

Issues in Internationalization of education: The case of a Danish Business School exporting a blended learning MBA program to developing countries.

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Abstract

Internationalization activities, according to Roger Bennett (Bennett and Kane 2009) include, but are not limited to, international franchising, curriculum internationalization, exchange programs, and the recruitment of foreign teaching staff. Internationalization also includes cross-border delivery of educational services, for example in the form of net-based distance education or blended learning programs (Hughes 2008). This paper addresses the issues that an educational institute may face when offering blended learning programs in countries, in which the cultural and social context, the educational and pedagogical traditions, and the access to supporting technologies differ markedly from the corresponding conditions in its home country. Based on the insights emerging from a discussion of these issues, the paper points out the problem areas in which further research is needed in order to establish a theoretical and practical platform for cross-cultural delivery of higher education as blended-learning programs.

In theory, there seems to be a perfect fit between the principles of blended learning and the needs of both the provider of cross-border higher education and the students. Within a blended learning framework, it should be possible to achieve the fine balance between exposure to high quality learning material, well-qualified teachers and face-to-face interaction in local learning environments. However, concrete experience made by a Danish higher education provider when offering an MBA education as a blended learning program in Egypt and Vietnam strongly indicates the pedagogical, organizational, social and cultural complexity involved in such an endeavour and the need to further develop blended-learning methods.

The case of a Danish private business school "International Business School of Scandinavia" (IBSS) and its experience in exporting a blended learning MBA program designed in Denmark to countries in the Middle East and Asia show that the use of the blended learning mode of teaching and advanced distance learning technologies was not enough to overcome the barriers that arise in countries which in significant ways differ from the program's country of origin.

Within the overall framework of internationalization of education and blended learning theory, this paper accounts for the obstacles met by the Danish MBA provider and discusses how these experiences challenge state-of-the-art theory and practice in the area of blended learning.

Keywords

Internationalization, export, education, globalization, blended learning, e-learning, culture, Middle East, Asia, technology.

Introduction

The Universal Human Rights declaration number 26 states that "Everyone has the right to education" and that "Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit". This declaration that was released by the Human Right and adopted and proclaimed by the United Nations in December 10, 1948, has inspired the international community to partner with local governments of developing countries, to work together to bring quality higher education and professional education to people in these countries. Obviously, despite their accession to Human Rights

declarations on rights to education, many developing countries lack the resources to establish higher education opportunities which, in practice, are equally accessible to all citizens. Thus, to most developing countries, various forms of internationalized education represent attractive opportunities to raise the educational level of their populations.

Internationalization activities, according to Roger Bennett (Bennett and Kane 2009) include, but are not limited to, international franchising, curriculum internationalization, exchange programs, and the recruitment of foreign teaching staff. One aspect of internationalization of education is the enrolment of international students in overseas universities in western countries, which has been increasing in numbers markedly in recent years, for example, in UK the numbers of international students account for over 40% of UK postgraduate students and 50% of those doing full-time research degrees (Source: UK council for international student affairs – September 2010). The direction of international student mobility is clear: from the global South to universities within the western educational tradition, situated in the main Anglophone countries (Hughes 2008, 5). The migration of students away from their countries of origin to western countries may provide these students with a chance to receive quality education on the short run, but may eventually lead to 'brain drain' caused by uneven distribution of the world's knowledge resources on the longer run. Thus, subsidiaries of Western universities may be able to play a positive role in the 'knowledge economy' of developing countries if they, on the one hand, can provide more people with higher education and, on the other, enable talented people to stay in the developing countries instead of going abroad. With this vision and in an attempt to bring global educational standards to all nations, many institutes from Europe, Northern America and Australia export educational programs to other countries in Asia, Africa, Middle East, Eastern Europe and Latin America.

Within the wide range of different activities subsumed under the term internationalization of education, this paper will focus on cross-border delivery or 'exporting' of education. Since such international education programs are delivered in a country different from their country of origin, a blended learning mode of teaching would seem to be the optimal method as it provides the flexibility of online education where students can study on their own time and without the obligation of geographical relocation to be in class. At the same time, the part of the program which is provided as "face-to-face" helps students not to feel isolated from their learning community and gives them the opportunity to interact with teachers as well as with other students in a physical world rather than interacting with them only in the virtual learning environment.

"Options for blended learning go beyond the classroom. They're formal and informal, technology and people-based, independent and convivial, and directive- and discovery-oriented. If you want to help employees with retirement planning, for example, a blend makes sense because the need extends over time. People can seek the information that they need, when they need it." (Rossett, Douglass et al. 2003)

Although blended learning, in theory, provides an attractive solution for exported education, yet in practice, it encounters many challenges that have been overlooked by researchers who have studied blended learning extensively. Consequently, little attention has been given to blended learning in the context of export of education from one country to another country and the cross-cultural difficulties and challenges that may face the educators as well as students in implementing this mode of education in cultures that may not be used to it or may even be resistant to it.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the challenges that a western educational institute may face in exporting its programs to developing countries. These challenges go beyond the obvious language barriers to more complicated cross cultural barriers and even infra-structural problems like access to internet and internet speed and even availability of steady electrical power. The fact that these educational programs are developed in one country and therefore rooted in its cultural values and belief systems and furthermore affected by the social and political system of the society in which it is produced, may in itself pose a challenge in getting students from other cultural backgrounds to adopt and engage in these programs. Students may feel alienated from the program as it does not conform with their own traditions, values and beliefs. The authors hope that highlighting these challenges may help western educational institutes to prepare well for these challenges on beforehand, and thus save a lot of otherwise wasted time, energy and money. The attempt to raise the level of awareness of challenges in technology-enhanced cross-border delivery of education is motivated by the experience made by a Danish private business school "International Business School of Scandinavia" (IBSS) when setting up a blended learning MBA program in Egypt and Vietnam which was designed in Denmark.

Blended learning - a teaching method for international education?

Many factors contributed to the spread of exported educational programs from developed to developing countries, these factors include but are not limited to: the spread of web based learning and the enhancements in technology and the increased number of English speaking people in non-English speaking countries. In their book "The Impact of E-Learning Programs on the Internationalization of the University", Amirault and Visser argue that the spread of web based learning in recent years can lead to increase of internationalization of education but some issues must be taken into consideration such as the faculty and students roles and migration, and the willingness of educators to take the role of facilitators in the online classrooms. (Amirault and Visser 2010). Caswell refers to the impact of the reduced costs of reproduction of distance learning educational programs saying:

"This marked decrease in costs has significant implications and allows distance educators to play an important role in the fulfillment of the promise of the right to universal education. At relatively little additional cost, universities can make their content available to millions. This content has the potential to substantially improve the quality of life of learners around the world."(Caswell, Henson et al. 2008)

These assumptions of researchers like Amirault and Visser make it sound so easy to upload some course materials on a "Learning Management System" for students from different countries and couple this with some face-to-face sessions and turn it into a high quality western education exported to developing countries. Such combinations of learning material and face-to-face interaction are commonly referred to as "Blended Learning". Graham, Harding, Kriger and Woltering and many others have studied the value as well as the change in satisfaction level of students when using a blended learning program compared to using a traditional program and concluded that students' satisfaction level is higher when using a blended learning program. In a study comparing medical students' satisfaction level when using a traditional program to using a Blended Learning program, the results show that using the Blended learning program increase student satisfaction. (Woltering, Herrler et al. 2009). In another study which was carried out at the University of Granada, with 1431 students in 17 groups, testing the outcome of a blended learning experience, the results show that the use of blended learning reduced dropout rates and improved students' exam marks and their perception of the program. (López-Pérez, Pérez-López et al. 2010)

But in practice, the use of "Blended Learning" mode of teaching may not be as easy as it sounds in spite of the fact that the face-to-face part of the blended learning programs is a traditional and well accepted teaching methodology for most students. Yet there may be other factors that can affect students' acceptance and use of the e-learning component of the "Blended Learning" program. Cultural barriers are among the most relevant issues which may be encountered in internationalized blended learning programs. As these programs are designed in one cultural, linguistic and social context and are influenced by the educational traditions in that context and then made available to target groups in a broad variety of different cultural and social contexts, this represents in itself an intriguing set of problems, both seen from the perspective of the provider and the student. Language as one of the aspects of culture can also be a challenge even with the students who are fluent in using English as a second language since the relation between culture and language goes beyond the simple use of words and understanding their meanings. It also includes ideas and values that are deeply embedded in these words and the difference that these values represent from one culture to another. The different technological infrastructure in each country is another important factor which may affect the quality of students' use of the e-learning component of "Blended Learning", for example if the e-learning activities include online streaming videos and the internet speed in one of these countries is not high enough to support these streaming videos, then students' experience with these videos will be unsatisfactory and their understanding of the content of the video may be impaired. The speed of internet also affects synchronous e-learning activities like online classes and webinars, where students need to participate at the same time with the teacher in an online class. If there is difference in internet speed used by students from different countries at the same time, this will affect the reception of the information and the use of webcams and audio and so the interaction between students among themselves and also between students and the teacher will be interrupted and thus their benefit of the online class will be affected as a result of this.

The issues which students face when using the e-learning component of the exported "Blended Learning" educational programs raise a question of the quality of the education those students receive who enrol in these programs. Since these programs depend in their pedagogy on the online portion of their programs, so it is

expected that if students fail to benefit from the online part of the program, then the overall benefit that the student gets will be markedly decreased. These questions may contradict with the rather naive assumption that enhancements in technology have managed to solve the geographical distance barrier and have made it possible for exporting educational institutes to export their programs freely to students in the developing world and that this goal can be achieved by simply making their curriculum, books and teaching materials available to those students online.

Developing countries represent an attractive market for franchising western educational institutes and so many universities seek this opportunity both for acquiring a global presence in a world that is moving very rapidly more and more towards a global reality and also for the obvious financial gains that come from these franchises in developing countries. A western degree is becoming a "passport" which gives young people access to the global employment market. Within this context, "Blended Learning" represents an opportunity to achieve the double purpose of global presence and financial gain and a challenge, especially if the program is not well planned and adapted to suit the diverse needs of the students in these countries. The risk is that students will either abandon these programs for lack of a perceived value or, which is more dangerous, will continue in these programs but fail to benefit fully from the programs' learning potential. A good example of this is the issue which was encountered in the Middle East and specifically in the Arab Peninsular Gulf region in Dubai and Qatar, where a lot of branches of American Universities were opened offering undergraduate and post graduate education. After a few years of opening, the governments in these countries found that these universities are more concerned with their profits than with the quality of education that they provide to these students, which meant that students graduating from the same university in the home country may hold the same degree as the ones graduating from the overseas branch of the same university but with much less qualifications, education and skills (Bollag 2006).

The case of a Danish business school

In this paper we present the case of a Danish private business school "International Business School of Scandinavia" (IBSS) and its experience of exporting a blended learning MBA program designed in Denmark to countries in the Middle East and Asia and the challenges that it faced in doing so. IBSS started in the year 2000 with the belief that training and education is optimized by the use of new technologies and has ever since worked on using blended learning as the platform for learning. Consequently, IBSS developed a blended learning MBA (Master of Business Administration) program aimed at developing applied skills of students within the business field. The program targets two kinds of students, first experienced managers with lack of theoretical knowledge and secondly B.A. Graduates with little experience.

IBSS uses a teaching pedagogy derived from the social constructivist ideas in teaching which requires students to form new ideas and gain knowledge from experience and sharing of experience and ideas. Modules are delivered as blended learning courses which include classroom teaching and instruction, home and self study, and e-learning tutorials with text and streaming videos supported by online group activities which are either synchronous as online classes and webinars or asynchronous as online group forums.

For years, IBSS used Blended Learning in presenting different training programs for professionals in Denmark and it was widely accepted by all attendees. But when "International Business School of Scandinavia" started exporting its MBA program to other regions like Asia and the Middle East, students from these countries did not adopt the use of the e-learning component of the program and viewed it as a less quality education tool than the conventional face-to-face teaching method. Furthermore, when International Business School of Scandinavia (IBSS) applied for the EFMD-CEL accreditation (EFMD is a global organization devoted to the continuous improvement of management development www.efmd.org) after they interviewed MBA students from Vietnam, their feedback was that students enjoy face-to-face contact with teachers and each other but they do not engage in the online activities, partly because of the language barrier and partly because they feel more comfortable organizing joint study sessions among themselves instead of participating in online group forums as they enjoy the personal interaction in meeting face-to-face more.

The constructivist teaching pedagogy adopted by IBSS, which uses simulations and activities to teach students and where the teacher's role is more of a facilitator than a "Guru" who has all the knowledge, was not appreciated nor adopted by students in countries like Egypt and Vietnam. In Vietnam, some of the students refused to participate in the activities and when they asked the teacher a question and the teacher, instead of giving them a ready-made answer, asked them to look the answer up in the internet, the students were frustrated

and complained that the teacher was not an experienced one. This teaching pedagogy was very strange to the students, to the extent that they reported it to some local newspapers that "ridiculed" the Danish business school educational pedagogy and the use of "games" in class for post graduate students and they even considered it an insult.

In Egypt, also, students did not adopt the e-learning component of the MBA program, and although all students are computer literate and use email and social networks like "facebook" almost daily in their personal as well as professional dealings, yet it was difficult for them to see that this can apply to education. While they expressed their appreciation of the face-to-face component of the program, they were reluctant to use the online component of the program (synchronous and asynchronous equally). Some of the students expressed their dissatisfaction with having any online components in the program and their concern that if the graduation certificate contains any notion that this program has any teaching parts done online, that this would decrease the value of the MBA certificate in the eyes of their employers. This indicates that online education is perceived in some countries to be non equivalent to face-to-face education and less effective.

All these incidents drew the attention of the management in "International Business School of Scandinavia" to the fact that students in some countries like Egypt and Vietnam prefer the human-human interface to the human-computer or human-material interface. In addition to students' preferences in the method of education, there are many other cultural differences in teaching students from different countries which raise a lot of questions that the school must attempt to find answers to, some of which may include but are not limited to:

- How formal or informal should the interaction in the synchronous e-learning setup be?
- During group debates and forums, how much conflict can people tolerate in content or style of argumentation?
- What role exists for personal opinion as opposed to group opinion?
- How should teachers or trainers act – as facilitators or gurus?
- Which interface is preferred in each country, computer-human interface or human-human interface or human-materials interface?

There are also a lot of other issues that have been raised while teaching these students especially from these two countries and most significantly, there were the difference in gender roles and language. Some gender issues rose in some conservative cultures like: can men teach women and vice versa? Can men and women attend same classes? Can men and women co-exist in the same virtual class? Will men accept being taught by a woman teacher, even if it is online? Is the use of webcam in online class culturally accepted for both men and women?

Language issues were also encountered in some countries, specifically in Vietnam where students speak very little English and even though some of them can read and write English well yet it was almost impossible for them to understand or be understood by a native English speaking teacher. This problem was overcome by translating all the teaching materials to Vietnamese language and by using an interpreter during classes, but this raised some more language related cultural issues as: should the curriculum and content be translated to the language of the students in all countries? Or should the international educational programs admit only English speaking students? And if the schools admitted only English speaking students, would this deprive the non-English speaking students from quality international education? Can the new online translation tools (like Google translate) be used to solve the language barrier issues and be successful in translating contents of curriculum from English which is a rather simple language to more complicated languages like Arabic or Vietnamese or Chinese?

Other issues encountered by "International Business School of Scandinavia" were the different technological infrastructure in different countries, for example in Denmark 86.1% of the population are internet users while in Egypt only 21.1% of the population and in Vietnam 27.1% of the population are internet users (source: Internet World Stats: an International website that features up to date world Internet Usage, Population Statistics and Internet Market Research Data, for over 233 individual countries and world regions). This may result in limitation of the people who can benefit from the exported "Blended Learning" programs.

Also, the speed of internet is different from one country to the other, for example in Denmark the maximum speed of download is 60.94 Mbps while the maximum speed of upload is 41.27 Mbps. This is different from a country like Egypt where the maximum speed of download is 8.17 Mbps while the maximum speed of upload is 5.62 Mbps and in Vietnam where the maximum speed of download is 24.04 Mbps and the maximum speed of

upload is 13.97 Mbp. These differing speeds make synchronous e-learning difficult where the transfer of data from the computer of either the teacher or the student in one country can be much slower or much faster than that of another user in another country which may have a negative effect on the learner's experience with e-learning altogether. (Source: www.speedtest.net Speedtest.net is a broadband speed analysis tool that allows anyone to test their Internet connection). The different time zones between different countries may also make it difficult to schedule a time for synchronous online activities, like online classes, which will be suitable for all students and the teacher, so always someone will be waking up in the middle of the night for the class, which again makes the learner's experience unpleasant.

These challenges have intrigued research by the Danish business school under study to further study the effect of culture and cross cultural communication on internationalization of education and how this can be overcome in a manner that would benefit the students and the school at the same time.

Discussion

Blended Learning method of teaching provides a logical choice for exporting of education as it eliminates the need for long term geographical relocation of both students and staff while providing the students with the needed international teaching and exposure to both students and teachers from other countries. But as seen from the case of the Danish business school IBSS and the resistance from students towards using the e-learning component of blended learning, this raises the question of the usability and the real learning value that students may gain by using this method. A question that needs to be explored further is the quality of education that students get when they fail or refuse to make use of a large component of the blended learning program which is the e-learning component, whether this is due to their lack of faith in the online method of learning or due to their lack of experience in dealing with technology in a satisfactory way that allows them to make the best of the content of the program. In order to work with these questions we need to gain a better understanding on the issues involved in acceptance/non-acceptance of the e-learning parts of blended learning.

Another point that needs to be further investigated is the attractiveness of developing countries as a market for exported education especially by private operators in that field and although it seems to be a profit generating option for educators, but will the costs of adapting the courses to fit the local markets culturally, linguistically and pedagogically still make these markets profitable for these organizations?

Hence there are many problems involved when western education providers' export programs to developing countries and we suggest that these problems can be differentiated into four categories:

- Pedagogical considerations: the pedagogy used in developing the programs being exported may be not understood or not appreciated by the students in another country if the pedagogy of teaching they are used to is different and thus the educational provider must decide how to handle this: should the pedagogical approach be changed or adapted to meet the expectations of the students? Or should the provider attach importance to explaining the pedagogy and make sure that students are aware of this issue before they start?
- Contextual considerations: the context in which the program is presented should make sense to the students' culture and background. Since the educational programs are developed in western countries with ideas deeply rooted in the cultural and conceptual structure of the country of origin, this may pose a challenge for students from other cultures to relate to them and process the information in a way that makes sense within their own frame of reference and thus may affect the effectiveness of the learning process to them
- Organizational considerations: Offering blended learning programs in countries significantly different from the country of the providing institution represents considerable organizational challenges to that institution. For example, the institution often relies on teachers familiar with the educational tradition, culture, and language of the students. At the same time, such teachers must be experts in the disciplines they are teaching. Thus, in all forms of staff development activities ranging from recruitment to quality control, cultural barriers and geographical distance play a role.
- Technical considerations: the technological infrastructure of the countries that they export education to is also an important factor that should not be overlooked. Examples of these considerations are availability of an easy access to internet and the speed of the internet. The availability of technologically advanced computers in the country, at affordable prices together with the level of computer literacy of the majority of the target population for these programs. The technical requirements of the software you use for e-learning is also very significant in how useful the e-learning will be to the students, for example streaming videos

with high resolution may need a very high speed internet, which may not be available in many developing countries. Also, if you use synchronous e-learning sessions using webinars tools with students and the teacher from different countries and the speed of the internet is not the same then the teacher's presentation may be interrupted or there may be a time lag between the picture and the voice of the teacher and students.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, internationalization of education is a rising trend nowadays and theoretically speaking, blended learning method of teaching – which combines face-to-face sessions with online synchronous and asynchronous activities – is ideal for exported educational programs. Yet, in practice, this method of teaching was faced with many challenges as cross cultural barriers, technical infrastructure, pedagogical and contextual issues.

So what is learning? And is there only one method of learning that should be suitable for all? Or does learning have a "national identity" of its own? Learning to one culture may be linked to watching a "Guru" and learning from his/her experience or having a mentor, like in Vietnam where students go to colleges and get a mentor and learn just by following this mentor's daily dealings. Maybe learning is just the simple acquiring of knowledge and storing them in the brain to be ready for use when needed. A more important question is how exporting educational institutes may approach the different methods of learning? Should they force their own methods and just expect everyone to follow them? Or should they modify their teaching methods to meet the different needs of each group of students? And if they take this approach, what impact will this have on their profitability

Further research is needed taking an ethnographic observational approach to study the learning process of students in higher education levels in Denmark (representing Northern Europe) and Egypt (representing Middle East region) and Vietnam (representing developing countries in Asia) to find these points:

- What are the factors that influence students from different educational and cultural backgrounds and their acceptance and usage of e-learning?
- What are the students' expectations from e-learning in different cultures?
- What are the elements of e-learning that need to be modified in each culture to improve students' experience with e-learning?
- What are the factors that affect students' acceptance and usage of e-learning component of the specific blended learning MBA program which is under investigation in this study?

Also, Action Research is needed aimed at verifying the real effect of the factors concluded from the first study on the acceptance and usage of students in Egypt and Vietnam of the e-learning component of IBSS blended learning MBA program.

The result of these two studies is expected to shed the light on the most important factors that should be taken into consideration when educational institutes are considering internationalization of their educational programs and this would lead to better introduction and implementation of these programs in new countries.

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