

Chapter 17

A Hybrid Style of E-Learning in MBA Education Across Borders

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a real-life example of a course taught jointly by the MBA-IB program at the University of Tsukuba in Tokyo, Japan and the Master in Management program (ESC) at the Grenoble Ecole de Management in Grenoble, France using a hybrid style of e-learning that was aimed at increasing communication and collaboration among instructors and students. The qualitative analysis of this experience found that the variables that most significantly affected the development and outcome of the course were the unique goals, resources and student profiles of each university, the blending of synchronous and asynchronous instruction, the exchange of instructors to promote face-to-face instruction, and the use of a didactic and experiential approach to cross-cultural learning. Such cross-cultural course connecting distant groups working together toward the resolution of a common problem can become a stepping stone toward the promotion of sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

Today's connected and ultra-competitive environment is pushing not only businesses, but also higher-education institutions to compete for customers who are increasingly solicited by a wider variety of product and service offerings. At the

same time, the current global economic situation induces some students and workers alike to earn a degree and signal their innate ability, which is otherwise unobservable, to the shrinking labor market (Bergh & Fink, 2009). However, the financial crisis is hindering many of those who may have thought of taking a break from work

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-3613-2.ch017

to go back to school and improve their career chances. Instead, a growing number of business professionals opt to keep their job while pursuing scholarship.

Furthermore, the globalization of once local economies demands that they learn to deal with an ever more multi-cultural environment in which they now live and work. According to a recent report from the European Union (Eurostat, 2009), young people participate in formal or non-formal education and training in order to “do a better job and improve career prospects.” However, the research showed that the two most important obstacles to participation in education and training are work schedules and family responsibilities.

Accordingly, it has become imperative for institutions of higher education to appeal to a broader audience beyond the physical university campus, by offering flexibility to those who want to learn while balancing their job and private life, and by providing education on the emerging challenges of the global economy with a diverse body of international faculty and students. One of those emerging challenges is sustainable development, or “development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43). Sustainable development requires to view the world as a system, and therefore to connect to a broader range of distant stakeholders and share knowledge.

Distance learning has emerged as an answer to this multi-faceted problem and has entered the mainstream in higher education. Hicks et al. (2001) for instance suggest that universities should “provide for a larger and more diverse cross-section of the population, cater for emerging patterns on educational involvement which facilitate lifelong learning and include technology-based practices in the curriculum” (p. 143). Most institutions are

implementing e-learning at some level, ranging from merely offering classroom contents online to providing a full platform for student-instructor and student-student interactions similar to those found in a traditional classroom (Martins & Kellermanns, 2004). However, many researchers have found that matching the meaningful interactions evident in classroom settings is a challenge still unresolved (Robertson et al., 2005).

This paper outlines a real-life example of a course taught jointly by the MBA program in International Business (MBA-IB) at the University of Tsukuba in Tokyo, Japan and the Master in Management program at the Grenoble Ecole de Management in Grenoble, France during January and February 2009, using a hybrid style of e-learning that was aimed at increasing communication and collaboration among instructors and students. The authors who instructed the course had previously little experience with synchronous e-learning and were given the responsibility of jointly developing a new course to be broadcasted live to both campuses to promote cross-cultural management education. Based on the analysis of this experience and of student satisfaction and learning outcome, the authors examine the strengths and weaknesses of the course and provide recommendations for developing and managing a hybrid course that attempts to balance the positive aspects of e-learning with the benefits of face-to-face instruction.

The purpose of this research is similar to Alavi and Gallupe’s (2003) in that it intends to “avoid reinventing the wheel and to reduce the learning curve for others in institutions of higher education that are considering or initiating large scale technology-mediated learning initiatives” (p. 140). Next, we describe the theoretical foundation of this research. We present the case of the MBA course jointly taught in Japan and France, and is followed by a discussion of the results in section four. Last, we conclude this research.

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