THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL LIAISONS
IN INTERNATIONAL DISTANCE EDUCATION:
A CASE STUDY

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There can be unforeseen breakdowns in communication, and in the educational
process, when international education takes place between United States providers of
that education and working professionals abroad, whose native language is not English
and whose cultural experience is not of the U.S. The significance of the cultural
differences that exist in all societies cannot be overestimated, nor can the challenges that
occur, when those differences are not understood and appreciated by both the
educational providers and the adult learners. This paper details the important role played
by a Korean-born engineering Ph. D. student at Berkeley, hired to serve as a Cultural
Liaison between the Korean engineers taking a Berkeley course in a distance-learning
mode, and the course facilitator.

This paper highlights the difference between two educational outreach efforts of the Cal
VIEW program in the College of Engineering at Berkeley. Both of these efforts involved
professional engineers employed by Motorola in Korea who enrolled, at two separate times, in a
full-semester-length graduate course in Electrical Engineering and Computer Sciences.

The first effort was, to all intents and purposes, an abysmal failure, in that the majority of
the students dropped the course before completing it. Five years later, another group of
engineers at Motorola in Korea enrolled in ANOTHER full-length Berkeley course. This second
effort was a resounding success, in that 100% of the enrolled engineers finished the class, and
ALL of them received an “A” in the course.

Because our first experience offering a difficult full-length graduate course to a group of
Korean nationals - all working professional engineers - was a failed effort, it was important that
our program’s second effort be successful. Convinced that we needed to not only structure
things differently, but also have a better understanding of the cultural differences that separated
us, I hired a UC Berkeley Ph.D. student, born in Korea, to assist the facilitator of the course, a
Ph. D. student in the EECS department. For ease of recounting the case study that resulted
from this project, I will call the course facilitator “Michael” and the Korean cultural liaison “Yoon.”

What follows are the fine points of the project as detailed in the Course Instructor’s Manual
that Yoon submitted to Cal VIEW at the end of the semester. This manual now serves as the
primary procedural “bible” for all Cal VIEW’S international distance-learning activities with
engineers from other countries, and it is adapted to meet each group of foreign engineers’
unique cultural characteristics in order to optimize their opportunity for educational success in
our courses.

Background Cultural Information for Course Facilitator

Yoon educated Michael about some basic characteristics of the Korean culture, as follows:
Koreans tend to do things throughout their life as members of a group; they enter each level of
schooling at the same age, get married at the same age, start their professional lives at the
same age. They do not appreciate being singled out as individuals, or being put in
circumstances that would work to single them out and create a set of new rules, or allowances, that would apply only to them. To be seen as an individual, acting within a unique set of circumstances, governing only THEM, would be anathema to Koreans and put them at odds with their group, which, in this case, would be the other students in the class.

As a group, Koreans are strongly influenced by the principles and verities of Confucian thought, and they put a great deal of emphasis on the importance of paying respect to older people, even to those only a few years older than they are. They also believe that it is important to pay respect to teachers and parents, and to hold learning for its own sake in the highest regard. Education and learning in Korean culture is considered to be perhaps the most important activity in one’s life, and this importance has nothing to do with finding a good job, or moving into a higher-paid position, it has to do with living one's life in an honorable and conscientious manner.

Having respect for individuals older than they are, has made it important for Koreans to know the exact AGE of those they interact with, so they can place themselves at the appropriate point in the “age hierarchy” spectrum. This placement determines one’s manners and comportment with those individuals around them in the work place, as well as in social settings. It also applies to behavior within the interactive framework that defines the distance-learning classroom experience. Given the importance they place on knowing someone's AGE leads Koreans to think nothing of asking someone their age, and they tend to ask that question openly, and without hesitation or guile.

As a cultural group, Koreans tend to not share their personal opinion in a group of strangers, and they are not the first to initiate a conversation with someone they do not know well. They are often very shy and reserved in the beginning of any new social environment. Additionally, although Korean students are quite familiar with written English, as they start to study English in the 7th grade, they are not always fully comfortable with SPOKEN English and find it difficult to let their American instructors know that. Keeping this cultural conditioning of the Korean students in mind, Yoon identified the subjects he wanted to cover in his coaching sessions with Michael, in the topics that follow:

Adjusting the Course Syllabus to Avoid Official and Unofficial Holidays

Yoon pointed out that oftentimes there are unofficial holidays in Korea, the observance of which tends to change from company to company, or can be eliminated or postponed indefinitely, based on the current economy, when people tend to put in more hours on the job and take fewer hours of time-off from work. Knowing these dates is crucial when setting due dates for project and homework assignments.

Time Zones Are a MAJOR Problem

There are four major time zones in the contiguous United States, and seven time zones throughout the entire country. These time zones are determined by each state’s latitude and longitude. There is also the practice of “daylight savings time” which is activated in most States in the spring, when the clock is pushed back one hour to have another hour of daylight each day, and this lasts at least through October. In Korea, as in most Asian countries, there is only one time zone for the entire country, and there is no such thing as “daylight savings time”. There was more than just a little confusion when one of the Korean engineers was sent to Chicago, Illinois, on a work assignment, and was reporting Chicago time to the rest of the Korean students in Korea as being the “current time” in the U.S.”, when it was actually the current time only in the “central standard time” zone, where he was living. A month later, when a new time shift happened – that of “daylight savings time” - the problem was compounded. (Yoon made the distinction, in his report, that it is the folks in the United States that keep changing the time,
not the rest of the world, so it is up to us to get it right, when doing distance learning, if we want to eliminate the confusion that occurs when there are many time zones to coordinate!)

**Scheduling Telephone Office Hours for Questions and Answers**

Instructors holding office hours to answer questions, is something new to the majority of Korean students. In Korea, instructors and professors do not hold office hours. Students, theoretically, can arrange a “consult time” with the instructor each time they have a question, however this is a very unlikely thing to happen. More usually, they ask their friends or an older, more knowledgeable colleague – their “sun-bae”- for assistance.

If a U.S. instructor wants to hold telephone office hours with distance-learning students in Korea, Yoon suggests that the instructor explain to his students, exactly what that means. Just listing the appropriate “call-in” hours in the course syllabus under “telephone office hours” will be very ineffective and of course, no one will ever call.

**Encouraging Students to Actively Participate (Verbally) in the Course**

Koreans, by nature, are reserved and therefore very reluctant to voice their opinion on a subject. One way an instructor, who wants feedback, can help them speak up, is to pose a specific question to one person, and then ask someone else to answer another specific question. This will require a lot more preparation and commitment from the instructor, but it is the strategy most likely to bring about the hoped-for results. And, given that most Koreans’ command of English is of written English, Yoon strongly emphasized that a better approach is to ask questions of the students FIRST in an email, and then ask them the same question within a scheduled telephone conference call.

**What About Cheating?**

It’s important when dealing with another culture to say very clearly what constitutes CHEATING to a U.S. university professor, and in this instance, his surrogate. Something done quite routinely by students and professional engineers in Korea, is to look up past assignments and exams to help learn new material, and then submit some of those prepared answers as they respond to the new assignments. This routine practice took place in this course, and it was thought by the course facilitator to be “cheating”, and there was considerable confusion and consternation about this

Here is the edited discussion as Michael describes the situation:

“Some of the answers for the problem sets are very complicated, and I’ve never seen anybody answer them so concisely. (The Korean students’ answers resembled the solution sets exactly.) Ultimately, of course, the real test of someone’s knowledge is how well they do on an exam, and all the Korean students did extremely well on the exam, and that was a newly-created exam! Still, I DO have some concerns about the possibility of cheating taking place …”

Here was Yoon’s response to Michael’s comments:

“O.K. I get it. This type of thing is so common in Korea (getting previous year’s materials and using them as a reference) that generally no one (including the professors) regards it as cheating. One of the reasons why students do this is actually quite cultural. In Korea, professors are very difficult to reach for question sessions. The professor holding office hours is not common in Korea. So naturally students rely on other means to get
answers. And one of the methods is to get old solutions and look at them to understand the area in which they are having trouble. It is sort of back-calculating the concept (reverse engineering, you might say.) Frankly, even I did it many times and it helped me a lot. Usually the old solutions are similar but not exactly the same as the current problem sets, but I guess if you happen to have the solutions to the same exact problem what can one do but look at them, learn from them, and then – submit them! As you said, if the students do well in the exams – and they DID! - I don't see it as too serious a problem.”

Making Exceptions for Special Cases

During the semester, one of the Korean students was put on a very long assignment from his position in Korea; he was sent to Chicago on a work-related assignment. This obviously put him in a very difficult situation to pace the course and finish the homeworks on schedule. But this special situation was only revealed to Yoon AFTER he called the students in Korea and asked them whether there was anything special he could do for them.

Again, Yoon commented about the tendency for many people in Korea to move in and through and out of planned situations – such as a course of instruction – as a group; there is a strong affinity that individuals have for being part of a group. So anyone who falls out of this cycle often experiences themselves as isolated and apart from the group, and it becomes hard for them to adjust to the special circumstances that have created that sense of isolation. Simply said, something unforeseen happens to change their circumstances, and that really bothers them; they become worried and uncomfortable when things happen to upset their comfort zone of “group equilibrium.”

Yoon continued: “If Americans find it hard to believe this, let me give you an illustration of a common expression of “group think”. If you have a chance to visit Seoul, you will find lunch hours very interesting. The restaurants are usually very empty even just before noon. But from noon exactly, to 1:00 PM, restaurants are absolutely packed with people. Then all of a sudden, soon after 1:00 PM, the restaurant is entirely empty and very quiet, totally devoid of people except managers and wait staff. The contrast between “very crowded with customers” and “totally empty” is very noticeable. One might ask: “Why can’t they come out 10 minutes before noon or 10 minutes after 1:00 PM, and that way, avoid the crowd?” I guess it is just that they prefer to do even such a simple thing as having lunch, together.

“I use this example to try and explain why the Korean student reassigned to Chicago for his job, never said anything to the course facilitator Michael, and was suffering alone and in silence when he was trying to do his job at the Chicago plant and still work with the same schedule – and time clock – as the rest of his colleagues in Korea.”

Yoon went on to say this: “When I called the student in Chicago, I sensed that he was indeed very much worried about the whole thing. But at the same time, he didn’t want to follow a modified schedule, in the fear that something would go wrong; in other words, he did not want to be singled out of the group, by virtue of his changed circumstance. When we tried to give him some flexibility in turning in the homeworks and taking the exam at a later time, it was EXTREMELY important for us to assure him – which took a great deal of concentrated effort on my part, and on Michael’s part - that the criteria for him, would be exactly the same as what we used for the rest of the students, in terms of the grading scale and evaluation of his participation and performance in the course.”

Advice to All U.S. Instructors Working with Korean Students

If an unexpected event happens, most Korean students would rather suffer through trying to follow the originally scheduled guidelines for a course, even if those guidelines no longer pertain
to them, given the change in their circumstance. It is not in their nature to ask that they be given any kind of special treatment, even when the change in their circumstance, is NOT of their own making.

Therefore, when an instructor senses that a good student is suddenly starting to miss some work deadlines or starts to underperform, the instructor should check to see if any special circumstances, work or personal, has happened to change that student’s daily life. If making a special adjustment of the course schedule is necessary to help a certain student finish the course, due to special circumstances, the instructor needs to put that idea forth for the student to hear, while, at the same time, they should take pains to ASSURE the student that he or she will still be treated exactly the same as the other students taking the course, whose lives have NOT changed. Simply said, the Korean student will NEVER ask for any kind of “special consideration” due to their individual circumstance; that would be unheard of, as they will never, by choice, separate themselves from the group and the dynamics that are part of the group.

Summary Statement

Yoon offers the following guidelines to future Berkeley Cultural Liaisons, and the instructors they work with, when teaching courses to students in other countries using distance-learning technologies:

- Identify and be aware of each individual’s background such as schools attended, age, position at work, work hours, and convenient times to call, so that you create a friendly and welcoming atmosphere that encourages the students to contact you as the need arises, seek out your help if a difficult situation occurs that impacts their course participation, and trust your advice and support when you proffer it.

- Assist the course facilitator with any language problems that surface during the conference calls and telephone office hours.

- Keep in touch frequently with the students, in the role of friend and mentor, so they continue to feel connected to the program and not left out.

- Work with the Berkeley course facilitators and instructors in scheduling the syllabus to avoid national holidays, special holidays and special events in Korea. Including those dates would make adherence to the schedule defined in the syllabus impossible.

- Be on alert for any signs of potential or actual miscommunication, and take immediate steps to correct the problem.

- Serve as an advisor to the Cal VIEW program staff so that all correspondence with the foreign country is appropriately written, sent to the appropriate party, and signed by the most suitable (highest level) signee for any kind of official document. This protocol honors the importance that most countries place on giving proper respect to those in positions of high esteem and authority, when sending official documents that outline a program or a partnership that is/will be taking place now and in the future. (Yoon’s suggestion then became more direct. He said that the “Welcome to Berkeley” letter sent to every student by the course facilitator, and administered through the Cal VIEW program office, should have been signed by the Dean of the College of Engineering. When I learned of this
important protocol, I modified our program procedures, and we now have the “Welcome to Berkeley” letter go out under the Dean’s signature, and it is sent to the highest-level engineering officer at the sponsoring company’s local plant. Additionally, a copy of that letter is included in the student’s course packet, along with his/her own “Welcome to Berkeley” letter from the course facilitator.

Conclusion

As stated earlier, all of the Korean students who enrolled in the second distance-learning course, earned an “A” in the course. That good outcome would not have happened, were it not for the coaching, and communication skills, of Yoon with the students, and the numerous interventions and “teaching” sessions that he coordinated with Michael. There is no doubt but that his efforts made the difference between “success” and “failure” to the students who signed up for this course.

Bibliography: send request to atkins@berkeley.edu