

An Intercultural Learning Experience in Educational Technology

Dr. Niki Davis, Lara Hagenso & Rema Nilakanta
Curriculum & Instructional Technology, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Iowa State University
U.S.A.
nedavis@iastate.edu; hagenso@iastate.edu; rema@iastate.edu

John Fraser
Institute of Education
University of London
U.K.
fraserj@iastate.edu; fraserj@Richmond.ac.uk

Olatz Lopez Fernandez
Institut de Ciències de l'Educació
Universitat de Barcelona
Spain
olatz@gream.org

Tom Nyvang & Kristine Ellis
Institut for Kommunikation; Institut for Sprog og Internationale Kulturstudier
Aalborg Universitet
Denmark
nyvang@hum.auc.dk; kkse97@sprog.auc.dk

Abstract: The paper discusses the benefits and challenges inherent in transatlantic and/or global collaborations involving doctoral students and faculty members in the field of educational technology. It focuses on ILET (International Leadership for Educational Technology), a project funded jointly by the US Department of Education and the European Union. The paper presents experiences of doctoral students from Denmark, Spain, the UK and the US, their reflections on their collective experiences, and deliberations on the epistemological ramifications of their participation in the ILET project. Since 2001 the students have been engaged in transatlantic collaborations through online learning environments, student exchange between their respective doctoral schools in Europe and the US, and by conference presentations and publications. This paper expects to begin a dialogue on issues regarding global interdependency, e-mobility, intercultural competence, and linguistic and cultural imperialism grounded by the participants' experiences collaborating in the ILET community of practice.

Introduction

What are the gains, challenges, and possibilities inherent in transatlantic and/or global collaborations involving mobility for Ph.D. students and faculty members? This paper focuses on one such initiative, namely ILET (International Leadership for Educational Technology), a project funded jointly by the US Department of Education and the Directorate General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) of the European Union. ILET (<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~ilet>) constitutes a transatlantic, intercultural community of doctoral students and faculty members within six partner universities. It aims to build learning communities in the field of educational technology by offering students and faculty the opportunity to collaborate with partner universities through travel abroad and participation in scholarly online forums.

The ILET project began in Fall 2001 under the auspices of EU-US collaboration. It includes three U.S. universities (Iowa State University, University of Virginia, and University of Florida), three universities in Europe (Institute of Education at the University of London in England, Aalborg University in Denmark, and University of

Barcelona in Spain) as well as four professional organizations (MirandaNet, AACE, Oracle, and Universal Forum of Cultures Education Project).

ILET Activities

ILET offers multiple ways to initiate and establish transatlantic collaborations and provide avenues for learning such as:

- Reading Groups
- Summer Academies
- Travel abroad for doctoral students to work and study at partner universities
- Short term exchange of faculty

Each category helps provide an opportunity to enhance our knowledge of the impact of technology in education globally, our awareness being part of a widely distributed community of educational technology scholars, and our understanding and appreciation of global citizenship.

Reading Groups: Since its inception, ILET has held two reading groups, both two weeks long – one in October 2002 and the other in October 2003. The aim of the first reading group was to start to work towards a shared understanding of educational technology in the context of education in schools and universities. Online discussions were held using different online discussion forums such as Aalborg University's password-accessed Virtual-U (<http://vu.itf.auc.dk>) and SITE's public SITE Community Forum (<http://www.aace.org/site/forum/index.cfm>). The participants were thus exposed to different platforms reflecting distinctive approaches for online collaboration and learning.

For the second reading group, participants within the ILET community collaborated using a common online environment developed by ORACLE called Think.com (<http://www.think.com>). The environment allowed for participants to discuss issues involving electronic portfolios and technologies. Dr. Davis from Iowa State University (ISU) led discussions along with Dr. Sorensen from Denmark's Aalborg University (AAU).

Summer Workshops: ILET also conducted a 10-day academy in London in summer 2003 during which students participated in a conference at the Institute of Education's Doctoral School. Students had opportunities to listen to keynotes, attend research-based presentations, meet individually with faculty and students from around the globe and present their research. There were also visits to a variety of potential internship sites. Those interested are encouraged to view ILET experiences from the ILET website under the link "Student Experiences" (http://www.public.iastate.edu/~ilet/student_files/students_exp.html). ILET has planned a second summer academy for 2004 in Florida. In future, ILET may take the intensive experience to the SITE conference itself.

Travel Abroad: Doctoral students have traveled back and forth among the different ILET partner universities, negotiating work and study schedules based on their individual needs and conveniences. This has helped students seek out specific study programs at partner universities and periods of stay to integrate them within their personal and professional lives.

Publications: ILET faculty members and participating students have also made their experience public through conferences and journal publications. This has recently included the 2004 World Yearbook (Brown & Davis, 2004) on *Digital technology, communities and education*.

How Does a Typical ILET Student Exchange Work?

ILET is a loosely knit organization that is held together with a common purpose, namely, to collaborate globally in order to prepare educators and (future) faculty for the digitally networked 21st century. The loose structure allows for flexibility that is necessary to meet the needs of doctoral students that come from six different universities with six different practices and formal regulations of Ph.D. programs. Typically, students under ILET negotiate their program of study individually. Once a student decides to participate in ILET, s/he consults with her/his resident ILET representative (usually a faculty or staff member) to decide on the choice of the partner university and the activity s/he would like to pursue at the host institution with the understanding that the activity

would be mutually beneficial. The student is then helped to make contact with the host university representative, with whom the student ironed out the details of her/his study there.

It is not mandatory that students travel abroad to participate in ILET. It is possible to gain ILET experience by serving as mentors and/or facilitators for visiting ILET scholars or participating in reading groups held online. However, the primary responsibility lies with the student, with ILET providing the support structure to move the process forward.

What is so Unique about ILET?

As seen, ILET provides a framework for personalizing one's study program abroad or at home. This underscores its uniqueness. In other words, ILET is designed to provide personalized structure. Natalie, an international doctoral student at ISU reflects on the Summer Academy she attended in 2003.

Why go abroad? Based on my learning experiences from the past five years of studying in a foreign country three major strategic reasons come to mind. First, the opportunity was at a convenient time in my program of study; second there is access to people who are experts in the field, and third, access to facilities, equipment, collections, archives, and libraries needed to enhance one's learning experience. In [all] areas, I was not disappointed. (Johnson, 2003)

Moreover, ILET is designed specifically for doctoral students, mindful of their demands and needs. Rema, a doctoral student at ISU has not been able to travel abroad due to personal commitments at home. She has however found in ILET a platform to apply her knowledge gained in the doctoral program. Rema helped set up the ILET web site and an online project management forum for ILET coordinators. She has also been instrumental in mentoring visiting ILET scholars and helping them become active participants in ongoing projects in her department. She has published, along with her major professor, Dr. Davis, who leads the ISU ILET team, on her experience with ILET. ILET has thus helped her grow as an individual scholar and a professional.

A new ISU ILET participant, Lara along with Rema, has been increasingly working side by side with Dr. Davis as well as the ILET scholars who have traveled to ISU from abroad. Her role is that of a facilitator making sure that the visiting scholar's stay is comfortable. Her involvement in ILET also consists of public relations, such as promoting ILET's goals through poster presentations, organizing recruiting meetings, and coordinating electronic communication. These activities have granted Lara the opportunity to take on leadership roles and widen her scope of scholarship.

Tom, a recent ILET graduate from AAU in Denmark, concurs on the flexibility provided by ILET – flexibility that helped him use its services to enhance his program of study.

I wanted to use ILET as a platform for a visit abroad and decided to go to Iowa State University (ISU) in the fall of 2003 because ISU based on what I could find out seemed to fit my research interests the best. As my visit at ISU is now coming to its end I can definitely say that it did fit my interests! I have participated in a class that gave me new insight into the research interests of the Ph.D. students in the Curriculum and Instructional Technology (CIT), been part of a project that is developing an electronic portfolio for Ph.D. students and co-written a research paper with an ISU Ph.D. student. All activities have added to my own study of implementation of ICT in higher education and increased my awareness of an academic culture that is different from the one I know from Denmark. (T. Nyvang, personal communication, Monday November 24, 2003)

Lessons Learned So Far

Benefits

- ILET participants have rated intercultural experience as very important. Such experiences have helped participants expand their cultural awareness and enhance their understanding of educational technology in different contexts. Olatz, a doctoral student from University of Barcelona narrates her valuable experience with ILET that brought her to ISU and helped her with her scholarship.

The main reason for going to ISU was to continue my training in the field of "Assessment in Virtual Learning." My major professor, Dr. Illera, recommended that I go to ISU and work with Dr. Davis and get exposed to their perspective on this topic and develop the theoretical framework

for my doctoral thesis. Fortunately, I have found some other PhD students in CIT department at ISU working on the same topic in their own doctoral program and I have learned a lot about not only the theoretical aspect but also about their practice, above all participating as an invited researcher in the E-doc Project, specifically in the design team developing the e-portfolio for doctoral students in the CIT department. Moreover, my stay provided me other opportunities of research, participating as a speaker in different university organizations, being member of groups and seminars, etc. Finally, I had access to resources for continuing my own research and to collaborate on research papers. All of these activities have not only improved my knowledge and my expertise, I believe they have enriched me as a person and added an intercultural dimension to my thesis that needed to be developed. (O. Lopez, personal communication, Tuesday Jan 6, 2004)

- ILET has given participants the opportunity to work with scholars in specific areas of interest and within the different pedagogical and research cultures of the six universities. John, an ILET graduate, who is studying part time for a professional EdD at the Institute of Education (IoE) at the University of London was able to take a leave of absence from his position as an Associate Professor of Design and Communication in London and under the auspices of ILET has been able to negotiate a sabbatical year both teaching and researching collaborative designing at Iowa State University.
As well as teaching graduate and undergraduate online classes in the School of Design and the School of Education I have been given the opportunity to present my work at major international communication and design conferences and also to meet up and share ideas with some of the leading practitioners and researchers in the field of online group collaboration here in the US. (J. Fraser, personal communication, Wednesday, Dec 3, 2003)

Challenges

As an innovative enterprise ILET faces the challenge of sustainability. Sustainability includes issues related to adept resources management as well as taking care to design pedagogy relevant, meaningful, and culturally sensitive to the participants and the community as a whole. We have listed below few of the challenges that have emerged since ILET's inception.

- ILET faces tremendous challenges in sustaining initiatives such as online reading groups. Engaging with reading groups requires extra effort from doctoral students who are already overburdened fulfilling their doctoral duties that include fulfilling course requirements as well as meeting their teaching, research, and professional duties. This applies equally to the faculty involved as well.
- Intercultural experiences are very difficult to plan and stage. In the case of travel neither the visitor nor the host have effective methods to determine in which areas of collaboration the intercultural meeting will result in the highest mutual gain. However, the real challenge here probably is to orchestrate a mutual search and learning process.
- Travel requires financial funding as well as coordination among partnering universities with dissimilar academic terms. The potential ILET student's personal schedule further complicates the process. Recruitment to study abroad is recognized as a significant challenge, especially for mature students.
- In addition, travel implies an understanding and appreciation of new cultures and ways of living. It is important for ILET participants to spend time trying to become familiar with the ways of life at their host country. To this end, the partnering universities need to provide adequate information and experiential outlets to facilitate the process. The University of Aalborg (<http://www.humfak.auc.dk/ILET>) has created a web site elaborating on the needs and cultural information for ILET participants. Similarly, the University of Barcelona (<http://www.ub.es/multimedia/ilet>) has also posted on its web site resources for ILET exchange students. However, more needs to be done.
- In addition, methods for assessing the level of intercultural competence acquired by ILET students needs to be established. This would include determining which assessment methods are most compatible and applicable for

measuring intercultural competence. This would, in turn, require considerations of what this intercultural competence consists of in the ILET context.

According to the Sapir-Whorf (Jandt, 2001) language and culture mutually control each other. In other words, culture is expressed through language, thus producing a certain reality “unique” unto that culture. For example, in Danish the word *hygge* carries with it certain cultural meanings that are not easily translated into English, even though the word itself would translate into cozy or comfortable. So, in order to fully understand the word *hygge* you need to include a “cultural” translation as well, so to speak. In a setting such as ILET what cultural implications might there be when a lingua franca such as English is primarily used? Does the use of English as a lingua franca promote a more Anglo-Saxon “reality” or culture of educational technology, thus making its use more akin to linguistic imperialism? Understandings of theories and their practical use may be closely linked to the culture within which they are used. For example, in literary studies notions of modernism may vary depending upon the cultural and historical context of the particular country.

David Crystal (1997) points to other potential disparities with the use of English as a lingua franca, which he has deemed “linguistic power.” Do those whose mother tongue is English have an advantage over non-native speakers? For example, in academic fields, such as educational technology are non-native English speaking researchers at a disadvantage, since they may have to spend extra effort on language considerations, thus taking precious time away from the research itself. Moreover, there seems to be a shift toward only having work recognized in the international community if the work is produced in English and published in academic journals that are steeped in more Anglo-Saxon academic traditions.

ILET’s Theoretical Groundings: Learning in Communities of Practice

Taking into consideration the cross-cultural collaborative nature of ILET, it is seen that its core philosophy reflects Wenger’s (1998) theory of learning that maintains that learning takes place in communities of practice. Etienne Wenger describes practice as “a process by which we experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful ... [it is] about meaning as an experience of everyday life (Wenger, 1998, p. 51-52). Wenger’s notion of practice comes close to what we have underlined as activities and goals of ILET. Practice enables the negotiation of meaning, which is understood as a duality of *participation* and *reification*. “Participation refers to a process of taking part and also to the relations with others that reflect this process. It suggests both action and connection. [while] reification refers to the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into ‘thingness’” (p. 55-58). In ILET participation takes several forms including participation in ILET activities listed earlier. Reifications is evidenced in the form of papers and presentations such as this one, contributions to readings groups, contributions on the ILET web site, reading groups syllabi, etc.

A community is constituted by mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998, p. 73). All three dimensions are both subject to, and influence, the negotiation of meaning in the community. In ILET, mutual engagement is linked to the formation of cross-cultural collaboration and maintenance of social relations within the collaborating groups. Joint enterprise is related to the common project and negotiation of its target and content. Shared repertoire refers to shared artifacts as well as the shared academic and social history of the collaborators.

In short, learning in ILET entails all of the above. Learning takes place at the individual as well as at the community level. At the individual level, ILET participants learn by engaging in and contributing to a community while at the community level the community of ILET practitioners defines new practices by refining existing ones.

Implications

Curriculum Issues: ILET initiative comes with its own challenges and raises important questions relating to curriculum. As seen, one of its greatest challenges is sustainability. ILET participants agree that one of the most important features of ILET is the cross-cultural experience. This however brings with it the challenge of sustaining such experiences since these require monetary support and are also contingent on individual student’s personal and academic needs and demands on their times. It would seem that integration of ILET-type experiences within the doctoral curriculum would be one way of addressing this challenge. In the case of the Danish university this has already been done at a national level. The ministerial order on the Ph.D. study and degree states that all doctoral programs shall include “Participation in research activities, including stays at other, mainly foreign, research

institutions, or in similar ways.” (Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, 2002). This however does not automatically meet the challenges listed above, but ensures institutional commitment toward allocation of resources and acknowledgement of cross-cultural experiences.

Global Curriculum: Related to the above concern on curriculum is the implication of a global curriculum for educational technology. Is the satisfaction expressed by ILET participants highlighting the need for a global community of learners with the common purpose of enhancing education with the help of technology? If so, what are the implications for individual educational technology programs and educators alike? If we turn to Wenger's (1998) definition of the constituents of a community again a global curriculum would ensure that all doctoral students share a repertoire of theories and discourses, and designed the right way a global curriculum could also support the construction of a joint enterprise and mutual engagement. However a global curriculum also sounds like a threat to the intercultural diversity we value highly, not to mention the danger of creating what may be seen as cultural imperialism.

Promoting intercultural competence: Gudykunst & Kim (1997) state that “the intercultural person possesses internal attributes that are not rigidly defined by any single culture. Instead, he or she is someone who has internalized different cultural elements and is open to further intercultural growth” (p. 364). Would this definition of intercultural competence be adequate for the ILET context or is there a need for a more refined definition in order to fulfill the ILET goals of students achieving increased intercultural sensitivity? Moreover, how do you ensure that this intercultural development is able to take place both for traveling and non-traveling students?

Traditional vs. E-Mobility: The question arises whether “e-mobility” can provide another solution to the above challenge, especially where traditional modes of mobility are not possible? If so, what are the critical factors that make such mobility successful?

Conclusion

Our experiences provide concrete evidence supporting the need for ILET-like initiatives in graduate and post-graduate programs Innovative activities like ILET are crucial for enhancing the quality of education, especially at the doctoral level. However, these experiences also underscore the fact that cross-cultural educative practices come with their own unique challenges. They raise important questions relating to global interdependency, e-mobility, intercultural competence, and linguistic and cultural imperialism. These issues need to be addressed and readdressed constantly in the course of the program to confront emerging challenges, which usually result in new awareness, and which in turn works to benefit the individual participant as well as the whole community.

References

- Brown, A. & Davis, N.E. (2004) Digital technology, communities and education. In A. Brown & N. Davis (Eds.), *World Yearbook in Education 2004*. Routledge, London.
- Crystal, David. (1997) *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation. (2002). *Ministerial Order on the PhD Course of Study and on the PhD Degree*. Retrieved January 12, 2004 from http://www.videnskabsministeriet.dk/cgi-bin/doc-show.cgi?doc_id=130951
- Gudykunst, W. & Kim, Y. (1997) *Communication with Strangers*. McGraw Hill. Boston.
- Jandt, F. (2001). *Intercultural Communication*. Sage Publication. London.
- Johnson, N. (2003). International Perspectives on Educational Technology: A Reflection Paper. Retrieved January 12, 2004 from <http://www.public.iastate.edu/%7Erex/Natalie/summeracademy.htm#Reflections>.
- Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York, NY: Cambridge University.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.