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Developing international perspectives through videoconference tutorials for global learning

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The experiences of three cohorts of Australian students enrolled in a global learning science course are explored in this case study using interview and questionnaire data. The effectiveness of videoconference tutorials as a global learning strategy in developing students' international perspectives, communication skills and intercultural understandings and skills is discussed. The case study raises question about effective facilitation, communication, engagement and experiential learning within the international videoconference tutorial environment.

Keywords: internationalisation, videoconference, global learning

Background to the study

Australian graduates are now seen as requiring international skills and perspectives for the increasingly fluid and dynamic cross-border activities that occur within the global setting. According to Rimmington & Gibson (2006) the use of communication technologies for 'global learning' can facilitate cross-cultural, experiential learning; international student collaboration; and the development of the global graduate. 'Global learning' is the term given to courses and programs that utilise the affordances of communication technologies such as videoconferencing and Voice Over Internet Protocols (VOIP) for international student collaboration (Rimmington & Gibson, 2006). Global learning is a teaching strategy that combines the global reach of communication technologies with global perspectives to produce a global graduate possessing the attributes required for their field of study and sensitivity to the cultural differences related to their chosen profession (Rimmington, 2003).

Few studies of global learning exist as yet, however, some reports suggest global learning projects have improved pre-service teachers' ability to teach in diverse classrooms and develop multiple perspectives (Gibson, Vialle, & Rimmington, 2003; Gibson, Watters, Alargic, Rogers, & Haack, 2003; Rimmington & Gibson, 2006). Whilst some discussion of the use of videoconference for lecture delivery is appearing (for example, Carville & Mitchell, 2000; Freeman, 1998) and synchronous modes of communication, including internet video-conferencing and chat systems such as Skype and MSN Messenger, are being explored (for example, Lord & Lomicka, 2004), there is little commentary or research on the use of videoconference specifically for tutorials based on cross-institutional student engagement.

The current paper presents a case study that aims to address this issue by exploring the effectiveness of videoconference tutorials as a means of supporting the development of international perspectives in science and more generally. A Bachelor of International Science has been developed at an Australian university that aims to enrich and enhance students' international science perspectives. 'Global Learning', in which the students participate in videoconference tutorials with their peers at universities in Ireland and the United States to explore science topics of international significance, is a key teaching and learning strategy for the degree.

A student-centred approach was taken with responsibility placed on students for carrying and leading discussion. Students attended an initial workshop in the use of the videoconference technology and were provided with the opportunity to 'meet' informally with the students at the other universities in the absence of the lecturers. Students were required to prepare for the videoconferences by reading and analysing prescribed reference materials and were supported by academic staff within and before the tutorials. At the end of the third year of implementation a total of 24 Australian students had studied in the program. For reasons of confidentiality the pseudonyms 'Australian University' and 'US University' are used in this paper.

Method

Case study method, explained by Stake (1995) as "the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (p. xi) was utilised for this study. The case focuses on the experience of the first three cohorts of Australian students to enrol in the course. Qualitative and quantitative data gathered from the three cohorts by group interview and by online questionnaire are discussed. Sources of data are shown at Table 1.

Table 1: Australian student data

Cohort	Number of Students Enrolled	Number of Responses to 2008 Questionnaire	Number of Students Interviewed
2006	5	2	5
2007	8	3	8
2008	11	9	6
Total	24	14	19

The relatively low response rate of 58% for the end of 2008 online questionnaire is explained in part by the difficulties in contacting some of the 2006 students who had completed their degree course, and by the absence overseas on study abroad programs by some of the 2007 cohort.

Illustrative quotes from student data are labelled as follows:

I = Interview response

Q = questionnaire response

Thus, for example, Q3 = response to questionnaire by student #3.

Findings

Student responses suggest that those who completed the questionnaire found the videoconference tutorials effective in several ways. The responses to the 2008 Likert scale questionnaire for all cohorts shown in Table 2 are indicative of the findings of the qualitative data gathered through questionnaire and interview.

Table 2: Likert scale responses on relevant questions in 2008 Questionnaire

	How effective were the videoconferences in:	Highly Effective	Effective	Somewhat Effective	Not Effective	No Response
1	enabling discussion with students from the other universities	10	4	0	0	0
2	supporting development of international perspectives	9	5			0
3	helping develop communication skills	5	8	1	0	0
4	helping develop cross-cultural skills	5	7	1	0	1

All but one of the students rated the videoconference tutorials as effective or highly effective in helping develop cross-cultural skills, with one student rating somewhat effective. One student wrote that the videoconference tutorials:

... allowed us an insight into the vast array of opinions of young people in different countries and their opinions on certain topics. We were able to share opinions and really have a good intellectual discussion on topics that really need to be discussed (student Q14).

All 14 respondents rated the videoconference tutorials as either highly effective or effective in supporting the development of international perspectives and all 13 of the students who wrote comments on the advantages of the videoconferences for learning wrote exclusively, or mainly, about the value of encountering different perspectives, for example:

It definitely encouraged me to think about global perspectives and allowed me to compare my views with students from different nations (student Q3).

In encountering and critiquing a range of perspectives on globally significant science issues, respondents believed they were able to develop a form of global consciousness and enhance their capacity for analytical thinking.

Videoconferences allow multi-regional issues as part of the global issue (i.e. Global Warming/Climate Change) to understand how it is affected on the local scale (student Q6).

The development of communication skills and videoconference technique were an important intended learning outcome. Students were expected to develop these skills through the videoconference experience so the main responsibility for carrying the discussion was with the students. 13 of the respondents found the videoconference tutorials to be either highly effective or effective, with one student noting they were only slightly effective. One of the

students commented on this aspect of skill development in the open-ended questions as follows:

I think it's a huge learning experience to have to cooperate and be patient to have an effective conversation incorporating time differences - it took some practice! ... Really forced into having to work out effective communications in an actual practical situation (student Q9).

A few students in each of the cohorts wrote comments suggesting that the videoconference tutorials would have benefitted from a more structured and controlled approach, for example:

The videoconferences could be more effective if they were more controlled ... (student Q11).

Some students did not develop the confidence and communication skills to deal equally with students from a culture other than their own. In interviews with the 2006 cohort, all five students described a certain reticence in discussing topics of a perceived politically sensitive nature with the US University student group. One student commented:

I had to often be diplomatic and careful about my approach to asking contentious questions to the Americans. (I4)

These students also commented on what they saw as the forthright communication style of the US University students to whom they deferred, particularly on matters of US global involvement in world affairs, for example:

We all backed down on their [international aid program] you know, we'll use the US example, and we're talking ... it's possible that they know more about it, like, of what their country's done than we do. (I1)

Conversely, all 5 felt comfortable discussing politically sensitive topics with the Irish University students who they perceived as more like them, as one said:

I feel more comfortable speaking to the [Irish University] people than I do, I'm like, Oh we've got a meeting with America today. (I2)

From the above findings, questions arise about ways in which the tutorial experience might best be structured and facilitated for maximum learning, and about the development of counter-productive divisions and stereotypes that may occur across student groups.

Discussion

Experiential learning or structured facilitation?

In this case the videoconference discussion sessions provided the opportunity for communication across national boundaries, however, even the most confident student needs the opportunity to be heard. Should a level of facilitative structure be provided by the tutor such that interactions in the videoconference environment are equitable? Or should students be expected to find their own way into the discussion? In this case the videoconference tutor's role was to facilitate discussion and provide information where needed, but the main responsibility for carrying the discussion was given to the students.

Experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) is an accepted model for skills development and for transformative learning (Cranton, 2006) but experiential learning requires more than the experience itself. It is through reflection and theorising on experience that technical, communication and cultural learning occurs (Brookfield, 1987; Dewey, 1910; Hatton & Smith, 1994; Kolb, 1984; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005; Lewin, 1946; Mezirow, 1990). Otten (2003) has noted that intercultural contacts do not necessarily lead to intercultural competence. Students need to experience, reflect and “make strange the familiar” (Culler, 1983, p. 9) and to develop the personal awareness associated with intercultural perspectives (Jones & Killick, 2007) and communication skills development. The experience of one student sounds a warning of the need for support in coming to terms with difficult issues:

It made me kind of depressed. Oh not depressed, just anxious, because of global warming, and like we'd be having our discussions and what are the countries doing? Pretty much nothing. ... (I14)

Conclusions

The use of videoconference tutorials holds promise as a strategy for global learning offering a form of ‘virtual’ study abroad. Here is an opportunity for students to test values and attitudes against those of others, to explore their own prejudices and stereotypes, while developing discipline-based knowledge and global skills. From student responses, videoconference tutorials hold the promise of significant intercultural and international learning. In the words of one of the students:

The discussions open your mind to other perspectives and opinions, as well as introducing the ideas you may never have even considered (student Q10).

While it is not possible to generalise from one case, significant questions about the facilitation of videoconference tutorials have emerged. How can students be supported in completing the experiential learning cycle in developing communication and intercultural skills, and dealing with the emotions arising from confronting topics? Or should the tutors take responsibility for providing facilitative structure to ensure equity of engagement in videoconference tutorials? This case suggests the need for further research into effective teaching and learning strategies and models of staff development for global learning. The need for the development of resources to support teachers using videoconference tutorials for global learning has been identified. What this case demonstrates is that videoconference tutorials offer an exciting and challenging teaching and learning strategy for international higher education.

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