

Encouraging Cross Cultural Interaction and Understanding Online Using WebCT

Introduction

BMA2/385 *Managing Business in the Asia Pacific* is taught across five campuses (Hobart, Launceston, KL, Singapore and, this year, Jakarta). BMA2/308 *Electronic Marketing* is taught across the same campuses. We enhanced cross cultural interaction between students through creating 'virtual tutorials' using the discussion board feature in WebCT in both units.

What is a virtual tutorial?

A virtual tutorial is a tutorial conducted online utilising, in our cases, a discussion board. Students are posed open-ended questions within online discussion groups and given a specific time period in which to respond. Students from five campuses (across three countries) were grouped into online discussion groups, each of 20, using features within WebCT to facilitate and assess contributions.

Desired outcomes

Firstly we wanted to facilitate student interaction across the five campuses. Secondly we wanted to facilitate student understanding and sensitivity to cross-cultural differences through sharing of perspectives—specifically in relation to electronic marketing and international management, focussing on the Asia Pacific region.

We also felt this process would complement our efforts to internationalise the curriculum not only for the domestic students in Hobart and Launceston but also students at the offshore campuses who would be exposed to Australian culture.

Several other desired outcomes were ICT-enabled:

- The virtual tutorials afforded more flexible delivery because of their asynchronous nature; students could complete the exercise over a given interval as opposed to at a given point in time.
- Online communication and interaction improved our quality assurance processes; we had much better consistency across campuses as well as more timely monitoring of student learning taking place. We could take corrective action by noting student responses within discussions.

In short, we found that the virtual tutorials provided a nexus of flexible delivery, internationalisation, QA and ICT.

Historical context

Both BMA2/308 *Electronic Marketing* and BMA2/385 *Managing Business in the Asia Pacific* were first taught to around 120 -150 students in 2000 across four campuses (Hobart, Launceston, KL and Singapore) using traditional modes of delivery and assessment. The onshore (i.e. domestic) teaching consisted of 12 weekly lectures and tutorials. Tutorials for BMA2/308 were held in computer labs. Offshore teaching involved slightly different arrangements. The unit co-ordinator (from the School of Management) developed the unit outline and unit materials as in the domestic case, but local lecturers in KL and Singapore conducted weekly workshops based on that material. The unit co-ordinator would visit each campus at some point during the semester to deliver some of the material. Regrettably, offshore visits by the unit co-ordinators were discontinued at the end of 2002.

Prior to 2001-2002, assessment for both units consisted of two essay assignments (together worth 60%) and a final examination (worth 40%).

Approach using WebCT

WebCT enabled a number of innovations apart from the virtual tutorials. It facilitated electronic assignment submission as well as collaborative group work. In addition chat sessions were conducted prior to major assessments.

Steps involved in using virtual tutorials

Allocation to tutorial groups

The first step was to create the private discussion groups (i.e. groups where only group members can view and participate). This involved allocating students from the different campuses evenly across the groups. Based on past experience we found groups composed of 20 students worked best. We tried for gender balance as well.

Setting of tasks and deadlines

Once the tutorial groups were created we set questions and deadlines. *Electronic Marketing* had four virtual tutorials, each with opening and closing dates spanning 8 days. *Managing Business in the Asia Pacific* had two virtual tutorials each spanning two weeks. Half the students in each group were asked to answer the questions one week whilst the other half were asked to comment the following week. The odd or even last digit of the student's ID determined whether they answered or commented. At the end of the semester all tutorial groups were opened so that the entire class could view all responses.

Moderation

Virtual tutorial moderation was an important step. Tutors were assigned to specific virtual tutorials. This meant that students were exposed to tutors from

other countries since virtual tutorials, by construction, did not align with face-to-face tutorials. Tutors 'lurked,' facilitating discussion but were not to dominate it. They provided insight and encouragement.

Assessment of participation

Lastly, assessment was carried out. WebCT facilitated the ability to compile postings by student. *Electronic Marketing* had the tutors mark students within their respective virtual tutorials. On the other hand, *Managing Business in the Asia Pacific* had tutors mark their own face-to-face students. Either way could be facilitated by WebCT's search and compile functions. Assessment criteria included participation, completion of all questions, accuracy, brevity, consideration of other contributions and overall quality.

Barriers or difficulties encountered

Staff training

Staff training issues proved more of a challenge than originally anticipated. It was very difficult to teach the local lecturers how to moderate and assess virtual tutorials through email and even through periodic telephone calls. In one instance the Singapore administrator had to be coached on how to search for student postings through an hour-long telephone conversation. A more robust system for training needs to be in place for this kind of activity to scale up to more than just one or two units.

Student access and familiarity with WebCT

Students' access to and comfort in using WebCT varied considerably. Late enrollees could not access WebCT. This was partly caused by delays in enrolment processing. Labs at the offshore campuses varied in its capability and quality. Information concerning software/hardware requirements for WebCT was not communicated in timely fashion. These problems were exacerbated by not being able to visit the offshore campuses.

Preparation and support

There were also miscellaneous issues. Trying to have everything in place by Week 2 of the semester was very challenging. Forging appropriate discussion-type questions (requiring research) to provide sufficient scope for unique contributions stretched the imagination. Cultural differences in student learning styles, adoption of technology and inclination to seek assistance were also problematic.

Achieving a balance between the benefits of flexible delivery and, at times, an intense need for support was a great challenge.

Outcomes of evaluations of the project

The present set of SETL (Student Evaluation of Teaching & Learning) evaluations indicated improvement in receptivity to virtual tutorials. For the combined Hobart and Launceston campuses, the *Managing Business in the Asia Pacific* 2002 SETL mean score to the statement 'The virtual tutorials

helped me understand the unit material better' was 3.56 with a standard deviation of 1.2. The mean score of the approximately equivalent question in 2003 (The virtual tutorials facilitated cultural understanding) was 2.97 with the same standard deviation. Moreover, results from offshore centres showed even lower mean scores, indicating even stronger agreement with the statement.

Plans for future development

Refinement will be based on further analysis of the evaluations (including written comments, which have not yet been received) plus experiences of *Electronic Marketing* and other lecturers' units within the Faculty. It would be extremely beneficial to group students into fours with at least one student from offshore for a group project. This would enhance cultural interaction beyond the current virtual tutorials and face-to-face group project work. Tools in VISTA (the newer version of WebCT) may facilitate more cross campus collaborative work.

We did trial use of WebCT chats for students. It may be useful to embed sessions throughout the semester to facilitate students' understanding at key points.

Gallagher (AEI 2002, *Internationalising Education*) notes that fewer than 1% of Australian tertiary students study abroad (only the USA is worse amongst other OECD countries). Could appropriate use of ICT along the above lines help reach the overwhelming numbers of students who will not study abroad?

References

Gallagher, M. 2002. *Internationalising Education*. Address to the Sixth Annual National Teaching Forum of the Australian Universities Teaching Committee, December 2002.

<http://aei.detya.gov.au/general/interest/2002/Interest0202.htm>

This case was written by:
Jon D Kendall & Heather Francis
School of Management
Hobart

Telephone: (03) 6226 1713
Email: Heather.Francis@utas.edu.au