An Exploratory Study on the Operation Videoconferencing in Bi-National Tutorials

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Abstract

Research in the area of using newer technologies such as videoconferencing via the Internet in tutorials is limited with even less covering the issue of effectiveness as a learning device. This technology enables expansion of the international marketing tutorial to include other countries/cultures. This study uses a case study methodology to investigate the conduct of bi-national tutorials to see if videoconferencing adds value to the learning experience of students. Two tutorials were conducted between students in two universities in Australia and Hong Kong. The students involved were positive with regards to interaction, engagement, motivation, interest in learning and felt comfortable with videoconferencing their tutorials. Issues involved with this project included: time differences (project length, semester timing, timetabling), role of champions, and common curricula. The authors derive human and pedagogical recommendations for running bi-national tutorials using videoconferencing.

Key words: Videoconferencing, tutorials, bi-national, internet, international, pedagogy

Research in videoconferencing

With the considerable progress made in Internet provided technologies, more educational providers are moving to use desktop and small group videoconference systems to link to classes and/or students over the Internet. There is little research on the actual implementation of videoconferencing in educational institutions, specifically as related to the operation of joint tutorials. Sumner and Hostetler (2000), conclude that according to most available research, desktop versus face – to – face communication produce similar learning outcomes. This is also supported by Owen and Aworuw (2003), analysis of how distributed education compares to traditional classroom teaching. Forster and Washington (2000) offer a positive, yet realistic, model of organization for videoconference courses. Amerian (2002) argues that educators should use videoconferencing interactively, not passively like the ‘six o’clock news’. Videoconferencing, “should be used for tutorial support to maximise the benefits of small group interaction, and not primarily for content delivery, which can often be more effective using books, videos and multimedia CD packages”, (Hearnshaw, 2000 p. 222).

The existing research answers a number of questions and provides a number of important conclusions, for example Greenberg (2004) states:

• Videoconferencing is neither more nor less effective than a traditional class.
• Videoconferencing supports far greater interaction than is otherwise possible from many asynchronous technologies, and effective videoconferencing based instruction must be designed to take advantage of this capability.
• Other, related instructional strategies have been identified to maximize the success of videoconferencing based learning situations.
• When used appropriately, videoconferencing is a cost effective way for educational institutions to deliver successful educational experiences to an expanded population.
This paper explores whether the use of videoconferencing enhances a student’s experience in a tutorial where cross-national/cultural issues are being explored in the context of international marketing. What are the benefits and challenges to marketing educators in conducting bi-national tutorials?

**Method**

This study uses case study technique, ‘which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon in its real life context using multiple sources of evidence, (Robson, 1993, p. 52). In this instance, evidence will be provided through observation of observers, facilitators and students evaluation of the tutorials. By using a number of sources of evidence this in part overcomes the possibility of bias by either or all parties.

The universities that were involved were Lingnan University Hong Kong & Swinburne University of Technology, Australia. Lingnan group comprised approximately 30 3rd year business students in a management class and Swinburne students comprised 12 2nd year marketing and international business students mainly in 2nd/3rd year. There were two tutorials conducted in September and October 2003, 6.30-7.30 pm AEST in labs specially constructed for videoconferencing. The first tutorial was run by Lingnan and had 6 groups of three to four students present findings for an ethics case study on Scaffolding. The followup tutorial was conducted by Swinburne two weeks later with a small group of 2 students presenting a case by Trimarchi (2003). In addition to the students there were a number of observers in both countries as well as lecturers, tutors and technicians.

**The first tutorial**

Both classes linked up without incident. The first noticeable difference between the two videoconference sites was the use of the microphones. Lingnan used a handheld microphone, as the group of students was quite large. This resulted in the presentation looking a little like a television show. Students could only talk (and be heard) when the microphone was handed to them. This appeared to slow things down on the first observation. At Swinburne, two microphones were strategically placed among the group of twenty students. This resulted in student being able to speak freely at the time of their choice.

Lingnan was to present in this videoconference class and thus they formally started the class session. When the class started Swinburne students were not acknowledged immediately, rather the class just started whilst it appeared the lecturer addressed the local (Hong Kong) students. Only after the first student had made his presentation, and asked for comments and questions, was Swinburne acknowledged. At first people appeared to be uncertain when the student asked for questions. Most Swinburne students appeared a little camera shy, however questions were raised and dialogue between students at both ends began. The local camera at both end points looked for a single shot or close-up on students that were talking, wherever possible. This initially resulted in some laughter as other students, oblivious to the fact they were blocking such camera shots were gently pushed out of the way by others. This appeared to be due to the fact that students were looking at the far end picture and not necessary the local picture. It did not take long however for students to ascertain what was going on and to move out of the way when the camera was focusing on some one in their vicinity.
Another observation was that, when someone in a large group was asking a question you really had to search for that person to see where he/she was. Students at both ends appeared to have difficulties understanding each other. This was not because of poor audio rather it appeared to be language oriented. People appeared to be camera shy initially but this became less so during the second half of the conference. Additionally, when questions were asked nobody appeared eager to answer. A considerable amount of coaching by lecturers, and tutors took place to encourage students to answer. As is often the case in groups some students tended to talk more than others. It was no different in these groups.

Furthermore it was observed that the Lingnan students introduced themselves, before addressing the group whilst Swinburne students did not. The Lingnan students presented their conclusions regarding the case in an orderly fashion, eliciting questions of the Swinburne students. This was very confronting to the Swinburne students as it was quite formal and somewhat ‘put them on the spot’. This could be that Lingnan students might have been exposed to more videoconferences than the Swinburne students or this is a cross-cultural difference in terms of class engagement. Humor was used to good effect during the conference at both ends. The videoconference seemed somewhat stilted at the start but appeared to flow more naturally toward the conclusion. It was clear students were concentrating on the incoming picture, whilst also having to get used to seeing themselves on the near picture, this took some getting used to.

When the videoconference class ended initial reactions from students were gauged in interviews. Students mentioned that it took one hour to cover a standard half hour tutorial exercise, but that it was more engaging doing it in a videoconference. All students liked seeing the far end students and commented they liked the camera focus in on people. Some students wanted it to be more like a tutorial for example; the tutor should be more in charge and speak more. Swinburne students suspected that Lingnan students were worried about their English. In the first half hour of the videoconference the international students based at Swinburne asked questions however, in the second half the Australian students were more dominant. All Swinburne students said they did not like the roving microphone at the Lingnan end.

The second tutorial

There was a noticeable difference in this conference and the first. This time, Swinburne students were presenting, and Lingnan students were providing the questions. A separate monitor (also called a confidence monitor) was set up for the Swinburne presenters. This monitor permitted the presenters to view the remote site as well as the images that were being transmitted. It also allowed the presenters to address the local class simultaneously without turning their back to any participating site. This was similar to the experiences of Price and Spence, (2002). Students appeared to be more at ease with the medium and were more eager to participate. Conversations were more plentiful and playful. The web-conference provided useful visuals (PowerPoint), which all participants could see on a separate screen. Interaction flowed more easily than previously. Some comments were made immediately after the videoconference one of which stood out: “you see every cringe, especially as it is larger than life on the screen”.

Both tutorials
Students commented that although the teachers may have been well trained and prepared to use the videoconference technologies, the students were not and, in many cases, were overwhelmed by the initial videoconference. Some students wished that they were told in advance what to expect. They also wished that they too should have been trained or prepared and suggested there ought to be a prepared write up to supplement some of the language barriers that appeared to be present. The language (accent) barrier was clearly identified by most students to as being of significance and one that was slowing down the class significantly. Indeed some students said they covered in one hour what they would usually cover in half that time. For some students the tutorials where too structured and they would have liked to see a format that was less formal.

One student felt that “We should know each other more first, so we can talk more freely”, whilst another thought it “Critical that participants are told beforehand what will happen, what is expected of them and what they can expect from the other end”. All in all most students enjoyed it but thought the sessions were “very intense”. Approximately 70 participants from both universities were invited to complete a short survey, see Table 1

**Table 1 key survey findings (n=43)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension (questions truncated)</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interaction with students from other University by videoconferencing (vc) helped me learn more</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VC tutorials using case study were engaging, motivating</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VC technology enhanced my interest in learning</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions raised in discussions were critical to issues raised</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I accepted ideas put forward by students from other Uni</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My learning responsibilities have been appro. allocated</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt comfortable with tutorials delivered by vc</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* full details will be revealed at the conference.

**Common issues**

The two-hour time difference between the locations in this instance was generally not seen as a problem. The main dilemma was that the Academic years were vastly different at both Universities, this meant that to find a window where both classes could discuss the cases meaningfully could only take place after some weeks had transpired in respective subjects. Additional to this were the difficulties with timetabling the classes to enable use of the laboratory setting. Most, if not all class sessions are setup and confirmed well before the start of the semester, so planning to incorporate these tutorials was made several months before they were conducted. Another challenge was the issue of tutorial time allocation, at Swinburne, the tutorial is 1 hour long, where at Lingnan was 1.5 hours.

This project was initiated via two educational facilitators at the respective universities. Their personal vision of the process was the driving force behind the instigation of this project. Recruitment to the project were technical specialists to conduct the videoconference hookup and subject academics to enable a common learning environment. In this project the Lingnan side had two groups of subject academics who were introduced to the concept during the life of this project and in the first instance did not go ahead with it due to: lost contact, semester breaks and the outbreak of SARS closing the Lingnan campus for a few weeks. Their
discontinuance is not known however it could be that they had lost interest or did not have a relevant class in the subsequent semester in which to apply this concept to. This meant more time taken to recruit new academics to the project and agreement to content etc.

The eventual running of the two tutorials meant an alignment of curriculum which requires significant planning. In this case the Swinburne tutorial was on International Marketing and Lingnan on International Management. In addition the Swinburne students were a mixture of second and third year students whereas the Lingnan students were all third year. The first issue was finding a topic common to both subject cohorts, and exercises relevant to the course level of the students. It was agreed to use an ethics case study for the first tutorial to see what differences there were between the east/west cohorts. A confounding factor for the ethics case was the impurity of culture with Swinburne students with at least eight different cultures represented with twelve students. The second tutorial it was decided to use a case about Hong Kong and an Australian company’s market entry strategy to enter this market (Trimarchi, 2002). In this instance the case study was presented by Australia students who were in some respects reality testing their strategy with the Hong Kong students. The difficulty with this approach is that the Lingnan students were not fully conversant with the theories surrounding market entry and therefore their feedback was somewhat shallow.

**Recommendations**

The following are additional recommendations that could well aid tutors:

- Train students and staff thoroughly in all facets of videoconferencing before classes,
- Ensure language barriers where possible are cleared before the videoconference,
- Beware of cultural differences before commencing projects and find a way to work with it,
- Ensure a coordinator is appointed during the implementation process who can oversee and deal with all common issues between connecting parties,
- Maintain someone in the room during every videoconference. Both a local facilitator and a technical support person (close by) are mandatory (Greenberg and Colbert, 2003),
- Ensure introductions are made all round to ensure that students and tutors alike know who their counterparts are,
- Limit the number of observers or outsiders to reduce the artificiality of the session,
- Adhere to a rigid timetable, start on time, finish on time,
- Keep the first video meetings short, increasing duration once expertise has developed,
- Do not assume your English (accent) is understood during foreign link-ups,
- Be aware of technical, human and educational limitations,
- Use ‘people and content’ where possible to aid communication,
- Use continuous presence to ensure all parties can be seen at all times,
- Use hand signals to attract attention when raising questions. (ensure you understand the cross cultural significance of same too) This is specially important when class sizes are larger,
- Encourage interaction by involving participants by asking them for feedback and addressing them directly, although this could be problematic in high context cultures,
- De-brief after classes where possible to obtain useful feedback,
- Ensure co-ordination of curriculum and learning outcomes between parties before commencing the project
- Aim where possible to conduct these tutorials in a “regular” room rather than a studio to reduce the degree of artificiality of the surroundings.
Future research could be conducted in a number of ways including: Cross cultural experiences, valid measurement of bi-national tutorial effectiveness, common/joint assessment, and international collaboration activities.

References


