Making Global Connections: The Virtual Classroom Project

Mark Lewental
Director of Media Services
718-982-4013
lewental@mail.csi.cuny.edu
Michael E. Kress
Vice President of Technology Systems
718-982-2350
kress@mail.csi.cuny.edu
College of Staten Island
City University of New York
2800 Victory Blvd
Staten Island, New York 10314

During the spring of 2004, the College of Staten Island (CSI) undertook an exciting project to connect our campus in New York City with three international partners in China, Turkey and South Africa using internet based videoconferencing. Based on a model developed by East Carolina University and funded by the State Department, the plan was to travel to each of the partner universities and set up the curricular and technical groundwork for the upcoming semester (Fall 2004). The College partnered with Shanghai Television University (China), University of Port Elizabeth (South Africa) and Kadir Has University (Turkey). A team comprised of a content expert and a technical lead, traveled to each University and met with their counterparts to develop the curriculum and deploy the technology to create the "virtual classroom".

CSI was invited to participate in the Global Experience Through Technology Project (GETT) via a videoconference that took place in April, 2004 between CSI and ECU (East Carolina University). The principle directors from ECU, Dr. Elmer Poe and Dr. Rosina Chia, explained the project and the GETT model. The conceptual model of GETT is to "harnesses commodity internet technology to bring students from different cultures together in a common classroom."[1] Simply put, the model utilizes videoconferencing over the internet using video over IP (internet protocol, H.323[2]) technology and an inexpensive desktop based videoconferencing system to create a "virtual classroom" where all the participants can engage in a meaningful and pedagogically sound lecture and discussion regardless of geographic location. In addition, the project incorporated the use of Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and e-mail to further enhance student to student communications.   The goal of the project is to allow the 98%[3] of the students, who cannot participate in any study abroad programs, have a valuable international experience. The technologies employed by the GETT model are both inexpensive and easily deployed since they consist of a desktop based videoconference system[4], freely available chat client[5] and the internet. Funding for the project was provided by a grant from the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. The grant covered travel, hotel stay and equipment cost for each of the participating colleges in the project.

Recruiting International Partners

Recruiting International partners is a formidable challenge even in the best of circumstances. With less than six months until the start of the course, the time pressure was very significant.   In

order to get the project going in this short time, CSI sought international partners with whom it already had an established relationship. The first partner, Shanghai Television University (SHTVU) in Shanghai, China had a long standing faculty exchange program with CSI and a member of the CSI faculty was teaching at SHTVU during that spring. SHTVU was also a good fit because of the many similarities between CSI and SHTVU. SHTVU is part of China's Open University system which is comparable to CUNY in many ways, including its open enrollment policy. In addition, the educational model of SHTVU makes heavy use of distance education. The second partner, Kadir Has University (KHAS) which is located in Istanbul, Turkey was brought about by personal contacts between Vice President Michael Kress and KHAS administrators. KHAS' focus on international education also made it a good choice to join the project. The final partner, The University of Port Elizabeth (UPE) located in Port Elizabeth, South Africa was chosen because CSI's President, Marlene Springer recently visited South Africa and established a professional relationship with UPE.

The Course, International Partnership and Technology

With all the international partners selected, the project team composed of Dr. Michael Kress, Professor Ngolet and Mr. Mark Lewental, focused on the course curriculum, technical details and travel itinerary. The CSI course that would serve as a 'vessel' for the project was a CUNY Honors College course, HSSH 206, The Non-Western Experience: Social Sciences. This course met the thematic criteria of focusing on World Culture and Globalization as designed by Professor Ngolet and other faculty partners. In addition, honors college courses have small student enrollment, thereby conforming to the project course cap of a maximum of 15 enrolled students at each participating college.

Preparations for each visit included gathering all of the necessary equipment that would be needed at each site to conduct the course. This included the Polycom Via Video desktop videoconferencing system, accessories, software, etc.[6]

The project team prepared a travel itinerary allowing them to spend a week with each partner in the project. During the first visit to Kadir Has University, Dr. Kress and Professor Ngolet met with faculty and administrators and developed a formal agreement to collaborate on the virtual course and developed the core curriculum. From there, they flew to Port Elizabeth and met with representatives from UPE fine tuning the course materials and trouble-shooting the videoconferencing equipment. The last leg of the journey to SHTVU was covered by Mr. Mark Lewental and Professor Ngolet. They met with faculty and administrators in Shanghai and tested the video conference facilities.

Challenges Faced

The project as conceived divided the semester into thirds. Since there were four institutions involved, the objective was to have two partners work together for one-third of the semester and then switch to work with another partner and finally switch once again for the final third. As designed, the sequence would have been as follows:

1/3 Semester	1/3 Semester	1/3 Semester
CSI – SHTVU	CSI – KHAS	CSI - UPE
KHAS – UPE	SHTVU – UPE	KHAS - SHTVU

The CSI team arrived in Istanbul in July and were met by a delegation from Kadir Has University. As planned, both team members began to focus on their perspective area for the project. Professor Ngolet met with KHAS faculty and began fleshing out the curriculum. Dr. Kress worked closely with KHAS' technical group and conducted several tests connecting to CSI's videoconference system. Both team members successfully completed all that was required to prepare for the upcoming Fall semester. Upon the teams' arrival at UPE, two problems surfaced. First, UPE's Fall semester did not correlate to CSI's or KHAS', making it impossible for any formal scheduled inclusion of UPE in the Fall semester. An agreement was reached however, for faculty members from UPE to participate in several sessions in the fall as observers, with their full participation expected in spring semester. The second challenge was a technological one. South Africa's limited network infrastructure would not support the use of internet based videoconferencing. Instead, UPE used a videoconference system based on Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN), which is a type of high speed digital telephone network similar to standard phone service. Fortunately, the videoconferencing equipment[7] at CSI could accommodate both ISDN and video over IP so CSI bridged the three way sessions. With both these problems solved, the team worked with their counterparts and fulfilled the goals of the project.

To visit the last partner, SHTVU, Mr. Lewental flew to Shanghai and met Professor Ngolet. The workflow at SHTVU was the same. Professor Ngolet worked with the faculty on the curriculum and Mr Lewental worked with technical representative to make sure that we could connect CSI with SHTVU. The CSI team was apprehensive, but hopeful that we could successfully complete the task at hand, despite the challenges we faced. The most pressing one was time since our visit came in August and the semester for both CSI and SHTVU was two weeks away. They managed to carry out several tests with CSI confirming our ability to conduct videoconferences over the internet. Professor Ngolet did not have much success in meeting with SHTVU faculty to work on the course content, but felt that the material he left for them was sufficient to get started. He was confident that by using e-mail and the telephone, he could collaboratively resolve any difficulties that might arise. Although we left Shanghai with confirmation that SHTVU would participate, in the end the layers of bureaucracy needed for official approval, did not allow them to join CSI for the fall semester.

In an effort to preserve the project, CSI went ahead with KHAS as our partner for the whole semester. Although we were not able to meet the ambitious goals we had set to have a "round robin" pairing of four countries, the course that was held would proved the project a huge success.

The Virtual Classroom: Fall 2004

The class was composed of eleven CSI students, majority of whom were from the Honors College. To make the course work for our international partners, it met at 8 A.M. EST on Monday and Wednesday, which was 3 P.M. in Istanbul. The class was held in the Library's Videoconference Lab since all of the necessary equipment was housed there. To facilitate the Internet Relay Chat, laptops were provided for each student to use during the class. In addition, a course site was set up on the College's Blackboard server, thereby making it possible to provide all course readings to the students. This was extremely useful since the course readings, assembled from many sources, were not readily available to our international partners.

The format for the course was to have each faculty member give one lecture during the week. Usually, CSI conducted the lecture on Monday and KHAS would do the same on Wednesday. To further enrich the course, Professor Ngolet had several guest speakers come and present on specific topics in the course. This greatly enhanced the variety of ideas that were presented. After each lecture, which lasted about 45 minutes, the students had the opportunity to interact with the lecturer, as well as, each other and discus the ideas that were presented using the videoconference system. In addition to using the videoconference system for face to face discussions, student could also use the Internet Relay Chat to chat with their partners at KHAS. This tool brought mixed results as it made the foreign students more comfortable in 'talking' to our students, but the topics would not always stay on the course content.

The technology proved to be challenging at times. The idea of using the internet for video conferencing is not new, but the technology still needs to be perfected. At times during the class, we would loose connection to KHAS and have to wait for them to reconnect. Since this was a lecture based course, sound was absolutely critical, yet sometimes the audio would be garbled to the point of inaudibility. During those times, patience and the request to repeat the question or comment, usually saved the day. As the semester progressed, everyone involved, faculty, staff and students learned how to interact and make use of the technology in order to have a meaningful class session. The course was extremely content rich. There were weekly reading assignments and written assignments were done by the students at the end of each major section in the course. In addition, toward the end of the semester, several students from CSI and KHAS were asked to give class presentations on a topic covered during the semester. In spite of the fact that the course was conducted in English, the presentations done by the KHAS students, who are non-native English speakers, were outstanding.

Pre and post surveys were conducted. At this time, we are analyzing the data which we expect to publish at a future date. Here, we present the results of two of the summary questions in the post survey:

Of the nineteen students who responded fifteen strongly agreed and four somewhat agreed on a five point scale to the question:" I am satisfied with my experience in the course?"

Of the eighteen students who responded eleven strongly agreed, six somewhat agreed and one neither agreed nor disagreed on a five point scale to the question: "I would participate in a class with a similar format in the future?"

Both groups of students showed a great deal of enthusiasm and dedication to the course. This was evident in the low level of absenteeism during the course of the semester. On the final day of the semester, Professor Ngolet organized a farewell party for our partners that included poetry readings, music and songs by both CSI and KHAS students. This amazing culmination of the semester was an incredible site to behold as the several thousand miles separating the classrooms seemed to disappear and the students were suddenly in 'one' room enjoying each other's company. Here are some excerpts from feedback sent to Mr. Lewental by the students:

CSI Student

"It was such a pleasure being surrounded by intelligent people who are willing to have a free flow of ideas and opinions on any range of topics. It was particularly interesting that half of those people were thousands of miles away yet expressed similar viewpoints as ours. It seemed as if we were seeing the workings of globalization firsthand. This experience also helped highlight a point that I have learned from years of working with international students: cultural differences don't make much of a difference if you're just willing to listen to each other."

CSI Student

"The virtual classroom project is the best educational experience I've had so far. Though my partner and I did not have an ideal working relationship, it was still beneficial. My partner and I had interesting conversations regarding the US actions in Iraq, music, literature, globalization, etc. Through our chat sessions, the differences between my partner and I lessened. Our conflict was not based on cultural differences; rather, it was similar to the types of conflicts I experience with classmates here when we work together as a group."

KHAS Student

"In fact we have learned too many things. It was an amazing lecture but, because of the speaker phones we couldn't hear the presentations very well, if we could it would be much better."

As these brief comments indicate, the students from both countries benefited from participating in the course. In the post 9/11 world, students may be unable, due to financial or other reasons, or unwilling to participate in travel abroad programs, so the Virtual Classroom project offers them the opportunity to be exposed to different cultures and ideas.

CSI will again be conducting the course in the Spring 2005 semester and making improvements to the technology in order make it as transparent as possible. Our participation in the project has been a tremendous learning opportunity and we are looking forward to the new semester, Spring 2005.

Acknowledgements

CSI. His scholarly perspective on Globalization and jolly personality will be long remembered by all of us. Many thanks, also, to our partners at Kadir Has University: The academic components of the course were brought together through the dedicated efforts of Dean Nulifer Narli, PhD; Professors Levent Soysa, PhD and Muberra Yuksel,PhD. Key in the development of the collaboration was the efforts of Mr. Ethem Kok, Director Emeritus of Computing at Borough Manhattan Community College; Erol Ucdal, PhD, Special Assistant to the Rector, and the Rector, Dr. Yucel Yilmaz who personally supported the project. Also key in the implementation of the technology was Professor Taner Arsan, PhD.

We also acknowledge our gratitude to Dr. Nico Jooste and Ms Alize Naude of The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, formally University of Port Elizabeth, as well as, Vice President Wang Min and Professors Xia Qian and Randy Zhang from SHTVU for there collaboration. We look forward to their continued collaboration in the Virtual Classroom Spring 2005.

Most of all, we thank Dr. Rosina Chia and Dr. Elmer Poe from East Carolina University and our President, Dr. Marlene Springer and Provost, Dr. David Podell for providing us with such an exciting opportunity.

Notes

1. Rosina Chia and Elmer Poe, "Creating the Global Experience Through Technology: The ECU Model", A Manual Created for the Workshop Cosponsored by the U.S. Department of State and East Carolina University, June 2-4 2004, Preface.

2. International Telecommunications Union. "Packet-based multimedia communications systems." http://www.itu.int/rec/recommendation.asp?type=folders&lang=e&parent=T-REC-H.323

3. Nancy McGillicuddy, "Electronic Farewell Ends Global Classroom Session.", Pieces of Eight, May 2004, http://www.news.ecu.edu/poe/504/global.html.

4. Polycom Incorporated. "Via Video Product Highlights." http://www.polycom.com/products_services/0,,pw-186-3027,00.html.

5. mIRC. "mIRC Home Page." http://www.mirc.com/

6. Rosina Chia and Elmer Poe, "Creating the Global Experience Through Technology: The ECU Model", A Manual Created for the Workshop Cosponsored by the U.S. Department of State and East Carolina University, June 2-4 2004, 19-2.

7...Polycom Incorporated. "VSX 7000 Product Highlights." http://www.polycom.com/products_services/0,1443,pw-35-185-4363,00.html.