

International communication: Putting your money where your mouth is

Mark Northover

*Centre for Education and Professional Development
Auckland University of Technology*

An experimental approach to an undergraduate International Communication assignment involved the online collaboration of tertiary students from a New Zealand Institute of Technology and a New York College. Students were assigned working groups with four NZ and four US students each, and required to complete and submit a case study project. At the end of the course, students at both colleges were surveyed about their attitudes and experiences of the online collaboration, and what they had learned as a consequence. While attitudes ranged from the extremes of 'fantastic' to 'waste of time', there was a general consensus that the experience had been worthwhile in exposing them to a real world example of working in a cross cultural environment. While the challenges of new technology and time zones had a significant effect on communication and time management for many, learning to work with a different cultural paradigm and to live and work with compromises for the completion of the project was an important lesson for many.

Keywords: Online learning, Blackboard, computer mediated communication, collaborative learning, International Communication, group work, cultural diversity

Introduction

Contemporary educational theory encourages the provision of real world experiences, or authentic learning tasks (Herrington, Oliver, & Reeves, 2003), in learning. The concept of 'situated cognition', wherein students experience deeper learning if the tasks have relevance for their own real world expectations, was first articulated by John Seeley Brown and his colleagues (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). They summarised that 'knowledge is situated, being in part a product of the activity, context, and culture in which it is developed and used'. The purpose of the exercise for the students in this report was to expose them to the real demands of working in an unfamiliar environment, both technologically and culturally. Added to this was the 'psychological distance' (Roblyer & Edwards, 2000) experienced by many online learners working in an electronic (distance) medium.

Surveys of students engaged in distance and online learning are not as common as they perhaps should be. Elgort and Marshall (Elgort, Marshall, & Mitchell, 2003) examined the experiences of students from non-English speaking backgrounds, and noted that these students often gained more from their online study environment by being more critical of their own performance, and adapting more rapidly to this new mode. The reports that constitute the SOLE (Students' Online Learning Experiences) investigations (Alexander, 2004; Harrison & Weedon, 2004; Martin, 2004; O'Leary & Cai, 2004) report on a wide range of experiences, both positive and negative, of students using online course delivery modes in the UK.

Description of the online activity under study

In semester 1 2003, the Bachelor of International Communication programme at Unitec Institute of Technology in Auckland undertook to be true to its title. After various collaborative undertakings between teaching staff of this course, and with academics from other universities, it was felt that a specifically international flavour to the course would be beneficial to the students, and an interesting challenge to the course delivery.

Consequently, an agreement was reached between lecturers at Unitec, Auckland and at Baruch College in New York City (one of the ten senior colleges that comprise the City University of New York - CUNY). Debbie Rolland¹ from the School of Communication at Unitec and Professor Jana O'Keefe Bazzoni² from

¹ <http://www.unitec.ac.nz/?8DD5D5F0-BA48-415B-9C74-8A68621BBD73&ID=3EE494C1-4CCF-497D-99CA-44B5198F4A8C>

² <http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/wsas/departments/communication/faculty/bazzoni.html>

the School of Communication Studies at Baruch agreed to involve the students in a collaborative group activity in the completion of a major assignment for the paper. The assignment was based on a textbook case study of workplace diversity, related to communication issues within an organisation. There were eleven discussion questions for the group to answer and present as a group project. The assignment fitted the assessment strategy of both colleges, so that learning outcomes, procedures and marking criteria could be synchronised.

The opportunity to introduce a real world experience of international communication into an International Communication qualification was one of the key drivers for this experiment. Students would become much more aware of the issues, challenges and barriers in communicating across time zones, cultures, expectations and differing local demands. The diversity provided by this scenario reflected the issues to be discussed in the project itself. In this instance, communication could only be electronic between the two campuses, although the local groups could meet and work together in person. The value of an activity such as this in achieving the learning outcomes for the course is the extent to which it creates an authentic learning activity - an activity in which the students can see their learning in terms of their view of the world in which they intend to live and work.

The students were assigned to collaborative work groups, in most cases including four from each country of origin. The students were assigned the project, broken down into 11 questions that required answers. The project was explained in detail to each class locally. The students, 23 from each college, were all enrolled into the online course delivery system (Blackboard) at Unitec.

At the completion of the paper the students were asked to complete a survey that addressed their responses to this exercise, and their attitudes to the online environment as its medium. A total of 27 students completed the survey, 13 from NZ and 14 from NY, giving a very even cover of the two groups. All survey questions were 'essay type' questions, with some questions being quite directive and others more open ended. The summary below has categorised the answers for the open questions where possible.

Summary of survey responses

Question 1: Name the techniques you primarily relied upon for this project; name as many as you used.

Table 1: Survey question 1 responses

Discussion Board	25	Instant messenger	2
Email	22	SMS	2
Chat	17		

Students were encouraged to use whatever means of communication seemed most appropriate and most successful to them. While most used the online communication facilities provided within the Blackboard environment, a few used other tools such as computer instant messaging (eg MSN) or text messaging (SMS).

The facilities provided by the LMS (discussion board and chat) were the most widely used, as well as extensive use of email. This email use may have been from within the Blackboard course, but could also have been quite external to Blackboard. Many students noted a frustration with the time delays in getting responses to discussion board postings (see later questions), and email was used as a more reliable means of maintaining timely communication. This indicates that students are less likely to check their Blackboard course than they are to check their email account. One student posted a good summary of the pros and cons:

I used private emails because it was basically a guarantee that people were likely to check it and respond. Blackboard chat and IM gave real time response and issues were addressed and resolved. As for the discussion board, I think it really did serve the purpose, it provided a central place where every one could have gone to give answers and feedback to the case itself.

Question 2: In your experience, which was the most appropriate technique for this project? Why?

Table 2: Survey question 2 summary

Email	9	Chat	5
Discussion Board	8	Mixture	5

Many of the comments here related the value of the communication function with the issues of time difference between the two campuses. While a number said email was preferred, this related to the synchronous chat alternative. In general, the discussion board was valued because of the ability to revisit and re-read everyone's comments, as well as the any time any place nature of the interactions. There were a variety of comments that did not pose a credible argument for one method over another. Some of this reflects a lack of familiarity with online learning tools, as compared to the more accustomed email –

Email was the most appropriate technology ... regardless of the time difference we knew the message would be received.

Private email because you can talk from anywhere and check your email at any time regardless of the time difference.

... The discussion board and blackboard chat was not appropriate for transferring information; just chatting.

Questions 3: How well did you get to know your non-local group members using this technique?

Table 3: Survey question 3 responses

Very well	1
Well	8
Not so well	12
Not well at all	6

The majority of students did not find this a successful way to build an online community, despite having class photos posted online. The comments often reflected a lack of ability to agree on process, and the issues around collaboration per se, not necessarily related to geographical and temporal distance.

... it seemed like just one of them communicated with our group on behalf of the others...

... we all had very different ways of communicating our messages and felt that sometimes the message was lost or easily taken the wrong way ...

... The time difference and our completion limit had forced us to focus more on our task.

There were a number of 'inter-cultural' differences evidenced by some of the comments – some students from both campuses found it difficult to establish a working relationship with people from different cultural and social backgrounds.

Not well at all ... they didn't do the assignment at all. Maybe they just don't care about the grade, or because they are American they are individual. They have no idea about what is called group work

... I didn't get to know the NZ group as well as I had hoped ... they have to be a bit more understanding and open minded. They should be able to allow for a flow of ideas. ... to analyse those ideas and select the best one as a GROUP EFFORT, instead of disqualifying any ideas that aren't theirs ...

Question 4: What advantages does this technique have for online collaborations?

Table 4: Survey question 4 summary

Convenience	14	Self Expression	2
Time Management	6	Real world experience	2
Communication	4	None	1
Real time Simulation	3		

Many students commented on the convenience of discussion boards in being able to post and read contributions at any time, regardless of time difference. A number of others also mentioned the group

dynamics as keeping them on task, forcing them, as a matter of group responsibility, to remain task oriented and to meet deadlines.

... helped to address situations almost immediately. It also put what you have learned into perspective and finally it gave a real account of what to expect in a business environment where you have to rely on these techniques ...

... amazing how quickly and easily you can get to know someone so far away!

None, students should be encouraged to use other channels of communication.

... it teaches us the real value of intercultural awareness and that no matter how far apart we are in the world we can still fight and have resentments – I guess an important lesson for future life?!?!

Question 5: What disadvantages does this technique have for online collaborations?

Table 5: Survey question 5 summary

Slow responses	9	Technology difficulties	2
Impersonal	7	Group issues	2
Confusing	5	No detail	1
Time difference	2		

It was interesting that despite the number of comments about time difference in the previous questions, only two students mentioned it here as a disadvantage. The major time issues resulted from the delays in posting and responding when using discussion boards. Use of virtual chat was the main cause of time zone issues, but this was a known factor. The frustration for students arose from their difficulties with group mates failing to work with the same levels of urgency, meeting deadlines and maintaining a flow of discussion.

... different work expectations meant frustrations on work received and posted.

... if a person does not check his or her email regularly, the information flow will be slow

... responses would get posted a week after the question was answered and by then the response was no longer useful.

There were also areas of personality conflict within members of working groups. These conflicts are not peculiar to remote collaborative groups – they are unfortunately a fact of life when people with diverse commitments, personalities and expectations are expected to work together. The distance adds another dimension to the group dynamics, as group members lack the crucial ingredient of ‘face mail’ (body language) when communicating:

... Sometimes what is being written can be interpreted differently than what it is meant to be ... as being “rude” and this can cause conflict. This is typically ... when messages are sent between different cultures – cross cultural communication...

The tone of the messages could be misunderstood. After a certain amount of time, explaining oneself can be exhausting.

One student referred to the worth of a structured collaborative environment by recognising that their use of other systems meant missing out on some of the group interaction –

... because I was allowed to use my private email I interacted less with the Blackboard system. I would therefore miss postings that were relevant to the class. If the use of Blackboard email accounts were enforced it would have caused greater interaction with the Blackboard system.

The challenge here is to set practices and guidelines that maximise the learning experience for the group. While this student recognised the benefit of the discussion postings etc, and the cost in missing those, she/he would quite possibly have objected to being forced to use the Blackboard system exclusively, and would have looked for alternatives. Unfortunately the time constraints of a project like this does not allow for the students to make these mistakes and subsequently decide for themselves what the best use of the tools would be.

Question 6: Was this your first experience with the Blackboard discussion board? If you answered ‘yes’, was it easy or difficult to use?

Table 6a: Survey question 6 responses

Yes	15
No	12

Table 6b: Survey question 6 summary

Easy to use	14
Not bad	1
Difficult	0

The split of previous experience with Blackboard was roughly 50-50, and did not represent a usability barrier to those for whom it was a new experience. Two comments indicated frustration with navigation aspects of Blackboard (one relating to 'unused' menu areas, the other about the number of clicks required to access discussion postings), while another thought the use of this medium for this assignment was 'a genius idea'.

Question 7: Please describe in as much detail as possible what went well during this collaborative project.

Comments in this section ranged from 'not much' to 'almost everything'. More mention was made of the capacity for misunderstanding the intention of postings, with a shift in collaborative intent as the deadlines drew closer. At least three students referred to the process of moving through stages of conflict that were unproductive (storming), to the productive collaboration required to complete the project.

Another three students considered that the 'problems' associated with 'the other end' had brought their local group together more strongly. While this was not the intention of the project, it may still ultimately have led to a better output for each group. The overall impression from the responses to this question is that there were widely varying experiences across students from both campuses. Some thought it was difficult and 'chaotic' while others felt it was a great reflection of the issues of cross cultural communication and collaboration.

Question 8: What were the aspects of this project that you enjoyed the most?

Table 7: Survey question 8 summary

International	12	Technology (online chat)	2	Sharing workload	1
Group (team) work	6	Cultural	2	Diversity	1
Communication	5	Compromising	2		

The most frequently mentioned aspect was the ability (novelty?) of working with a group from the other side of the world. Learning the true meaning of cultural diversity in a work (study) situation, and the demands of group or teamwork was also a valuable experience for many students. A couple mentioned the fun of online chatting, which was obviously a new experience for them. Clearly, one of the main purposes of this project – experiencing and overcoming the challenges of international communication – was recognised by a significant number of these students as a valuable exercise.

It remains to be seen over subsequent delivery of this course, whether the novelty value of working across time zones like this is still seen as a valuable experience for the students. In 2003, this concept was still quite new for students in both New Zealand and New York, but will inevitably become less so.

I enjoyed meeting new friends and the idea of working/communicating together with others thousands of miles away from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds. Being able to make compromises in putting the final case together.

Teamwork and cooperation is the aspect of the project that I enjoyed the most. I've learned how to communicate with my other group members... also I found that time management of each member and group is very important for the organisation of the team and completion of the project. ... We hear about international relations all the time. Here we had one. We actually worked together internationally on 'solving' the case study.

Question 9: Describe the problems you experienced in the course of this collaborative project in as much detail as possible

Clearly the aspect that affected the students most was the need to deal with a 16 hour time difference. It is probable in reality that this was exaggerated by a lack of suitable time management. Many of the comments indicated that slow responses to postings were a problem, attributed by the students to the time difference. As the pressure comes on for meeting assignment deadlines, real time communication becomes more desirable as the communication becomes more pressing.

Table 8: Survey question 9 summary

Time difference	14	None	4	Technology	2
Confusion in communication	6	Different approach to the task	3	Arguing	2
Lack of response	5	Cultural difference	3	Group size	1
Late (slow) response	4	Distance	2		

Two students itemised 4 and 7 issues each that had caused problems for them, including a range of issues from technological to cultural and cognitive differences. Three students suggested that none or very few problems were experienced, while a number of others were quite openly critical of the work efforts of their overseas partners. This international finger pointing was evident in both directions from various respondents. One of the more perceptive comments showed an ability to analyse and benefit from the difference between the groups:

... NY3 approached this case study from a practical perspective, while NZ approached it from a theoretical perspective. We started blaming each other – and competed on who was right. Eventually we understood that this was a unique situation and we should just enrich our answers by putting both perspectives into our answers.

Question 10: What were the most stressful parts of this project?

Table 9: Survey question 10 summary

Collation of final submission	7	Communication	4	Different expectations	3
Time to complete	5	No Stress	3	Group organisation	1
Difference of opinions	4	Time difference	3	Presentation	1

Most pressure was acknowledged by the students towards the end of the project, when the final write up and submission were due. Others suggested that a last minute realisation that a group presentation was also required caused stress for groups expecting more time to prepare. Many of the comments here reiterated those made earlier in the survey, especially in questions 3, 5 and 9.

Question 11: What did you learn during this project (about communication and about online collaboration)?

Table 10: Survey question 11 summary

Cultural differences	6	Clarify expectations	3	Keep on task	1
Clear communication	5	Time management	2	Different expectations	1
Take responsibility	3	Avoid conflict	2	Organisation	1

Student comments indicated that the hidden agenda of this project – to experience and appreciate the real issues of international communication and collaboration – had clearly been achieved. Many comments related to the specific impact of cultural and language differences, and that international collaboration is in fact hard work. The project case study related to diversity, and here the students experienced diversity first hand. Most students valued the experience, though a few were clearly frustrated at the extra effort required.

Question 12: Was this project worth the time?

Please explain

Table 11a: Survey question 12 responses

Yes	22
No	2

Table 11b: Survey question 12 summary

International communication	6
Practical experience	4
Intercultural	4
Technology	2
More time	2

This one asked the hard question (from the lecturers' point of view), putting their semester's efforts up for scrutiny. Happily, the response was overwhelmingly, though not unanimously, positive. While a couple indicated they would have appreciated more time to complete the assignment, the majority reflected on the value gained from working with the issues of internationalisation first hand. The two negative responses to this question suggested that both students had completely missed the point of learning about and coping with

diversity and collaboration. Most of the others acknowledged that the difficulties imposed by the joint effort were ultimately of great value to them and their expectations of the course.

... The collaboration itself was a huge lesson on communication and how to get the work done efficiently using the proper skills.

... has given me a better understanding of how groups work and what part diversity plays in the workplace and on an international scale. I am aware of the importance of being culturally sensitive and that skills in this area are very important to have.

Yes, it was very much worth every bit of time and effort I put into it ... this project has taught me much that I will be able to use in a future occupation. The main purpose of the case study was to learn how to manage diversity in the workplace – but in the end it was actually all about managing the diversity within our NZNY3 group. We needed to manage our own diversity first in order to come up with the answers ...

No, I do not feel it was a fair test of my capabilities in writing a report on workplace diversity ... and I believe through own group selection using only one city I could have produced a much higher quality assignment that would reflect my abilities.

Question 13: What, if anything, could be improved if this project were repeated with another class in future? Be specific.

Table 12: Survey question 13 summary

Less time difference	9	Face to face meetings	2	Select own groups	1
More time	4	Smaller groups	2	Individual submissions	1
Clearer project guidelines	4	Blackboard instructions	1	Enforce Blackboard communication	1
Time management (deadlines)	4				

Many comments referred again to the challenges of time difference (two suggested Australia as an alternative) although a couple admitted that this provided its own value. Three suggested that the lecturers could have provided more interim deadlines to assist groups to stay on task throughout the project. This may have helped to get through the ‘forming’ stage of the group more rapidly. Two others suggested that groups should have been smaller (most had eight members), producing less conflict and easier group management.

I think that it may be useful to do this with an Australian class instead (just because of the time difference) – but then on the other side we probably wouldn’t get the same diversity – since Australians are like kiwis (I think) ...

Conclusions

There was a great deal for the students to come to grips with and accomplish in this project. Not only did they have to analyse a case study in workplace diversity, write a paper and prepare a presentation, but they also had to learn a whole new set of skills in communicating online and managing group dynamics. Many of the comments referred to the difficulty of managing personality conflicts, differing work ethics, misunderstandings of language and cultural nuances. All of this would have detracted from the task at hand, making the timelines a lot shorter once the actual project work was started.

In many respects, this activity meets the definition of authentic learning activities as outlined by Herrington, Oliver and Reeves (Herrington et al., 2003). They recommend that for learning activities to have an authentic relevance to the desired learning outcome, they should include the following aspects:

- *have real world relevance*; this activity directly served the aims of the degree - international communication
- *are ill defined, requiring students to define the tasks and sub-tasks needed to complete the activity*; in this case the activity was well defined, but the students were left to determine the most appropriate means of collaborating and communicating
- *comprise complex tasks to be investigated by students over a sustained period of time*; the case study related to workplace diversity, and required the students to resolve their own cultural diversity in order to become productive
- *provide the opportunity to collaborate*; clearly in this activity, collaboration was an essential and required ingredient in developing a solution to the case study
- *provide the opportunity to reflect*; a great deal of reflection on the process of the activity is evident in the responses to the end of course survey, which provide the substance of this report

- *are seamlessly integrated with assessment*; the assessment of this activity was the group project – a collaborative set of answers to the eleven key case study questions
- *allow competing solutions and diversity of outcome*; the students had to evaluate the contributions and suggestions of the rest of their group and come to agreement on the best answers

While some of the students may not have fully appreciated the fact, they were exposed to a challenging and stimulating experience that added significantly to the traditional format of this assignment, and delivery of this paper at Unitec.

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