Learning Can Be a Long Shot: Distance Learning Characteristics of Two Cultures

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Abstract: This paper is a report on the experiences of an American professor teaching web-based distance learning in Nepal and Iceland. When the teacher is from one culture and the students are from another, effective E-Learning involves added issues. Both the teacher's culture and that of the student influence learning. This paper follows the American professor as she tries to address these issues in Nepal and Iceland, using similar experiences from the U.S. Students differed in both their culturally-based learning styles and levels of experience. Results range from discouraging to humorous to heartening.

Introduction

In 2002, the author was awarded a Fulbright grant to teach and research at the University of Kathmandu in Nepal for a period of five months beginning in August. Because their Fall semester didn't finish until the end of February, we finished the course via distance learning. The winter semester (January – May) was spent (physically) at the University of Iceland in Reykjavik (and online for January and February with the Nepali students). Then a second Fulbright grant in the summer of 2003 sent her back to Nepal for the summer term (June and July).

All courses were taught via blended learning – in Nepal the students took part of the class face-to-face in the classroom and the remainder via web-based distance learning; in Iceland, part of the class took the course via distance learning and part of the class did it in the classroom. In all cases, we used a course management system called OfCourse (See http://www.cs.wpi.edu/~kal/courses/awt) which integrates communication tools into already existing web sites (Lemone 1999b). This differs from well-known Course management Systems such as Blackboard, WebCT, Manhattan and Moodle which provide a set of tools into which course documents can be embedded. The cultural differences of the three countries (the U.S. influence on the instructor and the Nepal, and Iceland influence for the students) and nationalities influenced both learning and teaching. The following section describes some aspects and demographics for each country. Then, class experiences and survey results are shown. Finally, conclusions are drawn from both the experiences and the surveys with recommendations for the future.

Demographics and Other Influences

The information here is from The World Factbook (2004**),** World Facts and Figures (2004) and Asian Productivity Organization (Adhikari 2002).

Nepal

Nepal is one of the poorest, least developed countries in the world. It is a land-locked country about the size of Arkansas with a population around 26.5 million who live primarily in a number of major cities. Nevertheless, the people in the villages especially in the Himalaya are a source of concern to both Nepali's and others in the world. Nepal's multiple natural resources include hydropower, quartz, timber and an outstanding natural beauty. Its hazards include thunderstorms, flooding, landslides, earthquakes, and Maoist Terrorists. These terrorists have created anarchy and strongly influenced the material in this paper by often preventing face-to-face classes from taking place. Nepal's current environmental issues focus around deforestation, contaminated water and vehicular emissions. The life expectancy is 59; it is one of the few countries in the world with a lower life expectancy for

women (58). Infant mortality is high (71/1000 births); child mortality is also high with contaminated water cited as an underlying reason in a large number of cases. Literacy (defined as "those above 15 can read") is 41% for men and 14% for women. Industries include tourism, textiles, carpets and rice. Outsourcing has not yet come to Nepal: unemployment hovers at 47%. The number of Internet users is hard to ascertain: 35,000 users is a recent estimate. These are almost all located in the major cities - not in the villages or mountains where E-Learning could also make a major impact.

Iceland

If "poor" and "non-technological" characterize Nepal, "high income" and "connected" characterize Iceland. True poverty is almost unknown, and almost all Icelandic children are brought up using computers and the Internet.

Iceland is also a small country - slightly smaller than Kentucky. Its population is small - about 280,000. Where Nepal is landlocked, Iceland is "sea-locked", being an island, but, like Nepal, the population is concentrated in a few major cities. Those not living in cities are far from isolated. There are adequate roads, television, and phones. Fishing, hydropower and geothermal power are among its natural resources, with earthquakes and volcanoes among its hazards. There are no terrorists in Iceland. The people are law abiding and peaceful.

Iceland lists water pollution and inadequate wastewater treatment as environmental issues, but these are considerably less life threatening than the same issues in Nepal. Life expectancy is 80, infant mortality low (3.5/1000 births) and literacy is 100%. Its economy is capitalistic with a huge welfare system. Unemployment is just 3%. There are almost as many cell phones as people and at least half the population describe themselves as frequent Internet users.

Cultural and Educational Influences

It would be hard to pick two more opposite countries and culture.

Iceland

In 1955, the Icelandic author Haldór Laxness won a Nobel Prize for his 1946 book "Independent People" which described a man too independent for his own good. Icelanders pride themselves on their *independence*. This trait emerged in the course at the University of Iceland where half the students chose to take the course via web-based distance learning.

Technologically savvy and computer literate, the Icelandic students needed little in the way of support to thrive. The distance learners did as well or better than their peers who chose to come to class (at 8 a.m. in the dark of winter!).

Nepal

At the other end of the spectrum, the web-based distance learners at the University of Kathmandu in Nepal approached such learning in a way that was consistent with their culture: *interdependently*. Nothing made this clearer than their first bulletin board posting: they posted as a group, signing it as coming from the entire class. Most postings continued in this fashion.

Both

Both groups were doing a project-oriented course (they were to design a technologically sophisticated web site) that also had weekly homeworks and a final exam. While working together (virtually or otherwise) was allowed and even encouraged on the project, most Icelandic students chose to do individual projects, that is, to work independently. The Nepali students, however, chose to work in groups of twos and threes, that is, interdependently.

This independence versus interdependence continued in all aspects of the course. The weekly homeworks and final exam were clearly specified to be individual work. With few and minor exceptions, the Icelandic students followed these directions. They continued to work independently. But nothing - patient explaining, impatient explaining, splitting grades among "sharers" and a variety of other techniques - stopped the Nepali students from working together. This peaked at the final exam where the department head, while proctoring, allowed them to confer with each other (one of the students who was also an instructor reported it). Clearly, a different course mode was needed for them.

Other factors than independence and interdependence influenced these courses. The Icelanders had extensive experience with computers and the Internet (as mentioned above, almost everyone in Iceland has a computer and they are one of the most "connected" cultures in the world.) In addition, Icelanders are excellent writers and many of the students produced visually beautiful and useful projects. Perhaps they would have been even better if they had worked in teams. Most of the Nepali students knew little computer science; none had their own computer, and frequent electrical outages, computer crashes and terrorist-related school closings limited their work.

The Learning and Teaching Experience

Americans tend not to be overly independent or overly interdependent on the average – at least as far as teaching and learning go. The course has been taught (web-based) to American distance learners successfully a number of times. It is set up to have a project and a number of homeworks and a final exam. As mentioned before, the project can be done in groups; some American students do it in groups; some do it individually. The homeworks and final exam are designed to be individual work, and most American students abide by this - an early warning when copying is suspected is usually all that is needed to stop it. While there is always some adjustment to using the communication tools (bulletin boards and chat rooms etc.) for those who haven't taken web-based distance learning before, American computer science students are very knowledgeable with computers and systems and adjustment is rapid. The course model seemed a reasonable model until it was moved to a foreign culture.

The Nepalis
The first issue that needed to be addressed in Nepal was the inexperience with computers and computer environments. Because the last two months of the course would take place via web-based distance learning, it was important to get them using the course management system as soon as possible. This was very difficult until the students learned there was a tool that showed their grades. The Nepali students were highly grade conscious, constantly checking and arguing about their grades. They ignored the bulletin board until postings appeared as quiz questions (and then 1 person read it and told the others). Weeks went by before they dared to post themselves, and then the postings were signed from the entire class. They never became very adept at using it, with individual postings being more the sort of things for which email is more appropriate (e.g., questions about individual grades).
Because of the instability in the country and university due to computer crashes, electrical outages and terrorist closing of the schools, scheduling chat room sessions was not a good option.
During the web-based distance learning part of the course, the students, without the physical presence of an instructor continued to work as a group. Future undertakings of this sort should adapt to this behavior. Unfortunately, while everyone enjoyed the results of the work, not everyone contributed to it. Learning the material took second place to receiving a grade. One or two people would do the work; everyone else signed their name. This may be a problem for any web-based distance learning model.
Also, web-based distance learning seems best suited to students who can go "out on the web" and find supplementary material to aid their learning. The Nepali students were unable to do this. Learning in Nepal encourages memorization, not independent exploration.

The Icelanders
The Icelandic class was large – in excess of 75 students. Because a number of them were married with families and needed to take their children to daycare (almost all Icelandic children go to daycare), the 8:00 am class time was particularly inconvenient. When given the option of taking the course via web-based distance learning, over 50% of the class selected this medium even though none had done a distance learning class before.
Because Icelanders pride themselves on their independence, once again it was difficult to encourage bulletin board postings – they do not like to ask questions or admit they do not know something. One particularly good student received a 0 on a weekly assignment because she would not post when she had a problem. The majority of the postings were from foreign students living in Iceland; the Icelandic students would reply with answers sometimes.
They were equally unresponsive in the classroom; classes were very quiet. But this same independence and their web experience aided their learning as they searched the web for supplementary material, often emailing me that they had found better sources for some of the course material.

Since the instructor was there physically and they could come to the office, there was no reason to use the chat room, and it is unlikely that many would have attended a chat room session (many, but not all, American students taking the course love chat room sessions) if there had been any.

The distance learners did as well on the final exam as did those who attended class physically. The class model worked for them in many ways: their independence allowed them to search out answers and to do the individual work independently. But, the lack of communication prevented a feeling of camaraderie and increased isolation – always a problem in web-based distance learning classes.

Survey

Both classes filled out the same survey also given to American students when the class is taught to them. The Icelandic students (those who took it via distance learning) liked the distance learning option, and nearly all would take another course via web-based distance learning. They believed they received as good a grade as they would have from a face-to-face course.

The Nepali students did not like the medium; they preferred the part of the class when the instructor had been present. In addition, they believed they would have received a higher grade if part of the course had not been taught via distance learning. Interestingly, none of the Nepali students lowered their grade after the instructor left; they received the same grade or higher than their in-class average for the first part of the course. Many of the Nepali students said they would take a web-based distance learning class again if that were the only option. One student mentioned that distance learning would provide courses not available to students in Nepal – there is a major shortage of PhD educated instructors.

Conclusions

Distance learning in the U.S. continues to expand, applying to a number of groups: single parents, professionals who travel, students who dislike classes etc. Not all students thrive under this model and learning styles as they apply to web-based distance education continue to be studied. In addition, the "American-centric" orientation of instructors needs to be understood, addressed and adapted for other cultures.

Icelandic students have some of the same motivations as American students plus the added incentive of not traveling in the long, dark winter. It appears that distance learning is an appropriate mode due to Icelanders access to computers, computer sophistication and independent nature. On the negative side, their super independence impedes their use of communication tools – something that contributes to the learning in a web-based distance learning course. American instructors need to address this issue to effective teach such courses.

While we may think of distance learning in Nepal as being most applicable to isolated villages in the Himalaya, both technological and pedagogical issues indicate it is best at present in the few major universities in the larger cities. At present, only these have the facilities needed. As electricity, computers and even water come to the isolated areas, some technological issues will be addressed. In addition, wireless technology continue to expand. But the pedagogical issues remain biggest issue for American instructors. Asian, and in particular Nepali culture has assets and liabilities for Americans and the courses need to be adjusted to effectively teach these students. Possibly, some of the students who are exposed to distance learning will themselves become instructors. Instructors who themselves have experienced distance education are likely to make better distance learning instructors, especially if they had a positive learning experience themselves.

While awareness of cultural differences is important for classroom teaching, it is critical to online courses. To really reach students, teachers from one culture need to be especially aware and sensitive to their own cultural issues and those of their students, adapting online courses to take advantage of these different ways of teaching and learning.

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