

Benefits of Distance Education Beyond Borders,
NSU and ITESM Experience

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Abstract:

It is well known that Human Capital is a Nation's most important asset. Therefore, education with high quality standards and under the most advanced educational techniques is the key strategy to assure not only its preservation, but its development as well.

The Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM) is strongly dedicated to education, stating that its Mission is “to educate individuals to be committed to the social, economic and political development of their communities and to be internationally competitive in their professional field.” At Campus Sonora Norte, we are proud to say that we are walking firmly toward this mission as a result of the excellent relationship with the Northern State University in South Dakota, whose friendship and commitment have been crucial in our exchange agreement for students and professors since 1998. In the paper, the successful traits of the agreement are discussed with particular interest on distance courses across borders to enhance the learning process.

We believe this experience is an example of how both countries may benefit of our own differences to enhance and enrich our education systems and of course our own cultures.

Introduction:

Scholars and educators are continually looking at instructional methods for linking students and faculty. The traditional academic model involves the student and instructor physically meeting on-campus. Hence, learning consists of the classroom world of the chalkboard. This model allows for student access to learning material, professor, and other students. Over the last thirty years, the rapid advancement in travel and communication creates new opportunities and challenges in academia to modify the learning process. In particular, the information technology (IT) revolution has accelerated the need for developing new skills needed to stay competitive in the global labor market. Some of these qualities necessary for an IT executive are communication ability, technical knowledge, problem solving, and relationship building. Information technology (IT) advancements creates a situation where faculty and students can learn, experience, and cultivate these new competencies across borders instead of only in the classroom world or books. For example, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, while tabling the Eighth Malaysia Plan in Parliament on April 23, 2001 stated “a strong human resource base to support the development of a knowledge-based economy and enhance productivity and competitiveness will be one of the key strategies in ensuring that the nation is able to face the challenges of globalisation and sustain economic growth.” Therefore, the academic learning environment must provide opportunities to properly develop these necessary skills demand around the globe.

We present one case study of the distance learning features of the academic exchange between ITESM-CSN and NSU. First, the paper consists of a brief history of

the exchange. Second, educational opportunities are discussed. Third, the success factors are presented. Finally, concluding comments are presented.

Background--NSU and ITESM Experience

Independently, in 1996, both ITESM and NSU were looking to create an international exchange environment to enrich the educational opportunity of students at their respective campuses. In January 1997, faculty from NSU and ITESM made initial contact to discuss establishing an international exchange relationship. During March 1997, NSU faculty traveled to ITESM for both parties to evaluate and frame the potential exchange agreement. Through faculty contact during this period both parties agreed to proceed. April 1997 the university presidents met and agreed on the terms of the exchange. By August 1997, the first students from ITESM attended NSU. During the following January 1998 the first NSU students were attending ITESM. In addition to students and faculty, distance courses have been offered via technology to the exchange partner. The role of distance education courses offered via technology across borders are now discussed.

Educational Opportunity

Quality education is imperative in academia. On campus education has many elements, but there are three key parts. These elements are (1) student access to learning material, (2) student access to a professor, and (3) interaction with other students. All three elements must be incorporated into distance learning courses.

The paper will discuss the student, professor, and university roles in creating successful cross border distance learning courses. These elements will be discussed within the context of the two courses that have been delivered between ITESM and NSU. Each campus has initiated a course for the other campus. The courses have been fully integrated with students at both the host and remote site.

Student View

Student benefits, tasks, and opportunities of distance learning beyond borders are many. In the traditional classroom, the student has access to learning material, professor, and fellow students during class periods. Yet, this situation provides for limited interaction beyond the campus so there is a lack of cultural awareness and technological skills that the global environment now requires. By participating in a distance course beyond borders students will develop both global and traditional awareness and competencies the global workplace requires. These issues will now be discussed.

First, students have gained through cultural immersion into the other university setting. Students learn from the students at the other campus. This happens during class the time period around breaks when students are free to interact with the other campus. Students at both campuses noted – “an opportunity to know people from different cultures and their way of living”. Another student added – “I found myself studying the

people as much as the learning material.” As noted in Higher Learning Commission (formerly North Central Accreditation) new standards “graduates have skills and knowledge to function in diverse local, national, and global societies”. This standard is being addressed and met through courses offered across borders.

Second, students interact with faculty beyond their home university. The professor brings different country’s perception to current events being discussed. In addition, the faculty at the receiving institution provides further insight to the discussion. This again helps fulfill the need for students to gain global awareness.

Third, students have the opportunity to globally network and interact with team members across borders. A student noted – “As we can learn about them, they can learn about us, and open an important door for future relations in the business arena.” Another student said – “It might become an important link between both countries.” These quotes provide a further avenue of global growth awareness for all students.

Finally, technology awareness and usage as well as information management skills are gained. These globally necessary skills are learned through participation in a global distance course. As a student noted – “this gives us a chance to use technology and hold conferences across the real world.” This matches with what employers are hoping new graduates will be able to do.

Professor View

Professor gain comes from expanded class participation from cross-cultural viewpoints. This multi perspective class discussion enhances the learning environment for all students. In addition, the faculty develops the ability to relay course content to

students from another cultural perspective. This feedback gets incorporated into other courses taught.

Faculty must clearly define course expectations. These course expectations pertain to student and faculty roles for the course. The student must understand that the host professor culture sets the standards and you must adjust. Having a faculty facilitator at the remote site helps students overcome but does not eliminate potential difficulties.

University View

As noted earlier, university accreditation boards require global awareness and knowledge. The cooperation and collaboration between the universities improves global competencies in the students who will be the future leaders in both countries. By offering distance courses across borders, students will gain the global awareness and knowledge.

Each university has responsibilities to facilitate the success course offering. Both universities must provide appropriate hardware and software for course presentations (vtel, pictel, netmeeting etc) and access to course management system (Learningsapce, Blackboard, WEBct, WEBTEC etc). Knowledge of these hardware and software help prepare students with technology skills. ITESM spends considerable time and resources preparing all their students to be proficient with Learningspace. This course management system allows for dispersion of course material and access to professors. Similarly, NSU uses WEBct for course management system. To successfully deliver a course via technology, the appropriate platform skills must be know by students at both locations. While the process of accessing course management systems are similar there are still unique features that must be learned.

Strengths and Barriers of Successful Exchange Relationships

Three specific attributes of successful distance education exchanges are (1) the faculty must be stakeholders, (2) contingency plans are necessary, and (3) sufficient university resources. Each point is now discussed.

First, the distance learning course must be faculty driven. Faculty involvement allows for selection and deliver of appropriate courses that encourage cooperation and interaction between schools. One feature we learned is to have faculty at both sites. There should be a faculty facilitator at the remote location to improve course interaction. For example, faculty guide students to see beyond the observed cultural differences. In addition, students are initially shy about interacting with a faculty member in the other country. Hence, the remote site faculty facilitator provides an avenue to funnel information back to the lead professor. Finally, the two faculty discuss what is working and not working within the course.

Second, contingency plans for course delivery must be developed. The headaches of technology increase exponentially when crossing a border. Technology will fail so that faculty and students must be flexible in delivery of distance courses. It helps to have bilingual technicians to trouble shoot hardware and software problems. One solution was having a student with tech skills at both ends (i.e. NSU student in Mexico and/or ITESM student in United States). These students were familiar with the receiving site technology, thereby improving the troubleshooting process chances.

Third, each university must assure that the students have access and knowledge of the skills necessary to successfully complete the distance course across borders. These are not costless activities and sufficient resources must be allocated.

Barriers:

There were four significant barriers and concerns that needed to be addressed. Each barrier will be addressed.

First, students at both sites must have knowledge of the course management system used to decimate course material. For example ITESM uses Learningspace and NSU uses WEBct. ITESM has trained students with Learningspace. Yet, initially there was a steep learning curve in gaining competency with Learningspace. NSU students were not up to speed with Learningspace. Hence, NSU students were initially frustrated with accessing on-line resources. The university/faculty role at both universities failed to take into account these differences in course system management. Faculty discussion outside of class time provided possible solutions. This platform issue must be addressed for future distance course offerings.

Second, finding a common class time for the course was difficult. NSU and SDSU, both South Dakota Regental Institutions, have different class periods. Trying to match class times across countries was difficult. Furthermore, the time zone change has to be addressed. Whereas South Dakota, USA partakes in daylight savings time, Sonora Norte, MEX does not. Hence the class time changes during the semester by having one site with daylight savings versus no switch for the other end. The solution we used was for the host campus not changing and the remote site adjusting.

Third, the university and faculty must take into account differences in university holidays and start/end date for the semester. The question is how or if you have class when only one site is in session? We used these holidays to facilitate faculty travel to the other university. The remote site students greatly appreciated having the main professor

in class at this time. In addition, courses should NOT be held on Monday where a plethora of USA holidays fall.

Fourth, clear course expectations are needed. The two universities have different student, faculty, and university expectations with respect to learning. The lead faculty must clearly define course courses for each of the concerned entities.

Overall, none of the barriers are prohibitive in preventing cross border courses. With sufficient planning all barriers were reduced or eliminated.

Conclusion

Global learning experiences are imperative for today's student to be prepared for the new global workplace. Through the ITESM-NSU relationship, students obtain the technology and cultural global skills necessary. As one faculty stated "what we are doing is a very good example of cooperation across borders not limited to just 'business', but also for creating understanding of international culture, ..., to build stronger relationships between our countries." Continued faculty involvement at both ends will ensure a strong and vibrant exchange relationship allowing students to gain global awareness and knowledge needed in the global workplace.