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Hodgkinson, Myra;Holland, Joe
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Collaborating on the Development of Technology Enabled Distance Learning: A Case Study

Myra Hodgkinson, *The Nottingham Trent University, UK*
Joe Holland, *University of Wisconsin-Stout, USA*

SUMMARY

This article addresses the processes used and developed in an effort to create a collaborative online degree programme involving four different universities located in three separate countries. These academic institutions undertook the task of developing the curriculum aided by input from industry representatives and potential students. The focus of this article is the process through the experiences of two members of faculty. The starting point is how two partners from education became involved and provides an overview of the technologies used to support and deliver education online. Finally, several issues that emerged regarding the provision and design of a collaborative curriculum are identified.

INTRODUCTION

This article is concerned with a collaborative project involving four institutions of higher education located in Germany, the UK and two in the USA. The project was concerned with the design of a Masters award-bearing programme in Hospitality and Tourism Management for students anywhere in the world. The intention was to provide a collaborative curriculum delivered by international faculty members and using technology (Lotus Learning Space) to deliver the curriculum and to support the students. The paper recounts the processes from the perspective of a lecturer from a large UK business school and an American professor.

The structure of the paper is in three sections; firstly, a discussion as to how the authors became involved in the project and the experiences that resulted. Secondly, there is a brief discussion regarding the technology used to support the proposed programme and finally, the identification of issues that emerged from providing and designing a collaborative curriculum are discussed.

The project

The project proposal was written by members of the School of Hospitality and Tourism (approximately 650 undergraduate and 30 postgraduate students) of the University of Wisconsin-Stout, a public university

situated in the upper mid-west of the USA. This particular campus is part of the University of Wisconsin system. Within this system is the Business School, located at Whitewater, Wisconsin, the other significant US campus with regards to this project.

In June 1998, the Hospitality and Tourism Department was successful in securing a $350,000 grant from the University of Wisconsin-Central Investment Fund to initiate a global hospitality management programme utilizing distance learning. The rationale for the project proposal was:

- recognition that the rapid changes in global matters require extensive training of corporate members in the hospitality and tourism sectors;
- provision of distance education provides a means for students to obtain educational programmes without attending campus-based programmes;
- expansion and the use of technologies provides an alternative to competitively-priced traditional programmes;
- commitment to quality in the provision of such programmes;
- commitment to a new hospitality and tourism Masters degree that will be focused on global hospitality management;

- adoption of an integrated approach using distance learning, which will enable partnerships with industry and other institutions to move hospitality and tourism graduate programmes into a new international market place.

THE BEGINNING

In March 1998, the authors met whilst attending an IBM Solutions Workshop in Stuttgart, Germany. It is important to note that the author from the UK business school had little information technology expertise other than that required by a member of faculty to communicate via electronic mail and to word process. The reason for attendance was that her role as Faculty Learning and Teaching Co-ordinator required that she became better versed in how technology can support the provision of business and management education (Currie, 1999). Dearing identified the importance of the need to embrace technology by the UK Higher Education sector:

> New technology is changing the way information is stored and transmitted. This has implications both for the skills, which higher education needs to develop in their students, and for the way in which it is delivered. It opens up the possibility of higher education programmes being offered remotely by anyone anywhere in the world, in competition with existing UK institutions, but also offers a global market place in which UK higher education can compete.
>
> (Dearing, 1997)

The second author was facilitating several sessions at the workshop from the perspective of technology supporting open and distance learning based on six years of experience. The outcome from this initial meeting of the two authors was the start of a global partnership. This resulted from an informal conversation when the opportunity arose for the UK author to invite the American professor to her business school to disseminate to a wider school audience. It was during this visit to the UK that the American professor extended an invitation to become involved in the global hospitality management project.

An invitation to the USA

Initially, a Delphi survey with hospitality organizations was carried out. This was followed by interviews conducted with 20 corporate hospitality managers to evaluate the potential for expansion into the adult corporate educational market. This activity was followed by a teleconferencing link-up that provided the first opportunity for partners to introduce themselves and to discuss individual institutional strategies around involvement in the project. In September 1998, the author received an invitation along with the other collaborating partners for a proposed two-day visit to the USA.

The first evening provided an informal opportunity for the collaborating partners to meet. The was followed by an all-day meeting with an agenda that included the following activities:

- a demonstration of an existing distance education programme currently offered at the University of Wisconsin-Stout;
- a market overview concerned with the recruitment of potential students;
- a discussion around involvement of project partners additional to those present;
- discussions around the administration of the programme;
- the identification of what was perceived to be needed to be effective educators with students from other national cultures;
- a discussion regarding the perceptions of 'what does collaboration look like';
- an exploration of aspects of technology.

America comes to the UK, December 1998

Prior to Christmas 1998 a one-day meeting was hosted in the UK to enable the identification of a name for the Partnership, that is, 'Global Partnership for Hospitality Education' (GLOHBE). In addition, a mission statement for the partnership was also agreed:

> The partnership's mission is to foster collaboratively worldwide learning for the professional hospitality marketplace by means of state-of-the-art educational research programmes.

The specific goals of the partnership were determined and are as follows:

- development of a curriculum in partnership with private sector corporate partners (if appropriate) to meet global marketplace needs;
- delivery of a hospitality and tourism masters degree programme to an international market through distance education technologies;
- maintenance of collaborative partnership models for the development of knowledge and delivery of hospitality and tourism education learning into international markets;

- enhancement of the student-centred and workplace-based learning environments and removal of time and place barriers to learning;
- expansion into international markets and establishment of the partner organizations as major institutions for hospitality education.

Time was spent at this meeting on determining the factors that would make this proposed master's degree different from similar offerings. It was felt that the partnership would be better prepared to manage in a global market place, would be able, because of its global nature, to develop relationships/professional networks from around the world thus having access to worldwide expertise. In terms of students, there would be opportunities to recruit students from different locations but the nature of the programme would enable independence from existing national cultures and the students' current employment. However, there was a realization that this would require members of faculty to develop significant understanding of different national cultures, to manage students sensitively and to also question their own expectations regarding students. The nature of the programme would be industry specific but global. This would be supported by technology, which would enable flexibility of access and modes of learning. The technology would require the development of communication skills, knowledge management and access to base level resources and thus the enhancement of knowledge. In addition, the programme would provide opportunities for collaborative research amongst faculty members.

During this session there was significant discussion around action learning, learning outcomes and module/course credit points. It was at this time that the differences between the UK and the US education systems became most apparent. Recognition must be given to the American partners who were more than willing to understand the philosophy and rationale that underpins the UK higher education provision and to adopt them for this award-bearing course.

By late January of the following year, further tele-conferencing took place at which time the partners reached agreement regarding their involvement in the delivery of particular modules. Further, it was agreed that another two-day face-to-face meeting was necessary and was arranged to take place during April in the UK. The purpose of the meeting on the first day was to share an overview of the programme to date, then to discuss the current provision within the institutions and to identify ways forward regarding

partnership issues such as team teaching, registration of students, fees, contractual arrangements, quality assurance, ownership of modules, marketing and training of faculty. The following day there was an opportunity for members of faculty to work in teams around the collaborative modules. By the end of this two-day meeting the extent of involvement by the four partners was refined. It was agreed that the American university would be the awarding body, thus responsible for academic standards (Quality Assurance Agency, 1999) and enrol all students. The UK university working with the American business school would team-teach a total of two business and management modules – thus each of these two modules would be taught by an American and a UK tutor. These modules were identified as appropriate as they were of a compatible standard to existing postgraduate business and management modules taught on other programmes.

It was never the intention of the UK author's business school to play a significant part in the provision of the proposed Masters degree. This was due in part to Hospitality and Tourism not being significant in the portfolio of courses within the provision. In addition, colleagues were at the stage of developing their skills and expertise in using Lotus Learning Space, focusing on an undergraduate award bearing programme whereby the students would attend the business school for the first year, then spend the next two years in industry, returning to the school for two three-week study blocks in both the subsequent years. Thus, at the time of the American initiative, staff and students of the UK author's business school were learning, understanding and developing their skills in the use of the technology to support the curriculum. Because of these two significant issues it was not possible to be equal partners in the American initiative. It was, however, desirable to be involved so as to gain understanding of the development of an international collaborative award-bearing programme and to learn about how a distance-learning programme supported by technology can be developed. Thus it was agreed that the UK tutors would not receive any remuneration for this teaching (at least in the first year of delivery); rather, it was viewed as part of their staff development activity.

A video conferencing link in May 1999 was organized and provided an opportunity to discuss customer needs and how, as these needs change, they will impact on the curriculum, the first steps in course development and implications for a further meeting in June at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. This visit in June

included the two academic colleagues who agreed to team-teach the two modules and the senior technician responsible for providing IT support. The activities at this meeting were concerned with online learning and are described in the next section.

THE TECHNOLOGY

The technology used to support delivery of the curriculum is Lotus Learning Space. This part of the paper will not, however, provide details of the technology other than to say that its uniqueness is the fact that it has four integrated databases. When designing the delivery of the programmes this platform enables a much greater level of student interaction to be achieved than by using the World Wide Web only. Rather, this section will discuss the lessons learnt from collaborating with colleagues with significant experience in delivering the curriculum using technology.

The second author of this paper led the workshop that took place at the University of Wisconsin-Stout in June 1999. His aim was to enable colleagues with little or no experience of online delivery to design modules to a high standard. He provided the following guide as key to successful delivery:

* it is necessary to include in the design, links to on-line resources on the World Wide Web;
* the storage and manipulation of resources requires the development of content databases;
* connections between the online resources are linked from databases to web pages and should be intuitive and seamless;
* the provision of interactivity between people via messaging and, for example, the utilization of guest speakers;
* the importance of interactivity between people and resources via online tools, for example, threaded discussions and spreadsheets.

The level of interaction available to the students with the curriculum and with each other is fundamental to the use of this technology. This is perhaps the hardest aspect to explain to colleagues. One of the most significant results from engaging with this project has been the realization that colleagues new to the technology must experience it first hand from the perspective of a student to appreciate what it enables a tutor to do regarding the design of modules. In addition, it is not possible to design the curriculum without being able to envisage how the design can cause the student to interact with it in order to achieve the learning outcomes. Experience in the use of technology to support online delivery has resulted in five factors for success being identified:

* access: not only from the perspective of the user being able to access the course site but also access to the system's resources, including processing the student's application and access to the libraries;
* student satisfaction in terms of perceived value for money and value for time spent;
* faculty satisfaction including academic integrity, pride in the development of the course and individuals' workload;
* learning effectiveness which can be measured in terms of what the student has achieved;
* economic efficiency (using courses over and over again).

THE PROGRAMME

The Masters award title of MSc Global Hospitality Management was agreed and the following programme objectives were identified:

* to enhance learners' ability to critically create, analyse and strategically manage in the workplace;
* to expand learners' knowledge/understanding of external and internal issues so that long-term business strategies may be developed;
* to develop skills to manage service and promote customer-focused behaviour in a diverse global environment;
* to enhance leadership and human resource skills to more effectively manage a changing workplace.

Upon completion of the programme the following learning outcomes were identified in terms of what the learner will be able to do:

* function more effectively at upper management levels of their organization;
* develop research, critical analysis and problem solving skills;
* better manage their own learning;
* utilize technology to maintain or develop a company's competitive edge

The MSc Global Hospitality Management Programme offered by the university partnership is structured as follows:

* the programme includes 11 modules with each module consisting of a three-credit research paper.

The programme includes up to nine credits of electives from any of the participating institutions;

- the initial pilot programme is operated as a set programme. This means that students start as a group and finish the programme as a group. It was agreed that by adopting this system for the pilot it would enable the University partners to evaluate and develop the programme components;
- at the end of the 11 module period, each student completes a major paper;
- the length of the degree programme is three years;
- modules are offered in six-week blocks;
- all students have a mentor;
- after the pilot phase, optional courses/modules will be added to the programme to extend depth.

In August 1999, the first 12 enrolled students were invited to a two-day orientation event at the University of Wisconsin-Stout along with faculty from the collaborating institutions.

ISSUES EMERGING FROM THE PROJECT

Thus the project had been a success: there existed a programme, and there were students recruited to it and faculty members prepared to deliver it. This is not, however, the end. There were a number of issues emerging from this two-day orientation, which would have an impact on the delivery of the programme.

Firstly, it was recognized that there was a need to retain this first cohort of students in order to claim that the project has been successful. Secondly, students indicated that they had enjoyed the variety of activities, particularly the team building exercises and international facilitators during the orientation, but that they felt that too much material had been covered in the two days. Thirdly, members of faculty agreed benchmarks in terms of the response time to students. In relation to students raising questions via e-mail, it was agreed that responses would occur within 24 hours. Regarding feedback on assessments to students where the module has been team-taught, it was agreed that the team would collaborate on grading and provide feedback to students within 48 hours. The fourth issue was concerned with the technology. Students found the installation of the software difficult and suggested guidance be made available in the form of a flow chart or step-by-step instructions. Students asked about the possibility of being provided with laptops with installed course software. This suggestion is being investigated, particularly the possibility of leasing arrangements.

Lessons learnt

In concluding this overview of the process in designing global programme at Masters level, a number of lessons have been learnt. To appreciate how the use of Lotus Learning Space or any platform can truly provide an interactive learning experience for students, it is essential for everyone engaged in designing courses/modules to have first hand experience from the student perspective. The best way to achieve this is to work through an existing module. All members of faculty need to be aware of cultural differences when teaching students, for example, are ticks small insects or are they check marks? It is important for collaborating partners to meet face-to-face, not only to identify a common language i.e. module/course, course/programme, but it is also important to get to know each other and to build trust. Lastly, different countries have different education systems, for example, in relation to credit points, quality assurance processes, external examiners and formal validation of programmes.

In conclusion, the most significant aspects for the authors of this paper are threefold. Firstly, an appreciation that technology enables us to design educational delivery that eliminates or reduces many of the barriers to learning. Secondly, that it is through intelligent design of courses and a better understanding of learning that we create effective learning environments. Thirdly, that it is possible to develop collaborative programmes across different national cultures and educational systems with trust, understanding and a commitment to a more enlightened educational student experience. Collaboration is more than simply exchanging information. Meaningful collaborative learning (whether between the collaborating parties or between students), creates added value and new understanding amongst the members of the group (Garrison, 1997).

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Myra Hodgkinson is the Learning and Teaching Co-ordinator at Nottingham Business School

Address for correspondence: Dr Myra Hodgkinson, The Nottingham Trent University, Burton Street, Nottingham, NG1 4BU.
Tel: 0115 941 8418;
Fax: 0115 848 6512;
E-mail: Myra.Hodgkinson@ntu.ac.uk