

INTERCULTURAL AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION VIA THE INTERNET: SUCCESS STORIES FROM CANADA

Macfadyen, Leah P., The MAPLE Centre, The University of British Columbia, Canada,
leah.macfadyen@ubc.ca

Abstract: The benefits of international education are beyond question, but international education (IE) activities remain beyond the reach of most students. Can information and communication technologies (ICTs) expand access in a meaningful way? We report highlights of six diverse case studies of innovative Canadian adventures with online IE: how they advance internationalisation priorities, support intercultural learning, and increase access to IE. Importantly, these projects demonstrate how ICTs can move us beyond old paradigms in which developed nations send their students and their ‘knowledge’ to the developing world, and instead create a new space for students and faculty to meet as equals.

Keywords: ICT, online, internet, international, intercultural, education

Introduction

The benefits to individuals, institutions, communities and even nations of international education are beyond question, but established IE activities (student exchanges, study-abroad programs, overseas summer projects) are expensive, and are often only available to wealthier and traditional full-time students at large institutions, or to academic high-flyers. If we accept the value of international education as a means to improved intercultural and international communication, knowledge, skills and understanding, and even as a vital prerequisite for success in a globalised economy and workforce, then international learning must be promoted for *all* students. How can this possibly be achieved? Could the Internet really provide a new vehicle for international learning? Or, do the communicative limitations of ICTs make the creation of meaningful relationships, and ‘real’ intercultural learning, impossible? What would an online international education project look like? Can students really develop intercultural and international awareness and competencies by participating in internet-based international education activities? What are the challenges of designing, teaching and learning within online international projects? We set out to find answers to these questions.

Method

We examined a set of six case study “online international education” projects. These are international courses, programs or projects developed by Canadian post-secondary institutions for their undergraduate-level students. The projects are diverse in disciplinary focus, staffing structure and development process, project funding source(s), institutional collaboration(s), and numbers of students participating; they have been developed in a variety of public post-secondary institution types, in various regions of Canada, in one of the official languages. All achieve IE objectives through innovative uses of ICTs. We investigated: educational objectives and outcomes, the institutional context, the project evaluation process, funding/costs and sustainability, partnerships, leadership/staffing, the project development process, the student

demographic, use of ICTs in the initiative, instructional design, and challenges and lessons learned. Below, we give highlights of these diverse success stories. They illustrate a multitude of ways in which public educators can make use of the limited resources available to them to promote intercultural and international learning for a broader audience of students. For further details of our case study methodology, see the full Case Studies Report at www.maple.ubc.ca.

Results: The Case Studies

TABLE 1. Summary details of “Online International Education” case studies

Ryerson University, Toronto (www.ryerson.ca)

- Project:** “Virtual Law Firms”
- Objective:** Incorporate experiential learning into a business law course.
- Description:** Optional activity within a credit-level course. Student “Virtual Law Firms” are assigned to disputing parties; they must communicate with international clients, and negotiate with ‘opposing’ Law Firms to reach settlement.
- Students:** Final-year Bachelor of Commerce students in a ‘Legal Aspects of International Business’ course.
- Leader:** Professor Mary Jo Nicholson, Faculty of Business
- Strategy:** Participate in an existing and centrally coordinated international business online simulation.
- Partners:** Association GlobalView (www.globalview.org) and multiple participating international institutions
- Funding:** None required
- ICTs:** Web access via web browser; Email; Chat.

The University of British Columbia, Vancouver (www.ubc.ca)

- Project:** “Working in International Health”
- Objective:** Internationalize the curriculum; prepare students for work in the developing world.
- Description:** 100% online, credit-level course with instructors. Weekly chapters and assignments on issues in world health: determinants of population health, primary health care strategies, poverty, malnutrition, women’s health, children’s health, refugees and natural disasters, and aboriginal health. Facilitated online discussion on selected health topics. Predeparture preparation.
- Students:** Medical students who will spend time working in a developing country.
- Leader:** Dr. Michael Seear, Professor of Clinical Medicine.
- Strategy:** “Lone Ranger” development of an online course with administrative assistance.
- Partners:** none
- Funding:** Development funding from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA); UBC pays tutors.
- ICTs:** WebCT course platform, Email, discussion board, digital images, hyperlinks to international resources.

Mount Royal College, Calgary (www.mtroval.ab.ca)

Project: “Repentina”

Objective: Expand students’ professional horizons, emphasize design communications.

Description: Compulsory for-credit synchronous international design challenge activity within credit-level courses in Interior Design. Multicultural, multinational design teams of students are tasked with collaborating online to develop solutions to community-based design challenges.

Students: Second-year Interior Design students in Canada, USA and Mexico.

Strategy: Multi-institutional collaborative design of project, with support from Mount Royal International Programs Office.

Partners: Kwantlen University College (Vancouver), Texas Christian University (USA), West Virginia University (USA), Autonomous University of Guadalajara (Mexico), University of Guanajuato (Mexico).

Funding: Four-year grant from the Program for North American Mobility in Higher Education - a program run cooperatively by the governments of Canada, the United States and Mexico (www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/hrrib/learnlit/iam/).

ICTs: Blackboard course platform: interactive drawing board tool, Email, file exchange, discussion board, student web pages, web-cameras, videoconferencing.

Newfoundland - Ireland Public Private Partnership

Project: ‘e-Learning for Business Innovation and Growth’ (www.emergewithus.com)

Objective: Respond to observed learning needs in the community.

Description: Non-credit facilitated modular courses, in areas of need for development in the new (and globalised) economy: ‘Working with ICTs’, ‘Growing Your Business’, ‘Relationship Marketing’, ‘Public Relations and Media Management’ and ‘Web Site Development’.

Strategy: Project team included multiple institutional, governmental, national and private partners. Collaborative design and development of modules.

Students: Small business owners and employees in Canada and Ireland, all ages, most working full-time.

Leaders: Erin Keough, OLIN (Open Learning and Information Network), NL
Janice Cooper, Operation ONLINE Inc., NL

Partners: College of the North Atlantic (NL), Memorial University (NL), Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design & Technology (Republic of Ireland), City and County Enterprise Boards (Republic of Ireland), Media Development Companies.

Funding: Canadian Federal and Provincial Government funding; National and County Funding from the Republic of Ireland.

ICTs: WebCT course platform: modules text, discussion board, Email, audio files, images, graphics, digital video, interactive ‘self-assessment’ activities, hyperlinks to online resources.

University of the Arctic (www.uarctic.org)

Objective: Create access to relevant and appropriate higher education for peoples of the Circumpolar North; facilitate connections and communications between Circumpolar peoples.

- Description:** A ‘university without walls’, using whichever teaching media are most effective for different communities. Courses cover traditional and Western knowledge systems, the Circumpolar geography, the dominant physical and biological processes, Northern peoples and their history, environmental and climate change, economics, the spiritual and aesthetic, indigenous rights and new political structures, and new forms of Northern cooperation.
- Strategy:** Courses developed by teams of specialists from participating circumpolar institutions, guided by principles of Circumpolarity, Interdisciplinarity and Diversity.
- Students:** Students enrolled through participating Circumpolar institutions.
- Partners:** A co-operating network of some forty universities, colleges and other organizations concerned with higher education and research (including First Nations representation) from all eight arctic states. Supported by the Arctic Council, Governments of Circumpolar member states.
- Funding:** Governmental, United Nations, institutional and private.
- ICTs:** WebCT course platform, email, multimedia, discussion boards, Portal.

Université de Montréal, Québec (www.umontreal.ca)

- Project:** “Introduction à l’Éthnomusicologie” (“Introduction to Ethnomusicology”)
- Objective:** Expand awareness of ethno-cultural aspects of music; assist people from the developing world to “take their musical heritage into their own hands”
- Description:** 100% online credit-level course with instructors.
- Leader:** Dr. Monique Desroches, Professor of Music and founding Director of the World Music Research Laboratory (lrm.musique.umontreal.ca)
- Strategy:** Developed with support from the Université’s Centre d’études et de formation d’enseignement supérieur (CEFES); co-instruction with colleagues from partner institution.
- Students:** Students of music and/or anthropology in Québec and Réunion.
- Partners:** Université de la Réunion, Reunion Island.
- Funding:** Université de Montréal
- ICTs:** WebCT course platform, Email, discussion board, supplementary multimedia CD ROM.

Conclusions

Online international education advances internationalisation

Each of the projects summarized in this paper advances the goals – educational, institutional and humanitarian – of international education. They ensure excellence in higher education and research; contribute to the development of human potential through economic and social development; establish forums for sharing ideas by creating a ‘global village’ within the academic community; foster international co-operation; enhance student mobility; and contribute to international development assistance (AUCC, 1995). None of the project leaders in this study would argue that ICT-mediated international experience can or should ‘replace’ face-to-face IE activities, but in each case, new learning opportunities made possible by

creative integration of ICTs are allowing Canadian students to participate in making true internationalisation a reality.

ICTs can support international and intercultural learning

Learners in online and face-to-face IE activities face many of the same challenges: they must overcome language barriers, negotiate cultural differences, learn from their international counterparts, and make their international teams ‘work’. Just like exchange students, online learners struggle with intercultural confusion and miscommunication, the challenges of managing time and workload, and the dawning realisation that theirs is not the only valid worldview. Horizons are broadened, personal and professional relationships are developed, and new ways of working and living encountered. Importantly, students in many of these projects acquire skills that will stand them in good stead in Canadian and international job markets: they are developing competence with ICTs; they are developing a more sophisticated appreciation of both the advantages and disadvantages of technology-mediated communications; they are experiencing the need for professional and clear communications in vivo; and they are acquiring a clearer understanding of the importance of global perspective in the global workplace.

In addition, ICTs arguably augment student learning and participation, and can even offer features simply unavailable in a regular classroom. Instructors describe how online activities actually increase student participation, promote more thoughtful student contributions, and encourage quieter students to ‘speak’. ICTs facilitate students connections to peers around the world; they allow the possibility of ‘guest lecturers’ from anywhere in the world; they offer access to vast online resources, and access to higher level international education to segments of the Canadian population that was previously unimagined.

Challenges and lessons learned

Online international projects are not without challenges: they require a serious time commitment on the part of faculty, instructors, and usually an array of support staff. Faculty and students can encounter a steep learning curve as they work with technology for the first time, and often need considerable support. And successful projects are not easily established unless institutions have a campus-wide commitment both to both internationalisation and to integration of ICTs into teaching and learning. In addition, these and other innovative projects are literally dragging their institutions behind them: old ideas about student and course accreditation, job descriptions of faculty and non-teaching personnel, and what constitutes ‘real’ learning no longer mesh with the new global perspective of outward-looking international educators. Institutional perspectives on exactly who their target audience are must change, as educators begin to understand the benefits of IE for lifelong learners and other groups who have traditionally been under-represented in the hallowed halls of higher learning. And older larger institutions – especially those that are very decentralised– are slower to change.

International Education Offices can play a key role in online IE

An important finding of this study is the degree to which International Education offices can support ICT-mediated IE activities. IE personnel have valuable skills and experience – in particular in selecting international partners, developing international partnerships, and soliciting funding for new international projects – that faculty often lack. Their involvement can contribute to better project management and co-ordination, more effective sharing of responsibilities and, importantly, the long-term ‘ownership’ and sustainability of projects. Their central position in institutions allows them to be key co-ordinators of cross-campus initiatives and promoters of decentralised projects internally and externally. Not only does this maximise project success and reduce duplication of effort in the same institution, it allows IE offices to play a valuable role – as they should – in a key feature of institutional internationalisation: internationalising the curriculum.

ICTs help us share the wealth

Perhaps the most exciting features of online IE projects are the ways in which they are helping to change old “colonial” models, both of education and of internationalisation. Association GlobalView, home of Ryerson’s “Virtual Law Firms” project, actively seeks private sector sponsorship to keep costs low and allow participation of institutions from the developing world. Partners in the Repentina project were able to redistribute funding creatively in order to support under-resourced Mexican partner institutions in full project participation. Newfoundland and Labrador’s eBIG project extends IE possibilities to rural learners in one of Canada’s most economically depressed regions. The University of the Arctic’s current funding strategy not only actively supports participation of students from the Russian North (the Arctic region with the weakest ICT infrastructure), but overtly seeks to promote the North’s ‘indigenous scholarship’ and change the North/South, centre/periphery dynamic that has historically shaped available education in Canada’s North. Even at the very simplest level, ICT-mediated projects allow many more students and faculty – rich or poor, rural or urban, ‘developed’ or ‘underdeveloped’ – to meet and learn as peers and colleagues, with the recognition that input from all is needed and valued.

The full text of this report can be found on the UBC MAPLE Centre web site:
www.maple.ubc.ca

References

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