

A Model for Global Distance Education Projects

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization of education has become a major focus of many universities and programs over the past several years. Providing international experiences for students is a commitment institutions have made to help students embrace diversity more fully, and prepare more completely for current professional expectations (National On-Campus Report, 2004). Many organizations define international educational experiences as “**study abroad**” activities, and concentrate on recruiting students for exchange and travel-based programs. This approach, however, is beginning to change (Knight, 2004). Given the current uncertainty in many international settings, students and families are sometimes reluctant to commit to an abroad travel experience. Finances also factor into many student’s decisions about travel. Costs of higher education have risen substantially, and an overwhelming number of students are financing their education through loans requiring repayment upon graduation. Adding a semester or summer abroad to that debt is sometimes unmanageable for students. As a result, some schools are exploring different methods of providing international exposure without requiring students to travel (OECD, 2004). One such method is to create a collaborative experience modeled on an educational **design charrette**. This activity is typically faculty-driven, and requires that student groups solve a given problem in a limited amount of time and present their solution. For the purposes of a global experience, student teams are composed of diverse students, and the problem would be addressed through digital means. This paper provides a model for such an alternative global experience that can be used in conjunction with, or to replace a travel-based abroad experience.

BACKGROUND

International experiences provide a multitude of benefits for everyone involved, however many institutions are rethinking the traditional student exchange (Bisoux, 2003). After the terrorist attacks on 9/11, President Bush declared an initiative to bring young people together with their peers in different countries through the educational process. As a result, a consortium connecting students from over 100 countries called Friendship Through Education was formed (Edutopia, 2002). Programs such as this provide middle and high school students with international opportunities to interact without leaving their classroom. Colleges are also making strides in identifying opportunities for their students to interact globally without requiring travel (Kucko, Prestwood, & Beacham, 2005).

The expectations of college graduates entering the professional world continue to grow as we move into the 21st century. One area of importance has become a student’s exposure to cultures other than their country of origin, and their embrace of diversity. Corporations today are often multinational, maintaining offices and strong business relationships with professionals from many different countries and cultures. Governments are supporting a variety of programs to enhance trade and communications between both advanced and developing countries (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2007; Presidential Initiatives, 2006). Even smaller businesses are experiencing heightened expectations to interact internationally to be competitive.

Graduates with international exposure are better prepared to meet these new expectations successfully. With the development of more sophisticated technology, opportunities for students to have international

experiences without being required to travel have expanded significantly. Experiences with these unique programs have been successful based on student and faculty responses. Faculty members have identified a greater sensitivity and understanding of cultural issues by students after engaging in these multi-cultural distance events. Students have discussed the success in terms of both their learning opportunities related to working with students from other countries as well as the long-lasting relationships they have created and in many cases maintained. Using this technology in an ordered and pedagogically appropriate manner can provide enlightening experiences, heightened diversity, and strong relationships between students and faculty of different cultures.

DISCUSSION OF MODEL

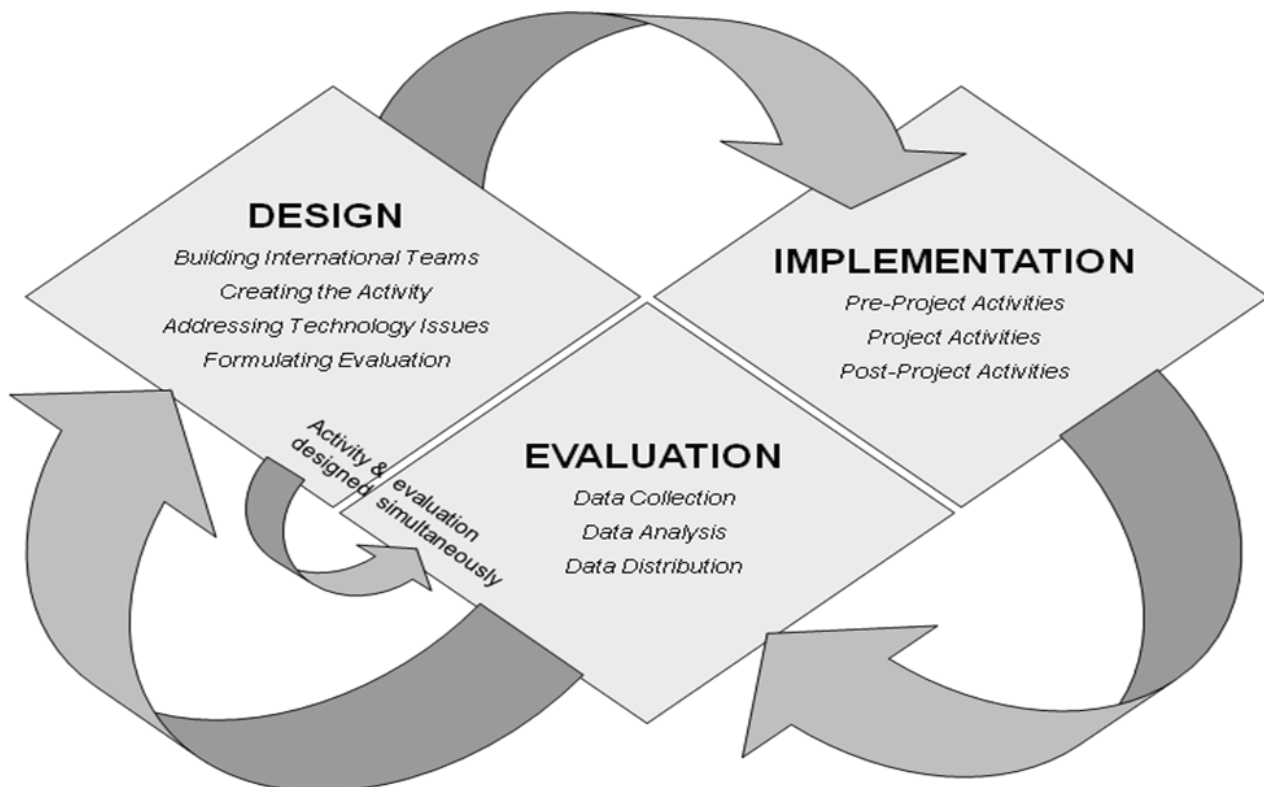
Providing a successful global interaction at a distance is a complex activity that requires a clear understanding of the **pedagogical goals** and a strong organizational

structure to foster positive experiences. Individual international experiences have positive outcomes, but this model is based on the shared experiences of international groups working on a project-based problem. There are 3 major components of this model (see Figure 1). These components are the DESIGN of the experience, the IMPLEMENTATION of the activity, and the EVALUATION of the activity. Each component has several sub-categories for consideration as described below.

Design

The design portion of this model is based on the creation of a shared project experience where students of different cultures come together to solve a collectively relevant problem. The categories included in the design component are: 1) building international teams, 2) creating the activity, 3) addressing technology issues, and 4) formulating the evaluation process. Each of these areas has specific objectives to make the design phase successful.

Figure 1. Model for Promoting Global Educational Experiences Through Collaborative Education Projects



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