The Internet as a Medium for Facilitating APEC Business Education*

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Abstract

This paper discusses the potential of using the World Wide Web (WWW) associated online tools for facilitating APEC business education. A summary of evaluation of online training is given, with some case studies referred to, and associated advantages and disadvantages are discussed. This paper concludes that the distance education program using the WWW is not a substitute but a useful complement to the traditional international exchange program such as the junior year study abroad. A possible implementation strategy for a pilot study is also proposed.

1. Introduction

The vary nature of Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) requires a way to overcome the distance and to enhance the mutual understanding in the culturally diversified region. In APEC Leader's Declaration-Subic, November 1996 says in A Shared Vision as follows: "We also place great value on promoting more people-to-people linkages, particularly in education and business". While the APEC Educational Network (Edunet) was already created by joint activities in APEC and served for information sharing in the region, there is still a need for providing more innovative way to use the Internet and associated tools in APEC business education.

The World Wide Web (WWW) has grown rapidly over the last few years in the tools that are associated with it and the opportunities that it can provide. A wealth of information covering virtually every subject is available for individuals to access and contribute to. Companies and organizations are making use of the Web global influence to buy and sell products and provide information in a way never before possible. With the aid of E-commerce, Intranets and Online training courses geographical and cultural barriers are dissolving.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss a better way to use the Internet as a medium for facilitating APEC business education. One of the most direct ways to improve the quality of international education is to facilitating the student and faculty mobility in the university level. Now more universities in Asia-Pacific start engaging into the various forms of the exchange programs. One of the traditional approaches is the junior year study abroad program. Many universities encourage their students to go abroad for one or two semesters and recognize the credits taken in a foreign university toward graduation.

The Japanese Ministry of Education just announced that a Japanese university could recognize up to 60 credits from foreign universities including those earned through the Distance Education. Previously the maximum credits transferable from foreign universities were 30. This is a significant deregulation aiming at facilitating international student mobility. Since Japan is hosting the International Secretariat for University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP), it is her responsibility to take an initiative. This paper proposes a possible pilot project for APEC business education that uses the Internet as a Medium.

2. Does the Virtual University Replace the Real University?

Recently, the WWW and the Internet have become important tools in distance teaching and communication. The WWW enables timely distribution of documents, often referred to as electronic textbooks, in which content is presented using a wide variety of media (hypertext, graphics, animations, audio, video, and so on). The Internet, on the other hand, has increased the range of facilities (electronic mail, newsgroups, videoconferences, and so on) with which organizations can communicate, both synchronously and asynchronously. Together, the WWW and the Internet have enriched both the classroom and distance teaching environments.

E-mail is now a common form of communication and has the advantages of being faster than surface mail and more private than faxes. Another advantage of e-mail is that files, such as text, audio, pictures or even video can be 'attached' to e-mails.

For online meetings some collaboration software is free and allows meetings of several individuals that can discuss through speakers and a microphone while, at the same time, all accessing the same document and

editing it as necessary. One can also 'chat' via typing with either the whole group or an individual.

There are now a number of conferences that are held online. This allows papers to be published online and using discussion group attendees can ask questions of the author or make more broad comments to other attendees.

Discussion groups allow people to post messages to a server that displays the message for anyone interested in reading it. Using 'threads' of topical issues, participants can ask questions of others as well as post answers to questions to arise.

The online training market is rapidly growing. What is driving the market now is the strong need for training mediums that can be quickly adapted to meet companies' rapidly changing requirements. The WWW is proving to be a suitable environment for such applications and companies and universities alike are developing online training courses and collaborative online Universities. A typical project such as 'Cyberspace University' can be found in anywhere in the world that is a collaborative efforts by several universities contributing educational contents. This means that a broader number of courses are offered and that these courses can be accessible to more people.

One can easily find a corporate example of the online training courses. It has been often reported by a business magazine that U.S. companies have been implementing their intranet-based training applications to make sales training easier, faster and more interactive. One of the basic features appreciated by a Director of Training is the interactive nature of the online training. It is often said that a corporate intranet will help a company to reduce its expenses while delivering improved training programs. In addition, the company will spend less on developing the modules, which are written

in standard HTML.

One can find the application of the training module on various company policies such as corporate drug and alcohol policies already adopted. Employees will questions to test their comprehension of the policy, by the end of the month. Trainees will submit answers to each question simply by clicking on an HTML link. Their responses are then submitted to the database, they are scored as correct or incorrect, and the results are made accessible to course administrators.

The advantages of delivering distance learning on the Internet include the following (Bates 1995; Eastmond 1995; Wulf 1996). Namely, they are (1) time and place flexibility; (2) potential to reach a global audience; (3) no concern about compatibility of computer equipment to videos and CD-ROMs; (5) easy updating of content, as well as archival capabilities; and (6) usually lower development and operating costs, compared to satellite broadcasting, for example. Carefully designed Internet courses can enhance interactivity between instructors and learners and among learners, which is a serious limitation of some Direct Learning formats. Equity is often mentioned as a benefit of online learning; the relative anonymity of computer communication has the potential to give voice to those reluctant to speak in face-to face situations and to allow learner contributions to be judged on their merit, unaffected by "any obvious visual cultural markers" (Bates 1995, p209). The medium also supports self-directed learning-computer conferencing requires learner motivation, self-discipline, and responsibility.

As with any medium, there are disadvantages. At present, limited bandwidth (the capacity of the communications links) and slow modems hamper the delivery of sound, video, and graphics, although the technology is improving all the time. Reliance on learner initiative can be a drawback for those who prefer more structure. Learner success also depends on

technical skills in computer operation and Internet navigation, as well as the ability to cope with technical difficulties.　Information overloaded is also an issue; the volume of e-mail messages to read, reflect on, and respond to can be overwhelming, and the proliferation of databases and web sites demands information management skills.　Access to the Internet is still a problem for some rural areas and people with disabilities.　Social isolation can be a drawback, and the lack of nonverbal cues can hinder communication. Although the Internet can promote active learning, some contends that, like television, it can breed passivity (Filipczak 1995).

There is an argument that computer learning environments cannot duplicate the community of the classroom, Cook (1995), however, argues that the assumption of a sense of community in traditional classrooms may be false.　If community is defined as shared interests, not geographic space, electronic communities are possible.　Wiesenburg and Hutton (1995) concludes that building a learning community is of critical importance to the creation of a successful virtual classroom.　Dede (1996) agrees that "to succeed, distributed learning must balance virtual and direct interaction in sustaining communion among people" (p.199).

As the use of the Internet becomes common in the university education, advantages and disadvantages of online education are clearer.　It is important to construct a better program to implement an online education into the international program.　The virtual university will not replace the traditional way of teaching at a university.　However, university must introduce the way to enhance the effectiveness of the existing program.　This requires a strategic thinking in constructing the network of universities that use the Internet as a medium for facilitation.

3 . Online Education as a Complement to Study Abroad

One way to implement the distance education into the traditional form of international education is to combine with the study abroad program. More universities in the world encourage students to study abroad and to acquire real experiences. As international travel becomes cheaper and easier, more students choose to go ahead. Some of the universities did not approve the credit transfers from a foreign university in the past. Therefore students had to take a leave of absence and spend an extra year or so after they came back from abroad. Now more universities are making bilateral agreements with foreign universities and allowing the credit transfers.

The Japanese Minister of Education just announced the deregulation of the limit to the transferable credits for undergraduate students from 30 to 60 for a Japanese university. This deregulation will make it easier for a Japanese university to make the new exchange program or twining arrangement with a foreign university.

Now the study abroad coordinator must think carefully how to implement the online education to the traditional study abroad program. Students must usually spend two years before going abroad. During these two years, students can learn the language, culture, and history of the country where they want to study in the third year. Online business education can be very effective tools for these students. They obtain various information on the country where they want to study. Once they decide to go to a particular university abroad, the advantages of the Internet are great. Students can gather information on various universities and professors in the host country.

Study abroad period can nullify some of the disadvantages online education has. Students have real experiences in the study abroad period and learn

more deeply various aspects and problems of other APEC countries. If the study abroad program includes the internship opportunities in the companies, the attractiveness of the program will be greatly enhanced. The key to a successful internship program is the good relation between university and business community. If the university in the host country has a good relation with the regional Chamber of Commerce, the probability of a successful program will be greater.

After study abroad period, students must return to the home university to finish their degrees. If the university requires a graduation thesis or a research paper on the topics related to the study abroad experience, the Internet provides a very useful device for supervision by a professor in the foreign country. In the final year of the study, students have real experience and more familiarity with the information technology in a natural manner. This type of the program is essential for business students in Asia and the Pacific. More job opportunities are created in the area related to the Internet. E-commerce will expand further in the next decade. Universities in Asia and the Pacific must cooperate each other to implement the effective business education with the Internet.

4. Network of APEC Business Education

The construction of the various networks among universities in Asia-Pacific is underway. The number of the bilateral exchange agreement has significantly increased. In a recent ASC conference on Promoting New Exchange in Higher Education for the 21st Century, Professor Ninomiya of Hiroshima University emphasized the needs for more effective short-term study abroad program. Japan currently serves as International Secretariat for University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP). We are developing

a trial credit transfer scheme for UMAP. The UMAP Credit Transfer Scheme (UCTS) will play a major role in reducing barriers to student mobility and will ultimately assist in working towards mutual recognition of qualifications throughout the Asia-Pacific region. The use of the Internet is essential in this process.

In the context of APEC, we should come up with a pilot business education project in the scheme of UMAP. Generally speaking, the Business Schools in universities have a better relation with industry and business community. When we can create the network of the business schools in Asia-Pacific, the development of the online education tools is important in the accumulation of human capitals in the region.

5. Online APEC Business Education as a Model for UMAP

Online APEC Business Education Program combined with the junior year study abroad program can set a model for UMAP. The existing network of the APEC Study Center can be a convenient vehicle for constructing a wider cooperation among universities in Asia and the Pacific.

A Model for APEC Business Education

Undergraduate

1st year at a home university	Introduction to Economics, Marketing, Management, Accounting, Business Law, Information Science, Language Studies
2nd year at a home university	Introduction to APEC, Online Education on International Business and Economics, Learn how to use the Internet Effectively, Language Studies
3rd year, Study abroad at a host university	Seminar in a small class, Language of the host country, Lectures on Business Courses in English, Internship in local companies
4th year at a home university	Online supervision on the graduation thesis or business report, Additional subjects based on the choice of the students

Master of Business Administration (Graduate)

1st semester at a home school	Introduction to Economics, Marketing, Management, Accounting, Business Law, Information Science, Language Studies.
2nd semester at a home school	Introduction to Asia Pacific Regional Economy, Online Education on International Business and Economics, Learn how to use the Internet Effectively, Language Studies.
3rd semester, study abroad at a host school	Seminar in a Small Class, Language of the host country, Lectures on Business Courses in English, Internship in Local Companies.
4th semester at a home school	Online Supervision on the graduation thesis or business report, Additional Subjects based on the choice of the students.

6. A Possible Implementation Strategy for a Pilot Study

It is important to start a pilot project and evaluate the effects of the program and the costs associated with. We recommend the establishment of a pilot study project on the online APEC Education with the junior year abroad program in the context of UMAP.

The involvement of the universities where APEC study centers have already established is essential.

1. It will be a good idea to start with a pair of a business school in New Zealand and a University of Commerce in Japan.
2. We can start from implementing an online course on International Business and Economics.
3. Two universities sign the student exchange agreement with an online business education.
4. Each university assigns the professor in charge of online APEC business program.
5. Each university sets up a small seminar class with 10 or 15 students.
6. Making a pair of New Zealand student and Japanese student to study a shared research theme such as how to market the N.Z. products effectively in the Japanese market.
7. Both N.Z. students and Japanese students write a joint graduation thesis both in English and in Japanese. Universities recognize the thesis as credits toward graduation.

We should start this type of program from the autumn semester of 1999 and continue for at least 5 years. After reviewing the experiences of five years,

we should decide to move on the wider cooperation toward all the universities in the Asia-Pacific region.

7．Conclusion

The educational tools developed through the Internet can be incorporated into the traditional type of international education programs. Online business education can be a very effective medium for facilitating the student mobility in Asia and the Pacific. Contrary to the common assertion on the virtual university, online education never replaces the real experience and can be used as useful tools to improve the quality of the international education.

A possible strategy for introducing a pilot APEC business program has been suggested. The existing network of ASC could be a useful vehicle for starting a new program. Researchers at APEC study center need to work closely with the study abroad coordinator at a university.

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