

NATV 3130: Optimizing Traditional Learning Approaches in an International Blended Learning Course

Robert Lawson and M. S. Cintra Martins

Abstract—Native Studies 3130, International Indigenous Literatures, was a blended learning course that ran in the spring of 2012 at the University of Manitoba in Canada. The course, part of an international cooperative venture between the University of Manitoba and the University of San Carlos (Universidade de São Carlos) in Brazil, explored a range of international indigenous literatures. Students from both countries participated in online synchronous lectures and asynchronous discussion forums. This paper focuses on the effectiveness of the synchronous component of NATV 3130, the online lectures. Traditional lectures work in an online context if they are kept to a reasonable length and if they are highly interactive. Because they enable access to important visual cues, such as hand raising, facial gestures etc, synchronous lectures in an international context facilitate the creation of “bridging social capital,” understanding and trust between different cultures.

Index Terms—Blended, indigenous, international, lectures, online, traditional, synchronous.

I. INTRODUCTION

Distance education pedagogy is so substantially different from that of its face to face counterpart that one wonders if there is any room for traditional elements, such as lectures, in the online context. Some distance educators characterize traditional lectures as inefficient and passive forms of instruction not suited to the active learning environment that many instructional designers favor. Using NATV 3130, an indigenous literature course at the University of Manitoba, as a model, we will demonstrate how synchronous lectures can be an engaging teaching method within a distance learning context.

II. NATV 3130

NATV 3130 was part of a cooperative venture between the University of Manitoba and the University of San Carlos (Universidade de São Carlos) in São Paulo, Brazil. The course objective was to explore a variety of international indigenous literatures from Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Brazil. Only Canadian students were enrolled in NATV 3130; Brazilian students were enrolled in a much lengthier course at their home institution.

Nevertheless, students from both countries participated

together in online synchronous lectures and asynchronous discussion forums. NATV 3130 is a trial course, a model the university, and perhaps other institutions, can use to facilitate international educational ventures.

II. COURSE SET UP

An intensive blended learning course, NATV 3130 ran for only four weeks. Because of the small class size, enrollment consisted of six Canadian students, learners engaged in independent study, coming together only twice a week for the synchronous lectures. The lectures ran from 8:30 in the morning until 10:00 am central time, São Paulo is two hours ahead of Winnipeg, and the meeting platform was Adobe Connect. Canadian and Brazilian students congregated in their respective classrooms and were visible to each other by camera. In addition to the synchronous component, students from Brazil and Canada had access to the course through the University of Manitoba’s Angel Learning Management System where they could download selected readings, view the recorded Adobe Connect lectures and participate in asynchronous discussion forums.

III. CURRENT BEST PRACTICES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Before engaging in further analysis of NATV 3130, it is important to briefly review best practices in distance education. Many distance educators favor a social constructivist approach to online course design, which, according to David Lebow [1], emphasizes the following features: “collaboration, personal autonomy, generativity, reflectivity, active engagement, personal relevance, and pluralism.” Proponents of this learning approach place less emphasis on the role of the instructor and incorporate problem solving exercises that promote deeper levels of cognition. The lecture, on the other hand, is associated with transmission based approaches that encourage passivity. Reviewing the use of online lecture capture at one American institution, noted distance scholar Tony Bates recently commented: “it’s just the tired old classroom model with technology added” [2]. Similarly, Catherine Matheson observes the lecture’s relative inefficiency, noting how student attention spans rapidly decrease after 15-20 minutes and how learners recall much less information from lectures than they do, for example, from group discussions [3].

Given their proven inefficiency, is there any purpose in retaining the lecture format? Some educational theorists, including Catherine Matheson, believe they do have some educational value. Proponents of the lecture format often

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Robert Lawson is with the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada (email: lawsonr@extended.umanitoba.ca)

Maria Sílvia Cintra Martins is with Universidade Federal de São Carlos/UFSCar – Brazil (email: msilviamart@gmail.com)

cite their use in “motivating” and “inspiring” learners, teaching them to take organized notes and giving them an opportunity to gain expert insight into a particular topic [3]. To be successful, Matheson believes lectures should adhere to a number of restrictions: “lectures can be effective if they are made more interactive with pauses, activities, questioning and reviews of what has been said” [3].

IV. LECTURES IN NATV 3130

So, how effective were the lectures in NATV 3130? In one sense they were a complete disaster. In many cases, the lectures were cut short because of technical problems. The Adobe Connect sessions were plagued by internet blackouts and the inappropriate use of wireless on the Canadian side; this problem was later corrected through the use of an Ethernet wire connected to the university’s main computer system. Additionally, the lectures at the University of Manitoba were held in a frequently-used engineering lecture hall, whose computer settings were altered on a daily basis. In the future, the University of Manitoba needs to use a controlled room like their Brazilian counterparts.

Despite the technical deficiencies, when the lectures worked, they proved quite an engaging experience for both Canadian and Brazilian students. Having the opportunity to listen to recognized subject matter experts from two different countries was a rare and exciting opportunity. As the course progressed, this synchronous course component came to conform with Dr. Matheson’s formula; lectures were shorter and began stressing more interactivity. Students were able to converse with two prominent indigenous guest speakers, Daniel Munduruku from Brazil and Ian Ross from Canada, and watch these writers exchange ideas. With frequent pauses, they were also free to question instructors and to question each other. Many of the questions were unrelated to the course topic; for example, students wondered about Canadian perceptions of Brazil and vice versa.

V. IMPORTANCE OF INTERACTION

Regarding this intense interaction, NATV 3130’s online lectures helped foster the creation of social capital, which Schwier and McCalla define as a “common social resource that facilitates information exchange, knowledge sharing, and knowledge construction through continuous interaction, built on trust and maintained through shared understanding” [4]. They further argue: “Social capital can bridge cultural differences by building a common identity and shared understanding. The fact that building social capital requires continuous interaction enables people to identify common interests and build trust. This raises their level of shared commitment, and encourages a sense of solidarity within a community” [4]. In essence, NATV 3130’s lectures provided a bridge not only for understanding international indigenous culture but for promoting cultural understanding between Canada and Brazil. Having the opportunity to experience important visual cues, facial expressions, laughter etc, was an important part of this intercultural discourse. The lectures were conducted in English but both

sides had a translator on hand in case of linguistic difficulties. The instructors also managed language problems through the use of the Adobe Connect whiteboard feature, which they used to display lecture notes.

In addition to the important visual cues, the technical gaffes, strangely enough, played an important role in cross-cultural communication. Although a source of great frustration, the technical problems helped construct a less idealized image of each other’s culture, an important component of any intercultural dialogue. Brazilian students, some of whom have a sense of inferiority with respect to the level of technology in northern countries, were able to acquire a less stereotyped view of Canada.

VI. THE DISCUSSION FORUMS

One sign of Canadian student engagement was their extensive participation in the ungraded discussion forums. Without any prompting from the instructor, the majority of Canadian students posted on a topic relating to the day’s lecture. Aside from the contributions of two students, Brazilian participation was minimal. Unfortunately, many were under the false assumption that it was a graded assignment for Canadian students only.

VII. CONCLUSION

Despite technical difficulties in the initial offering, NATV 3130 has great potential. When they worked, the lectures were an immensely engaging format that allowed students to gain important insight into the subject matter and each others’ cultures. In the future, students require greater clarity and guidance in the use of the discussion forum, which could become a graded course component for both universities. As an adjunct to the discussion forum, we would advocate the use of social media for collaboration, in particular, a Facebook page. A Facebook page could enhance communication between Canadian and Brazilian students and function as an incubator for discussion forum posts. In keeping with social constructivist learning principles, it would be useful to introduce collaborative assignments; for example, teams of Canadian and Brazilian students could create an online learning resource related to the subject matter, perhaps even an encyclopedia of indigenous literature.

Unfortunately, with respect to the collection of detailed student feedback, ethics protocols at the University of Manitoba prohibit retrospective course studies. During the second course offering next spring, however, we would like to develop and distribute a student questionnaire to more completely assess and further improve the effectiveness of the online lectures.

With some adjustment, NATV 3130 has the potential to become an even more engaging educational experience, one that combines the best features of traditional and newer pedagogical approaches.

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Robert A Lawson has a PhD in German from Queen's University in Kingston, Canada and a diploma in instructional design from Athabasca University in Athabasca, Canada. He has over

fifteen years of post-secondary teaching and instructional design experience. Currently, he is an Instructional Designer with Extended Education at the University of Manitoba. He is interested in learning technology and various learning theories, including social constructivism. Dr. Lawson is a member of the Canadian Network for Innovation in Education and the Education Technology Users Group.



Maria Silvia Cintra Martins has a doctorate in literature from São Paulo State University (Universidade Estadual Paulista Júlio de Mesquita) in São Paulo. She is a Professor in the Department of Modern Languages at the Federal University of São Carlos (Universidade Federal de São Carlos – UFSCar). Her research interests include applied linguistics, writing, translation, digital literacy and indigenous literature. She has published books,

articles and chapters on Applied Linguistics and on Literature, including the following. MARTINS, M. S. C. . Letramento, interdisciplinaridade e multiculturalismo no Ensino Fundamental de nove anos. Campinas: Mercado de Letras, 2012. MARTINS, M. S. C. Letramento, etnicidade e diálogo intercultural. DELTA. Documentação de Estudos em Linguística Teórica e Aplicada , 24, 2011, pp. 53 – 70. MARTINS, M. S. C. The continuum illiterate-literate and the contrast between different ethnicities. Traditions of Writing Research, 9780415993388, New York, Routledge, 2010. Dr. Cintra Martins coordinates the research group LEETRA ("Languages, Ethnicities and Styles in Transition"/CNPq). She has also participated in an interdisciplinary research project supported by CAPES (a government-supported body for the improvement of post-graduate education in Brazil) entitled "Indigenous school education in two realities: a comparison between the Ethno-educational Territories of East Amazon and of Rio Negro."