

Distance Education the Pacific Way

A Multi-Modal Teaching Approach for South Pacific Learners

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Abstract: This article explores some of the challenges and solutions of distance education among South Pacific Islands, as well as the cultural appropriateness of different distance-learning approaches for South Pacific learners. The distance-learning approach also incorporated the three protocols suggested by McInnerney and Roberts (2004) to develop a sense of community. The course utilized WebCT, using the communication chat rooms, discussion boards and emails; video conferencing was also used to conduct student debates between two Pacific Island Centres in the island countries of Vanuatu and Samoa. Students formed International learning teams to prepare and to conduct debates between the two nations. The students also produced and showed videos on their islands' cultures, educational systems, and economies. The distance-learning approach generated high levels of interest and motivation, as well as creativity, which engaged students fully in their own learning. A sense of community was developed indicating that distance education including online learning can be culturally sensitive and complement the 'Pacific Way' of learning.

Keywords: Asynchronous Learning, Culture, Distance Learning, Multimodal Learning, Online Learning, South Pacific, Videoconferencing

Introduction

IN THIS PAPER, the authors report on their implementation of a multi-modal, student-centred distance learning approach that challenges the criticisms of online learning for South Pacific Islanders. The authors suggest that online learning can be a very useful tool to meet the educational needs of South Pacific learners. This paper describes a pilot distance-education course at the University of the South Pacific (USP) for teachers. USP has been a pioneer in the development of correspondence courses, teleconferencing, and satellite-delivered video courses.

In the last decade, as the western countries incorporated online learning, USP has been slow to move to online learning. The reason for this reluctance is twofold. First, student-centred learning is foreign to the South Pacific culture; second, appropriate technology has not been available.

The University of the South Pacific (USP) provides a unique educational program. The University:

- Serves, and is managed by, 12-member island countries.
- Services an area encompassing 1/3 of the earth's surface.
- Has adopted print-based distance learning as an essential teaching method to meet the needs of its member countries.

- Teaches member countries that share a culture, which is clearly distinct from European and American cultures

In order to appreciate the particular challenges faced by teachers in the Pacific Islands, it is necessary to recognize the great distances that separate countries, as well as linguistic, cultural, economic and developmental differences within the region. Key challenges include:

Isolation: Graduates have little exposure to other Pacific Island cultures, European cultures, and to international business practices. The high cost of Internet access adds to the isolation.

Lecture Model: Lecture remains the dominant instructional method. Little emphasis is placed upon collaborative, student-centered learning.

Cultural Barriers: Many South Pacific educators view online learning as a cultural threat. Some argue that education "should not be a direct transplant of western formal schooling, otherwise it will not be adaptive" (Harris, 1992). Other educators argue that South Pacific students learn differently and in a way that is not promoted by online learning.

This pilot course incorporated online pedagogical methods to help meet the cultural needs of Pacific Island learners. This course translated classroom



practices and approaches that support the *Pacific Way* of learning into a distance education environment. Key features of this *Pacific Way* include:

- Curriculum content that is sensitive to, and rooted in, the cultural context.
- Student-centered learning methods that challenge passive, rote learning
- Group activities that promote group involvement in learning, and encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning
- A framework within which students are encouraged to think critically
- The use of the Internet and multimodal teaching approaches

The *Pacific Way* is more than a view of education. It is a cultural and political process to deal with common challenges.

The Pacific Way of doing things referred to dialogue, consensus and mutual understanding. The politics of confrontation and contradiction, a common characteristic of western liberal democracy, was to be shunned in favor of collective consensual engagement.

<http://www.pacificmagazine.net/pm62004/pm-default.php?urlarticleid=0005>

The *Pacific Way* was designed to build a sense of community and promote productive social interaction into the fabric of the course, using the three protocols outlined by McInerney and Roberts (2004). The three protocols involve:

1. Greater use of distance synchronous communication strategies
2. A 'forming' stage as an integral part of the course structure
3. Effective guidelines for successful online communication

Methods

The pilot online course, Introduction to Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, was simultaneously taught to 30 students in two USP campuses: 20 in Vanuatu and 10 in Western Samoa. The course objectives were to:

1. Develop within students a global perspective
2. Promote understanding and cooperation among students in two countries by working collaboratively on international teams projects via the Internet
3. Develop faculty/student expertise in e-learning
4. Integrate the benefits of face-to-face and online learning,

Throughout each week, students had face-to-face classes linked to the themes of the course. One unique characteristic of the course was the use of WebCT and videoconferencing to prepare and deliver student debates. Students worked collaboratively in international teams via WebCT to develop weekly debates that were conducted through videoconferencing (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Live Televised Debate on the Topic, “Globalization or South Pacific culture?” between Students in Vanuatu and Samoa.

Instead of having Vanuatuan and Samoan debate teams, the teams were internationalized. Team members used the Internet to prepare for the weekly debates. This approach combined the benefits of face-to-face interaction and any-time, anyplace learning. The course included three debates on key Pacific Island cultural issues. The three debate topics were:

1. English language is the key to education in the South Pacific.
2. Access to education in the South Pacific should be limited, based upon the economic conditions
3. South Pacific culture or globalization: Which way should we go?

To prepare for these debates students used the synchronous chat rooms and asynchronous discussion boards of WebCT to interact with classmates, team members, and the instructors on the two campuses. The following extract from the logs of the Chat Room give a ‘flavor’ of the interactions.

“Student 1: i am very busy with the excitement of trying to use this new technology whoow

Student 2: Hi Rosie, wow! we’re buddies, so let’s get some ideas, shall we?

Student3 Hi George iam here do you get me/

Student 1: Yeah, why not! can I first scare you!! I don’t remember when I last took part in a debate.

Student4 yes herem i get you clearly

Student3 Hey Goggy I just send yur a message about your autobiography, check it out right n ow.

Student 2: Rossie, I’ve never been in a debate, and that’s the truth, not even in my own language.

Student3 Hello Logged On People, I am keen to chat with you all. Especially about the debates. I am in the Rebuttor team for Week 1 Debate

Student 1: Hi Arthur, nice to have you on line, your company is fun.

In this extract Student3 logged on to ‘chat’ and to experiment with the technology, whilst Student 1, 2 and 4 were keenly focused on their participation in the forthcoming debate.

Students used the chat room to establish contact with each other and to share their initial thoughts. This was especially important in the light of the time difference between the two sites, which straddle the International Date Line. The camaraderie engendered by the technology is clearly evident in the extract and is central to the development of the ‘Pacific Way’

Students worked in groups to produce a video introducing their own culture to others to be shown before the debate sessions on T.V. The purpose of the video was to create a *cultural dialogue* where

students from two South Pacific island countries could compare and contrast their cultures and educational systems.

Discussion

Although these students may share a common Pacific culture, in the course it became apparent that there were also significant differences. At the start of the course some students expressed unease about working with individuals from other Pacific Islands, although most were open and willing to cross the national boundaries.

Student reactions to the course were extremely positive. The chat room and discussion boards generated high levels of enthusiasm. Students were keen to develop their skills with the technology and worked long and hard on the debates and videos. The videoconferences formed student bonds and served as a vehicle to show case the student films and to promote appreciation of the contrasting South Pacific cultures.

Although debates are not part of the cultural traditions of the South Pacific, students participated enthusiastically, bringing their own cultural stance to their contributions. The students engaged in dialogue, discussion and worked to achieve consensus. The instructors noted that the students' communal culture translated easily into working in online groups.

The instructors also noted that "acceptance" rather than "critical thinking" appears to be the South Pacific Way. These students, although they were teachers, often experienced difficulty in applying principles of critical thinking within their debates.

The technology supported the students' cultural proclivity for group work and communal interactions, since many students come from tribal villages. Students were excited at seeing themselves and their 'virtual' classmates on television. (The use of television also added a sense of formality to the occasion and caused some students to experience 'butterflies' prior to transmission.)

The spirit of the 'Pacific Way' thrived in an atmosphere of common endeavor. Far from being seen as an 'alien' approach, students embraced the technology with enthusiasm. They became empowered to interact with each at a distance. After they became comfortable with the televised medium, they became confident and enjoyed the experience.

Whilst recognizing that student numbers in this pilot course were relatively small, students' written evaluations and tutor observations and assessments of the products of the course provide support for the value of the experiment. We found that national boundaries melted as the two groups interacted and shared their joint work. The learning teams shared their knowledge, skills, and culture to complete their

common tasks. Students became deeply involved both in the technology and the debates.

The following student comments indicate their reactions to the course:-

"I like the discussion sessions. I learnt a lot from other teachers experiences. I enjoyed doing the film.

It was a wonderful experience."

"I enjoyed learning through teams. The webCT sessions are good, The video conference debates are enjoyable. I did enjoy the course. I learnt a lot of new things. Thank you for that experience."

"A very good attempt and an effective way to interact with colleagues on the other side of the divide. It demonstrates the practicality of a virtual classroom."

"I like the course because it provides a balance between theory and practice and introduce the participants in the course to a variety of teaching methods as well as ways to use the technology around us to the advantage of our profession. This is challenging and a learning experience too. It helps the participants to reflect deeply on some critical issues in education and in our regions today."

"The introduction to the use of Web CT is very useful for me as It is becoming an important mode of teaching in a regional institution like USP where I am currently lecturing. Learning teams are also important as we don't only share ideas but also learn from each other.

Video conferencing is also an important mode of learning, as we can share and learn from each other outside our geographical location. We researched and shared ideas across different institutions and the topics were also relevant to our region today.

Conclusions

This project suggests that online learning is appropriate for South Pacific learners.

The pilot course demonstrated the viability of videoconferencing and Internet-based study groups as a cost effective way to provide educational opportunities throughout the Pacific Islands. Online learning holds the promise of providing Pacific islanders the opportunity to learn, regardless of their location. Moreover, these technologies can provide essential bridges to instantaneously link the various islands. The benefits of distance learning hold great promise in this region where students are separated by thousands of miles of blue water.

Returning to the concept of 'The Pacific Way,' in the words of the late *Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara*:

“Just one word – at the outset, it was we, the old men who dreamt dreams. I now call on the young men and women to see visions. For where there is no vision the people perish.”

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