

Innovative classroom practice in an offshore environment



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***Abstract:** This paper provides a case study of the course *Communication for Information Managers* (taught in Hong Kong by the University of South Australia), which has initiated a team-teaching approach that integrates ESL, academic skills and business communication content in an offshore classroom. To evaluate the effectiveness of the new approach, both quantitative (grade comparisons) and qualitative (*Student Evaluation of Teaching*) analyses are used. The authors conclude that immediate results are unlikely to be able to be measured in the short-term, but further qualitative analysis is needed to assess the effectiveness of the team-teaching approach.*

Introduction

In an era of educational internationalisation, the development of offshore campuses in association with local institutions (also referred to as "twinning arrangements") has become a common phenomenon for most Australian universities, supported by an "apparent spread of offshore teaching programs by Australian universities seeking to gain a competitive advantage in international markets" (Mazzarole & Hosie, 1997, p23). The University of South Australia has twinning arrangements with a variety of countries, mostly in SE Asia, and particularly in Hong Kong and Singapore. The benefits of internationalisation to Australian universities have been well documented (Marginson 1998; Dobson 1998; Cannon 1997), and there is a substantial body of work outlining the potential of new technologies in the delivery of distance education (Cargill & Jevons 1997; Harisim & Hiltz 1995, Laurillard 1993, among others). However, little attention has been given to the classroom needs of students 'in educational programmes in which the language of instruction is not the vernacular of the host country or host institution' (Bookin-Weiner, in de Wit (Ed) 1995, p.160).

Lecturers from the University of South Australia have been teaching courses in offshore programs in association with Hong Kong Baptist University since 1995. Despite relatively successful academic outcomes, teaching staff had expressed concern about the language skills of Chinese students who clearly had difficulty with lecture materials delivered in English. The level of English language required to enter the course is an IELTS of 6, however, unlike international students studying in Australia, Hong Kong students are not continually exposed to the English language. This had become apparent when reading students' assignments and with talking to students after lectures. Indeed, some students required other students to translate their questions into English. In April 2001 the Dean of Teaching and Learning, the Director of Offshore Programs and the Course Coordinator of Business Communication Skills (NESB) met to discuss this issue. Business Communication Skills (BCS) is a content-based

ESL course which has been running since 1997 to support International and local NESB students in the School of International Business at the University of South Australia. It was decided that the skills taught in BCS could be integrated into one of the general communication subjects in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong vs Adelaide

It was agreed that the teaching and learning environment in Hong Kong is vastly different to that of the School of International Business in Adelaide, in the following ways:

- Hong Kong classes are larger (between 200 and 300 students per intake whereas BCS classes in Adelaide range from 50-100 students per semester);
- Tutorial classes in Hong Kong are larger (between 30-40 students compared to 20 in Adelaide);
- A largely homogeneous cohort of students in Hong Kong (Chinese language background, Hong Kong born), versus a diverse range of students in Adelaide (up to twenty different nationalities and language groups);
- An acceptance and expectation by the Hong Kong students for the traditional “lecture” as the ideal mode of delivery;
- An expectation that Australian lecturers will focus on content rather than skills;
- A perceived reluctance on the part of Hong Kong students to interact (with each other and with the lecturer) during class time;
- A limited amount of contact between lecturer and students (20 hours of lectures in two one-week blocks, limited tutorial time with local tutors, and limited face-to-face individual consultation time with lecturer);
- Fewer assessment tasks (just one written report, whereas BCS students are required to submit three written documents and give three oral presentations);
- Final grade determined by an examination which rewards rote learning rather than deep learning; and
- Limited contact between the lecturer and tutor resulting in limited knowledge of tutorial progress.

It was also determined that both the Hong Kong business students and the NESB business students studying in Australia had some fundamental things in common, including:

- Often inadequate or barely adequate English language proficiency for university study (Pantelides 1999; Wajnryb 2000)
- A lack of understanding of academic conventions (such as referencing) (Ballard & Clanchy 1997);
- A perceived tendency to plagiarise in assessment tasks, largely because of the two factors above;
- A cultural and linguistic background that may inhibit the development of critical thinking according to a western model.

It was decided that Hong Kong students’ need for language and academic assistance outweighed the difficulties of adapting the current approach used in BCS. *Communication for Information Managers* (CIM) was suggested as a course which might provide the opportunity to develop an appropriate team-teaching model, building on the lessons already learned in the School of International Business in Adelaide.

Developing the new curriculum

In the months preceding the July visit to Hong Kong, the BCS Course Coordinator (henceforth referred to as the language and academic skills (LAS) lecturer) and the CIM

lecturer met on a regular basis to discuss how best to incorporate language and academic skills in an already packed curriculum. Both lecturers were mindful of the need to develop a mutually respectful, collaborative relationship to ensure the success of the new approach (Snow & Brinton 1984; Benesch 1992; Babbitt & Mlynarczyk 2000).

Content vs Skills

It was decided to reduce some of the textbook-based content, and divide the remaining portions between the two lecturers wherever possible. Writing and skills-based content (about a third of the existing curriculum) became the responsibility of the LAS lecturer. This “divvying up” created some space that could then be used to teach additional skills such as referencing, avoiding plagiarism, grammar and practical group work. The CIM lecturer continued teaching content. Both lecturers agreed to focus on the content and skills needed to fulfil the assessment task (a formal report based on a case study). New tutorial exercises were developed and distributed to the Hong Kong based tutors, which would further build on the skills introduced in the lecture. Unfortunately, only one of the two tutors completed these in the tutorial classes highlighting a need for closer collaboration with the offshore tutors.

Educational rationale for the new course structure

The educational rationale for introducing ESL skills combined with course content was to improve the English writing and speaking skills of the students through increased interactivity in the classroom; a level of English speaking interactivity missed in students’ day-to-day routine and thereby creating a “learning community” (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles and Turoff, 1996 and Jensen, Christie and Baron, 1997). This follows a constructivist model of education providing a student-centred and collaborative approach and moving the lecturer from an instructional to a facilitator role (Connell and Franklin, 1994). It was anticipated that this would provide a teaching platform which was more responsive to the needs of the students.

The constructivist approach needed to be considered in conjunction with the culturally specific learning style of Hong Kong students. Their primarily Confucian heritage culture (CHC) supports the notion of a collaborative style of learning (between student and teacher) through scholarly discussion (Feast and Churchman, 1997, p 3). However, Feast and Churchman also state that CHC students rely on cues from the teacher to guide their study strategies; that is, an emphasis on information such as assessment content, and the depth of understanding needed for different topics. It was hoped that this would be gained by combining the ESL methodology with the course content.

Delivering the revised curriculum in Hong Kong

The students were divided into two groups, and taught in adjoining lecture theatres. Each group spent two classes out of four with each lecturer.

Making expectations explicit

Following the advice of Tang (1996, p. 199) and Biggs & Watkins (1996, p. 279), both lecturers focussed on making expectations explicit. In addition to distributing lecture outlines, some time was spent at the beginning of the first lecture explaining to students the rationale behind the team-teaching approach. The CIM lecturer’s classes were referred to as lectures, and the LAS lecturer’s classes were called workshops. Classroom responsibilities were made explicit, particularly the expectation that students would work in groups when required, complete writing and discussion tasks, and respond to lecturer’s questions. Each lecturer emphasised the importance of *both* content and skills to complete the assessment task and exam.

Seating

The importance of encouraging interactivity in the Chinese classroom has been highlighted by a number of authors, including Tang (1996), Tang and Biggs (1996, p. 169), and Ballard and Clanchy (1997, p. 39). To facilitate the idea that students and the LAS lecturer would be working together, A4 sized signs with the words "Please do not sit here" were placed on seats in the back four rows. With between 90-100 students attending each lecture, this seating arrangement ensured that students sat in the first eight rows. This allowed eye contact between the LAS lecturer and the students, and also facilitated pair and small group work.

Everyone has a name

Another strategy (mentioned in Ballard & Clanchy 1997, pp. 38-39) which aimed to make students feel involved in class exercises, was the time spent at the beginning of each lecture on introductions. Students were asked to say their preferred names out loud. The lecturer would repeat the name, clarify pronunciation and then move to the next student. This process usually only took 5-10 minutes and was an excellent investment in the success of later class exercises. Using the roll book and notes taken during the introductions, the LAS lecturer was later able to ask questions of individual students, or use students' names in examples and anecdotes.

Informal feedback during the first visit

Anecdotal evidence would suggest that students enjoyed and felt that they benefited a great deal from the new approach. At the end of the third workshop, one student came up to the LAS lecturer and said it had been the most interesting class she had ever attended. She said that although she had initially felt "tense", she had thoroughly enjoyed the interactive nature of the workshop, and had learned a lot.

Assessment

The rationale behind Business Communication Skills (NESB) in Adelaide is that students require the opportunity to progressively build skills throughout the semester. To this end, there are six assessment tasks, beginning with a short oral presentation worth just 5% and concluding with a formal written report worth 30% of the semester's grade. The BCS lecturer provides comprehensive feedback and is available for individual consultations. There is no examination. Realistically, an offshore program catering for over 200 students could not employ the same assessment and feedback schedule, particularly in light of the seven-day turnaround required for assignments (a contractual obligation between the Universities set up on initiation of the twinning arrangement). The new approach sought to use the *philosophy* of BCS without radically altering the existing means of assessment (one report and one examination, worth 50% each). Marks for the written report were equally divided into content and language, with an ESL specialist and the content lecturer marking all assignments. Students received a comprehensive marking sheet for both elements, and could clearly see the areas that they needed to work on. The examination was altered slightly to include an application exercise. Rather than simply reiterate items from the textbook, students had to apply the principles in a short piece of writing. It was this element with which the students had the most difficulty, despite generally outstanding answers for those questions that required memorisation of theory. The CIM and LAS lecturer were each responsible for marking the components of the examination that they had personally taught.

Subject analysis

A comparison of CIM 2000 and CIM 2001

The focus on student learning incorporated in the new approach, particularly in terms of double-marking, has resulted in difficulties in comparative analysis. One significant change

was that prior to 2001, the CIM lecturer had applied a standard distribution model to grading. As part of the new approach, the LAS lecturer and CIM lecturer decided to allow grades to be based entirely on performance outcomes, even if this resulted in apparent anomalies.

Despite these changes, both lecturers thought it was important to do a comparison of overall grades (between 2000 to 2001) to ascertain if there had been any discernible improvements or differences. Please see Appendix One for the graphs of the semester grades. The graphs show that there has been little discernible difference in terms of overall grades between 2000 and 2001. In 2000 there were a total of 13% fails, and this figure did not change in 2001. Combined P1s and P2s were 57% in 2000 and 48% in 2001; Credits were 25% and 24% respectively. The only other difference was in the Distinctions awarded, which were 4% in 2000 and 12% in 2001. As grades were not significantly altered in the application of the standard distribution in 2000 (approx 1-2 % shift upwards) the results indicate a clear shift in grades upwards overall. The apparent improvement in the upper end of the mark scale may suggest that conscientious, capable students benefit the most from increased language/academic skills input. As mentioned earlier, the different marking scheme, whereby students had to perform well in *both* areas (content and language) might be considered to be a more rigorous (and less forgiving approach) than had formerly been employed. In this case, it is perhaps surprising that the overall pattern of grades did not significantly change, in the lower end of the grade distribution. However, 65% of those students who completed both pieces of assessment and failed did not attend lectures or workshops.

Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET)

Lecturers routinely receive formal evaluations from students at the end of each teaching cycle. Both the CIM lecturer and the LAS lecturer received very positive feedback, with 90% or more of the students expressing agreement or strong agreement with 15 out of 18 statements concerning the value of the course (please see Appendices 2a and 2b). In particular, students expressed satisfaction with the statements: “The pre-exam workshops were important for my learning”(41% strongly agreed and 48% agreed); and “[The lecturer] showed a positive attitude to students” (30% strongly agreed and 60% agreed).

Areas where some dissatisfaction was expressed were in relation to the following questions: “This subject was interesting to you” (15% disagreed and one student strongly disagreed); “The unit textbook was readable” (21% disagreed and four students strongly disagreed); and “The assignments and exercises were suitable” (14% disagreed and two students strongly disagreed). Both lecturers agree that the textbook currently being used (an American text directed towards first language tertiary business students) is not ideal, and research is currently underway to find a more suitable text, with an ESL focus. In addition, both lecturers believe that further explication of the purpose of assignment tasks and in-class exercises is needed so that students better understand the role of assessment in the course. In particular, students need to be made aware of the importance of communication skill-building as well as knowledge acquisition.

Conclusion

It is clear from the analysis to date that it is difficult to ascertain the effectiveness of the new team-teaching approach. One issue that complicates short-term evaluation is the potential long-term impact of this method. Students may not recognise the benefits of communication skills and academic conventions until further advanced in their studies. Both the CIM lecturer and the LAS lecturer believe that further qualitative analysis needs to be done. To this end, research is being undertaken in 2002 to ascertain students' perceptions of the team-teaching

approach. This research includes a series of on-line focus groups (in May 2002) and individual interviews (in second semester 2002). In late December 2001, a questionnaire was posted on the program website, although not enough students have responded to provide a valid sample (please see examples in Appendix 3). Using the data collected in Semester 1, 2002, the course *Communication for Information Managers* will be revised in time for the next cohort of students in second semester. Neither the CIM lecturer nor the LAS lecturer suggests that the approach currently being used is an ideal one. However, both are committed to on-going research and development of a model that seeks to address the needs of NESB students studying in an offshore environment.

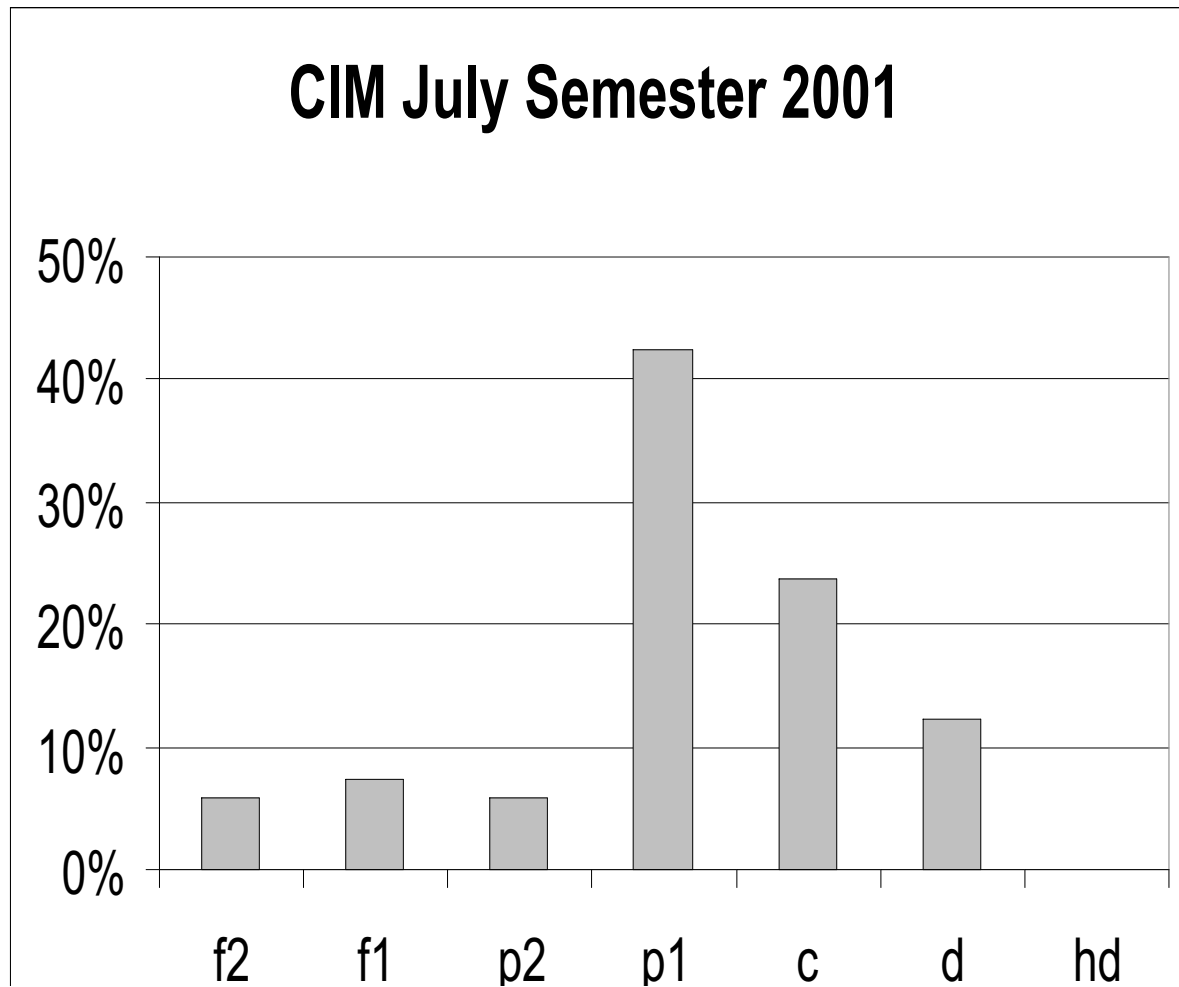
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Appendix 1

Comparison of CIM Marks 2000 and 2001



Appendix 2a

University of South Australia BAcc/BBus Programme (July '01 Semester)

Date :	2001/11/03	No. of students Enrolled :	108
Course :	CIM (B) COMMUNICATION FOR INFORMATION MANAGER	No. of students Responded :	68
Instructor :	SONJA JENSEN	Response Rate :	63%

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1./ Displayed mastery of the subject ...	21	46	1	0
2./ Showed sufficient preparation for the workshops ...	26	40	2	0
3./ Was clear in presenting the work ...	25	42	1	0
4./ Was able to communicate well ...	25	42	1	0
5./ Was capable of stimulating students' thinking	21	44	3	0
6./ Managed time well ...	21	44	2	1
7./ Was fair in testing and grading ...	11	51	6	0
8./ Showed a positive attitude towards students ...	29	39	0	0
9./ Showed personal motivation and enthusiasm for the subject ...	23	44	1	0
10./ made the workshops useful ...	21	44	2	1
11./ This subject unit was interesting to you ...	11	50	7	0
12./ This unit is valuable to you ...	11	53	4	0
13./ The level of difficulty of this unit is appropriate ...	12	51	5	0
14./ This unit textbook was readable ...	7	40	19	2
15./ The assignments and exercises were suitable ...	6	53	9	0
16./ The unit learning materials were easy to follow ...	10	51	7	0
17./ The subject unit was well structured ...	8	58	2	0
18./ The pre-exam workshops were important for my learning ...	31	32	4	0

Instructor Performance Index : 1.13

Keyword Performance index :

2 – Excellent 1 – Good 0 – Average -1 – Fail -2 – Poor

Other comments :

1. Focus more examination in pre-exam workshop, please.
2. The textbook is difficult to understand what it says.

Appendix 2b

University of South Australia BAcc/BBus Programme (July '01 Semester)

Date :	2001/11/03	No. of students Enrolled :	100
Course :	CIM (A)	No. of students Responded :	67
	COMMUNICATION FOR INFORMATION MANAGER	Response Rate :	67%
Instructor :	TRACEY BRETAG		

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1./ Displayed mastery of the subject ...	14	51	1	1
2./ Showed sufficient preparation for the workshops ...	21	42	3	1
3./ Was clear in presenting the work ...	15	50	1	1
4./ Was able to communicate well ...	17	41	8	1
5./ Was capable of stimulating students' thinking	13	45	7	2
6./ Managed time well ...	13	44	9	1
7./ Was fair in testing and grading ...	6	54	6	1
8./ Showed a positive attitude towards students ...	21	42	3	1
9./ Showed personal motivation and enthusiasm for the subject ...	19	42	5	1
10./ made the workshops useful ...	11	53	2	1
11./ This subject unit was interesting to you ...	8	44	14	1
12./ This unit is valuable to you ...	9	49	8	1
13./ The level of difficulty of this unit is appropriate ...	6	54	6	1
14./ This unit textbook was readable ...	5	51	9	2
15./ The assignments and exercises were suitable ...	7	48	10	2
16./ The unit learning materials were easy to follow ...	8	51	7	1
17./ The subject unit was well structured ...	6	53	6	2
18./ The pre-exam workshops were important for my learning ...	24	33	5	1

Instructor Performance Index : 0.95

Keyword Performance index :

2 – Excellent 1 – Good 0 – Average -1 – Fail -2 – Poor

Other comments :

1. Hope to be able to choose a better textbook of Business Communication.
2. Tracey is really a good lecturer. I can see her enthusiasm in teaching.
3. Tracey is a funny lecturer. She tries to use many ways to make thing clear to us. And Sonja did very good preparation for lectures. She is a very beautiful mum / pregnant lady.
4. Generally speaking, excellent.

Appendix 3

Communication for Information Managers (HK11918)

Semester 2, 2001

Evaluation of Team-teaching

In July, 2001 Sonja Scobie and Tracey Bretag developed a new approach to teaching *Communication for Information Managers*. Classes were divided into two groups, with Sonja teaching Communication theory, and Tracey focussing mostly on Communication and academic skills. In addition, the assessment was double-marked and students were given two feedback sheets to enable them to concentrate on relevant areas that need improving.

What did you think of the new approach? To help us improve the course and analyse its applicability to other courses, we would appreciate you taking a few minutes to complete the following questionnaire. Please return the questionnaire by Jan 18 via e-mail to Sonja.Scobie@unisa.edu.au

Please rate the following statements on a scale of 1-5.

1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree. Place your rating below the rating scale for each question.

1. I liked the team-teaching approach. 1 2 3 4 5

Your rating: 4

2. I understood the course content. 1 2 3 4 5

Your rating: 4

3. My writing skills improved. 1 2 3 4 5

Your rating: 4

4. I learned valuable academic skills (eg assignment writing, exam preparation)

Your rating: 5

5. I think it was beneficial to receive "double feedback" (theory and language).

Your rating: 5

6. I'd like this approach to be used in other courses (see the question below before you answer this question).

Your rating: 5

7. I would like to see a separate language skills course at the beginning of the degree.

Your rating: 3

8. The skills I have learned in CIM will be useful in my other courses.

Your rating: 3

9. I liked the focus on interactivity in the lectures (eg group exercises).

Your rating: 4

10. Was the lecture material supported in the tutorials?

Your rating: 5

Please rate the following statements on a scale of 1-5.

1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree. Place your rating below the rating scale for each question.

1. I liked the team-teaching approach. 1 2 3 4 5

Your rating: 4

2. I understood the course content. 1 2 3 4 5

Your rating: 4

3. My writing skills improved. 1 2 3 4 5

Your rating: 3

4. I learned valuable academic skills (eg assignment writing, exam preparation)

Your rating: 3

5. I think it was beneficial to receive "double feedback" (theory and language).

Your rating: 4

6. I'd like this approach to be used in other courses (see the question below before you answer this question).

Your rating: 3

7. I would like to see a separate language skills course at the beginning of the degree.

Your rating: 3

8. The skills I have learned in CIM will be useful in my other courses.

Your rating: 4

9. I liked the focus on interactivity in the lectures (eg group exercises).

Your rating: 4

10. Was the lecture material supported in the tutorials?

Your rating: 3

Thank you!

Please rate the following statements on a scale of 1-5.

1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree. Place your rating below the rating scale for each question.

1. I liked the team-teaching approach. 1 2 3 4 5

Your rating: 4

2. I understood the course content. 1 2 3 4 5

Your rating: 4

3. My writing skills improved. 1 2 3 4 5

Your rating: 4

4. I learned valuable academic skills (eg assignment writing, exam preparation)

Your rating: 5

5. I think it was beneficial to receive "double feedback" (theory and language).

Your rating: 5

6. I'd like this approach to be used in other courses (see the question below before you answer this question).

Your rating: 5

7. I would like to see a separate language skills course at the beginning of the degree.

Your rating: 3

8. The skills I have learned in CIM will be useful in my other courses.

Your rating: 3

9. I liked the focus on interactivity in the lectures (eg group exercises).

Your rating: 4

10. Was the lecture material supported in the tutorials?

Your rating: 5

Thank you!