Chapter 19
Building Relationships in an International Blended Learning Program:
Opportunities and Challenges in a Central American Country

Ravisha Mathur
San José State University, USA

Lisa Oliver
San José State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Several challenges that were encountered in establishing a joint international Masters program in Instructional Technology in a Central American country were explored. These challenges involved aspects of program development, delivering effective course content, using appropriate learning strategies, operating in a cross-cultural context, and working in an organization that had limited technological capacities. The foundation for working with these challenges involved establishing strong, mutually beneficial relationships with the Central American country, the Central American University (CAU), and the students. In addition, the overriding theme in developing this blended learning program was to allow for capacity-building since one goal for creating this program was so that the North American University (NAU) would build the program and relationships to the point that the CAU would be able to take over and manage the Instructional Technology program on its own.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

In the summer of 2002, the CAU contacted the NAU in order to begin negotiations to create an international Instructional Technology Master's program. There was a strong need for a program of this type because there was no other educational technology or project of this nature available in the Central American country. Since the Central American country had no total quality management which is necessary for international certification, it could not sell products internationally. Thus, Instructional Technology was critical for standardized

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training and technological literacy was vitally needed to assist the country in moving from a rural economy to an international economy. By combining technology with teaching, individuals from various social economic backgrounds would have access to and be able to play leadership roles in their communities. Faculty from both CAU and NAU were also interested in building capacity to integrate technology into teaching and learning in its public school programs.

Currently, the population of the Central American country is comprised of approximately 7 million people with a wide variety of mixed biological heritage who follow several customs and habits that constitute Spanish-American cultural patterns (Index Mundi, 2006). The land has limited productive territory (primarily agricultural) and a very high population density. Within this country, there are marked imbalances in income distribution that create sharp contrasts in standards of living and general quality of life between the powerful and wealthy elite and the poverty-stricken masses. These contrasting lifestyles have created serious rifts in society that have effectively divided the population into distinctive subcultural groups.

After emerging from years of civil war, several projects were created to enhance social reconstruction of the country (DeLugan, 2005). The new leadership wanted to strengthen the economy to further emphasize free market strategies and international trade. Thus, the Central American country's Ministry of Education established educational initiatives that were focused on transforming education to promote technical careers at higher levels and to extend commerce (DeLugan, 2005; Moncada-Davidson, 1995). One such initiative was to enhance the use of technology within the country and to improve the technological skills of educators and school children. The collaboration between the NAU and the CAU was a part of this technological initiative.

In November 2002, a Memorandum of Agreement preceding a formal Memorandum of Understanding was drafted between the two universities. From both universities' perspectives, the goal of the collaboration was for the CAU faculty to eventually offer the Instructional Technology degree solely from their own university in their own country. In addition, it was planned that all course materials would be ultimately turned over to CAU faculty for management and project continuance. As yet, the effectiveness of the initiatives promoted by the Ministry of Education is still to be determined.

SETTING THE STAGE

Universities are increasing their international collaborations and as a result the number of distance education programs and students involved in these programs has subsequently also increased. However, the success of these programs is largely dependent on two factors: 1) appropriate access and use of technology, and 2) establishing good relationships with the countries, institutions, and students involved in program development and delivery. As several studies have documented, barriers within these two factors can prevent students from effectively learning in both an online and a multicultural context (Cegles, 1998; Leggett & Persichitte, 1998; Muilenburg & Berge, 2001).

In distance education courses, it is often the case that much of the relationship-building or collaboration between institutions takes place through an online format. For this collaborative program, it was an asynchronous learning environment in that there was a combination of face-to-face meetings as well as communication through technological means at different times throughout a single course delivery. Consequently, both faculty planning the degree and the students earning it used a variety of technology throughout the entire process. While planning the program, faculty used email and teleconferencing to supplement telephone and written communication. Through email communication, faculty quickly resolved issues as they developed. Teleconferencing was utilized when