of students, from Salford, were studying a final year optional module, Developing Teaching and Learning Systems, whose module leader was organising the collaborations and significantly involved in the action research. Thus the collaboration was in line with the **philosophy** for that module, and was an integral part of the **pedagogical strategy**. The second group of students, from Almere, were studying English. Since they were enrolled at the last minute, to replace the intended group from Stuttgart whose module failed to run, the collaboration was not part of a planned **strategy**.

Figure 3 indicates the transaction between the two groups where each can derive a different benefit. The rapid agreement of the Almere lecturer to participate can be explained by the fact that the Salford and Almere lecturers had met as part of a visit to Salford by Almere students, and they realised that their general philosophies to education were not in conflict, and that this activity was aligned with the existing relationship between the two departments (**organisational context**). As a result of this visit, the lecturers knew a little of

the **educational setting** of each others' modules, but the students participating knew little about the context of the other group, until they began to talk to each other. By using the Internet, both groups were able to converse via discussion forums already set up on the Salford server that offered the **shared technical environment** needed for their collaboration. Some groups supplemented this environment by use of ubiquitous technologies such as electronic mail, chat rooms and mobile phones.

Task and learning outcomes can help define the purpose that is generally recognised as an important factor in successful online communities, (Kim, 2000; Preece, 2000). For Salford students the **task and learning outcomes** were clear: that they should collaborate with another group of students to receive external feedback on the prototype learning systems that they were developing as part of their group coursework. The **outcomes** were twofold: that the evaluation could help identify the improvements require to the group's prototype; and that the activity would aid the individual reflection, both of which are required as part of their assessment.

For Almere students, the **learning outcome** was to improve their English language skills, and these were assessed by the tutor's inspection of the fact and quality of their participation. The **task** was less clear, as they were asked to evaluate the Salford prototypes, but were not given evaluation criteria until some way into the collaboration. Even then, the criteria did not fit the criteria that would be used in the assessment of Salford students prototypes. This first collaboration with Almere students was relatively successful, as compared

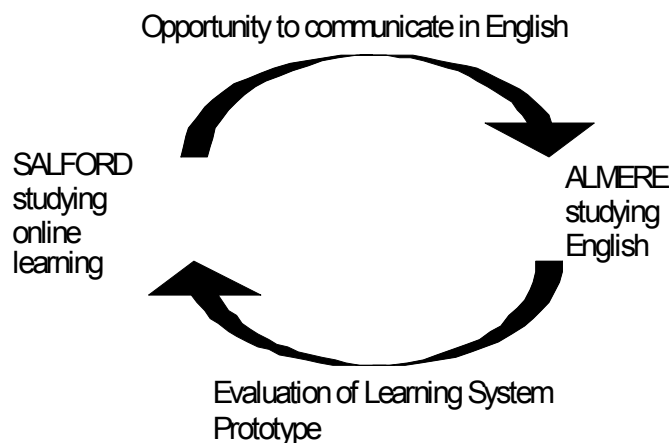


Figure 3 – Actual Collaboration

with the second collaboration, and the Almere tutor attributed this to the fact that the collaboration was compulsory for the Almere students and that it was assessed.

Table 1 confirms what has been a consistent finding; namely that students find such collaborations useful and beneficial, but that each group perceives the other as deriving more benefit.

Table 1 - Results of questionnaires from Almere and Salford students

	Salford		Almere	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Did you benefit from this evaluation exercise?	76%	24%	62%	38%
Did you feel that the evaluation activity was of benefit to the team of students in S / A ?	88%	12%	100%	0%
Do you believe that it is useful to collaborate with students in other centres?	92%	8%	92%	8%

Staff also judged the collaboration to be beneficial. Some students recognize the value of trans-national collaboration as a preparation for work in the European and Global context:

“One of the most pleasing experiences that I had was working with the Dutch students as it is the best example of the Internet and its abilities, as it allowed me and my team to interact with people that we never would have the chance to normally. The only thing was that the system was not that great, and this then meant that we were not able to evaluate their system. But we were able to check what they thought of our system by email. Though the language was a problem that we could not handle.”

However trans-national collaboration is not without its problems. Although five weeks were scheduled for the activity, technical hitches and mismatch of term times interrupted this period. The discussion did not start until the third week, with most of the communication taking place in the fourth week. Although students were encouraged to engage in social exchanges early in the collaboration period, they rarely did, with many regretting this later. A significant issue is the complexity of organising collaborative activities in the face of different terms and semester times, different curricula and assessments and different group sizes. Figure 2 gives us an indication of this complexity in the simplest case – that of two groups collaborating. Involving more groups further increases the complexity.

We have summarised our findings in the guidance points below but since we recognise that such guidelines tend to be reified, (Lisewski & Joyce, 2003), we encourage readers to consult the full case study that contains many more insights from the two cycles of collaboration, (Whatley & Bell, 2003).

1. The activity should benefit both sets of students in order to promote collaboration

Potential benefits should be real and apparent to all student groups involved in the collaboration, although our experience indicates that participants tend to see themselves as deriving slightly less benefit than their collaborating partners. Asymmetry of purpose has permitted interdependent benefits for students. We have found that benefits are available to participants, although variable and not always as planned.

2. Participation in the collaboration is affected by student motivation, assessment of the outcomes of the collaboration being one significant motivating factor

We found that when the activity contributes to assessment, participation is encouraged but that other motivators may also play a part. We look forward to exploring this further in future work.

3. It is important to situate the activity in the host module for each student group

The activity should be situated within the host module with a clear purpose, for example as a task component of an assessed activity or to satisfy a learning outcome.

4. Plan the shared activity to take account of discontinuities between the host modules.

It has proved a real challenge to situate the activity in the host module for each group of students whilst taking account of the differences in pedagogical and organizational arrangements. Students are encouraged to build up an online relationship and conduct the collaborative activity within more complex time constraints.

5. The added dimension of a different language/culture offers general and pedagogical benefits

In trans-national collaborations, acquisition of foreign language skills is a pedagogical benefit but students also valued less tangible cultural benefits to be obtained in discussion with students from other countries.

DISCUSSION ON THE USE OF TRANS-NATIONAL COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITIES

Trans-national collaborative activities can be used in a variety of settings to benefit students, to promote international staff networking, and to strengthen institutional partnerships. The work described in this paper was a pilot study (funded by the University of Salford Teaching and Learning Quality Improvement Scheme) that helped to build contacts and the concept for an EU Minerva-funded project, Collaboration Across Borders (CAB) that commenced on 1 October 2003. We are currently seeking participants in this project, who may seek to benefit in general pedagogical terms, and specifically by designing activities that will internationalise their curricula. By Summer 2003, we will have established an online presence for our CAB Staff Network at <http://www.cabweb.net> that we hope can contribute to development of two of the other elements of Knight's typology, namely competency and ethos. In this symposium we are exploring the concept of Internationalising the Curriculum in general, and looking for new network members for the CAB project. Salford's International Strategy is evolving but the University's Teaching and Learning Strategy already includes a commitment "to internationalising the curriculum both to reflect and draw upon the wide experience of our students and to prepare all students for future employment in the global economy." This process element of Knight's typology is currently receiving attention.

We can examine some hypothetical scenarios and discuss what part trans-national collaborations can play in them:

Attracting international students and strengthening partnerships with institutions overseas

Links with institutions overseas can lead to and be strengthened by online collaborative activities. In our pilot project, we found that existing links with IvIE Almere allowed us to arrange a substitute activity at short notice. Activities will be easier to organise with partner institutions, and may encourage students to consider our Salford-based or distance learning masters. Another source of contacts is our campus-based international students who can put us in touch with their home universities and colleges. Many postgraduate international students are themselves lecturers and teachers.

Enriching the curriculum to educate graduates for global business environment

Salford is renowned for the employability of its graduates, and the opportunity to converse and work with students from different countries, across time zones, can only enhance student skills at global working.

Support for multi-cultural aspects

Increasingly, groups of students have diverse cultural backgrounds, even at one University. When groups of students collaborate across national boundaries they discover similarities and differences that cut across the boundaries of the country in which they are studying, that can provide interesting food for discussion and reflection.

CONCLUSION

We have offered a brief presentation of research done into trans-national collaborative activities that has led to a Minerva project. We hope that readers may be moved to look at our case study and consider using the pedagogical model and guidelines, presented in this paper, that we believe offer support for the design of trans-national collaborative activities, and we would welcome feedback on any or all of these. Those who would like to find out more about participating in the CAB project are encouraged to contact Dr Elena Zaitseva at E.Zaitseva@salford.ac.uk who has recently been appointed as researcher on the project, or check our web site at <http://www.cabweb.net>. We have outlined some possible scenarios for such activities, safe in the knowledge that colleagues at Salford and elsewhere will not be limited by *our* ideas. It is an exciting opportunity to integrate activity-based approaches with broader strategies for internationalisation of the curriculum. Our pedagogical model is based on the concept of mutual benefit for students – a fitting concept for internationalisation that respects the individuality of one's own and other nations, however we interpret the act of "belonging" to a nation.

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