

COMMUNICATING ACROSS THE ATLANTIC: US AND BRITISH STUDENTS DISCUSS CRIMINAL JUSTICE ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

An e-communication initiative was developed between criminologists in Manchester Metropolitan University in Britain and the University of West Florida in the USA. This paper discusses this e-communication project, locating it within wider economic and political imperatives and examining the project conceptualization, its design and realization.

Keywords: E-learning, pedagogy, communication, ICT, email, international, innovation

INTRODUCTION

Modern degree programs have witnessed an exponential increase in demand, with employers seeking diverse combinations of skills and knowledge and students expecting programs that can suit varied career demands: employers are demanding information and communications technology (ICT) skilled graduates [1]. Meeting these demands requires innovation and imagination. In Britain, Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) has an e-learning strategy to integrate e-learning across its degree routes. In the US, the University of West Florida (UWF) recently conducted a project linking by email, students from the Pensacola campus with students at the Fort Walton Beach campus. From this an e-communication project was developed by the two universities which, although containing material relevant to the field of criminology, is readily applicable and transferable to other disciplines. Essentially the e-communication approach can enable and facilitate students' participation in a borderless community and enhance skills in many diverse areas. This paper discusses the opportunities provided through this form of e-learning.

The concept of e-learning is still evolving as technological and pedagogic developments are applied to virtual learning environments. In the context of this paper, e-learning is defined as learning which is facilitated and supported through the use of ICT, and is learner-focused, interactive and accessible to all students. E-learning can deliver on many fronts not least of which is its flexibility in relation to time and space of study. Students do not have to be campus based to participate in learning exercises. As educators we are alive to the benefits e-learning can bring but we should also be concerned with the risks. Students learning in this environment can miss out on the stimulation of exchanges with academic staff and other students. Can e-learning cope with this danger? Are we headed for a future where ideas flounder without the opportunity for expression and development? Understanding, designing and managing e-learning activities within higher education that truly develop minds is becoming a critical component to programs. This paper provides a systematic evaluation of both the global context of ICT within the academy and of the operation of an e-communication project. In doing so, we raise questions about whether technology-supported learning opportunities represent a significant challenge to traditional modes of learning and what that might mean to academics and students alike.

E-LEARNING IN CONTEXT

It is essential to see the development and ongoing expansion of e-learning in a wider context of economic and governmental (higher) educational policy. The last 10-15 years have seen an enormous expansion of information technology worldwide. ICT investment as a proportion of GDP was under 3% in the US in 1995 and less than 2% in Europe. By 2003, (despite the economic slowdown and the bursting of the technology bubble in 2000) expenditures on ICT accounted for 7.3% of GDP in Britain and 8.8% in the US [2].

It is widely recognized that ICT technology and e-learning/e-knowledge are vital parts of the 'knowledge economy' proposed by modern economics [3]. In such an economy, knowledge and learning are of central importance in wealth creation and learning has to be continuous or 'lifelong' in order to keep pace with new developments and to sustain a supply of high quality knowledge workers/intellectual capital and to remain competitive in a quickly expanding and now global market [4]. The Chair of the Commonwealth Centre for Electronic Governance has declared that "to thrive in the global knowledge economy it is going to be important to change the whole educational system" [5]. Economists and governments across the globe have now recognized the tremendous importance of ICT and this has been made explicit in many policy documents which all make similar claims to the vision statement of the Treasury Board of Canada [6] in 1999 which states that information technology is and will be "the single most important force shaping society in the next century".

In Britain in 2000, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and Universities UK jointly published a report, 'The Business of Borderless Education' and The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education was established to monitor developments and provide resources for those with interests in e-learning. More recently HEFCE, the Higher Education Academy and the Joint Information Systems Committee have published a "strategy and implementation plan for supporting higher education institutions to develop and embed e-learning over the next 10 years" [7]. In the US, Congress established the Web-based Education Commission to "explore the promise of the Internet and other technology-mediated learning strategies and to identify the obstacles that inhibit students from realizing that promise" [8]. The links between technology, knowledge and the economy are made repeatedly in their report to Congress [8] where it is recognized that e-education "is big business now and will be bigger in the future."

Whether due to e-learning developments on a global scale (such as virtual universities) or to more domestic educational or social policies, or even to demographic trends, the current situation in universities in Britain and the US is one of strong competition for students [9, 10, 11]. This results in at least two pressures on universities [12]. Firstly there is a need to provide an enhanced learning environment which will stimulate recruitment and retention of students. Additionally, and interrelated, there is a need to keep up with not only academic and disciplinary developments but to demonstrate a high level of skills/employability provision. Universities then, are seeking to develop, embed as routine, and maximize quality of experience generally and e-learning cannot be exempted. ICT experiences and the development of the concomitant skills have long been associated by students with such maximizing of future opportunities. Furthermore, some students today [variously referred to as Digital Natives, Generation Y, The Net Generation, Generation N, or even 'Plug and Play Kids' [13] are increasingly sophisticated users of modern technologies in their everyday lives. They expect their universities to have kept

up with these technologies (even to be pioneering new technologies) and to have thoroughly explored their potential for the teaching and learning environment.

COMMUNICATING ACROSS THE ATLANTIC: COLLABORATION BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES

Background

As the above shows, the integration of e-learning to facilitate learning in the classroom is not uncommon, especially as it relates to increasing accessibility to students who may be geographically bound [8] or by focusing on student-centered learning [13]. The e-learning project between MMU and UWF extends beyond these ideas, using e-learning to increase the depth and scope of the learning opportunities, moving beyond the single classroom or even single course. The structure for the MMU/UWF project, connecting students in two universities on separate courses was borne out of an initial pilot study completed at UWF in Fall 2001, which connected students from a freshman/sophomore-level 'Criminal Justice' class with senior citizens enrolled in a lifelong learning 'Crime' class. The traditional students were actively engaged in synthesizing and responding to discussions and at the end of each semester, students evaluated the e-learning project by completing a two-page questionnaire containing both Likert-scaled questions and open-ended questions. Students responded on whether the project helped them apply classroom knowledge, develop effective communication and writing skills, and present a persuasive (but grounded) opinion. The evaluation found that written communication and debating skills were enhanced. Additionally, students were asked whether the e-learning project was beneficial, if they learned anything and to suggest changes that might be considered in future classes. The project demonstrated that distance "no longer determines ... communications" [4] and this concept of overcoming distance provided the springboard for the e-communication project whose next step was to span the Atlantic. In the late Spring of 2004 the academics from UWF established an email dialogue with a criminologist at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) in the UK to consider the potential for an international e-communication collaborative project. A small scale pilot was planned for launch in the Fall semester 2004. In each university students followed their own course of study determined by their instructors. Although lectures, seminars and associated study materials in each university shared common themes, they were not identical in content or presentation. The students' common experience was in relation to the e-communication project.

Methodology

The first task of the project, long before the students enrolled, was to model the e-communication process as the academics involved felt there were a number of potential benefits to systematically describing and agreeing on the project design. For example, clear modeling creates a project which is more easily shared with other practitioners, allowing for meaningful comparisons of teaching activities and approaches. Early consultations between academic partners in the project found support for the idea of a common framework and it was decided that a practice model would be developed similar to Salmon's [14] five-step model of online learning which moves from initial set-up and welcome, through to familiarization and socialization, information exchange, knowledge construction and further development. Salmon's analysis of what needed to be done at each stage helped to inform the e-communication model.

The basic aim of the project was that learners should be enabled to engage in discussion, working through increasingly complex topics and to assess their own and others' participation to inform future development of the project. It was also important that the project model should be capable of exploration and evaluation by the wider research community. It was therefore important to consider what the established practice was and how e-communication could enhance this. Traditionally, students are limited to classroom-based discussions where teachers set discussion topics. This basic model was adapted for e-communication, utilizing email as the communication vehicle and learners were encouraged to develop a position on a topic and maintain the discussion through collaboration with their peers. The core of the model emphasizes the pedagogic importance of clear goals and guidance, routines of organized activities which are progressive and that offer component-to-cumulative learning opportunities. The project model also prioritized student autonomy, building in opportunities for students to gain a sense of ownership in their learning through challenging interaction, reflective evaluation and appreciation of the *process* and not merely the *outcome*. By crediting the student's participation rather than simply grading an end product, the project demonstrated how the learning processes and the learning relationships can be valued as important.

The project model was then mapped around the intended learning outcomes for each cohort of students and this informed the method of assessment employed at each university. Although students in each country were on different courses they were graded on similar criteria, including timeliness of initial and subsequent communications, adequate discussion of all parts of the topic, appropriate justification/citation of sources, and writing style. Students in Britain were also assessed on a short reflective appraisal paper. Twelve students from each university took part in the project which was designed to a seven week timetable. Students were paired up and each week a different topic was set. At the start of each week students were emailed their discussion topic and had through to the following week to complete discussion of the topic. This included two emails per individual (four responses per pair) per week.

The advantages of utilizing this e-communication model can be defined within the five stages of Salmon's model. Firstly, meetings were held by academic staff with participating students in each university prior to the start of the project to give students a pack of information which included instructions on how the project would run and a consent form to permit academic staff to use students' emails as data for research. Students then had a 'free' week to get to know their partner. Secondly, the on-line and asynchronous environment encouraged socialization and familiarity leading to greater participation from students who found face to face discussion difficult. An example of this from the pilot was of a UK student who has a physical condition which affects her speech. The e-communication model provided her with a discussion environment where she was not disadvantaged. This aspect of the model also encourages participation from students who prefer reflective interaction rather than spontaneous debate. Furthermore, students could contribute as much as they wanted to the discussion without feeling they were dominating class time. Thirdly, the asynchronous nature of the discussions allowed students to reflect on the information they shared and as participation could occur beyond class time at times more convenient to students, this provided a sense of control and ownership of their learning. Fourth, students constructed discussions which not only responded to specific weekly topics but, as the topics were incrementally complex, students were able draw on their cumulative development of knowledge rather than merely construct compartmentalized answers. This led to the fifth stage, as students reflected on their own development and the design of the

project. As Salmon suggests, the “results should be active online learning, good contributions, interaction between participants and increased student satisfaction” [14].

Findings

Some students thought the e-communication project would be an easy task, likening the process to a ‘pen pal’ relationship. However, Student A described feelings of concern about the project “My US partner and I started off with a brief email introduction so we could get an idea about each other and that took a bit of the fear away. Not wanting to show myself up I feel I’m doing more reading than I would normally”. There was a clear indication that students felt they were representing their university (and maybe their country) and so had to work hard to do well: Student B emailed her instructor and signed off by saying “I have some ‘impressing’ to do and that means extra reading to prepare”. The reality of this first stage of the model therefore went beyond the mere ‘getting to know you’ stage to a more structured approach to preparation.

The discussions made by students were insightful and well thought out. Students on both sides of the Atlantic took the project seriously, putting a great deal of time and commitment into conducting extra reading around the topics and attempting to meet all requirements in a timely manner. Some problems emerged with saving and forwarding emails. Student C said in an exchange with her partner “I’m still trying to get the hang of saving, replying and forwarding my mail but that’s human error, nothing to do with the system”. Generally, students made valiant attempts at participating in a timely manner. Because students had just one week to fully discuss each topic (with a minimum of four communications between them) and there was a six hour time difference between them, it was sometimes difficult to ensure that each partner responded within the time frame. Several students expressed frustration with this element of the project. Unfortunately, this is a common problem with the design of this project. As long as email is the chosen communication method, there will be practical and technical difficulties. One possibility for resolution would be to include all participants in an online teaching platform (e.g., Web CT, Blackboard, Desire2Learn) via a discussion board. In that way, students could post within the platform and carry out their discussion in ‘one place’ as opposed to separate emails. This would enable a smoother transition from stage one to stage two of the model and is a planned development for the project.

The topics generated great discussion between partners. Students took great care in providing thoughtful and complete responses to the topic and many referenced class and other texts, current news items, and web pages. Such interaction is indicative of the stage three developments of reflective appraisal and taking ownership of the learning. This became increasingly apparent in later topics. For example, it was clear through the week five discussion on sex offenders that the US and Britain have similar policies on how to sanction such offenders but that there were differences in public notification of the residency of such offenders on release from prison. Student D asked her partner “Do you think that the sex offender notifications in the US make people feel safer about where they live? Or do you think that they give a false sense of security? Because not all sex offenders are caught, or convicted”. Students were thinking critically, having to consider their own stance and make international comparisons. Although the topic was Criminology, many academic subjects would lend themselves to this form of critical debate and reflection. Students were exploring their opinions about the knowledge they had gained through classes and their readings, and although at times they held similar opinions regarding offenses, offenders, and policies this was not always the case. At points the debate became quite heated:

“The sex offender policy in the US offers the opportunity for the public to find out who the offenders are and where they live. Why do you in Britain think that only certain agencies should have this information? How would you feel if you were the victim?” (Student E in response to what he considered to be rather more liberal ideas). This level of exchange is indicative of arrival at stage four, where students draw on deep knowledge to inform their responses.

Overall, the students were very positive about the experience and their evaluation forms indicated they enjoyed participation in the project. Student F remarked “this was the most difficult and also the most rewarding experience of my university career”. This was echoed by the majority of students on their evaluation forms and many students commented that the project should continue as an embedded part of each course. It was interesting to analyze students’ grades on the project. In Britain 25% achieved a first class mark; 42% achieved an upper second; 25% achieved a lower second and 8% achieved a third. Although differences in grading systems means that results are not directly comparable, results in the US also indicated success with 85% of students receiving an A grade and 15% receiving a B grade. Of all students who completed the project none failed. Of course we cannot ask, “How well is this technology-based approach working, relative to the norm?” [15], since there is not a norm for reflective dialogue between students from different universities in different countries. What can be suggested is that this indicates the e-communication project was not a ‘dumbed down’ learning strategy as it resulted in a range of grades and provided the opportunity for a high level of achievement and student satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

E-learning within the academic community around the world now encompasses a wide and disparate number of technologies and pedagogies and it is without doubt that “higher education has entered a period of significant change as our universities attempt to respond to the challenges, opportunities, and responsibilities facing them” [13]. Nowadays talk of e-learning in universities tends towards discussions of learning platforms such as WebCT, Blackboard and Desire2Learn. However, there is an argument that too much money has been invested in technologies which may not be best designed to deliver the extensive promises they claim in pedagogical terms [16]. It is not enough to have the technology, the key lies in using it intelligently. It has been argued that in the future the “only comparative advantage a company will enjoy will be its process of innovation” [5] and this is as true for higher education as it is for companies. As time and space become relatively unimportant variables, the actual campus may be replaced by a more virtual campus and it is argued that the “physical link between campus and student is already being broken” [9]. The risk this poses is in atomizing the student body into a diaspora of free-floating individuals, separated from relationships with instructors and other students. It is our responsibility, as educators, to innovate to ensure that e-learning includes relationships of communication where ideas can be explored and opinions expressed and challenged. The small scale project discussed in this article demonstrates the utility of email as an educative tool which continues to be an important, yet relatively inexpensive, resource for educators and students. The project demonstrates just one aspect of the innovative potential which remains for e-learning in today’s borderless higher education community.

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