# Cross cultural comparison: the introduction of new technology with post-graduate students in Hong Kong and in the United Kingdom.

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**Abstract:**

This project focuses on the development of an existing virtual learning environment (VLE) within the Professional Doctorate course delivered in the United Kingdom (UK) and Hong Kong (HK). The universities involved are Nottingham Trent University (NTU), course provider (55 students), and Hong Kong College of Technology (HKCT), where the course had been delivered for 2 years (30 students) prior to the start of the project. The project sought to evaluate the implementation, and analyse potential benefits and challenges for introducing a western based tool, the VLE, into an international context where English may not be the first language and there may be a different culture of learning and pedagogy. The project identified key considerations for Higher Education in developing VLEs in the West for use with transnational courses in the East. A key outcome of the project is the creation of a wiki and blog to provide further support and learning opportunity for students in Hong Kong and the UK; the wiki has engendered a robust research environment with students in both countries working together to co-construct new knowledge at doctoral level.

NB  The framework for this Case Study is based on the evaluation framework provided by Saunders, Trowler and Bamber, 2011, p10)

## What was the genesis of the activity?

HE institutions in the UK are developing collaborations with partners in the East often resulting in academic staff, with little understanding of Eastern cultures, using Western designed VLEs and other technologies which lack full consideration of the learning styles and educational experiences of Eastern students. As part of the collaborative agreement with HKCT students, based in Hong Kong, were expected to

engage with NTU's VLE which is deployed across all courses, and valued by students based in the UK.

## Background and context

At the start of the project (2014) engagement with the VLE by HKCT Professional Doctorate students was almost non-existent. A visit to HKCT with the intention of engaging the students more thoroughly in the VLE revealed this disengagement was not in the notion of using the VLE for learning but in the unconsciously ethno-centric bias of the design of the VLE and development of the VLE.

Initial data was collated from the VLE analytics relating to the HKCT students' use of VLEs which showed that only 9 of the 35 students had accessed the VLE.

This project focuses on the development of evidence-informed practice to identify what techniques engage Eastern students more effectively with VLEs to enable a greater use of online learning, a deeper level of learning and a faster pace of progression.

Although focused on post-graduate students it is anticipated that learning through this project will help inform others facing the challenge of using a Western designed VLE with Eastern students.

## Literature Review

A literature review revealed no specific guidance to academics in relation to this area of practice. The literature review identified that Hofstede (1985) opened the debate and stimulated dialogue about cultural differences and the need for culture to be acknowledged in teaching and learning. Carroll and Ryan (2005) assert that there is a need to be explicit about purpose and structure of activities and assessment with Eastern students; while this assertion is based on classroom focused research it impacts on online learning. Brown (2004) drawing on Gestalt cognitive theory asserts that the personal theories of learning and constructs of international students differ widely from the Western norm, which can hamper learning and provides new challenges for tutors. Maclean and Ransome (2005) identify studying in a second language, adjusting to an unfamiliar educational context and perception of workload can impede international students.

**The intervention strategies**

Initial data collected via an online survey and completed by all Hong Kong students indicated a range of barriers to using the VLE:

- Lack of understanding of how to use the VLE;
- Lack of understanding of the purpose of the VLE;
- A requirement to change their password every 90 days by NTU – failure to do this resulted in no access to the VLE;
- Not regularly using the VLE, therefore forgetting where to go once logged in;
- Not all student had access to each of the learning rooms – this is due to them not following the more general structure of undergraduate students and therefore sitting slightly outside our existing systems.
- Not knowing where to go if they experienced technical problems such as logging in. This was compounded by the 8 hour time difference which excluded them from accessing timely help which UK-based students find essential.

We responded to these barriers by developing the induction for the students significantly. There is often an assumption that post-graduate students who will have completed undergraduate and Masters study will have prior experience of using a VLE in previous studies; this was not the case in this project as identified in this initial survey. Overall the survey evidenced the lack of prior experience Eastern students have of using VLEs. This finding is further supported by a recent comparative survey of Hong Kong students (n=1300) ranking Hong Kong students experience of ICT as 'low among all economically developed participating education systems' (CITE, 2015, p 3) This assumption had resulted little in the existing induction to introduce them to the VLE. The redesigned induction with increased focus on accessing and using the VLE has impacted significantly on the engagement of students. As part of the induction we also developed a labelled an image of the VLE as a quick reference guide for these part-time students who do not access the VLE on a daily basis as do full-time students. We developed a purpose for these students to go regularly to the VLE, such as regular news items, updates to reading, links to the course blog and wiki (see below), materials from workshops, use of Dropbox for tutorial records and submitting assignments. Finally we created a private content area in each module learning room and the course learning room for Hong Kong students – we put additional materials in these rooms such as the list of reading books provided for them at HKCT, and vodcasts on how to use a range of resources provided by the library to replace the drop in sessions our UK students are

able to access.  We have found that in Hong Kong the wifi can be slow for our students in accessing the content area of the VLE and have therefore added a widget to the landing page of each learning room which takes the Hong Kong students directly to their private area.  These actions have been reported as positively impacting on students using the VLE by student representatives at Course Committee.

We acknowledged the problems HKCT students can experience in logging into our systems and created a separate blog; the first blog proved unsuccessful, requiring students to register (free of charge) which the HKCT students were not willing to do.  We therefore set up a second blog using Word Press, where no registration is required, and populated this with vodcasts explaining how to access the VLE if they got locked out and how to access technical support if they were locked out, ensuring this would be accessible via mobile phones which is the most used technology by our HKCT students; this has been described as a 'lifeboat' by the HKCT students who are not able to drop in to the help desks at NTU.  The blog also has a questionnaire which links directly to the Course Tutor's email, to log any problems they have with the VLE.

We worked with our IT Support systems to introduce a timed email to go to the students every 85 days to ensure they had adequate notice to change their password (which is required every 90 days).  We developed the students' understanding of how to change their password by using a standard password and changing the number at the end rather than having to recreate a password each time.  We have also worked with our management systems teams to ensure all students have access to all learning rooms; this has been challenging because of the very nature of our Professional Doctorate students who are all part-time students working full-time in high level jobs and frequently work to individual deadlines resulting in cohorts progressing to new modules at different times throughout the year rather than each September or January which is the norm for undergraduate students.

**How was the activity reconstructed by the target group?**

Our second questionnaire indicated that our doctoral students wanted a space to co-construct knowledge with students in Hong Kong and also with our NTU students, share reading and support each other.  This was beyond the reach of the VLE where students can only upload to a discussion board rather than a 'space' and the design of the discussion board makes it challenging to co-construct knowledge as well as slow to access discussions from Hong Kong where there is a slow wifi.  We therefore

investigated various alternatives and discussed these with the students both in Hong Kong and the UK. After trialling various alternatives we found a wiki to respond to the needs of the HKCT students.

A questionnaire to our HKCT students identified the main elements to be built into the wiki and the overall design of the wiki.  Our literature review had identified students in the East preferred different fonts, more images etc to those in the UK but this was not supported by our data.  We selected PBWiki ([www.pbwiki.co.uk](www.pbwiki.co.uk)) which we had experience of in an academic setting and knew it would provide an appropriate space to meet the requirements of our students. The wiki was established with different learning spaces and pre-populated with text and readings, sufficient to support the students in working together initially.  Students were informed of this development via an email, invitation to join the wiki, and a news item in the VLE learning rooms.  We have also built the wiki into our taught workshops in Hong Kong and the UK. Uptake by students in both countries was initially slow but as students have attended taught workshops we have demonstrated how to use the wiki, explained the purpose and created time in the workshops for students to engage with the wiki.  Gradually the wiki is being used by the students and has been praised in course evaluations and by student representatives at course committee.  Analytics show that the students are increasingly engaging with the wiki; our research data indicates this will take time to embed but meets the needs of our students.

**Structure of the Wiki**

The Wiki has been designed without images and with clear fonts following data from questionnaires.  We have developed a landing page with links to different pages, each of which relate to different aspects of developing knowledge required for doctoral students.  The landing page also has a information on how to edit, a short video on what a wiki is, and a message from the course team. Each page has an area for students to pose questions to each other and is editable by the students or course team.  An example is shown in Figure 2 below from the Narrative Analysis page.

**New practices**

The induction has changed significantly with the VLE now being demonstrated at the Induction Workshop and time being taken to enable students to actively use the VLE at this workshop. For students who had already had their induction prior to the start of the research we have revisited how to access the VLE while we have been in Hong

Kong and they are now accessing regularly and feeding back, via the Blog, any additional developments that improve their engagement and experience; to date we have made all of the changes required. The new induction has now been used with 2 cohorts and has resulted in a higher engagement by students. This ensures students are able to access all learning rooms and have a clear understanding of the purpose of the VLE.

We have developed widgets on the landing page of each VLE learning room to enable: fast access by our Hong Kong students to their content area; a link to the course wiki; a link to the course blog. This simple accessing into the VLE and out to the key external sites has provided increased confidence in using our systems and increased engagement by the Hong Kong students.

We have developed time in each workshop for students, both in the UK and Hong Kong, to co-construct and share knowledge through the wiki; this may be in terms of key reading they have found of significant impact on their research, sharing their research methodology, and/or sharing their methodological frameworks including their developing understanding of epistemology and ontology. It is early days for making links across the continents in terms of writing papers, or putting together joint conference papers where they are undertaking similar research, but the students both in the UK and Hong Kong are excited about the possibilities of this through the wiki.

**What is the experience of the end user (students) of these changed practices?**

The key outcomes of the project were to develop evidence-informed practice to identify what will engage Eastern students to engage more effectively with a western designed VLE to enable a greater use of online learning, a deeper level of learning and a faster pace of progression.

While the VLE was the focus of the initial research and many of the challenges associated with the VLE from the perspective of the Hong Kong students have been identified and support put in place to manage these such as the Blog, the email reminder of the need to change passwords and the Hong Kong area within each learning room, it is the wiki that has the greater impact on these key outcomes.

## Key learning points and Conclusion

This research set out to answer questions related to potential ethno-centric bias in the use of Western designed VLEs and to identify appropriate technologies to support the learning of part-time transnational doctoral level students.  The research has provided evidence to support:

- the need to understand cultural and pedagogical differences when using technologies with transnational and international students:
- the need to understand the visual perception of meaning for different cultures;
- the need to identify the prior experience of transnational students in terms of technologies being used.

Specifically related to technologies the research has highlighted the importance of:

- signposting transnational students to technical support;
- ensuring a comprehensive induction which includes opportunity to use technologies in a supportive and assistive environment;
- the need to identify wifi speed and bandwith in the countries where the course is being delivered transnationally;
- to identify appropriate technologies;
- to recognise the need for adaptive alternative technologies as appropriate to the context of the transnational students;
- where co-construction of knowledge is required as part of the course  technologies need to be explored to provide the most appropriate for the educational context.

## Acknowledgements

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