



‘Because I said so’: A Teacher-Centred Approach as a Scaffolding Technique to Accommodate International Distance Learners in a Student-Centred Environment

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At the SUNY Empire State College’s Center for Distance Learning (CDL), the majority of students come from the State of New York, whereas international distance learners were historically a tiny fraction. This is currently being changed, with the ongoing rebranding of the College as New York’s Open University. Seeking to enhance its curriculum to better accommodate international distance learners, CDL has engaged in the development of bridging bilingual/bicultural courses such as “International eLearning Skills for Russian Speaking Students”. The course designed and taught by bilingual/bicultural professors helps students overcome linguistic, cultural, technological, and organizational barriers and adapt to the North American learning environment. In this paper, I will briefly describe the project, problems discovered and solutions found, including the use of scaffolding techniques, such as teaching-centred pedagogy.

Keywords: international distance learning, virtual acculturation, teacher and student centredness

Introduction

SUNY Empire State College (ESC) was established in 1971 to provide adult learners and working professionals with an opportunity to earn associate, bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the State University of New York (SUNY). The College employs a mentoring approach where students design individualised degree programs under guidance of faculty mentors. The College’s Center for Distance Learning (CDL), a founding member of the Sloan-C consortium, is a national leader in online learning. The Center employs LMS “ANGEL”, video-conferencing tool “Elluminate”, lecture capturing software “Accordant”, and widely uses Web 2.0 tools and virtual worlds. Historically, CDL has been primarily serving domestic students. This is currently being changed, with the ongoing rebranding of the College as New York’s Open University. To promote and coordinate global learning, CDL uses an international distance learning (IDL) faculty group. Among other things, the IDL group is involved in designing and developing dual degree programs with foreign universities. Students from partner universities, similarly to domestic students, can take one or several online courses [=units] at CDL or even assemble and complete an entire undergraduate degree program. Until recently, international students, being a

small minority in CDL courses, have been receiving equal treatment with domestic students under the assumption that if they wish to study at an American online college, they (or their home institutions) should be fully responsible for their preparation. A study of joint programs between CDL and three Russian universities (Chukhlomin, 2009; 2010a; 2010b) revealed that despite the efforts undertaken by partner universities incoming Russian students weren't sufficiently prepared for immersion into the virtual environment of CDL. To better accommodate international distance learners, the IDL group suggested using bridging bilingual/bicultural courses; this approach was described by Chukhlomin & Deshpande (2011) as the "3B Framework". The central idea of this approach is to design educational planning studies helping new coming international students to transition into the new environment by using scaffolds, such as bilingual/bicultural instructors, materials, discussions with peers, and employing teaching methodologies that are more familiar to students.

Barriers to International Distance Learning

Since 1998, SUNY ESC has been running a dual degree project in partnership with Omsk State University, a large nationally accredited Russian institution, located in Siberia. Initially, the project employed an international distance learning (IDL) format. To earn a SUNY bachelor's degree in business, Omsk students were supposed to transfer up to 75% credits obtained at their home institution, while completing remaining 25% credits at ESC through IDL. Notwithstanding substantial organizational efforts undertaken by both sides in 1998-2003, this initial program design was found not feasible. Omsk students were facing significant and sometimes insurmountable barriers that included: 1) organizational barriers; 2) communication barriers associated with language, culture, and differences in academic systems; 3) insufficient subject matter knowledge and skills; 4) a lack of experience in studying at a distance. To alleviate barriers, the initial program design was significantly changed; in particular, the following improvements were made: 1) instead of advanced level courses, only lower level American courses were offered through IDL; 2) a blended learning approach was employed where American professors annually travelled to Russia to conduct face-to-face classes; 3) advanced level American courses were conducted on-site only, through an offshore ESC's unit located in Prague, Czech Republic, where Russian students were required to travel to complete the degree; 4) additional courses taught in English by expatriate faculties were added to the Omsk curriculum. In this largely redesigned form, the Omsk dual degree program was re-launched in 2004; since then it has been successfully producing 12-15 graduates at the bachelor's level and 15-25 graduates at the associate's level every year. In 2010, the improved program design has been successfully replicated by another Siberian university located in Novosibirsk.

Eventually successful, the Omsk and Novosibirsk projects didn't provide a suitable model for online delivery of dual degree programs in Russia, without the need for either students or professors to travel internationally. Meanwhile, with the arrival of new learning technologies, such as Web 2.0 tools, videos, lecture capture, and videoconferencing, some of the barriers to IDL have apparently become easier to overcome [Maloney, 2007]. To investigate whether the new ESC's virtual learning environment has made it easier for international students to study online, the IDL faculty group initiated a series of new projects with Russian universities. In particular, in 2007 ESC engaged in a new project with a polytechnic university located in Tomsk, Siberia. Tomsk University was interested in replicating the initial design of the Omsk project where some of the students studying in Tomsk full time would be able to simultaneously complete a SUNY bachelor's degree through IDL. For this project, Tomsk University obtained funds from the Russian government. After conducting several pilot courses in 2007-08, the partners discovered that, similarly to the Omsk case, Tomsk students were experiencing serious problems with IDL. Namely, they: 1) found it difficult studying without face-to-face interactions with professors; 2) were mostly exposed to a teacher-centred pedagogy; 3) were largely not familiar with the concepts and terminology used in advanced level CDL courses; 4) were lacking some critically important skills, including English academic writing, communication skills, teamwork, and time management skills. Also, they were found to be: 5) not familiar with the American online classroom, for example, reluctant to participate and inexperienced in debating things; 6) reluctant to communicate with CDL technical personnel and student services; 7) not used to using the information provided for students on the ESC student website; 8) not familiar with the contextual information used by American course developers and instructional designers to design CDL courses that had been developed with primarily domestic students and adult learners in mind. On the other hand, it was also noticed that the Tomsk students very quickly learned how to use LMS "Angel", synchronous video tools and other learning technologies (Chukhlomin & Deshpande, 2011).

Virtual Acculturation

In recent time, the theme of virtual acculturation has received a growing amount of attention of researchers and practitioners from around the world (<http://www.acculturation.nl>). A literature on virtual acculturation provides

theoretical foundation for the design and development of bridging courses aimed at alleviating barriers to IDL. Acculturation has been defined as “those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous firsthand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups” (Redfield et al, 1936. p. 149). Recently, with the advent and increasing popularity of online education in the US and the global context, students from various countries are attracted more and more towards a US online degree (Pittinsky, 2003). With an increase in diversity in online classroom, there is a need to help learners acclimatize to the complexity of the virtual environment and to develop a culturally responsive pedagogy helpful to all learners (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002). Particularly, in an online context researchers have reported high stress among foreign international students exposed to their first virtual experience (Kyungbin *et al*, 2010). Bridging courses if designed adequately help learners successfully assimilate to the foreign educational culture and context. Literature has often highlighted the importance of such courses for incoming foreign students and has called for research in this area (Peelo & Luxon, 2007; Evans & Northcott, 1999). Particularly, in an online context, this becomes extremely important for international learners as they do not have the opportunity to actually “see” and experience the host culture. The benefits of such courses are significant. For instance, such courses provide students with an opportunity to learn about foreign country’s educational setup and requirements. In addition, such courses provide students with cultural understanding and norms of the host country (Peelo & Luxon, 2007). When dealing with homogenous bilingual communities and student groups, the use of the learners’ native language and bilingual instructors was found to have great potential (Taggart & Martinez, 2002; Werner-Smith & Smolkin, 1995).

International eLearning Skills: a bridging bilingual/bicultural course

This online study developed in 2008 serves as a bridging course aimed at providing remotely located, Russian-speaking students with a smooth way to transition into the American virtual learning environment. The main objectives of the course are to: 1) provide Russian-speaking students with an introduction to American culture and American education; 2) help them learn how to navigate the CDL’s virtual learning environment; 3) learn how to use virtual resources, conduct research and present results; 4) learn about student-centered environments and introduce “the American way” of online discussions, collaborative teamwork, reflecting learning, using technology, finding help. The 8 week course is conducted by bilingual/bicultural faculties in LMS “ANGEL”, with the use of lecture capture, video conferencing, e-portfolio, wikis, blogs, and a bilingual study guide. By the end of the course, students are expected to learn how to: 1) select and independently register for online courses at CDL; 2) make necessary arrangements for transferring credits and ordering textbooks; 3) use appropriate technologies and helpdesk; 4) use virtual library and style guides; 5) access the ESC-owned island in ‘Second Life’; 6) master ESC-specific tools like ‘Degree Planner’; 7) develop the first draft of their individual degree plan and write a rationale essay; 8) use ‘Smarthinking’ and peer tutoring support; 9) use wikis and e-portfolios. In addition, students are introduced to academic writing, library helpdesk, and peer tutoring and virtual career planning resources. Even more importantly, they are guided to develop (or, at least, create awareness of) such critically important skills, as communication, time management, self-guidance, and teamwork.

In 2008, a group of 8 Russian students took a pilot version of course and since then the course has been regularly offered by CDL. In 2009, Tomsk University sponsored a group of 10 professors to take the course as part of their faculty development training. In 2010, the course template was used to conduct professional development courses for groups of Russian-speaking educators sponsored by the Open Society Institute.

On the use of scaffolds

Scaffolding, grounded in Vygotsky (1978), is often seen as a conceptual framework for learners’ support in online courses (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; McLoughlin & Marshall, 2000). Also, scaffolding is found to be a useful technique in international education (Evans & Northcott, 1999). As an instructional tool, a scaffold enables a learner to solve a problem, carry out a task, or achieve a goal that she cannot accomplish on her own; this tool can be easily removed when no longer needed (Puntambekar & Hubscher, 2005; Wood et al, 1976). In the context of international distance learning, scaffolding can be organized with the help of bilingual/bicultural instructors and peers, and also through the use of bilingual instructional materials in the form of books, articles, video lectures, presentations on “YouTube”, etc.

In the above mentioned course, all announcements and most of the content guides are provided in Russian, including an introductory video lecture captured with the use of ‘Accordent’. In the opening 3 weeks of the course, the instructor who teaches the course should establish rapport with the students by following a ‘traditional Russian’ teaching style as if the course were taught in their home university. In other words, the

instructor is obligated to tell the students what exactly they should do, very much like it is normally done in Russian universities. During that time, students learn about the use of LMS 'ANGEL', the College website, a virtual library, a videoconferencing tool 'Elluminate'. Also, they read about American education, classroom structure, the differences in learning and teaching styles between Russia and the U.S., and expected behaviors in an "all American" online setting. Then, in the middle of the course, the instructor is required to switch his/her communications with the students to mostly English using Russian as a means of clarification only. When communicating in English, the students are required to practice learning behaviors "as in the US". During that time, the instructor's role is to explain how online courses are taught in the US and to demonstrate examples.

Conclusion: from teacher-centred to student-centred learning

International learners studying at CDL remotely can simultaneously be exposed to very different pedagogies; to succeed in both the American college and their home institution, they should be provided with assistance. Students from predominantly teacher-centred environments like Russia (Burry-Stock et al, 2001) tend to be reflective theorists (Mitsis & Foley, 2009); they usually expect their teachers to tell them where to go and how; at home, this strategy serves them very well. At the same time, in a student-centred environment like CDL, they are expected to take the lead. But how can a student do this if she or he has never done it before? The problem is aggravated by the fact that learning is taking place at a distance; in a foreign language; in a new cultural and academic environment. Perhaps, it is a logical and natural solution for teachers to lead the way one last time and invite students to follow just because the teacher said so.

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