

CROSS CULTURAL TRANS-DISCIPLINARY DISTANCE LEARNING: U.S./SOUTH AFRICA PARTNERSHIP

*Hari P. Garbharran, *Maria A. Smith, *Jo M. Edwards, *Peggy O. Murdock,
*Kathy M. Mathis, and *Mala L. Beard.

INTRODUCTION

The U.S.-South Africa partnership is an initiative to address public health issues in squatter communities, create an awareness of basic needs and problems in KwaZulu-Natal imijondolos, empower residents to develop good living habits, and promote cross cultural, trans-disciplinary distance learning. The U.S.-South Africa partnership evolved through a collaborative effort between faculty at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIUC), and faculty at the University of Durban-Westville and other research organizations in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This initiative was funded by the Association Liaison Office for University Cooperation and Development (ALO), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the White House Development and Democracy Initiative (EDDI).

Components of the partnership include research, education, and outreach. This presentation will address how a web-based course was developed to interweave all three components and facilitate cross-cultural, trans-disciplinary learning. The unique challenges from course conceptualization to implementation will be presented with solutions utilized in this project.

COURSE CONCEPTUALIZATION

Since the partnership spans two continents the research team developed a full web based course that would be offered to students from all three universities involved in the project. The advantages of web-based education include: easy access, quick student access, quick faculty access for revisions and updates, and reduction in printing costs. The disadvantages involve increased requirements pertaining to: substantial technical infrastructure, learners adopting a new way of learning, education of faculty related to the utilization of educational design, resource management, and substantial initial time outlay.

Developing the course required teamwork and preliminary planning. Weekly course preparation was not possible because information had to be available for students to work at their own pace. This was important in order to maintain course momentum and student interest. Team members had to develop familiarity with course software. They had to be risk takers since the restrictions of web design required alternative teaching and evaluation strategies. The course required faculty and students to be flexible and accept the role of risk takers.

*Middle Tennessee State University

Faculty promoted life long learning strategies for students through web-based methodology. The research faculty addressed issues not normally involved in traditional classroom lecture courses. These included student knowledge level of computers, student access to peers and faculty, and a higher level of flexibility and course specificity.

An initial decision related to course development was where the course home site would be housed. The decision was made to house the site at the university of the majority of research and teaching faculty. The course was housed on the MTSU server. This permitted maximum access for faculty technical support. Organization and management of the website was faculty controlled which allowed access for modification of course components.

Faculty collaboration and identification of a standard presentation framework was critical in order to streamline standard course elements. Through this teamwork and group collaboration, the course was titled "Public Health Concerns for Informal Settlement Communities in South Africa." The course was broken down into five units or modules, objectives were outlined, text format for lectures was adopted, and the team agreed to utilize study data in required student assignments. The group also observed the three important elements in assignment preparation: flexibility, specificity, and clarity. During course development the group took cognizance of the human factor and ensured that readers were presented with visual clues and avoided lengthy, full screens of text. The team viewed the web as another valuable tool in the delivery of course content.

COURSE IMPLEMENTATION

This full web-based course on South African informal communities was offered for the first time in Spring 2001 to students at MTSU, UDW, and SIUC. The course was interdisciplinary and a cooperative effort of several departments of all three universities. Disciplines embraced health education, engineering technology and industrial studies, and geography and geology. This interdisciplinary aspect allowed students to sign up in any department or academic unit. Multi-campus site availability permitted students to sign up at their degree granting university. This allowed students to obtain individual university credit and obviated problems generally associated with transfer credit across universities. The course also allowed for individual faculty credit hour production within their own academic unit. Each university received student tuitions generated for faculty teaching courses. Additionally, the course could be tailored to fit academic requirements needed for each institution.

The course was very interactive. Components included links to course information, staff information, course documents, communication, external links and student tools. Areas not required by faculty were easily removed. Students were oriented by email to components of the course software. These included the drop box for assignments, which allowed faculty a paperless mechanism to grade

and return assignments. The communication area allowed for easy access for student and faculty interaction as it housed all email addresses. Students introduced themselves to the group by creating their own web page during the first week of the course. This allowed students and faculty a visual representation of individuals in the course. Communication also included the ability to chat on-line and have asynchronous discussions. A specific area was tailored by faculty to include the course syllabus and information, which facilitated student use. Faculty developed a calendar, which identified all course components and specifics related to assignments and evaluation methods. Course lectures were housed in folders by units. This clarified beginning and ending points for specific content areas. Faculty were cognizant of download time for course components and organized information in formats that were easily accessible for students in the U. S. and South Africa.

Benefits to the students are numerous and include usage of actual first hand data to learn, sharing experiences across continents, and cross-cultural learning through the exchange of cultures. It increases the technology knowledge level of many students. Benefits to faculty included learning a new format for instruction that allowed an exchange that could only be imagined several years ago. Challenges for faculty were mainly related to course and time management. Faculty found that maintaining a presence to students related to the course was more deliberate and active for the web-based course as opposed to traditional lecture courses.

CONCLUSION

The Cross Cultural Trans-Disciplinary Distance Learning: U.S./South Africa Partnership was both challenging and rewarding. It allowed faculty to expand their horizons and expose their students to a unique trans-disciplinary, cross-cultural experience.

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