

An Analysis of Long-Distance Internet Cultural Communication: a Hong Kong Project

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Abstract

This paper investigates the efficiency and effectiveness of Information Communication Technology (ICT) as a marketing research tool that facilitates or hinders cross-cultural communication processes in a US-Hong Kong joint research collaboration project. The study aims to examine how ICT impacts the quality of teaching and learning of international business and management communication by allowing US-Hong Kong students to gain direct exposure through collaboration on semester projects so as to enhance their intercultural communication competence.

Both quantitative and qualitative measurements were used to measure the effectiveness of this joint intercultural communication research design. A questionnaire was administered to both Hong Kong and US participants to capture their overall impressions on the long-distance joint intercultural research project. Qualitative measurements employed included debriefings, selected focus group discussion, and student comments on long-distance intercultural e-mail communication. Results are discussed and recommendations are made.

Technologies such as e-mail and the Internet enable people from all parts of the world to communicate seamlessly without the limitation of geographical boundaries. These advanced technologies also make the movement of an international curriculum feasible. Furthermore, these technologies are changing not only the way we communicate in the globalized business environment (see for example, Beamer & Varner, 2001; Victor, 1992), but also the way we teach international business and communication.

With these advancements in technology, use of information communication technology (ICT) in teaching or conducting research has become popular. The Internet has opened a whole new way of teaching and studying international business and management communication. The mandate for internationalized curricula in all fields also creates an opportunity for students to collaborate with counterparts from all over the world. While communication technologies broaden the sphere of learning free from geographical boundaries, the technology has too often fallen short of its promise in the classroom (Hilton & Kameda, 1999, p. 181).

Many intercultural communication projects have dealt with the pen-pal style of interaction (see for example, Warschauer, 1995) in which participants mutually explored their cultures and living styles; while other research has focused on negotiating designated case scenario in a one-time interaction. These studies have paved the way for and contributed to the development of using ICT in intercultural communication. However, little research has been done to examine whether ICT as a pedagogical or marketing research tool facilitates or hinders long-distance projects where participants are required to exchange marketing information and negotiate fund-allocation decisions over a three-month period.

This paper examines the impact of ICT on long-distance intercultural communication in the exchange of marketing information and consequently negotiated funding allocation during an action learning project. The paper also explores the challenges and limitations of using ICT in long-distance intercultural communication project collaboration. Lastly, the paper suggests ways for conducting a long-distance joint research project.

THEORETICAL BASE OF THE ACTION LEARNING PROJECT

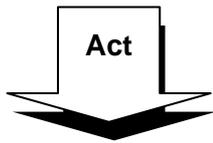
The underlying theory for this joint research project is based on the five-stage Action Research Spiral model (see for example, Kember & Kelly, 1993; Lewin, 1946/1988) to reflect the action learning process. In the following, I will describe how the project activities were facilitated through the use of ICT during the course of the project.



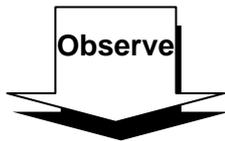
There is a growing recognition that information technology and telecommunication-based communication represent “the wave of the future”. Although ICT has been incorporated into teaching for various purposes, application and use of this hardware was not often interwoven into the course content. Consequently, students did not have a practical theory base or related experience for applying tele-communication technology such as e-mail, teleconferencing, discussion groups, Internet data banks and Web sites. The initial problem underlying the project described in this paper was the lack of opportunity to expose students to the use of ICT which would have better equipped them for their future careers. Therefore, the project was further designed to add realism and raise student motivation and involvement by incorporating the use of telecommunication technology in a realistic and practical way.



The plan related to how to integrate e-mail and other information technologies into the fabric of a semester-long long-distance joint research project on investigating, analysing, and comparing the competitiveness of a chosen product in the US and Hong Kong / China markets.



The action phase focused on monitoring the flow of telecommunication technology and on the possibility of providing feedback to students through e-mail and in-class discussions. Making sure that students adhered to schedules in posting central file messages in the list server (please note web-room chatting was not available during then) was an essential part of this phase. The schedule of class activities was altered so that it was possible to include appropriate discussions on the on-going process of information exchange via e-mail and central file.



The observation phase was employed to capture the impressions of the researchers and representative student groups. Multiple evaluation procedures were used to measure the effectiveness and efficiency of the project from differing perspectives and at various times during the course of the project. The evaluation aimed at uncovering general and specific impressions, problems, and suggestions for improvement. Mechanisms used for evaluating the learning process included student-to-student peer evaluations (i.e., peer critiques, debriefing, and questionnaires) and researcher-to-student evaluations (i.e., focus group discussion, debriefing, and feedback).



This is the period in which to digest and process the experience after the pace and pressure of the semester and to reflect critically on successes and failures. Debriefing was initially conducted in the middle of the semester so as to detect the difficulties encountered by students and provide prompt feedback. At the end of the project, ten student representatives were invited to participate in a focus group discussion that lasted for two and half hours. All Hong Kong and US students participating in the project were also required to fill out questionnaires.

DESCRIPTION OF THE JOINT RESEARCH PROJECT AND THE USE OF ICT

Project-based design was adopted to facilitate and enhance learning efficacy in conjunction with the use of the telecommunication technology. A semester-long project was employed to focus on the practical application of theories in the fields of organization, marketing, and intercultural communication. To enhance and build intercultural competency of students, Hong Kong students were paired with US students to conduct a joint research and information exchange for better decision making on whether the company should expand its product line in the domestic or international market.

To facilitate the realism of the project, a scenario was developed (see Appendix 1) to capture the essence of the project. In carrying out the project, students (a) formed task-force groups, (b) conducted field research and exchanged information, and (c) wrote business reports. This Industry Analysis Project (IAP) was a semester project in which students examined the competitiveness of a product in a chosen industry. The frame of reference for the field research is a theoretical model developed by Michael E. Porter (1979) that describes the structure of any industry. This model identifies five competitive forces that determine the nature of competition within the industry. These forces are: rivalry among existing competitors, bargaining power of suppliers, bargaining power of buyers, threat of new entrants, and threat of substitute products or services.

Project teams from Hong Kong were paired with parallel groups from an American AACSB university in California. Eight task-force groups of Hong Kong (N=60) and US students (N=32) were formed to examine the market potentiality of California and Greater China (i.e., Hong Kong and Guangdong Province) for designated products (e.g., mobile phone, digital camera, coffee maker, iTV). During the course of the project, both US and Hong Kong participants exchanged information regarding their chosen industry. Using Porter's five-force analysis, each intercultural team conducted an analysis on which to base the funding recommendation. At the end of the project, both US and Hong Kong task-force groups negotiated the percentage of funding (US\$100 million provided by headquarters) that each regional market (California in the United States and Hong Kong and Guangdong province in China) should be allocated for product development.

For the use of ICT, each task-force group exchanged information in regard to the secondary data (i.e., annual reports, the Internet, and World Wide Web information) and field research data (i.e., survey questionnaires, telephone interviews and face-to-face interviews). The task-force groups also needed to use ICT to clarify exchanged information and negotiate deadlines and fund allocation.

EVALUATION OF EFFECTIVENESS

To assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the joint intercultural communication project, both quantitative and qualitative measurements were employed. From the quantitative perspective, the questionnaire data captured participants' impressions on overall effectiveness of the telecommunication system and on the long-distance joint intercultural research project, whereas qualitative data provided more in-depth analyses on the success and failure of the project. In this section, I will first report on the quantitative questionnaire results; and then describe the mechanisms used to collect qualitative data (i.e., focus group discussion and debriefing).

Questionnaire and Participants' Ratings

The questionnaire data provided additional texture and insights by comparing US and Hong Kong task-force group responses to the semester project collaboration. The focus of the questionnaire was on: (a) overall effectiveness of the e-mail or the Internet communication system; (b) difficulties

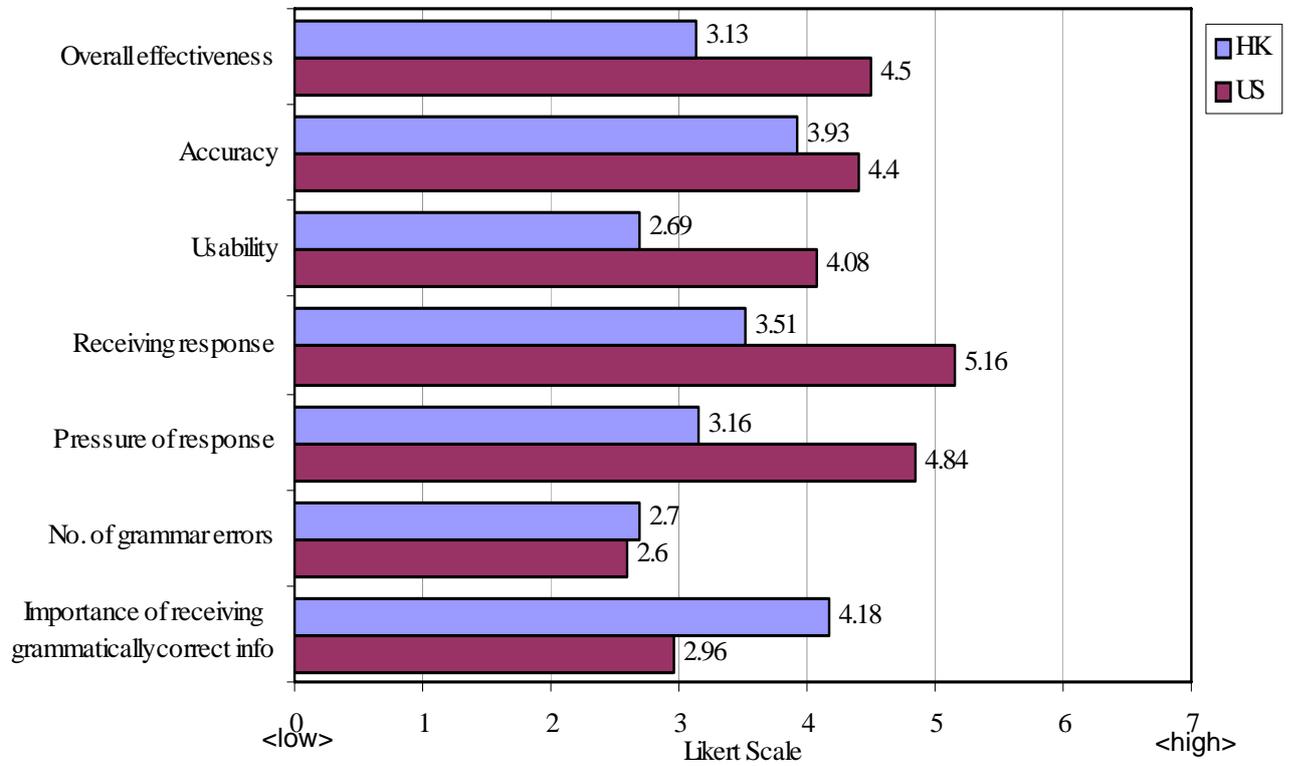
encountered in working with their group members and with their counterparts; (c) attitudes toward their counterparts; (d) the negotiation of funding allocations as well as decision making; and (e) their perceived relationship with counterparts.

Overall Effectiveness. Participants were required to assess overall effectiveness of the e-mail communication system in regard to the perceptions of accuracy, usability, and importance of receiving and responding to e-mail promptly. Figure 1 [on the next page] compares the mean scores of the US and Hong Kong students' responses to seven sub-statements on overall effectiveness.

The findings reveal that both Hong Kong and US students considered the overall effectiveness of the e-mail communication system was moderate ($M = 3.13; 4.5$ on a 7-point Likert scale). Although e-mail communication was seen as a necessity in day-to-day communication channels, the result seems inconclusive (see also Mak, 1995; Sharma & Garratt, 1995). The view of one US student indicates the realization of both the value of e-mail communication and the problems: "Overall, I think this project was very interesting. I think we should be doing more intercultural e-mail communications in the future when we're doing business but it's not as easy as it seems. I'm glad that I got an early glimpse."

As for the usability of received information from their counterparts, US students rated usability higher than did Hong Kong students ($M = 4.08; 2.69$). The discrepancy between US and Hong Kong student groups in perceiving the usability of exchanged information may be due to different perceptions of the information exchanged. To most US students, the exchanged information was seen as a reference for assisting them to make better decisions. In this case, information exchanged is considered a "process"; thus the form of the exchanged information does not need to be complete. In contrast, over 90 percent of the Hong Kong students expected their US counterparts to provide complete, semi-finished reports (products). This perception gap toward information exchange is likely to have caused the lower rating of the information usability by Hong Kong student groups.

Figure 1: A Comparison of Mean Scores of Overall Effectiveness between Hong



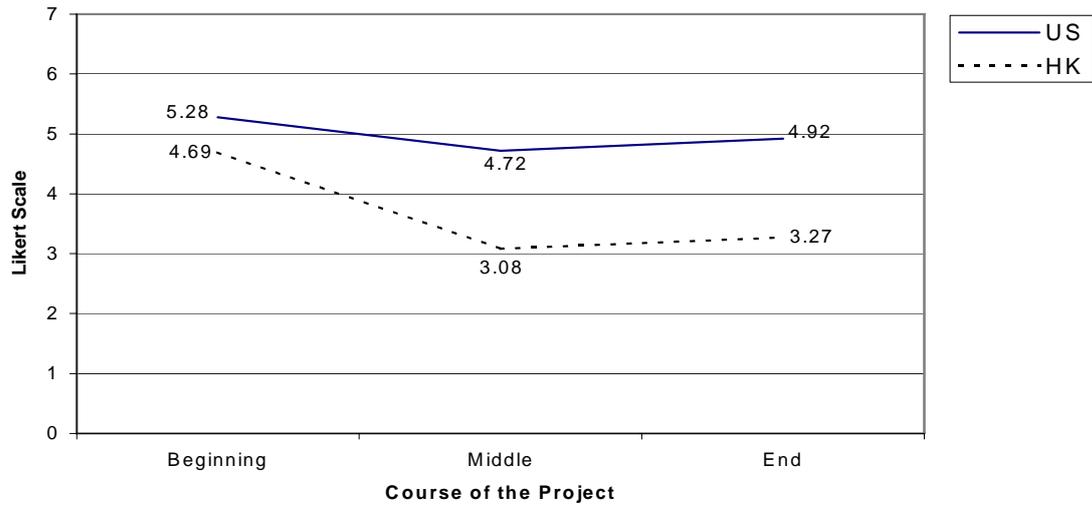
Of the seven sub-statements, the major difference lies in the importance of getting a prompt response and the pressure to respond promptly. US students rated 5.16 indicating the importance of getting a prompt response, and this result was consistent with their feeling of being pressured to respond promptly ($M = 4.84$). Compared to US students, Hong Kong students rated both items much lower ($M = 3.51$; 3.16) suggesting that the importance of getting a prompt response and pressure to respond to e-mail messages were not their primary concern. However, the results of these two statements contradicted the qualitative data in which 95 percent of the Hong Kong students reported that they became agitated during the course of the joint research project because of the slow response from their US counterparts.

Another major difference is the importance of receiving grammatically correct information. The results show that it is more important for Hong Kong groups ($M = 4.18$) to receive grammatically correct information than US groups ($M = 2.96$) and possibly explains the low rating for the Hong Kong students' perceived usability of exchanged information. It is hypothesised that Hong Kong students want to receive information that they can directly transfer to their reports without further rewriting. Consequently, the printed information provided should be complete and grammatically correct.

Difficulties Encountered. The second section of questionnaire asked participants to assess the degree of difficulty they encountered with their own project group members and with their counterparts. The mean scores of the US and Hong Kong groups in collaborating with their own project group as compared to their counterparts was 2.28 versus 3.47 and 3.88 versus 5.20 respectively. The results showed that Hong Kong students encountered more difficulty in collaborating with their US counterparts than their own project group members ($M = 5.2$; 3.47) in completing the project. This perception was consistent with and likely to explain the low rating of attitudes towards their US counterparts.

Attitudes Towards Counterparts During the Course of Project.

The high rating of the Hong Kong student groups on their perceived difficulties in interacting with US students was consistent with their overall attitudes toward their US counterparts at the beginning, middle, and end of the project. The Hong Kong student groups rated their US counterparts at 4.69 on a 7-point Likert scale at the beginning of the project; yet the rating decreased to 3.08 in the middle of the project indicating that the attitudes of the Hong Kong student groups had changed drastically. Although at the end of the project, the mean score increased to 3.27, favourable attitudes towards their US counterparts was much lower than at the beginning of the project (3.27 vs 4.69). In contrast, the US students rated their Hong Kong counterparts more positively - in that their ratings started with 5.28 favourable attitudes, which moved down to 4.72 in the middle, and to 4.92 at the end.



Key:

_____ : Attitude of US students towards Hong Kong students

- - - - : Attitude of Hong Kong students towards US students

In funding allocation, the results showed that 86 percent of US participants considered the negotiation of funding allocation between the two regions fair whereas only 67 percent of Hong Kong participants considered the funding allocation fair. Those individuals who agreed that the funding allocation was fair from Hong Kong and US task-force groups reported that the process of negotiating funding allocation was inspiring and that both parties could reach mutual agreement after a few e-mail exchanges.

While only nine percent of US students disagreed with the fairness of funding allocation, 27 percent of the Hong Kong participants reported that they did not reach fair agreement with their US counterparts. The Hong Kong students' reasons for not being able to reach mutual agreements were that:

1. insufficient information exchange from US counterparts did not allow them to accurately assess the competitiveness of the product markets in both regions;
2. the US counterparts failed to provide evidence to support their request;
3. there was no discussion or negotiation on funding allocation between both parties; and
4. the US counterparts insisted on their own recommendation.

In comparison, the US students felt that:

1. the Hong Kong student groups provided too much detailed information;
2. the Hong Kong student group did not respond to their proposal in time, so the US group decided to go half-half; and
3. the Hong Kong student group did not provide the US group concrete figure; therefore, there was no basis for negotiation.

The Perceived Relationships with Counterparts. All the participants were asked to characterize their relationships with their counterparts. About 78 percent of US students characterised their relationships with their Hong Kong counterparts as professional whereas only 18.9 percent of Hong Kong students considered their relationship with US counterparts professional. One third of Hong Kong students described their relationship as 'friendship'. The result revealed a sizeable perception difference between US and Hong Kong students on working relationships. The difference in the perceived relationships in the course of the project by Hong Kong participants reflects their Confucian-heritage culture (CHC) where strengthening interpersonal relations is more important than working / professional relations (see also Bond, 1991; Bond & Hwang, 1986; Bond & Lee, 1981).

In sum, the findings reveal that culture is likely to be the major attributable factor that compounded the difficulties of this long-distance joint research project (Martin, Jr., 1995). US students became aware of cultural problems in communication, especially in the use of humour, as shown by comments such as "Miscommunication arose due to cultural differences. Tried a sarcastic joke to generate good-fellowship. It bombed. Tried capitalising on phrases in "high-context" language. This, too, bombed." and "It was a valuable learning process. Our group members have been pretty upset about the miscommunication even when we tried to explain every single detail (we thought!) . . . I was amazed at the number of differences between the US and Hong Kong groups, even I

shouldn't have had any problem with the Chinese (HK) culture." The same was true of some Hong Kong students as indicated by the following comment: "Actually, I don't think e-mails are effective in making decisions. Miscommunication arises because of misunderstandings. Maybe we are from different cultural backgrounds, we can't understand each other fully. The most obvious example was that our US counterparts said that we couldn't understand their sense of humour. We in turn think they are impolite. So, in my point of view, face-to-face communication is more effective and better because we can interpret the meaning more accurately as people communicate verbally and non-verbally."

Qualitative Measurement

Measurements employed to capture the qualitative data included: debriefing and focus group discussion. In the following section, I will discuss these two qualitative measurements in detail.

Debriefing. Debriefing is considered an essential component of the five-stage Action Learning Spiral model but is often neglected because of the time constraints. The debriefing activities provide an opportunity for students to reflect and share their experience learned from other participants, and achieve closure on their semester collaboration. The focus of the debriefing activities was: (a) to reflect on student's experience in working as a team in completing the semester project; (b) to critically evaluate their own behavior and discover differences among group members; (c) to examine how team work contributed to their learning and what they could have done better; and (d) to make learning through group collaboration more effective.

In conducting debriefing, ten discussion groups from Hong Kong (made up of 5 to 6 person groups) were formed. One member from each discussion group was appointed as the moderator. The debriefing discussion was centered on four areas: (a) project management (individual and group tasks); (b) assessment of individual contributions; (c) interpersonal relations and communication; (d) experience learned from engaging in the project. The results of the debriefing are discussed in the following.

For project management, 90 percent of Hong Kong students reported that the division of labor was evenly distributed and that teamwork allowed them to complement each other's talents by maximizing each individual's specialty. They strongly believed that three heads worked better than a single head. In all, students learned to work as a team and utilize an individual's specialty to ensure the quality of the project. All the students considered that they had contributed to the overall group success. But when asked about their perception of their role in the group, less than 15 percent of students considered themselves as coordinator or group leaders. A very interesting phenomenon was that students were reluctant to use the word "leader" even when they served as coordinators throughout the whole project. This phenomenon reflects the Chinese collectivism concept; that is, Chinese are eager to be part of a group and commit to the activities of the group but take the lead (see Bond, 1991; Leung & Bond, 1984). Consequently, Hong Kong students did not want to be singled out or be different from their peers.

For interpersonal relations and communication, although 80 percent of respondents agreed that teamwork was essential for accomplishing a large-scale project, 40 percent reported that they preferred individual work. Working individually allowed them to work at their own pace and manage time more efficiently. When asked about the five most important aspects in completing the project, the following were the most frequently mentioned: task accomplishment, commitment, efficiency, harmonious relationships, and group spirit. While students found task accomplishment and strong commitment to be crucial, maintaining a harmonious group working environment was not neglected. Also, the most frequently mentioned valuable experiences from engaging in the project were: (1) learning to work with team members efficiently and effectively; (2) gaining knowledge of information technology; (3) learning to manage time better; (4) learning to be flexible; (5) learning the importance of effective communication.

Selected Focus Group Discussion. Ten Hong Kong student representatives were also invited to participate in a two-hour focus group discussion. Four topic areas were identified for discussion: (a) teamwork and small-group communication; (b) use of telecommunication technology; (c) use of language; and (d) reflections on overall learning. In the following, the findings on the four sub-topic areas raised during the focus group discussion are discussed.

Teamwork and small-group communication was the first major topic area in the focus group discussion. The focus was to understand the importance of teamwork, investigate students' attitudes toward teamwork, and compare the decision-making strategies used by different task-force groups in the course of the project. Eight out of ten representative discussants noted the attitude and strategy of their designated groups toward teamwork and small group communication changes over the course of the project. According to the discussants, maintaining group harmony was their primary concern in collaborative team work, but soon after they realized that the maintenance-relational teamwork strategy did not lead to group effectiveness. Consequently, group members needed to change their teamwork strategy from maintenance-relational orientation behaviour to task-orientated behavioural style in order to enhance group effectiveness. Although their attitude towards teamwork was task-oriented, the majority of the students consciously still tried hard to avoid conflicts even though they needed to voice differing opinions from time to time. Most importantly, group members learned to analyse and choose among alternatives before finalising their decisions.

Use of information technology involved the effect of using list server technology in the communication process and the situations in which other telecommunication technologies were used (e.g., mobile phones, Internet Chatting Queue [ICQ]). Although the use of telecommunication technology expedited the information exchange, students' feedback on its use was mixed (for similar feedback in other studies see for example, Mak, 1995; Sharma & Garratt, 1995). Seventy-five percent (75%) of respondents did not consider the list server communication channel an effective tool to enhance their communication process and information exchange. Instead, students preferred

using mobile phones or ICQ when communicating with their peers in Hong Kong and using ICQ when communicating with their US counterparts.

It is hypothesised that such an unfavourable response to IT use might be due to three factors: language use, speed and immediate feedback, and technological problems. Compared with face-to-face communication or mobile phone communication, sending messages through the list server or e-mail did not allow the Hong Kong students to use their native language, Cantonese. This phenomenon reflects general student attitude towards language use in the Hong Kong tertiary environment (see also Du-Babcock, 1999). Speed and immediate feedback as a factor contributing to the unfavourable use of the list server may have been due to the fact that the list server technology available for use at that time did not permit the use of attachments. Instead, students had to convert the information into text files. The incompatible technology slowed down their communication processes and thus increased their workload. Students also experienced inconvenience due to different software programmes.

An unexpected finding related to telecommunication technology was the use of mobile phones and ICQ. The use of mobile phones was very popular to all Hong Kong student groups as it allowed them to use their native language when discussing issues and to receive immediate responses. While mobile phones remained a popular communication tool when communicating with personnel in Hong Kong, ICQ became the dominant communication channel when contacting counterparts in US.

Use of language concerned the use of first- and second-languages and their comparative impact on the effectiveness of the oral and written communication. The focus of discussion centred on the usefulness of using English or Cantonese as an inhibiting, facilitating, or neutral factor; problems of communicating with interviewees and peers; and suggested ways of improving communication.

The Hong Kong students unanimously chose to communicate in Cantonese in their focus group discussion meeting although almost all of the students preferred to use English for report writing. These preferences reflect the uniqueness of the Hong Kong bilingual language environment; that is, Cantonese for oral communication and English for written communication (see also Du-Babcock, 1999). In Hong Kong, the norms prescribing language use are complex and contradictory. Hong Kong bilingual Chinese engage primarily in Cantonese language conversation as 95 percent of their colleagues or peers are Cantonese-speaking Chinese. However, for business, government and law in the workplace, English is the preferred medium of written exchange.

Three major areas on **reflection on overall learning** identified by all the discussants were: (1) difficulty in arranging interviews; (2) not knowing how to handle small-group communication effectively; and (3) not having sufficient time to reflect on what they had achieved.

Although more than 90 percent of the project groups found it difficult to arrange interviews with senior members of companies, all students succeeded in finding expatriate and local Chinese personnel for their interviews. Discussants reported that this process taught them how to approach and convince business people to grant interviews.

The second major area identified was that students did not know how to handle small-group communication effectively. Influenced by Confucian ethics, Hong Kong Chinese in a collective society consider group harmony is critical and essential when working in a team. In group interaction, Hong Kong Chinese regard harmonious interpersonal relationships as more important than in the West (see for example Bond, 1991; Kwok, 1992; Martin, 1995). To avoid confronting other group members, 90 percent of Hong Kong participants reported that they at first adopted maintenance-relational behaviour of teamwork strategy in which the greater time was spent on showing agreement, showing understanding of others' viewpoints in order to promote group solidarity. However, a drastic strategy change toward teamwork took place during the course of the project as students realized that the "heavy duty" IAP project work required substantial involvement of time and effort among group members. Consequently, the small group communication function switched from maintenance-relational behaviour to task-oriented behaviour. Nonetheless, the discussants found that even in strongly task-oriented groups, there were times when group solidarity took precedence.

The third area was that the students felt that they did not have sufficient time to reflect on their learning. Although students agreed that the learning objectives were achieved, they felt that the learning was "heavy". Thus, they constantly competed with deadlines.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The outcomes of this joint intercultural communication research project have resulted in important gains in relation to learning and teaching perspectives. The learning experience of students was enhanced in four ways:

1. The use of telecommunication technology enhanced the students' learning efficiency by helping them share, access, and exchange information; and consequently, improved their learning through a co-operative, team-building learning strategy.
2. The need for direct exposure to an intercultural experience by collaborating with US business major undergraduates provided Hong Kong students with a valuable opportunity to develop their intercultural communication skills.
3. The experience of arranging and conducting interviews with both expatriate and local managers enhanced Hong Kong students' persuasive communication and interviewing skills. This persuasive communication skill also helped them successfully negotiate the funding allocation with their US counterparts.
4. The experience of teamwork collaboration enhanced Hong Kong students' ability to work effectively in small groups and to understand the importance of group synergy. This enabled them to improve the quality of the tasks while maintaining good relationships with their peers.

There are four major implications for the quality of teaching; namely, interdisciplinary integration, intercultural communication competency, future career preparation, and contact with the business community.

1. The project strengthened the course by integrating interdisciplinary fields of professional business communication and business management.

2. The project enhanced students' intercultural communication competency. The experience gained in intercultural communication not only provided students with hands-on experience but also allowed them to put classroom-learned theories into practice.
3. This joint intercultural research collaboration provided a vehicle for not only effectively linking theory into practice, but also broadened students' learning horizon and thereby prepared them on how to work more successfully in the international workplace in their future career.
4. The project allowed students to reach out to the business community. The direct contact with the business community was beneficial to students in that, during the project, students were forced to consider the principles of communication that operated in various situations more carefully.

In all, the project enhanced students analytical and critical thinking skills, and thereby trained students to think strategically, communicate effectively, and act professionally.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This paper presents the integration of ICT into a joint intercultural communication research project. Overall, it is found that this collaboration experience was rewarding and innovative even though both US and Hong Kong students perceived the project tasks to be extremely challenging. Above all, this project can be considered as having achieved its aims; namely, to effectively introduce ICT into a management and organizational communication course, to increase student learning and motivation, and to broaden students exposure by including intercultural and business elements.

To ensure the smooth running of a joint intercultural marketing project through ICT, some recommendations are made and are listed below:

1. Make sure the long-distance e-mail project is not overly complicated. Breaking down the complex project to several sub-parts allows students to see tangible progress over the course of the project rather than feeling the whole project as an "impossible" task.
2. Build milestones into the project so that students communicate and exchange information regularly to achieve their goal, and not wait until at the end of project.
3. Have built-in assessment points during the course of the project. Assessments allow instructors not only to provide student feedback on their learning, but also to identify difficult concepts or tasks that need to be reinforced. As noted by one student, ". . . a good start might have been important but it would be nice along with some mid-point check points for the groups. For example, asking [us] the US students to submit their research [progress] report as a way to check the progress."
4. Foster multiple communication links not only between students but also between students and course instructors. The instructor should regularly monitor groups through face-to face consultations or weekly email reports, so that dysfunctional groups can be identified early.
5. Encourage students to reflect on self-for-one-self and self-for-others. Reflections allow individuals to critically and objectively analyze the

miscommunication incidents from their own and other's perspectives. Through the process of self-reflection, individuals are able to learn what went wrong and how to cope when miscommunication occurs, while self-for-others reflection allows individuals to become empathetic towards their counterparts.

6. Enhance intercultural communication competency through longitudinal, ethnographic research design. Due to funding resources constraints, many intercultural communication joint research projects are limited to a semester project where students are required to complete designated tasks. Very often students fulfill the course requirements but never have a chance to deeply reflect on what they have learned or what they could have done to conduct the project more effectively. Although the longitudinal nature of this type of study consists of two cycles of the five-stage Action Learning Model and requires a lot of time and effort to be invested, this will prove to be worthwhile, as it allows time for a variety of evaluation procedures to be employed and the model refined.

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