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**Cultural and ethical issues  
in  
international distance education**

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## **Introduction**

An increasing number of universities in Canada, Australia, the United States and Britain are developing distance education programs for delivery into other countries. As soon as educational programs cross national borders, a number of social and cultural issues arise. This paper draws on experience from developing, delivering and tutoring courses with international students, and raises some issues encountered when offering international distance education programs.

This is somewhat dangerous territory to enter. These experiences are personal and may not apply to other teachers in other circumstances. They raise questions concerning values and beliefs that are not subject to empirical enquiry or offer definitive answers.

It is also easy to adopt a high moral tone when discussing social and cultural issues. However, I believe that everyone who enters into the process of teaching has to operate on the basis of a set of values and ethics. In a world driven by the need to generate revenues, be cost-effective, deliver results, and watch the bottom line, it is important to stand back occasionally and raise questions about what we are doing. This paper is written in this spirit, and I hope it generates discussion, reflection and debate about the role of distance education in international development.

## **An example of international collaboration**

Before entering into the discussion of ethical and social issues, I would like to describe an international project in which we have now been engaged for just over two years, as this project is the basis of many of the issues I wish to raise.

The Monterrey Institute of Technology is a large and highly prestigious private university in Mexico, with 26 campuses across Mexico and some other Latin American countries. Monterrey Tech has a large and well-developed system of satellite television transmission of lectures between its various campuses, but it also recognizes the importance of the Internet and the World Wide Web for university-level teaching. In 1996 it was planning to offer a Masters in Educational Technology, and to get started quickly, it was looking for a set of five courses on technology-based distributed learning, primarily aimed at their own academic staff, that could be added to its own set of five 'core' courses.

Monterrey Tech and UBC entered into a broad partnership arrangement in 1996, which involved the exchange of students and academic staff. However, one of the main elements of this partnership arrangement was the request from Monterrey Tech for the Distance Education and Technology unit of UBC to develop and deliver the five courses it needed.

UBC decided that as well as offering these courses through its partnership with Monterrey Tech, the five courses would also be available as electives to the on-campus UBC students who were taking a Masters in Education. Furthermore, for those students who were not able or interested in registering for a full Masters degree at UBC, or who did not want to come to Vancouver to take the otherwise face-to-face Masters program, the five courses would be offered as a UBC

Postgraduate Certificate in Technology-based Distributed Learning, the certificate being awarded to those students who successfully complete all five courses. It would also be possible for participants to take individual courses, and courses for audit, that is, they could study a course without taking any assessment or obtaining any qualification.

The courses use the following technologies:

- print: required textbooks and selected readings reproduced and delivered to students
- a Web site, consisting of a study guide, original teaching materials developed by the instructors, online discussion groups, online resources (online articles, journals, extension library), a bookmark database (created mainly by students), student and instructor biographies, assignment questions, and the course schedule
- e-mail: between students and tutors; and between students and other students
- on one course a purpose-designed CD-ROM.

For the Monterrey Tech students there are also three video conference/satellite broadcasts per course usually involving members from the team at UBC. UBC staff are linked by dial-up terrestrial video-conferencing to the studio in Monterrey, and the broadcasts are up-linked and relayed by satellite TV to the various Monterrey Tech campuses. Students send in 'live' questions and comments by e-mail or fax.

Monterrey Tech is responsible for enrolling, tutoring, and accrediting its own students. UBC provides assistance and guidance to the Monterrey Tech tutors. UBC has developed a tutor manual and has a "closed" online discussion group for both UBC and Monterrey Tech tutors. UBC also develops guidelines and explicit criteria for marking assignments. Some assignments require students to work collaboratively, with one student from Canada, one student from Mexico, and one student from a third country working as a team. Assignments generally require students to apply course content to their own working context, and at least one assignment must be done individually. There are generally three assignments per course but no proctored examination.

The course content is in English (at the request of Monterrey Tech; it wants its students to be fluent in English in this area). Some of the Monterrey Tech online discussion groups are in Spanish; others are in English.

Monterrey Tech pays half the development costs of each course and in return has sole rights to offer the courses in Latin America. UBC has the rights for the rest of the world. UBC is responsible for developing the content and the design of the courses in consultation with Monterrey Tech. Monterrey Tech enrolls and registers students and keeps its own fees. UBC does the same for students outside Latin America. The Web site for each course is password protected for security and financial reasons. Students are issued an identification code and a password when they pay their fees. Monterrey Tech issues its own passwords.

The first course was offered in September 1997, and the fifth course was offered for the first time in September 1999. Each course will be offered probably four times at a minimum. Each course offering has attracted between 80 to 260 enrolments through Monterrey Tech, and between 25 to 80 enrolments through UBC. Altogether there have been nine course offerings up to December 1999, and there have been over 900 course enrolments through Monterrey Tech and over 200 through UBC, with students from 27 different countries. If these courses were offered only to UBC Masters students, we would expect a maximum of 10-12 enrolments per course offering. From UBC's perspective, these courses fully cover their costs from student fees and the payments made by Monterrey Tech (see Bartolic and Bates, 1999).

These courses are aimed at a 'niche' market in that:

- they provide specialist knowledge not readily available in most countries
- although the numbers interested in such courses in most countries is likely to be small, there is global demand for them
- they are targeted at people with access to computers and Internet technology (in this case, the participants are mainly working in universities or colleges)
- the target group (or their employers) are able and willing to pay the full cost of providing these courses.

Thus, while a niche market, they would be typical of many such programs that could be targeted at working professionals. For more information on these courses, see Bates and Escamilla, 1997, and <http://itesm.cstudies.ubc.ca/info/>.

### **Different models of international distance education**

The partnership with Monterrey Tech is just one example of marketing internationally distance education or online programs.

#### Direct marketing

Probably the most common form of marketing is to target individual students in different countries. Students who enrolled directly with UBC in the example above were directly marketed, mainly through professional list serves, i.e. online discussion groups for working professionals, such as the DEOS-L listserv running out of the American Center for Distance Education at Penn State University.

Such marketing is likely to work best when the language is the same, and when there are similarities in the culture between the offering institution's country and the country in which the participants live. Thus we had students from the USA, Australia, South Africa, and Hong Kong.

Nevertheless, we also had students from other countries with other first languages, and somewhat different cultures, such as Germany, France and Yugoslavia. Students in these countries had to have good English language skills, and be 'cosmopolitan' in outlook to take courses from an institution in another country.

### Franchise arrangements

The partnership with Monterrey Tech is a good example of what I call a franchise arrangement, in that the program is designed by one institution, but delivered by another under licence or a contract agreement.

There are several advantages in a franchise arrangement. First of all, it helps reduce the financial risk of the providing institution, The institution 'purchasing' the franchise can either guarantee a supply of fee-paying students or can provide up-front development money. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the franchise institution can provide cultural adaptation at both the development and delivery stage of the program. Furthermore, students who are not fluent in English can participate in their own language, through the discussion forums and the submission of assignments.

Lastly, when a franchised institution admits and accredits students, it enables an institution such as UBC, which has strict entry requirements and is turning away many British Columbian students who want to study there, to avoid the criticism that it is offering places to foreign students at the expense of local students. When students are registered and accredited through another institution, this provides a firewall regarding admissions, prior qualifications, and English language requirements for the institution developing the programs.

However, with a franchise arrangement, there is not equality between the two partners. There is an assumption that one partner has more expertise or knowledge than the other. The advantage to the 'weaker' partner is that the partnership may still give them competitive advantage over other institutions within their own jurisdiction.

### Joint programs

The third form of marketing is an equal partnership between two or more institutions leading to joint programming.

This may take one of several forms. Two or more partners may agree on an overall curriculum, and to share the delivery of that curriculum. For instance, UBC has a partnership with the Universities of Queensland and Melbourne in agricultural sciences. The three universities, all of similar research and teaching status in their own countries, have decided to collaborate on the joint development of common programs in the area of land resource management. Students in each of the three institutions will have access to courses from the other two universities.

All the courses will be available to registered students at each of the three institutions through the World Wide Web and CD-ROMs. Students are assigned to online discussion groups for each course, with students and instructors from each

institution. Students can take courses from their own institution in the regular face-to-face mode, or in a distance learning mode. Approved courses from the other institutions can also be taken at a distance, and be transferred into their own program.

Alternatively, if students they can afford it, they can spend time at one or both of the other institutions, taking some courses in the program in a face-to-face mode, and courses from their own university at a distance. Each university reserves the right to decide on which courses from the other institutions will be accepted as part of its own program.

### **Why do international distance education?**

There seems to be several reasons why institutions are wanting to do offer their courses internationally.

#### Money, money, money

Perhaps the most obvious is to make or save money. International students can be charged higher fees than students supported by taxpayers within one's own jurisdiction. Given that the costs of developing an online course are fixed, offering courses to students out of one's own jurisdiction allows for economies of scale.

This though is where some ethical issues start to arise. Should institutions in richer countries with the means to develop and deliver distance education programs into poorer countries seek to subsidise their programs at the expense of poorer countries? Is education just another commodity or service to be sold abroad? On the other hand, if students in poorer countries want to access courses from richer and perhaps more prestigious institutions from outside their own countries, and hence have the chance of better jobs and more prosperity, why should we prevent them from doing this?

#### Because they want it

Thus another reason sometimes given is not so much to make money, but to meet demand. An institution in the USA or Canada is merely providing opportunities for study that would not otherwise be available in another country. Indeed, it is often institutions in other countries that are making the initial requests for partnership and program provision, as in the case of Monterrey Tech. Thus demand can come from both individuals and from institutions for the delivery of programs from institutions in other countries.

It can be argued that this is a quick and less painful way for institutions with less experience in distance education in developing countries to get into it more quickly, and hence develop their own expertise. Partnering with a prestigious institution in another country can also improve an institution's competitiveness within its own country.

#### Altruism

The argument for international delivery of distance education can be carried even further into an altruistic one, in that marketing distance education courses internationally provides skills and knowledge that would otherwise not be available in the recipient countries, and helps improve the quality of education in these countries. This in turn helps their economic and social development.

A counter argument is that these international courses are available only to those that can afford them or have access to the technology, namely, those already privileged within a poorer country. Furthermore, taking money out of the country from this rich elite makes it harder for poorer countries to invest in their own educational provision.

### Internationalizing the curriculum

Developing programs for international delivery can also enable institutions to prepare their students for an increasingly global economy and society, if courses are planned from the start with an international focus, especially if they involve contributions from or joint development with institutions in other countries. Programs that have not only students but teachers from other countries studying and teaching collaboratively can provide a strong international perspective that would be difficult to achieve in other ways.

In conclusion then there are many different reasons for offering distance education courses internationally. Institutions though should be clear as to their primary motivation, as that will influence the kind of arrangements that will be most appropriate for international delivery or partnership. In particular, benefits should be apparent for both the providers and the recipients, whether they are individuals or institutions.

### **Some cultural and ethical issues arising from the use of the Internet**

#### Language and the Internet

English (or perhaps more accurately American) is at the moment by far and away the most predominant language in terms of the international delivery of distance education, although there is also a growing number of programs in Spanish being delivered across borders in Latin America. There are clear disadvantages of working in another language in online courses, when students have to contribute towards collaborative assignments or participate in discussion forums with those for whom English is their own language.

It is often difficult for those of us whose first language is English to comprehend fully the disadvantage this causes for those for whom English is not their first language. Perhaps the best way for English speakers to understand this issue is to imagine the situation if, as many commentators believe, China becomes the predominant economic power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Mandarin would then become the predominant language of the Internet. English speakers would have to learn Mandarin if they wanted to participate in international programs.

Online courses though also have some advantages over face-to-face teaching for students working in another language than their own. The asynchronous nature of online teaching allows students to take their time in composing responses in another language, whereas in classroom contexts often the conversation moves on before they have crafted an appropriate intervention. Monterrey Tech deliberately wanted the program delivered in English, since not only would their students get access to the content of the courses but would have the opportunity to improve their English in a subject area where English is predominant.

The problem is that providing distance education courses in a foreign language is not just a technical issue. As well as the actual language, such courses come with alien social and cultural contexts. Examples are drawn from another culture, idioms often do not transfer between cultures, and even the style of writing may be alien. For instance, at UBC we encourage course authors to use a chatty, personal and friendly style of writing, which in some cultures might be interpreted as being of poor academic quality.

### Culture and the Internet

There are also cultural differences in the approach to teaching. There is a tendency in 'Western' courses from the USA, Britain, Canada and Australia to encourage critical thinking skills, debate and discussion, where students' views are considered important, and where the views of teachers can be legitimately challenged and where student dissent is even encouraged.

In other cultures, there is great respect shown by students for the teacher, and it is culturally alien to challenge the teacher or even express an opinion on a topic. Although more research is needed, in our online courses there appears to be major differences between ethnic groups in their willingness to participate in online forums, and these differences seems to independent of skill in conversing in a foreign language.

We reward through grades students who participate actively and work collaboratively through discussion forums, and this will seriously disadvantage students for whom this is an alien or difficult approach to take, even for those willing to work in this way. I therefore find myself wondering to what extent I should impose 'Western' approaches to learning on students coming from other cultures, while acknowledging on the other hand that this 'new' or different approach may have attracted them to the courses in the first place.

### What to charge?

Another interesting set of issues arises around deciding what fees to charge, or rather in deciding on the principles in charging fees.

Let me give one example. UBC student tuition fees are considerably less than the tuition fees charged by the University of Melbourne. In UBC's case, the fees for Canadian students are set by government. In a joint program, where a UBC student can – or may be required – to take courses from the University of Melbourne, how does one deal with the differences in fees? The University of Melbourne would find



it hard to drop the fee level, because that would mean foreign students paying less than Australian students. On the other hand the UBC student or her parents may feel they have paid heavily in taxes to subsidise her courses, and would not see why she should have to pay more just because the course was coming from elsewhere. Indeed the government regulation would probably stop UBC from charging a higher fee, if it was a required course for a degree program. This may mean UBC itself having to cover some of the costs of its students taking courses from another institution, which would be a strong disincentive for developing such partnerships.

Another problem arises in the difference between fees charged to international students who study on campus, and those that study by distance. Those that come on campus at UBC pay a substantially higher fee than those who study at a distance. In both cases, it is the market and the laws of supply and demand that operate. Thus campus places at UBC are limited and hence scarce, enabling a high fee to be charged and all places to be filled. With distance education, though, there is theoretically no limit to the number of students who can be accommodated. Also, there is increasing international competition in the distance education market. It is a price sensitive market.

For Canadian students at UBC, though, there is no fundamental difference in fees for distance or face-to-face courses, since they are considered to be of equivalent standing. If though distance education and face-to-face courses are considered of equal standing, why should international students on campus pay two to three times the fee of those taking the course at a distance?

### Internet access

Another criticism of on-line courses aimed at an international audience is that this merely widens the gap between the rich and poor in developing countries, as only the rich have access to the Internet.

However, this argument is not as straightforward as it looks. There are many different ways in which people can access the Internet, without owning their own computers or having their own Internet accounts. One advantage of working with partner institutions such as universities in other countries is that they usually have Internet access and computer facilities on campus, which may be available for student use. Many employers have computers with Internet access for work purposes, and may allow or encourage employees to use this for improving their skills and knowledge. Lastly, the public can often access the Internet very cheaply through commercial, public cybercafés. I was able to get online in Kuala Lumpur from a cybercafé in a shopping mall for just US\$1 an hour. The cybercafé was used mainly by teenagers, who often spent 30 minutes or more online at a time.

Internet access will get both cheaper and more accessible in developing countries, and it could be argued that it will be to the advantage of people in developing countries to access knowledge and experience of Internet learning as quickly as possible.

### Collaborative learning

One of the major advantages of online courses is the opportunity for course participants to work collaboratively.

However, some students have objected to working collaboratively. Some object to the principle of collaborative learning, irrespective of the nationality of the other students; they believe that they should be assessed solely on their own work, and feel that their grades may be adversely affected by working with someone who is not as 'able' or motivated.

This is a reasonable argument. Not everyone contributes equally. Should one mark solely on the 'output', the final assignment, irrespective of individual contributions? Should one mark the process as well as the output? Should one for instance split the mark into two, half for the final assignment, which is shared by all participants, and half for individual contributions to the assignment? This would be fairer to students who put in more work, but often contributions are not made in a manner always accessible to the tutor, such as through direct e-mails between students. Also, it increases considerably the tutor workload if all contributions have to be assessed individually.

These issues are not specific to international courses, but there are other issues that arise once one 'goes international'. Some for whom English is a first language have objected that because of differences in English language fluency, they will have to do more work in correcting English or expressing the group's ideas more clearly. We have also had Mexican students objecting to working with Canadian students who were certificate rather than Masters students, since they believed that the certificate students were less qualified or motivated.

However, if one believes that learning to work collaboratively online is an important skill for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then it seems reasonable to set this as a goal, and to assess students skill in doing this, provided that students are forewarned before they begin the course that this is expected of them. We also ensure on the Monterrey Tech courses that as well as a collaborative assignment, there are always two individual assignments.

### **Quality control**

Perhaps the major concern in international distance education is whether international students are receiving the same quality of program, or achieving the same standards, as students taking a program in conventional ways. For instance, will a student studying a UBC program internationally be of the same standard as a student graduating from the same program on campus? Currently, UBC students taking a credit course at a distance sit exactly the same exam and are marked to exactly the same standards as on-campus students. Indeed, the degree diploma, while listing the courses taken, does not indicate whether or not the course was taken as a distance education course.

It is not always possible or realistic to ensure that students studying through another institution in another country will get exactly the same services and quality as students registered with the originating institution. For instance, for the certificate program in technology-based distributed learning, UBC tutor/student ratios are

approximately 1:20, while for the Monterrey Tech students, the tutor/student ratio can be as high as 1:60. Furthermore Monterrey Tech tutors do not always have the same level of content expertise as the UBC tutors who developed the course.

In discussing the issue of comparable standards, it is important to separate the qualification to be gained, from the institution developing the distance education program. Under our arrangement with Monterrey Tech, although the courses are designed by us, they are delivered and accredited by Monterrey Tech in Latin America. Thus Monterrey Tech recruits, tutors, examines and accredits the students, who receive a degree from Monterrey Tech, not UBC. For students who enrol directly with UBC, we tutor, examine and accredit to the same standards as for other equivalent UBC courses. Thus if tutor/student ratios differ between UBC and Monterrey Tech, or if Monterrey Tech marks assignments to a different standard, it does not impact on the quality of the UBC qualification, nor does UBC's exam marking and tutoring impact directly on Monterrey Tech students.

What then, if any, are the responsibilities of the institution originating a program to the students taking the program through another institution? It has to ensure the integrity of the content of the program. In other words, while changes may be made by the franchise institution to make it more suitable for delivery in another country, then the originating institution and in particular individual contributors to the program should have the right to approve any changes of a substantive nature if their names are used to promote the program. We also take responsibility for training Monterrey Tech tutors in the skills of online tutoring.

Secondly, an institution offering a program from another institution has the duty to ensure that it comes up to its own standards. Even in joint programs where the program material is developed to acceptable standards in all participating institutions, there may be differences in the quality of the delivery service. If for instance UBC students were to take courses offered by another institution, we should ensure that our students receive as good a service from the other institution as they would receive from us.

The advantage then of a franchise arrangement is that it not only ensures local tutoring and adaptation, but also offers a firewall, so that each institution can assess students to its own standards. However, students in the receiving institution do not end up with the same qualification as students registering with the originating institution.

The advantage of a truly joint program is that the qualification is of the same status, irrespective of which institution one is registered with. However, this will work only when each institution accepts the other as being of equal status, and working such a program through two Senates or more for academic approval is usually a very difficult if not impossible process. However, Monterrey Tech and Thunderbird University in Texas have agreed to develop a joint Masters program in international business.

## Conclusions

It can be seen that offering international distance education programs can raise some interesting and challenging issues. However, a number of strategies can be developed to deal with these issues.

## **Strategies**

1. First, it is important to be clear about an institution's motivation in moving into international distance education. If the main reason is to internationalize the curriculum and expose one's own students to other cultural standards, then this will affect the design of the curriculum and the kind of arrangements one wants to make with other institutions. If the aim is to make money, then the approach to curriculum design and partnership is likely to be very different.
2. There are clearly many benefits to be gained by working in partnership with institutions in different countries, rather than just direct marketing, although direct marketing may still be the only viable option if suitable partners cannot be found. Some of the benefits of working through local partners are as follows:
  - cultural adaptation
  - assistance with student recruitment, tutoring, and assessment
  - local accreditation/qualifications
  - contributions to content and program design to ensure local relevance.
3. It will help to have letters of agreement or contracts that spell out clearly expectations and assumptions, division of responsibilities, and financial arrangements, before programs are developed or delivered.
4. If possible, programs should be either designed from scratch with an international market in mind, and/or tailored to local needs. While this may add to the cost of development, it may also result in increased revenues.
5. International distance education programs should also be available to one's own students, so they can benefit from the international perspective.
6. Build local capacity for distance education through training contracts. Many institutions in developing countries may be happy to take courses from other countries initially, but most want to develop their own capacity for distance education. Delivery of courses developed elsewhere can be combined with local training.
7. Some institutions cannot offer whole programs at a distance because of Senate regulations requiring at least some attendance on campus. This regulation might be waived for international students, so that a whole program can be taken at a distance.
8. Develop special programs for course developers to increase sensitivity to inter-cultural and design issues for programs being delivered internationally.

9. Perhaps most important of all, identify the unique contributions that each partner institution can make to the development and delivery of international programs, so that all parties can clearly see the benefits.

## **Conclusions**

There appears to be a headlong rush into online learning and distance education, particularly in North America. Many lessons previously learned from older forms of print-based distance education still apply to these newer technologies, but have not been learned by many of the newer players. Others are inventing new ways of doing things which are yet to be tested. Many see online learning as a gravy train, with great profits to be made, and many of these institutions are barely a couple of years ahead of those they are trying to sell to.

In such a chaotic and fast developing context, caveat emptor – buyer beware! Individual students signing up for courses from out of state or country providers should be particularly careful. Famous campus brand names are no guarantee of experience or excellence in distance delivery. Local institutions can provide a valuable service to local students by advising on external providers. The Commonwealth of Learning has developed an excellent guide for students on choosing a distance education provider, and an equally valuable code of conduct for institutions wishing to export distance education (dwilson@col.org).

Secondly, there are clearly difficult issues of power and dependency here. It is natural that institutions in countries with less experience of online teaching and distance education will look to those with more experience, at least in the short term, for help and guidance. However, I believe that help should be provided in a way that reduces rather than increases dependency, by enabling local institutions to develop their own capacity for online teaching adapted to the needs of their own society.

Lastly, there are no easy answers to the issues of ethics and social responsibility with regard to international distance education. In the end, the best test is to ask: who benefits most from any particular arrangement, and in what way? The most successful operations are likely to be those where everyone who participates clearly benefits, whether they are the providing institution or individual students or partner institutions in other countries.

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