THE 'GLOBAL CLASSROOM': SUPPORTED DISTANCE LEARNING LESSONS FOR INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

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Abstract

Over the last 5 years, a Supported Distance Learning (SDL) business programme at the Hertfordshire Business School (HBS) has been successfully delivered to over 1000 students, majority of which is international, mature, and in full-time employment. Around 80% of the students who have graduated from this programme have achieved a ‘good degree’. The programme is delivered with the support of some of the school’s international partners located in Trinidad (CTS College), Pakistan (The Millennium Universal College - TMUC), and Indonesia (Raffles College). Students are offered the opportunity to gain a UK degree with global relevance and local support, without having to leave their homes. Partners provide local face-to-face sessions that are tailored to their students’ needs, expectations and local demands. The SDL model relies heavily on excellent inclusivity in practice, and this is achieved through the close and ongoing collaboration between the programme team, partners and students. There are two key parts leading to the success of this programme: the first one is the ‘global classroom’ facilitated by CANVAS, whereby all students in the programme (regardless of their location) have access to module pages where they can engage in discussion forums with each other, the module leaders and/or the local tutors from the other locations/colleges; the second one is the classroom environment, whereby each partner provides equivalent level of support, facilities and tutorials. General guidance is provided for all the face-to-face sessions, but each local tutor is responsible for bringing their own business experience and case-studies into the classroom. This is usually linked to their own business practice. There is great flexibility and variety in the delivery methods, something that prepares students for the needs of an increasingly demanding global market. Global classrooms offer an accessible way to internationalize teaching and learning experiences by combining cross-cultural collaborations with technology – some examples of good practice will be explored by this paper. On the other hand, local face-to-face sessions complement the ‘virtual’ experience – the partners’ work with students and the team at HBS will also be explored by this paper. Overall, there is a wholesome approach to the SDL experience because it provides students with important key opportunities for them to apply, discuss and develop new concepts and theories at both global and local level.

Keywords: SDL, Supported Distance Learning, Collaborative Provision, Globalisation, Local communities, Higher Education, Blended learning, International Partnerships.

1 INTRODUCTION

The rise of web-based technologies and communications has changed the way we teach and learn. Learning platforms like CANVAS have enabled the integration of different apps, tools and layouts which, when efficiently combined, can offer students a much richer experience than most traditional teaching methods. The variety of learning tools and environments may also match the requirements of different learning styles, something that may be beneficial to the individual learner. It is known that students prefer certain teaching methods over others, and that this may have a direct impact on student engagement and performance [1, 2]. Nowadays, students expect to be able to use technology for their study-related activities [3] and meeting these expectations has led to patterns of delivery that are much more flexible and accommodating than the traditional ones. Supported Distance Learning (SDL) and online courses, for example, have seen an increase in demand in recent years [4]. SDL programmes are considered blended or hybrid. There are different models and/or frameworks applicable to blended course design, however most programmes in Higher Education (HE) seem to fit within the ‘replacement’ or the ‘supplemental’ design model [5]. The first assumes a reduction of face-to-face teaching time, replacing this by interactive activities that take place outside of the classroom (generally with the support of a VLE such as CANVAS); the latter follows a more traditional approach, whereby the learning taking
place outside of the classroom is considered to be an add-on or an extension of in-class learning. Within an SDL programme, there are ‘three layers of action’ students must navigate through as part of their blended learning experience: an online/virtual component (the ‘Global Classroom’), a face-to-face element, and time for self-learning through independent reflection [6]. SDL and Online modes of delivery seem to work better around students with work and/or family commitments and/or who are unable to travel to campus every day [5-8]. Still in the context of HE, flexible learning is becoming a priority for decision makers [2] who see in these programmes an opportunity to explore new markets in a time of great challenge for the sector. Studies have also shown that by incorporating more technology-based tasks and activities outside of the Universities’ classrooms [3, 9] not only decreases running costs significantly, but could also impact student engagement and/or attainment rates [10, 11] in a very positive way. However, standard approaches and practices may not be adequate and/or inclusive enough to use in all parts of the world, i.e. what works for students in Pakistan, for example, may not necessarily work for students in Trinidad & Tobago. For programmes delivered cross-cultures, local relevance of contents and the use of cultural-based teaching methods [6, 12, 13] should also be considered to enhance the student experience even further. In fact, recent studies have shown a possible correlation between culture and learning styles, whereby culture can act as an enabler or a conditioning factor for learning [1, 2]. Teaching students through a ‘one size fits all’ method is likely to impair the learning of said students, so the ‘three layers of action’ are important as they offer a flexibility of tools that supports different learning stages and styles, leading to a more progressive, solid learning experience. ‘Global classrooms’, for example, are an online/virtual tool that can be used to enhance students and academics’ intercultural skills and learning. Through the ‘Global Classroom’, channels of communication are fully open to students, who can then discuss aspects of their learning and course contents with their peers, tutors and module leaders anywhere in the world. The discussions taking place in that virtual space can often be brought into the classroom for further discussion. During the face-to-face sessions, students have access to subject experts responsible for leading the activities in class and providing relevant examples through local-based contextualisation. To enable this in a way that makes sense to all the students in the programme, UH works closely with their international partners and students to develop course content that is relevant and meaningful. When outlining tasks and guidance for in-class time, a great level of academic freedom is also given to local tutors. The SDL community of educators and learners results from the combination of all these different elements and groups of people, all of which have led to a very successful programme, where everyone has their own important part to play.

1.1 The Partner Colleges

The University of Hertfordshire (UH) has been delivering SDL programmes for over 10 years, in collaboration with carefully selected partner organisations located overseas. The Hertfordshire Business School (HBS), for example, has been delivering the BA (Hons) Business Administration (top-up) programme (BABA SDL) in collaboration with partners in Trinidad (CTS College of Business and Computer Science; SITAL College), Pakistan (TMUC - The Millennium Universal College) and Indonesia (Raffles College) – this paper has been written in collaboration with some of these partners.

1.1.1 CTS College of Business and Computer Science (TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO)

CTS College of Business and Computer Science offers a wide range of programs from secondary to postgraduate credentials. The College was established in October 1999 and has evolved into one of the most respected academic institutions in the country, producing high quality, well-rounded and world class professionals. The academic programmes of the College are also in alignment with the strategic objectives articulated by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago for social and economic development. CTS College currently has over 1500 registered students across its various programmes and is involved in transnational agreements to offer accredited academic programmes with 4 awarding bodies based in the United Kingdom.

1.1.2 TMUC The Millennium Universal College (PAKISTAN)

The Millennium Universal College TMUC is one of Pakistan’s largest transnational education group, operating purpose-built University Campuses across major urban cities in the country. The college is committed to excellence in education, and is therefore, fully dedicated to providing innovative undergraduate, postgraduate, MBA, professional, skills, accounting, innovative sciences, fashion, design, media and business courses matching that criteria. As a specialist in transnational education programmes, TMUC has articulated many collaborative, affiliated and partnership arrangements with
renowned International institutions, Universities of Higher learning, Professional Bodies, Global Assessment Associations, with professional and higher education portfolios.

1.1.3 Raffles College (INDONESIA)

Raffles College is a private education institution located in West Jakarta, Indonesia. Previously known as INTI College Indonesia (established in 2001) and Raffles Academy (established in 2009), Raffles College is now one of the leading private education institutions in Jakarta. Affiliated with Raffles Christian School and incorporated in ‘The Raffles Group of Schools’, the group works as an accredited as a Cambridge International Examination Centre, offering IGCSE exams and International A-Level qualifications to students. Raffles College aims to bridge the graduate gap between expectations of academic success and industrial success. One of the short-term goals is to create graduates who are ready to compete in the global era and the ASEAN economic community. Raffles College also works in partnership with PSB Academy Singapore, and this partnership is focused on providing International standard study and pathway programs of leading universities to undergraduate students.

1.2 The BABA SDL Programme

SDL programmes at UH have evolved from what were initially two small pilot schemes (one in business and another one in computer science). Both these programmes are now part of a larger portfolio of transnational education (TNE) products that also include SDL programmes for Law and Design. The BABA SDL programme alone has registered over 1,200 students within the last five years and over 200 international students were registered to study in the programme during 2018/19. The programme implemented an ongoing review of contents and activities. This usually takes place after each teaching cycle and helps meet the strict demands imposed by several international governments and markets. Operating across multiple time zones implies having a mix of centralised and remote teams responsible for delivering and supporting the provision - as well as the students - ‘around the clock’. Fig. 1 illustrates key operational relationships and (inter)dependencies for the different teams involved in the management and delivery of the BABA SDL programme, from admissions all the way to pastoral care and admin. The teams based at UH are in blue; the teams for partner colleges are in green; both colours have been used to show where responsibility is equally shared.

The BABA SDL programme follows the ‘replacement’ model [5], and students are expected to make full use of the ‘three layers of action’ as part of their learning journey. The cyclical transfer of knowledge between HBS (as the HE provider), their partner institutions (as the local experts), and students forms a unique model of cooperation that actively contributes towards the programme’s curriculum [6]. With the roll out of CANVAS in 2018 this has been made easier with the teams able to reinforce the ‘Global Classroom’ concept both in and outside the classroom. Global classrooms are, in fact, gaining popularity as a collaborative education tool, ‘where students in different parts of the world can share joint learning experiences in real time’ [14]. Platforms allowing students from any part of the world to communicate with one another have increasingly become enablers for peer-to-peer collaboration and reflection. As a result of this, students are able to assess their ‘cultural assumptions, recognizing the diverse needs of
different target audiences, and recognizing the ambiguity of their language choices.’ [15] Programmes similar to the BABA SDL in design and delivery mode have also opened up avenues for the development of valuable collaborative partnerships, both locally and internationally [13]. By working together, Universities and colleges can share knowledge and good practice that better support the students during their learning journey and prepare them for the high demands of an increasingly global-facing employment market.

This paper will examine the BABA SDL programme through the eyes of HBS and the programme’s SDL international partners. From the multi-layered student experience all the way to the level of content contextualisation and in-class support, HBS and partner colleges will identify strengths and weaknesses of running an undergraduate programme through SDL mode. Any common points identified will then be used to draw important lessons for future intercultural learning practice, as well as in providing guidance for the development of similar cross-cultural programmes.

2 METHODOLOGY

Following the key principles of collaborative action research and reflective practice [3, 16], this paper will focus on two main areas of enquiry: How useful are ‘Global Classrooms’ for staff and students’ intercultural learning; and how SDL contact time (local face to face sessions) may enable local contextualisation of delivery modes, course contents and/or relevance of materials. The BABA SDL programme will be used as a case-study to highlight good practices (but also possible challenges) for Supported Distance Learning programmes delivered in multiple international locations. The international colleges delivering the BABA SDL programme are in Trinidad and Tobago, Pakistan and Indonesia, and these will be the locations covered by this paper. Case study methodology is a valid practice in business and the social sciences, and although individual case-studies may not be statistically significative, they may still provide analytically generalisable [17] results with significance for the wider academic community. Data has been collected and compiled by people who have been directly involved in the programme, particularly, programme leaders and/or programme managers under the support of their college directors or education technologists. Information about student numbers, student engagement with online contents and forums, academic staff expertise inside and outside the classroom, structure of face to face sessions, as well feedback received though programme committee meetings and staff forums have all been used to inform this paper. This data is automatically generated as part of running the BABA SDL programme (operational data). It is important to note that this is not meant to be an extensive study into SDL practices and/or the level of impact these practices may have in different cultural dimensions [18]. The paper aims to provide key guidelines in how to make the best use out of the technology and resources available within the scope of SDL programmes, to enhance staff and students’ intercultural learning and sensitivity when exposed to various cultural realities and contexts, as well as to improve their cross-cultural communication skills.

3 RESULTS

3.1 The ‘Global Classroom’ for intercultural learning

The ‘global classroom’ in the SDL programme is facilitated by CANVAS, the VLE platform used by UH. CANVAS rich environment provides students with plenty of tools that enable communication at different levels, matching the needs of most learning styles, and offering students the opportunity to interact with peers and tutors, both in synchronous and/or asynchronous ways. Online content has been designed and developed by module leaders and module tutors at the University, with the support of UH Online education technologists, to ensure the student experience is as seamless as it is rewarding and intuitive. The presentation and authoring of module content inside the VLE remains informed by modern user experience (UX) design principles. In keeping with which, emphasis on consistency has been shown to reduce the cognitive load of users. By ensuring that the mental model required to navigate content in each of the programme’s modules remains identical, the time required for familiarization is reduced. In pursuit of standardizing the presentation of module content within CANVAS, and to ensure module leaders remain able to adhere to common pedagogic principles, an online learning framework was adopted. To this end, modules are divided into units, each representing a weeks’ worth of work on the part of the student. These units are further divided into separate sessions, the constituent elements of which are narratives and tasks. Narrative components provide information and guidance whereas tasks are best understood as calls to action, be it reading, a formative quiz or any other type of exercise for the students to complete. Adherence to the framework ensures that content is not published to students
in isolation of narrative context. To elaborate further, elements such as narrated slideshows, videos and external links are always provided to students with a supporting explanation of their relevance. This also includes guidance on how to engage with the respective modality, be it entirely text-based (as an eBook might be) or audio-visual in nature. Tasks that are passive in nature are often followed by class discussions to encourage the consolidation of information.

Local tutors from partner organisations also contribute to the content updates, adding a different dimension to the student experience (see point 3.2). ‘Global classrooms’ will only enhance intercultural learning if the student cohorts are diverse. BABA SDL students are, therefore, added to the same online module pages, regardless of their location and/or point of entry. This ensures the criteria for success is followed. All BABA SDL students have access to the same module contents, tools and activity-based materials, without exception. Thanks to the use of Canvas ‘sections’ (see Fig.2), all theCTS, TMUC and Raffles students can ‘see’ each other, and interact with one another in multiple ways if they wish to do so, i.e. by ‘liking’ specific posts created by peers or tutors, by engaging in real time chat conversations, by working collaboratively through group pages, or by adding a post into (or participating in) a discussion forum. Local tutors, however, cannot see students from other locations, they can only see their own cohorts – but they can interact with any of the students’ posts added in the discussion forums or within the module pages, even if these have been posted by students that are not their own. This adds a valuable international flavour to any exchange of ideas, experiences and/or examples, actively contributing towards intercultural learning of students, their peers, and even of the academic staff involved in the delivery of the modules.

According to CANVAS generated data, students are making the most of the wide range of technology available through the VLE platform, and this is happening across all campuses. Forums, chats, group areas and synchronised sessions continue to engage the highest number of students when compared to other tools like the ‘BigBlueButton’ Conferences and/or ‘Office 365’ Collaborations. It was also noted that these preferences are consistent semester after semester, even for new students in the programme. Important to note that this may be a direct result of the way the course is structured, the type of assessments students have to complete, and the level of online activity expected of an SDL student (as opposed to an online student) – all of which may place limitations on time and commitment to learn a new technology. Discussion forums are the most important enablers of the ‘global classroom’, as they provide the right space for students to have discussions around their learning topics. All module leaders at UH are encouraged to prompt students with questions related to their weekly learning with a view to

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**Figure 2** CANVAS sections are used in the BABA SDL programme to organise students by partner organisation
gather as many international insights and examples as possible. Intercultural learning can be enhanced through the simple act of sharing views and or experiences that students are aware of or can relate to. The challenges of this arise from the fact that not all students use the available tools with the same purpose. CTS students, for example, engage more in discussion forums for their day to day communication, using their time in the classroom or an external app like ‘Whatsapp’ to discuss aspects of their learning; TMUC students seem to be particularly active in module-based discussions, with local tutors playing an active role in the generation of collective ideas; Raffles College students engage more with module forums when these are ‘set by the module leader’ [at UH]. Therefore, attitudes towards online participation and/or engagement differ from partner to partner and can have a detrimental effect in students’ intercultural perceptions, let alone their learning. Nevertheless, the nature of the ‘global classroom’ in the UH SDL programme facilitates the development of intercultural competencies; giving students an appreciation of different viewpoints to the same issues in business and management.

3.2 Local context and relevance through direct contact time

Under the assumption that different cultures may have different in-class learning needs [18, 19], partner colleges are given recommended activities by the module leaders at UH, however local tutors are given academic freedom to create the physical learning environment that better suits their students, often by incorporating an extensive and expansive range of academic & study skills methods that students can relate to and/or benefit from. As a result of this approach, each local partner college embraces in-classroom teaching in different ways.

It was found that CTS face-to-face sessions are often very structured but offer a balanced mix of theory and practice. Sessions are usually condensed into two hours per module, and students only need to be on campus one day a week, which makes sense as most students tend to be in full-time work and/or have full-time family commitments. The theory is introduced by the local tutor, who then prompts students to discuss in groups these same topics under a local perspective. Short video-clips, case-studies, formative group work, peer reviews, Q&A sessions - these all form part of the learning activities taking place inside of the classroom in this Trinidadian college.

SDL contact time for TMUC students includes slightly more activity variation week on week. This is because students attend several scheduled sessions over the week – like what happens at Raffles College. These students are between 20-24 years old with no other commitments besides their studies and can therefore be on campus for a more extended period than the students in CTS, for example. Face-to-face sessions at TMUC include conventional lectures, problem-solving activities, group discussions and reflective reviews to help students learn in a variety of ways. Local tutors follow a task-based approach so that learners can develop practical and employability skills [1, 2]. ‘Learning by doing’ helps students build an insight into the actual workings of the theoretical characteristics that are studied. Simulations and investigation of case studies are, therefore, an integral part of the teaching and learning for the SDL students at TMUC. At other times a more passive approach is also utilised, where the teachers allow students to independently read, research & present information; involving each learner and engaging them actively. This helps cultivate and motivate self-directed study and independent presentation and discussion skills.

SDL students at Raffles College have a similar profile to TMUC students, and the contact time is spread over a week, including a mix of lectures and tutorials drawn from weekly online contents. Activities in class follow a clear structure whereby local tutors provide a brief lecture on the main topics and then allow students to discuss these in group. Local tutors often engage students with local case-studies so that they can see how the theoretical frameworks apply to their local examples. Tasks that students are given in class often involve some reflection based on current trend or situation in business world

All partners agree that along with the benefits of a ‘global classroom’, students also need to ‘connect’ with the contents of the course to get the best out of their learning experience. This is key towards a higher student engagement rate and a better student experience [11]. All SDL academic staff teams, both at home or overseas, have a postgraduate qualification in one or more business-related subjects (usually an MBA or an MSc qualification). Most are also linked to local industries, local governments, or own their businesses. This ensures students in the programme can discuss BABA SDL weekly materials with business experts from their local area and/or country - their tutors. Establishing links to local business practice can expose students to different dimensions of intercultural knowledge. This is very important for the contextualization of theories and concepts, which ensure contents remain relevant to students throughout the duration of their study.
4 LESSONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The fast-changing dynamics of education warrants collaborative and cooperative cross-cultural efforts. HBS recognises this as part of their SDL portfolio development and continues to work closely with SDL collaborative partners to create programmes that are contemporary, current, global focused but with local relevance to students. This symbiotic relationship ensures that the development of these programmes – particularly their materials and contents - are planned and developed in an inclusive and flexible manner. Inclusive collaboration is, therefore, lesson number one.

Intercultural learning and global skill sets are only developed when students are exposed to situations that challenge their own cultural assumptions and actions. Cohorts of international students can achieve a better understanding of cultural diversity and enhance their ability to navigate through the challenges of multiculturality if they share the same online platform as part of their learning journey. To enhance communication between peers from different locations, it is recommended that module leaders create interactive activities that enable discussions to naturally occur as a result of this. It is important to note that even if all the students do not necessarily engage in the content-related discussions, they may still benefit from reading the participation of others in said discussions. Lesson number two is, therefore, linked to the way ‘Global Classrooms’ are implemented and managed as part of an SDL programme.

Intercultural awareness thrives in learning environments where communication goes beyond national borders, so this must be encouraged. On the other hand, most of students’ learning takes place within their familiar social and cultural contexts. UK programmes tend to provide a British perspective on things, which could disengage students as a result of the lack of local context and relevance. Moreover, each nation approaches learning and teaching differently as a result of cultural traditions, perceptions, practices and/or habits. Trying to match this diversity in a TNE programme is counterproductive, which brings us to lesson number three: SDL programmes must always attempt to capture the local international contexts of their students and link them to the required theory. Face-to-face contact between learners and their tutors is, therefore, a key factor in building a contextual knowledge base, followed by the interaction between module leaders and local tutors. For students, these sessions provide an opportunity to discover the key concepts in local business environments and comparing these to global scenarios; for academic staff, this opens a pathway for content updates, that can be re-written to include a more global perspective through the inclusion of more local dimensions.

Overall, blended programmes like the BABA SDL go beyond the conventional course structure and/or design to offer students a multidimensional learning experience that acknowledges and considers different social and cultural contexts as part of the ongoing programme development. This may enhance students’ perceptions and awareness of intercultural differences, paving the way for intercultural learning and better global citizenship.

REFERENCES


