

**PROGRESS REPORT
2000 NextED RESEARCH GRANT RECIPIENT**

**AN ASSESSMENT OF CROSS-CULTURAL AND SOCIAL
NETWORK INFLUENCES ON THE DELIVERY OF AN
INTERNATIONAL TEACHING MODEL UTILISING A
COMPUTER-MEDIATED APPROACH**

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Abstract

This paper provides a progress report and details of research being undertaken following the awarding of the 2000 NextED/ASCILITE research grant. The project is investigating cross-cultural issues in teaching an online program across three cultures: Australia, Singapore and Sweden. In addition the research is investigating the importance of social networks among students and how such networks differ by culture. The paper provides details on the background to the research and work undertaken to date. The final section presents details for the continuation of the research into 2002.

Keywords

*cross cultural teaching, social networks, computer-mediated communication,
online learning*

Background to the Project

In 1998 a partnership was developed between the School of Commerce and Management at Southern Cross University and the Singapore Institute of Purchasing and Materials Management (SIPMM) for the articulation of their diploma and advanced diploma awards into a Southern Cross Bachelor of Business Administration award. The program was unique in that it was developed to allow students to interact with the presented material utilising a computer-mediated environment. Subsequently a similar agreement has been negotiated with "Silf Competence" (SILF), Sweden's Purchasing and Logistics Association, for the development of a similar program to be delivered in Scandinavia. Furthermore, the Australian College of Warehousing (ACW) has recently entered into an articulation agreement with the School and the program will be offered to students from the ACW in 2001.

The current program involves ten Southern Cross University units being delivered online via Course-Info (from Blackboard.com). A total of 193 students have already undertaken the program from Singapore and the forecast student numbers are expected to double with the recent SILF and ACW agreements. Undertaking such a program raises a number of issues not normally faced in the traditional teaching environment. For instance, there may be cross-cultural issues and problems in teaching online students with different language and cultural backgrounds. In addition offering the program online also adds to the dimensions that need to be managed in the program. In an attempt to find solutions to some of these issues the researchers explored the literature in the field of cross-cultural computer-mediated instruction.

Cross-cultural computer-mediated instruction is a rapidly growing phenomenon, (Davis, 1998) and although in its infancy in Australia, is emerging as a key issue for educators (Gibbons, 2000). A number of instructors have experimented with courses that encourage their students to interact with colleagues in another country (eg. Lebaron & Pulkkinen, 2000; Sallis & Bygrave, 2000; Jager & Collis, 2000). However, for educational institutions involved in the delivery of programs across borders, understanding and researching the nature of learning and the influences of cultural settings is considered essential in an effort to develop and improve the delivery of cross-border programs (Stone, 1986). While the Internet makes it possible to deliver programs efficiently and effectively on a global basis there was a paucity of research reported in the area. Two notable exceptions were Chin, Chang, and Bauer, (2000) and Collis and Remmers, (1997). With the Australian education market rapidly expanding into the Asian arena, an understanding of cross-cultural issues in the use of computer-mediated education was considered critical for the success of an emerging industry.

Social Networks

When students congregate in a common learning environment, social networks are often established between individuals. Such relationships have been described as important features of life (Milardo, 1988). Differences in social networks between cultures have been reported (eg. Kim & McKenry, 1998; Julian & McKenry, 1994), however a review of the literature on the study of social networks within the learning environment revealed only studies which focused on family relationships and primary school students. No studies were reported at the tertiary level which examined social networks and students participating in computer-mediated courses. This suggests that there may be valuable opportunities for research in this area. The outcome of the literature searches revealed that minimal research has been undertaken to investigate the issues associated with utilising a computer-mediated approach across different cultures or social networks among students utilising a computer-mediated learning approach. As a result a project was developed to investigate these issues and was awarded the 2000 NextEd/ASCILITE research grant.

Project Aims

The project aims include:

- Investigate and contrast the learning experiences of students across three cultures,
- Examine the extent and types of social networks developed by student cohorts and the impact these have on participation in the computer-mediated environment,
- Document the influences of cultural differences on students' learning and participation in the computer mediated courses.

The project is significant in that it should contribute to an understanding of cross-cultural and social network issues in the design and delivery of computer-mediated programs. Educators should be able to use the information to assist in the development and implementation of programs for delivery across 'cultural borders'. An understanding of the importance and structure of social networks in disseminating information within the learning environment will also impact on the development and implementation of programs.

Progress

A literature search has been examined two areas. The first area examines cross-cultural issues in teaching. The majority of the work in this area, particularly in Australia, has focused on research that has been undertaken on foreign students studying in another culture, such as Australia (Anderson, 2001; Chin et. al., 2000; Conlan, 1996; Tan & Goh, 1999). However little published material has been found on the delivery of programs into other cultures, such as Australian courses being offered in Asia (although a scan of Asian newspapers will identify many Universities offering courses to students in Asia).

A second body of literature has investigated the use of Social Networks (Scott, 1991). The literature in this area is focussed on the use of 'social network analysis' as a means of studying interactions between people. To date no literature has emerged which has specifically examined the topic of social networks in tertiary education, although substantial material has been published on the use of social networks in computer-mediated environments (eg. Garton, Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1997). The work in these two areas continues and will provide the basis for a number of hypotheses that can be tested in future research.

In addition to the literature review a focus group has been conducted with a group of Singapore students to identify the issues they face when choosing a course from another culture and to obtain an idea of the nature and extent of social networks being used within the courses. At the time of writing final results from this investigation are not available, however the following comments are provided as a general observation on the focus group transcripts.

In general, the Singapore students showed considerable motivation to better themselves. The culture has a strong educational value and all students mentioned that they were doing the study to better themselves so that they can be promoted in their jobs, or obtain better jobs. They use groups as a means of discussing assignments in an organised manner. Several mentioned their groups met regularly, often in social surroundings and on the weekend. During these sessions they would talk about assignments, how they would go about approaching the questions and share information. This may mean splitting tasks and assigning tasks to individuals for their work. They would also have someone act as editor and review their work. Email or telephone were the normal means of contacting and maintaining contact within the group. Some of the respondents also mentioned that their groups had difficulty meeting, because of distance or time commitments such as work and family. In these situations the group would continue without the members and then email information to members who couldn't attend the sessions.

Groups were developed early in the course and students tended to remain in their group as they progressed through the course. The nature of the particular program is that students in a particular intake develop strong allegiances to their intake group. They also had very little choice in the units they were taking as the progression from unit-to-unit was pre-determined and resulted in students staying together as a group. This means that students get to know each other, however it can also mean that students who have to join the intake late can find it difficult to break into a study group, or be accepted by the intake group. Study groups were developed early in the course and assigned by the instructor. Students groups were used so they could undertake assignments or activities together. A number of students mentioned that groups are common in adult learning classes across Singapore and also in workplace training programs. Other students gave instances where groups had been used in the school situation, so it is not specific to adult education only.

The focus groups confirmed the strong links between members in a course to assist in the completion of assignments. The groups were also formed to save time and to provide a sense of security that the students were progressing along the right track. It was also identified from the focus groups that the study groups were used as social networks and were more than just a means of study - it appears that the social network may emerge as a result of the groups early in course. These findings support the investigation of networks among students and when comparing the findings from the Singapore students with Australian students would suggest there are differences in the way networks are used between groups in these two cultures.

Future Plans

The literature searches and preliminary focus group undertaken have provided confirmation of the importance for this research and revealed that a great deal can be learned from the investigation of social networks across different cultures. While the literature search will continue, the next stage in the project is to develop a social network questionnaire and administer it to students undertaking the course. At the same time it is expected that qualitative data can be collected from students studying in Sweden. Following the analysis of the social network studies it is expected that the researchers will be able to develop recommendations for the improved use and design of online courses incorporating computer-mediated communication.

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