

CROSS-NATIONAL E-LEARNING PROJECT BETWEEN SLOVAK AND U.S. MARKETING STUDENTS: CROSS-NATIONAL E-LEARNING SUCCESS FACTORS AND STUDENT PERFORMANCES

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces results of our cross-national e-learning project between Slovakia and USA in the fields of international retailing. Our project satisfied various generally accepted success factors.

Satisfied items are physical activities which both Slovak and U.S. students might be able to visualize, including "what" and "how" they should "do" and "learn." In addition, they may be able to envision expected efforts and outcomes of such activities. On the other hand, unsatisfied items seemed to be intellectual related activities. They might not be able to visualize clear directions and outputs of such activities. Students needed to recognize such directions and outputs clearer to take actions for information and knowledge sharing activities which require higher levels of knowledge, information, communication skills and motivation.

INTRODUCTION

A global environment with diverse business cultures, legal and regulatory requirements and remote work forces requires an entrepreneurial attitude and the ability to adapt quickly to various and frequently changing environments (Levin 2006), touts a recent article in the Wall Street Journal. Never before have business faculty and students needed to prepare more for a diverse and global marketplace. Equally important in the global business environment are strong technology skills and the knowledge to apply those skills.

In 2007, the United States (U.S.) will have over 217 million Internet users comprising 69 percent of the country's Internet users (Internet World Stats 2006). Indeed, the Internet has created new business models for the U.S. and the world. U.S. e-commerce is approaching ranges estimated from \$120 billion to \$198 billion dollar mark for 2006 (Business Wire 2006; Kahn 2006). Globally, all countries have

experienced exponential growth in Internet usage and e-commerce with worldwide sales of both retail and business-to-business e-commerce approximately 6.5 trillion (Lindburg 2005). We work and live in a technology driven, global economy.

Business schools are preparing students for the global Internet business world through case studies, journal readings and study abroad programs. Students need training in global business relationships and integrated Internet communication skills. To meet these requirements of the 21st century, business and marketing educators can develop and integrate well-planned cross-national learning activities using the Internet. These international joint projects can be developed in collaboration with faculty in other countries built around a web-supported curriculum that complements the classroom experience, empowering business students to consider the impact of global commerce and investments on their business skills and knowledge.

Scholars have long recognized that the Internet can provide a framework to enhance the educational process (Atwong and Hugstad 1997) and provide resources for pedagogical enhancement (King 2000). The design of web-based curriculum should incorporate the following factors: purpose of the learning activity, analysis of the learning activity, design of the learning activity, development of the learning activity, implementation of the learning activity and assessment of the learning activity (Kaynama and Keesling 2000).

The benefits extend beyond the business student with schools and educators benefiting from the integration of technology as more faculty, staff and administrators embrace the web-based and technology-based education curriculum. With budget restrictions and study abroad expenses going up, the international joint learning project is a feasible

and ideal project to help business and marketing students understand the global business world as they prepare to enter the global marketplace.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the literature supporting the project development and assessment; the cross-national Internet retail marketing learning activity for use in business and marketing courses using the Blackboard web software (www.blackboard.com); and report the assessment results from the spring 2006 classes. We conclude with recommendations for future international joint projects.

GENERALLY ACCEPTED SUCCESS FACTORS AND INHERENT PROBLEMS OF CROSS-NATIONAL E-LEARNING

There are three inherent problems of e-learning (Business of E-learning 2002). These are (1) lack of time, (2) unclear measurements of learning performance and (3) difficulty of finding information. The lack of time is dependent on a student's learning environment. However, faculty could minimize this problem by allowing students to focus on the learning activities instead of long e-learning sessions. We could also overcome this issue by making programs flexible and personalized so that learners can learn *anytime* they want – more asynchronous curriculum. Indeed, we think learning performance should be measured for technical mastery and confidence in the subject area. To expedite the international joint project over a ten-week quarter, we provided most of the required information and materials electronically so that the students had the pertinent foundation information. We did, however, integrate the traditional assessment tools: exams and questionnaires.

Business of E-learning (2002) also suggests solutions to address these inherent problems. The suggestions are (1) blended learning, (2) rich media content and (3) useful web content. Blended learning has been considered one of the most important success factors. According to Clint Smith (2004), the blended learning concept incorporates an optimum combination of traditional and non-traditional instruction methods.

The traditional instruction method includes in-class sessions led by a professor and in-class presentations. Smith (2004) introduced the "Rossett Model" of non-traditional instruction. In the model there are five types of non-traditional learning: information learning, knowledge management, performance improvement, establishment of community of practice and e-learning support.

Information learning includes out-of-class activities such as field trips. Knowledge management is knowledge sharing and improving via functional group discussions, individual discussions, and other interactions. Performance improvement is mutual learning aimed at maximizing learning results. The model also includes establishment of community of practice and e-learning supports such as Blackboard, discussion areas, message boards, and e-mail.

IBM uses a similar model "four tiers of learning" to facilitate its own successful e-learning program (Business of E-learning 2002). The four tiers are respectively "co-location" or learners' community building; "collaboration" or discussions and information sharing among the learners; "interaction" in the community and all community members; and "information" or sufficient information and content for learners.

While the above items are generally accepted as factors supporting successful e-learning, Ligorja and Cordeschi (2005) specify success factors for computer-supported e-learning. According to the authors, computer-supported e-learning will be successful if there are assignments or projects aimed at achieving common goals and clear responsibilities among learners dealing with each other's learning performance. Such responsibilities include meaningful discussion, active participation and critical thinking. Based on these issues, Ligorja and Cordeschi simply specified, "collaboration learning" as the success factor.

The collaboration-learning model is formed using four basic components: understanding of the learner, blended learning, learner empowerment and a cross-national integration (Ligorja and Cordeschi 2005). Understanding of the learner will help faculty to generate interesting discussion topics, assignments, and projects that have meaningful common goals. Blended learning addresses the inherent problems of e-learning as discussed previously. Learner empowerment means clearer responsibilities among participants and enhanced contributions to entire learning activities. Finally, the cross-national nature of learning will enhance interests in learning by students.

To this end, we conclude that there are five generally accepted success factors for a cross-national e-learning curriculum facilitated by traditional in-class tools and the Blackboard software. These factors are (1) time, (2) performance measurement, (3) information availability and accessibility, (4) blended learning and (5) cross-national focus. Therefore, our foreign direct

investment joint project with U.S. and Slovak marketing students integrate these elements.

INTERNATIONAL JOINT RESEARCH PROJECT

We followed the six steps of e-learning development suggested by Kaynama and Keesling (2000) to assess student learning (including student learning satisfaction) and to measure success factor differences among U.S. and Slovak students. The study was designed based on a previous cross-national teaching project involving U.S. and Slovak students conducted in 2002. We incorporated the entire success factor criteria previously discussed in order to observe the impact on student learning and satisfaction and as a way to objectively measure the benefits of the joint project.

Multiple instructors, located in the U.S. and in the Slovak Republic, facilitated the foreign direct investment joint project curriculum and research study. These instructors were already familiar with the marketing subject as well as e-learning teaching in international markets and classes. The study was implemented over ten weeks with three block units of learning using Blackboard software (See Appendices). It is important to note that we conducted workshops to teach students how to use the Blackboard software. The instructors discussed learning objectives and assignments with students during these workshops. Additionally, students were trained about the cross-functional team activity as well as on-line learning expectations. Our students were mainly marketing seniors and some general business seniors who had completed all foundation business courses.

The ten-week long joint research project final goal was to expand three U.S. retailers into the Slovak marketplace as a foreign direct investor. Through the use of Blackboard discussions, course textbook, site visits to retailers and direct collaboration between the U.S. and Slovak students, we developed an international plan for these expansions. Appendix offers a brief overview of the criteria used to develop the student teams and facilitate the collaborative environment on Blackboard. Assessments were done with the end-of-course evaluation and a written exam. We analyzed (1) if our global project contained all the success factors, (2) if there were differences in the success factors in our joint project, (3) if our students learned the subject and (4) if our students are satisfied with this project.

CROSS-NATIONAL E-LEARNING PROJECT BETWEEN SLOVAK AND U.S. STUDENTS

Our study design and development followed the following criteria. First, students had time to learn. Second, the project had clear learning performance measurements. Third, learners had sufficient information and easily identified support information. Fourth, we used blended learning techniques. Finally, we introduced cross-national dialogue into the project.

To maintain ample time for learning, we consider time length and focus. To give sufficient time for learning activities, we offer web only days, in-class discussion and workshops, and dedicated access to personal computers (PCs). This was particularly important for the Slovak students with limited access to PCs and the Internet. Since we contend that highly focused learning activities bring better learning performance within the same time length compared to less-focused learning, we split the learning process into three clearly defined block units (See Appendix). Students were expected to focus exclusively within each learning block unit. Each learning block unit has learning goals, a learning path, and supporting assignments. The units are designed sequentially to ensure step-by-step learning. The Blackboard program gave students the flexibility to learn using discussion boards, electronic based information, and support learning tools.

Setting measurements of learning performance included qualitative measurements, quantitative measurements, and learning process monitoring. To evaluate the confidence of our students in the subject, we simply asked questions relating to subject mastery and learning satisfaction. We used checklist questions and fixed alternative questions to keep answers unbiased. We provided a written exam to verify technical and subject mastery. The exam consisted of simple multiple choice questions based upon a 100-point scale. Both faculty and students monitored the learning process to maintain collaborative learning conditions. In addition to the professors' regular monitoring and supervision through Blackboard management, in-class feedback and additional workshops, we required each team to elect one marketing research leader and one marketing research coordinator representing each country and each group within the country/class. These students were in charge of overseeing all activities in each learner's online community and communicating to their respective country counterparts daily on the progress. They were responsible for monitoring, supervising, coordinating, and motivating of the online student community participants.

We worked diligently to provide good information¹ for the e-learning project. First, we gave clear instructions and repeatedly communicated instructions to all student learners. The syllabus included written instructions and students were given extensive training on the use of the Blackboard web program. The instructions included learning goals, learning flows, learning paths, common project goals², and clear tasks for each project and team member. Blended learning includes all four elements of the Rossett Model discussed above.³ Our study attempted to satisfy all the elements of IBM's four tiers of learning and included an inherent cross-national joint project.

IMPLEMENTATION

In the Slovak Republic, 14 male and 15 female students participated in this study and the U.S., 11 male and 22 female students participated. Instructor preparation began with re-designing the course syllabi to include the same learning purposes, detail explanations of all assignments, detailed time-table of the learning process, three block units of learning, and learning paths. The end result was one syllabus for both classes in the U.S. and Slovak Republic.

Once we prepared one syllabus, we created various additional documents to support our students' learning. Such documents included a time-table sheet, assignment sheet for each block unit, country data, cultural information, digital pictures of our students, information about the U.S. and Slovak universities, cities, and state/region, announcements on Blackboard, retail field trip notes, class notes, functional descriptions, cross-functional team building sheets and a flow chart for the international joint project.

We scheduled several mandatory sessions and workshops, including instructional sessions for each assignment and activity. This allowed us to assess students on session participation. The Blackboard workshops were also mandatory. Web days were scheduled for group activities and unit assignments.

¹ Information means clear instructions, visual items, in-class sessions, field trips, team-based out-of-class activities, and information sharing and exchange among each community.

² Common project goals means (1) common assignments in which answers are exchanged and shared to enhance mutual understanding and collaborative actions and (2) a joint project that requires professional obligations to achieve one common goal.

³ For example, we conducted joint teaching through a mixture of traditional in-class sessions, workshops, web-days, field trips, store visits, cross-functional activities, group and individual discussions via Blackboard and e-mail. We balanced these activities carefully so that students did not feel they were forced to follow a specific type of learning activity. We were especially sensitive to maintaining a balance between faculty-led workshops and teamwork projects.

There were two individual, one-on-one meetings to monitor the progress of each student in this study.

For the final evaluation, we used one questionnaire with 19 questions and one written exam with questions about international marketing and retailing concepts. The questionnaire was posted on Blackboard while the final evaluation was completed under professor supervision to prevent cheating. The questionnaire included checklist questions, fixed alternative questions and open expression of opinions. Our exam used multiple-choice questions. Both the questionnaire and the exam were completed at the end of the ten-week project. All students participated in this final evaluation.

We used very simple but critical variables for this joint project. The five generally accepted success factors were measured using 15 items in the context of cross-national teaching. The 15 items were: in-class sessions, field trips, store visits, group activities, e-mail, web days, access to PCs, introduction of students to each other, knowledge sharing between U.S. and Slovak students, information sharing between U.S. and Slovak students, discussions between U.S. and Slovak students, the Blackboard software application, cross-functional teams, final project with a common goal and the block unit approach (step-by-step learning paths).

Performance measurement was assessed using fixed alternative questions on the questionnaire and the exam. The questionnaire utilized several questions concerning international experiences, learning confidence and learning satisfaction of students. The exam measured learning level of basic concepts of this subject – international marketing and retailing. In addition to these success factors, we measured learning performance and student learning satisfaction by incorporating fixed alternative questions on the questionnaire and the distribution of a written exam.

RESULTS

All the generally accepted success factors are observed in our project. Both male and female U.S. and Slovak students considered almost the same factors as critical for the successful e-learning. They considered discussion between U.S. and Slovak students, information sharing between U.S. and Slovak students, group activities and knowledge sharing between U.S. and Slovak students as important and met by the project.

Our project did not satisfy some important factors that Slovak students considered as critical for the successful cross-national e-learning. For example, our Slovak students did not recognize discussion between U.S. and Slovak students, information sharing between US and Slovak students and knowledge sharing between U.S. and Slovak students very well. The U.S. students, however, rated these as very important. However, our project still satisfied the group project aspect that the students also considered critical. We also satisfied in-class sessions and store visiting criteria.

Overall, all students seem to learn quite well according to our results. We asked very specific question about the outcome of this intentional joint project. When asked, did you learn subject matter about international marketing and retailing from this project, 90 percent of the Slovaks and 93 percent of the U.S. students agreed. When asked if the curriculum made it easy to join in on the project with students from another country, 92 percent of the Slovaks and 100 percent of the U.S. students agreed. The students were also positive about the ability to facilitate cultural differences within the project. Ninety five (95) percent of the Slovak and 100 percent of the U.S. students agreed. Collaboration was also an important goal of the project. Ninety (90) percent of the Slovak and 96 percent of the U.S. students agreed. When asking, did you enjoy the international project, 80 percent of the Slovak and 93 percent of the U.S. students agreed.

Results of the written exam to check learning levels of basic international marketing and retail concepts of this subject showed that all U.S. and Slovak students learned very well from the joint project. For example, 5 percent of Slovak male students had perfect exams and 45 percent of them achieved at least 90 percent. Interestingly, fifty (50) percent of female Slovak students achieved perfect scores while 15 percent of them achieved at least 90 percent. The U.S. students also have similar results although none received perfect scores. Eighty (80) percent scored in the top 20 percent of the exam. While we observed that both male and female students seemed to enjoy this cross-national e-learning project, U.S. and Slovak female students showed higher satisfaction than male students.

CONCLUSION

According to the assessment results, our project satisfied various generally accepted success factors. Since satisfied items are relatively physical activities which both Slovak and U.S. students might be able

to visualize "what" and "how" they should "do" and "learn." In addition, they may be able to envision expected efforts and outcomes of such activities. For example, over 90 percent of both U.S. and Slovak students want to study abroad as a result of the joint project. On the other hand, unsatisfied items seemed to be intellectual related activities. They might not be able to visualize clear directions and outputs of such activities. Students needed to recognize such directions and outputs clearer to take actions for information and knowledge sharing activities which require higher levels of knowledge, information, communication skills and motivation. While our project missed several critical items of the generally accepted success factors, U.S. and Slovak students' learning performances were beyond the faculty expectations.

RECOMMENTATIONS

Even with the excitement of using Blackboard web technology, students from both sides felt limited in their inability to work face-to-face in a synchronous, real-time environment. We recommend that marketing faculty adopt Internet-based real-time communication technology, such as Skype (www.skype.com) to address this issue.

We also suggest establishing strong common grounds for communications before starting cross-national knowledge and information sharing activities. The strong common grounds could include sufficient knowledge and information acquisitions through fine tuned balanced learning, long-term motivation through integration of physical learning activities to intellectual learning activities, visualizations of activities and counterparts and basic infrastructures such as communication tools.

Such strong common ground may be established well if faculty focus on rational teaching approaches to allow students to gain sufficient knowledge and information prior to the cross-national collaborations. We should establish clear and rational learning paths and action paths for students. Then, we must guide them to follow such paths.

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APPENDIX

1. Blackboard Software for Slovak and US Students

Blackboard Academic Suite Windows Internet Explorer provided by Yahoo!

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

Back Forward Stop Refresh Home Search Favorites

Address [https://courses.cmu.edu/...frameset.php?tab=courses&url=for&common_course_id=570&_1](https://courses.cmu.edu/...) Go Links

Search Web

Blackboard Academic Suite Add Tab

My Institution Courses

Announcements
Course Information
Staff Information
Course Documents
Assignments
Communication Board
External Links
Tools
Control Panel
Refresh

W...he
and
Slovakia/VMS
University Students
University/VSM
ing.

A joint course, Spring 2006

VIEW TODAY VIEW LAST 7 DAYS VIEW LAST 30 DAYS VIEW ALL

October 26, 2006 - November 02, 2006

Wed. May 10, 2006 -- Final Project
Flows of the final project
Posted by Hideo Take.

Find your partners in the same expertise

(Based on information from Blackboard and [unclear])
Suggestions from Slovak members: 'What kind of "department store [Supermarket. Discounted general merchandise store]" will be successful in Slovak market. What kind of services and merchandise will be well sold in the market.

Powered by Blackboard

Internet

2. Joint Project Information for Slovak and US Students

Blackboard Academic Suite - Windows Internet Explorer provided by Yahoo!

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

Address: https://courses.cba.uab.edu/ebmsportal/faces/jsp/tea/courses/sumEnvironment/course.jspx?course_id=3724_1

My Institution Courses

Course Information

- USA CWU Syllabus**
ME485_Syllabus_06p.pdf (46.513 Kb)
- USA CWU Grading Policies**
ME485_Grading_Criteria_2006.doc (32.5 Kb)
- USA CWU Meeting Times**
ME485_schedule_spring_06.doc (79 Kb)
- Syllabus for Slovak Students**
BSM404_Syllabus (144 Kb)
- Joint assignment information (US and Slovak Students)**
Joint assignment information (US and Slovak Students) (39.5 Kb)
- Discussion issues of the joint assignments (US and Slovak students)**
Discussion issues of the joint assignments (US and Slovak students) (29.5 Kb)
- Views of Trenčin**
Views of Trenčin (1.097 Kb)

Powered by Blackboard

3. Group Discussion and Exchange Blackboard Areas Block One

Blackboard Academic Suite - Windows Internet Explorer provided by Yahoo!

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

Address: https://courses.cba.uab.edu/ebmsportal/faces/jsp/tea/courses/sumEnvironment/course.jspx?course_id=3724_1

My Institution Courses

TEAM #2 > GROUP DISCUSSION BOARD

Group Discussion Board - USA and Slovak Students Team #2

Add Forum

Block Unit A

- Introduction of yourself
 - Name and nickname
 - Where you live
 - Working experiences
 - Hobbies
 - Favorite shopping places
 - Your perceptions of Slovakia retailing and shopping behaviors
- Introduction of USA retailing
 - Retailers in USA (names, types, merchandise mix, merchandise quality, pricing, store design, store location, customer characteristics, your comments)
 - Market condition (past, current and future)
 - General retailing habits
 - General shopping behaviors
 - What kind of retailer you want to have
- Attach a photo of yourself!

Modify Remove

Number of Messages: 15
All read

Powered by Blackboard

4. Group Discussion and Exchange Blackboard Areas Block Two

The screenshot shows a Blackboard Academic Suite interface. On the left is a navigation menu with categories like 'Announcements', 'Course Information', 'Staff Information', 'Course Documents', 'Assignments', 'Communication', 'Discussion Board', 'External Links', 'Tools', 'Control Panel', and 'Refresh'. The main content area displays two blocks:

- Block unit 1 (Presentation summary)**: Contains a summary task: "Summarize these 4 items based upon your group discussions with foreign partners" followed by a numbered list:
 1. What were similarities?
 2. What were differences?
 3. Cultural issues and differences?
 4. Country issues and differences?
 To the right of this block, it indicates "Number of Messages: 6" and "[5 New]".
- Block Unit B**: Contains a task: "Students visit three types of local retailers and report to their US Slovak team members about the following items. Perhaps even some pictures of the different stores can be shared. Each team must visit different stores!" followed by a bulleted list of items:
 - Overview of the store (You may visit their corporate web pages for general information)
 - Location and accessibility
 - Competition
 - Target customers and markets
 - Local customer behaviors and adjustment
 - Pricing
 - Promotion mix and Sales promotion
 - Store design
 - Attractions and events (openings, periodical, if any)
 - Retailing systems such as POS, QR and vending machines
 - Merchandise mix (breadth and depth, quality, brand policy)
 - Shelf space and design
 - Other customer services such as "return policy"
 To the right of this block, it indicates "Number of Messages: 3" and "[1 New]".

5. Group Discussion and Exchange Blackboard Areas Block Three

The screenshot shows a Blackboard Academic Suite interface. On the left is a navigation menu with categories like 'Announcements', 'Course Information', 'Staff Information', 'Course Documents', 'Assignments', 'Communication', 'Discussion Board', 'External Links', 'Tools', 'Control Panel', and 'Refresh'. The main content area displays two blocks:

- Block Unit B - Group Presentation**: Contains a task: "Presentations. All teams must submit their presentation materials and analysis report in electric forms. These must be also posted on Blackboard for their US Slovak members" followed by a list of 4 items to be presented:
 - What were similarities and possible reasons?
 - What were differences and possible reasons?
 - Cultural issues?
 - Country issues?
 To the right of this block, it indicates "Number of Messages: 5" and "[4 New]".
- Block unit C: Final Project**: Contains a task: "Team 2 Super market. Find your partners in the same expertizes between Slovak and US team members. Slovak will suggest ideas first to wait for US responses. Then as a team you start discussion to create (1) entry strategy and (2) operating strategy." followed by sub-tasks:
 - Entry strategy: Store selection, entry mode, initial cultural considerations
 - Operating strategy: Merchandise, locations, opening events, other events, employees, competitive advantage building
 To the right of this block, it indicates "Number of Messages: 16" and "All read".

6. Group Discussion and Exchange Blackboard Areas Final Project Flows

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the following elements:

- Browser Title Bar:** Blackboard Academic Suite - Windows Internet Explorer provided by Yahoo!
- Browser Menu:** File, Edit, View, Favorites, Tools, Help
- Browser Address Bar:** Address: http://www.blackboard.com/academic/suite/.../courses/.../1324...
- Page Header:** My Institution Courses
- Left Navigation Panel:**
 - Announcements
 - Course Information
 - Staff Information
 - Course Documents
 - Assignments
 - Communication
 - Discussion Board
 - External Links
 - Tools
 - Communication
 - Course Tools
 - Course Map
 - Control Panel
 - Refresh
- Main Content Area:**

Flows of the final project

Find your partners in the same expertise

[Task] in information from [week] and [year]

Suggestions from Slovak members. What kind of department store (Supermarket, Discounted general merchandise store) will be successful in Slovak market. What kind of services and merchandise will be well sold in the market.

Response from US members. Find stores satisfying the suggestions or stores that may satisfy the suggestions

Discussions for the entry strategy

 - Store selection
 - Some modifications
 - Entry mode (How to enter)

Entry strategy established

Discussions for the operating strategy

Items to be discussed are appearing on assignment information note. please take a look.

Operating strategy established

Summary

 - Discussions
 - Strategies: Entry and Operating
- Page Footer:** Powered by Blackboard