Overcoming Obstacles to A Cross-Global Collaborative Classroom

Alvin Burns, Louisiana State University
alburns@lsu.edu

Hongyan Yu, Jilin University
yuhong@public.cc.jl.cn

Ann Veeck, Western Michigan University
ann.veeck@wmich.edu

ABSTRACT

Collaboration involving two sets of students studying the same subject but residing in separate countries is difficult due to synchronization problems, time differences, and language barriers. The authors describe how the Internet-based Blackboard™ platform was used to connect U.S. and PRC undergraduate marketing research students. While Blackboard's vision is to be a global pedagogical bridge, and it has excellent features, synchronization, time zones, and language difficulties still had to be surmounted. This paper describes how the authors used Blackboard and overcame these obstacles.

INTRODUCTION

While it is a fact that the business world is shrinking exponentially, there is scant evidence of this shrinkage in the cross-global collaborative teaching of business subjects. There are a few exceptions to this observation (Day, Milter, and Stinson, 1993, Flores, Molina, Marcon, and Bremer, 1999); however, while novel, impressive, and provocative, such cross-cultural/cross-global pedagogical partnerships are very few in number. The paucity of these success stories is understandable when one considers the significant macro-environmental factors that hamper such cross-global pedagogical undertakings. The purpose of this paper is to describe how two marketing Instructors bridged the considerable gaps separating a United States class and a Peoples Republic of China class with the use of a software platform called "Blackboard™." The paper first describes formidable obstacles that discourage cross-global pedagogical collaboration, and it notes how the Internet alone does not address these obstacles. Next, the paper describes the Blackboard course management software platform, and last, the paper describes how the Instructors used Blackboard to create a shared learning environment for their respective American and Chinese students.

Suppose, for a moment, that two instructors teaching the same subject but residing in very different parts of the world desire to have a create a collaborative environment where their students may work together or at least share experiences with various aspects of the course subject matter. It is important to emphasize at the onset that this scenario is not one where an instructor wishes to create a virtual classroom (e.g. Phillips 1998) where students from diverse locations are educated asynchronously and mostly independently from a central server. Rather, the instructors in this scenario have two intact, on-campus classes that they wish to coordinate and enter into a collaborative educational environment. These instructors soon learn that the slow growth of cross-cultural/cross-global pedagogical partnerships can be blamed on at least three daunting sets of differences that exist between any two classrooms situated in dissimilar countries. First, there are significant in-place "cultural" education institutional differences. For instance, inasmuch as academic semesters/quarters/terms are not synchronized for universities even within the same country; obviously, they are definitely not aligned across countries. Even the pace of a course within a term is not consistent as some European terms are heavily loaded into a few days or weeks, while other countries spread the class days evenly across the weeks in the term. Across hemispheres, the summer and winter periods are opposite, and national holidays vary greatly from one country to the next. Some systems allow for long study sessions prior to final examinations, while others provide for almost no "dead" days. Some academic systems place heavy weight on a single, comprehensive final examination, while others spread the assessment of student learning across a number of tests paces across the academic term. In short, due to these in-place institutional factors, it is intimidating to attempt any alignment of the course schedules for the same course taught in different countries.

Second, the physical distance factor exacerbates attempts at coordinated efforts in a number of ways. Distance means different time zones, and, perhaps, even

different days. Distance means that there is a cost of communication, both monetary and perhaps in terms of timeliness of communications. Distance imposes a number of penalties on educators who wish to coordinate, as they must find each other, communicate a willingness to work together, hammer out the details, and engage their students into the cooperative pact with practically no face-to-face communication and limited voice-to-voice communication at best. Electronic communication such as email is prevalent in economically advanced countries, but it is not common in countries with emerging economies, and it is almost nonexistent in agrarian economies. Plus, even if it is available, the cost of electronic communication may be a deterrent, particularly for students in transitioning countries. In sum, the immense distance between countries discourages instructors who wish to create a cross-global teaching situation for their respective classes.

Third, even if cultural differences and distance factors can somehow be surmounted, often there is a language barrier with which to contend. Educators typically teach, and students learn, in their native languages - English, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, French, German, Dutch, Hindi, Russian, and so forth - and they cannot expect their students to speak or write in any other than their native language. Granted, many students can read English and instructors teaching in countries where some other language is native often adopt textbooks written in English, but *spoken* English is invariably difficult if not impossible for many students whose native language is not English. In other words, language differences are another obstacle to cross-global collaborative classrooms.

THE INTERNET AS A SAVIOR?

When contemplating these obstacles and pondering a way to overcome them, one is tempted to immediately think that the Internet is the Holy Grail. At first blush, it is easy to think this, but when one looks more closely at the aforementioned cross-global obstacles and considers how the Internet works, it becomes apparent that the Internet *alone* is not the panacea that it may seem to be. Let us take each cross-cultural obstacle separately and examine the degree to which the Internet deals with it. First are the academic institution cultural differences such as juxtaposed schedules and different paces. The Internet in no way adjusts these. Second, the Internet handles physical distance easily as it shrinks distance by replacing miles or leagues to nanoseconds. However, it does not overcome temporal factors such as time zones differences. The third obstacle is language differences, and the Internet does not resolve these as Microsoft and other software vendors have language-specific versions. In short, the Internet alone does not overcome any of the cross-global differences that deter instructors seeking to work across country boundaries.

INTERNET COURSE MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE AND THE PLATFORM USED

On the individual campus level, the Internet has been used to great advantage in course management. That is, some educators have moved to "paperless" courses and courses that utilize the Internet and its electronic communication capabilities to great advantage. Of course, practically all educators who have done so have applied Internet-based course delivery platforms only to their own, local courses without concern for cross-global collaboration. But as will be detailed in this paper, an Internet-based course delivery platform can be adapted to cross-global collaboration such as the two-instructor scenario described above. However, the adaptation is not seamless, and each of the cross-global obstacles must be dealt with in turn.

There are a number of web-based platforms for college courses, including WebCT, eCollege.com, and TopClass. (Readers desiring a comparison of online course delivery software products should refer to "Comparison of Online Course Delivery Software Products," at *www.ctt.bc.ca/landonline/reviews.html*). The program that facilitated the cross-global collaborative teaching environment described in this paper was Blackboard™. This platform was launched in 1997 with the following vision:

> …to transform the Internet into a powerful environment for teaching and learning. Imagine a world where technology means opportunity, not complexity. Where teachers can extend their expertise and guidance beyond the classroom - to students on campus, across town, or even across the world. Where students can reach teachers, interact with classmates, and access learning materials anytime, anywhere. And where administrators can more easily support faculty, strengthen their educational communities, and foster lifelong relationships between their institution and its students. (source: *http://company.blackboard.com/vision.cgi?SELECT=2 1*)

As is evident its vision statement, Blackboard aspires to overcome the time and distance obstacles noted earlier, and it explicitly alludes to global applications. The Blackboard website is designed as follows. The basic Blackboard web page is two frames in columns with the left column taking about one-fifth of the page. It holds up to eight hyperlinked labeled buttons that open windows in the right hand column. Figure 1 lists these eight hot buttons and describes what happens when a student clicks each one or a submenu, if one exists. Figure 2 is a screen capture of the window that appears for a marketing research course when the "Course Documents" button is clicked. Figure 3

illustrates how a PowerPoint file can be observed on the Blackboard platform.

FIGURE 1 COMPONENTS OF THE BLACKBOARD™ PLATFORM

Component*	Description	
Announcements	Notices the Instructor wants students to see when logging into the course	
Course Information	Viewable and/or downloadable postings of documents such as syllabus, schedule, etc.	
Staff Information	Instructor details such as title, office number, office hours, email address, and a photo (optional)	
Course Documents	Holding area for files and folders such as PowerPoint class file, electronic handouts, exercises, etc. These can be viewed or downloaded	
Assignments	Holding area for assignments to be viewed or downloaded	
Communication	*Send Email*	Email all, groups, or individual students
	Student pages	View student home pages
	Discussion Board	Threaded discussion forums
	Virtual Classroom	Live chat with teaching tools such as a white board, posting of slides, etc.
	Group pages	Group-specific chat, email, discussion board, and file exchange
External Tools	Hot links to web pages related to course subject matter	
Student Tools	*Student Drop Box*	Allows students to post electronic files for the Instructor to access
	Change Your Information	Change personal information or password
	Check Your Grade	View grades posted by the Instructor
	Edit Home Page	Template to create a home including a photo
	Student Calendar	Personal calendar
	Student Manual	Manual on how to use Blackboard

*Italicized & bold indicates a hyperlink
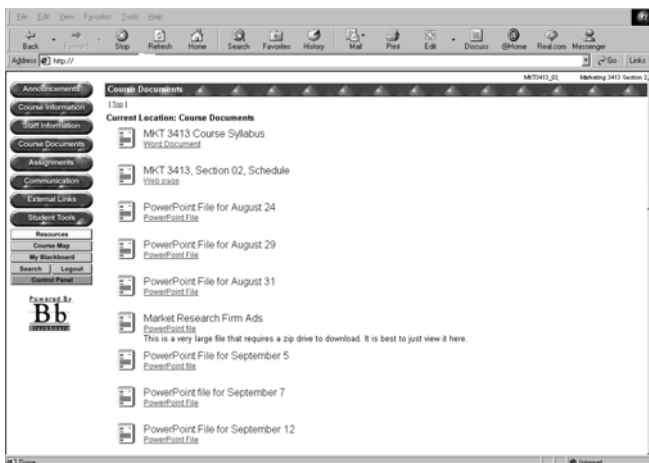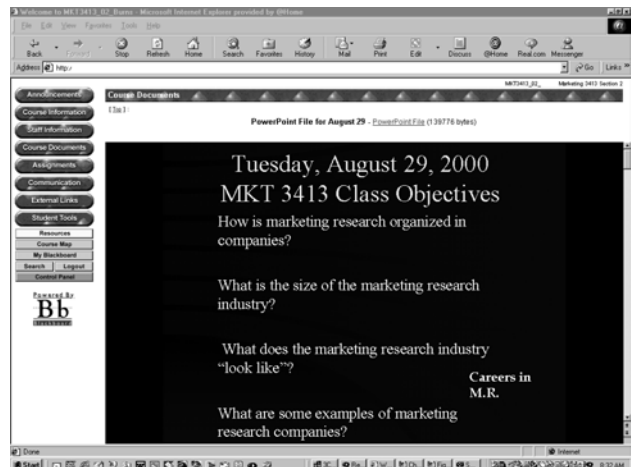
FIGURE 2 COURSE DOCUMENTS WINDOW

FIGURE 3 VIEWING A POWERPOINT FILE

As can be seen, Blackboard is an Internet holding ground and access system for course information of various types, class and course materials that are viewed and/or downloaded as electronic files, and it has a number of communication features that give students ownership in the course (home pages, threaded discussion forums) and enable easy Internet message exchanges. With the Blackboard platform, an instructor has the tools to utilize the full power of the Internet. In fact, there is a "Control Panel" hot button available only to the instructor that opens an extensive menu from which he/she uploads and posts files or announcements via page editors, creates groups such as student teams, accesses files in the digital drop box, posts grades in a spreadsheet, and manages the course website, including creating tests and surveys.

USA AND PRC BLACKBOARD-BASED MARKETING RESEARCH COURSE

There is a brief history to be related regarding the relationship between the American instructor (Burns) and the Chinese instructor (Yu) who sought to create a cross-global collaborative classroom. While the two have met face-to-face subsequent to the submission draft and prior to the final draft of this paper, they initially "met" by email when the Chinese instructor contacted the American instructor in 1999 as a result of adopting the American's marketing research textbook. The two instructors shared information about the course via email occasionally during that year. During the time of this initial set of communications, the American instructor was not teaching marketing research, but his college adopted Blackboard and he became proficient in its basic features. In the fall 2000 semester, the Chinese instructor contacted the American instructor and informed him that he was teaching a section of undergraduate marketing research, whereupon the American indicated that he, too, was teaching undergraduate marketing research.

The two instructors shared information and teaching ideas via email early in the semester, and the American inquired with his computer technicians as to the feasibility of "enrolling" the Chinese students onto his Blackboard course roster. This task was accomplished with a list of the Chinese students' names, identification numbers, and email addresses. The Chinese instructor was added to the Blackboard course as a co-instructor, meaning he had access to all of the Blackboard course management functions.

Perhaps it will be informative to provide some detail on the many disparities between the two university systems and situations. Jilin University is located in Changchun, Jilin Province, PRC, and is a city of approximately 12 million located in the northeast quadrant of China and due north of North Korea. Jilin University is the largest university in China with approximately 40,000 students who enjoy free tuition and room and board on the campus. There is keen interest in marketing in China today due to the open trade system instituted in the last ten years. Jilin University is entering into a credit hour system, transitioning from a lock-step system where each student completes four years with an intact class of 40-50 students. Only recently have Chinese universities allowed relatively unrestricted access to the Internet by Chinese students and faculty; however, Microsoft Office (i.e. Word and PowerPoint) is widely used by students and faculty members, but pc ownership is almost nonexistent among students. Louisiana State University is a typical Deep South "flagship" university located in Baton Rouge, a capital city of approximately 400,000 residents, with about 30,000 students enrolled. Most students live off campus in nearby apartment complexes and many work to pay for tuition and living expenses. Almost all LSU business students own personal computers, not to mention cell phones, CD players, televisions, and a large number of items that PRC students do not possess. In short, there are profound differences between the situations of American and PRC university students.

While the two instructors could converse satisfactorily in emailed English, language differences immediately became an issue as none of the 50 U.S. students understood a word of Chinese and only about 40 of the 60 Chinese undergraduates could be added onto the Blackboard course roster as the remaining 20 Chinese students did not understand English. Nonetheless, the Chinese professor began posting his documents to the Blackboard website. Figure 4 is an example of one of his PowerPoint file slides accessible to either set of students but understandable only to the PRC students because it is in Chinese characters.

FIGURE 4 CHINESE POWERPOINT SLIDE

Both instructors were teaching the marketing research course using the live-case team research projects approach (Burns 1978), and they emailed back and forth discussing the idea of having students identify interesting research topics where American and Chinese college students could be compared. However, the American instructor had committed to sponsored projects wherein his students would do pilot studies for local companies, and the topics would not pertain to Chinese respondents. The Chinese students, however, were curious about American versus Chinese students, and it was discussed that the Chinese students would identify possible research topics, perform exploratory and qualitative research using the Blackboard system and American student informants, design a questionnaire that would be completed by American students, and the data file would be sent back. However, it was the first time that marketing research had been taught at Jilin University, and the Chinese professor decided that generating useful marketing research information for local companies was a more judicious choice at this time.

To encourage communication, the American students brainstormed a number of topic questions that were posted as Discussion Board forums. These generated some, but not a great deal of comments. Some American and many Chinese students posted information on their home personal home pages and a number uploaded their photos. Refer to Figure 5 for the threaded discussion forums main page.

FIGURE 5 THREADED DISCUSSION FORUMS

WRESTLING WITH CROSS-GLOBAL COURSE COLLABORATION OBSTACLES

With the first attempt at a synchronized cooperative undertaking, cross-global obstacles immediately conspired to thwart the undertaking. The two instructors learned that while their semesters began at about the same time, the Chinese semester extended into January of the next year, while the US term ended in early December. It was agreed to not change either course schedule as it was impossible for the US students to continue beyond the end of their classes and inappropriate for the PRC students to accelerate their schedule.

On a different tact, the Blackboard platform has a "Virtual Classroom" feature that can be used a chat room, and the American instructor proposed an online focus group where he would play the role of a focus group moderator with the Chinese students logged into the chat room and the American students observing in their classroom multimedia connection and large projection screen. However, the language obstacle became even more problematic as it became apparent that while some Chinese students understood and could write English, their overall proficiency level was not high enough for a real-time chat session. Internet access also became an issue as the American instructor learned that most Chinese students did not own computers, and most of them accessed the Internet through an Internet café or "web bar" - at a cost of about RMB $2.00 (about $.25 US) per hour. The time factor became an obstacle, as the Chinese students were 13 hours ahead of the U.S. students' time, meaning that if the online focus group took place during the normal class hours of the U.S. students (3:00-4:30 p.m.), the Chinese students would need to be online at 4:00-5:30 a.m. While the Chinese instructor believed his students would not mind sleep deprivation, the web bar did not open until 7:00 a.m.

The solution to all of these Virtual Classroom problems emerged during an hour-long chat session with the two instructors plus the recruitment of a third instructor/author (Veeck). First, the Chinese students were organized into teams, each with an English-capable leader who would operate the computer keys, and an interpreter who would translate the English into Chinese for the other team members. Second, the third professor, an American who spoke fluent Chinese, was added to the online focus group and recruited to be the focus group client. Third, the Chinese students conferred among themselves and identified times when they could be online. This meant that the online focus group could not be conducted during the American students' class time; however, the American students could log into the chat room and observe. Also, the Blackboard Virtual Classroom captures the entire transcript of each chat session, and it is available to view or to download as a text file. Instead of a trial run for the online focus group that would necessitate the Chinese students being organized and online at two separate times, it was proposed that the Chinese students would identify good chat times, and they and the American students would use the chat room to converse on whatever topics they wanted to at these times as a means of using and becoming familiar with the Blackboard chat room. This plan was successful, and two sessions of approximately one hour each were used

to test the capacity of the Blackboard chat function and to assess the capabilities of the Chinese students' Internet access system. Finally, the third author who has expertise on emerging consumption patterns in China identified the topic of traditional Chinese medicines versus the use of Western medicines by PRC residents. The topic list was supplied to the Chinese students, and the online focus group took place for approximately 90 minutes with six Chinese student teams and the three instructor/authors on line as well.

UPDATE AND PROSPECTS FOR THE CROSS-GLOBAL COLLABORATIVE CLASSROOM

At the end of the fall term, the American lead author (Burns) visited Jilin University to confer with officials, deliver lectures, observe some of the Chinese student team presentations, and to have "free talk" with the Chinese students. This was the American's first trip to China, and it served to educate him on the (changing) Chinese university system as well as to familiarize him with various nuances of Chinese student life. Unfortunately, no time was available for the two professors to have an extended face-to-face conversation on their joint experiences.

With the facilitation of an Internet course management system with capabilities such as those found in Blackboard, the prospects for cross-global collaborative classrooms seem bounded only by the energies and imaginations of the educators involved. For example, if the Chinese instructor had not opted to use sponsored projects, the aforementioned suggestion that the Chinese students design and execute a college student survey to be administered to both U.S. and Chinese students so they could examine differences in purchasing behavior, life styles, or other constructs of interest. This undertaking would require some sort of exploratory and/or qualitative research accomplished either with the Discussion Board posted Forums (any student can post a new forum) and/or an online focus group or chat with U.S. students. A questionnaire could be posted for the U.S. students to critique or make suggestions, and the final questionnaire could be sent in file format to U.S. students to download, print, and administer to fellow students. The completed questionnaires would be input to create an SPSS or Excel data file to be sent back to the Chinese students. No doubt the findings would spur much discussion between the two groups of students.

As a final comment, it is obvious that the Blackboard-based marketing research class described here is simply an example of how a cross-global collaborative classroom can be accomplished. Conceivably, any business subject where the instructor desires student discussion, interaction, or teamwork is amenable to this approach. For instance, one possibility that is being discussed by the two lead authors is to create cross-global teams and to run a batch marketing simulation game. Blackboard will accommodate this easily as it allows for the setup of student teams who can chat, email, share files, and participate in threaded discussion forums privately. (Perhaps this approach will be presented in a future ABSEL Conference.)

REFERENCES

Burns, Alvin (1978), "The Extended Live Case Approach to Teaching Marketing Research," *Exploring Experiential Learning: Simulation and Experiential Exercises*, Volume 5, Daniel C. Brenenstuhl and Samuel C. Certo (eds.), 245-251.

Day, William, A., Richard G. Milter, John E. Stinson, (1993), "Collaborative Education Done Globally," *Developments In Business Simulation And Experiential Exercises*, Volume 20, 122.

Flores, Myrna, Arturo Molina, Giuliano Marcon, Carlos Bremer, (1999), "Creation of a Virtual Learning Community for the Global Virtual Enterprise Project," *Developments In Business Simulation And Experiential Learning*, Volume 26, 250-254.

Phillips, Vicky, (1998), "Virtual classrooms, real education," *Nation's Business*, May, Volume 86, Issue 5, 41-45.