



EVALUATION OF DIDACTICS FROM A CROSS CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE THE EBIT PROJECT: ONLINE EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA

Larsson, K., Stockholm University/KTH, Sweden
Andersson, A., Örebro University, Sweden
Wikramanayake, G.N., University of Colombo School of Computing, Colombo, Sri Lanka
Hansson, H., Stockholm University/KTH, Sweden
Glimbert, L., Stockholm University/KTH, Sweden
Weerasinghe, T.A., University of Colombo School of Computing, Sri Lanka

Summary

Aim: The aim of this study is to identify and discuss the challenges when transferring evaluation methodology and practice from one cultural context to another. **Approach:** The Asia-Link project Asia eBIT aimed to develop and implement a 3-year online external Bachelor program in ICT in Sri Lanka. An important part of the project is recurring evaluations of several different aspects of the program. Information has been obtained by questionnaires, interviews, field visits, focus groups and expert evaluations, conducted face to face and online. **Findings:** The structural differences of the educational systems among partners created a number of challenges, such as: organizational aspects of educational activities, didactic practice, learning culture in traditional education and online courses, staff responsibilities and duties, the financial model, language and other cultural issues. Major challenges mainly concern the interviews and have been three-fold: 1) getting students to talk; 2) when they talk - overcoming the language barrier; and 3) getting students to honestly speak their minds. This process has been a requirement in order to produce usable evaluations at the same time as it is part of the ongoing evaluation itself. **Conclusions:** The findings in this study further the understandings of the complexity when conducting evaluations across different cultural contexts. This understanding is important in order to perform high quality evaluations and should be part of any evaluators' skills when facing similar challenges. This is a unique study on evaluation approaches of Sri Lankan online ICT program.

Introduction and aim

Quality is about values. Values have its roots in culture and history. Therefore when cultures and different history traditions meet in a globalised world, there is a need for negotiation, adaptation and reformulation of values. Some values are more easily adopted than others, for instance the value of economic profit and other market oriented principles, however when it comes to education it is about rebuilding the society by changing and developing the minds of the new generation. Every society wants the education system to reflect and transmit the ideologies of the current order. When education moves online values are again challenged. Internet has its built in values, which are questioned. The early developers adhered to the values of speed of information transmission, openness of information and free information. We see today a divergent development of the Internet; both a movement for open and free information and a movement of increasing security, privacy and commercialization of information. Both paradigms have its legitimate reasons for development. This study is about online education developed for Sri Lanka's need of computer proficient graduates. When designing education there is a need to conduct various types of evaluations in order to improve the courses and assess their learning impact. Although the evaluation methods may be the same across cultures, the cultural settings need to be understood by the evaluators as this is part of the context being evaluated.

The aim of this study is to identify and discuss the challenges when transferring evaluation methodology and practice from one cultural context to another.

Background

Bachelor of Information Technology (BIT) is an external degree program managed by the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka. The BIT was launched by the University as a mechanism to address the demand for IT graduates in the country. It was designed as a low cost self-sustained external degree program where the university only gets involved in providing the curricula, conducting examinations and certifying successful candidates. The University made arrangements for optional face-to-face learning opportunities at a number of non-accredited private institutions island-wide. This level of support was totally inadequate as both candidates and teaching institutes were unable to figure out the expectations of the program using a list of textbooks. Thus BIT immediately faced several challenges such as: 1) gradual decline in intake, 2) high dropouts of enrolled candidates, 3) low success rates at examinations and 4) low participation and success by less urbanised/rural/overseas candidates. Higher education system in the country didn't allow the staff to be directly involved in teaching in this program. Thus the University decided to provide indirect support to the BIT candidates using a Learning Management System (LMS) which was introduced during the 4th year of this program. Initial LMS provided quizzes and assignments using past examination questions. Although it provided an opportunity to revise the LMS alone didn't help the candidates to learn the courses. Thus it was less effective in addressing the above challenges. In the 7th year of the program an open source LMS was introduced along with e-content, e-activities, e-assessments [8]. The new curriculum was introduced to the student in 2006 through this having interactive online learning content, activities and assessments. This enabled the students to learn through the system as well as the institutes to identify the expectations of the university and facilitate the students.

The EU funded Asia-Link project Asia eBIT aimed to develop and implement a 3-year online external Bachelor program in ICT in Sri Lanka. The project has been a cooperation between University of Colombo, Stockholm University and Delft University of Technology. The EU partners' contribution has been in the field of knowledge transition and assistance based on the partners previous experiences in the field, both in pedagogical and technical matters. The eBIT project has likely contributed to broader dissemination and easier access to higher education in Sri Lanka, reducing the national knowledge divide. Providing digital resources and a learning space that does not carry the barriers of traditional education makes us say this. An innovative, yet realistic, approach to the paradigm shift of going from teaching to learning has made the transformation able to handle for most learners in the program. While

introducing the learners to on-line learning methods and a re-designed knowledge acquisition mode, we also made sure the literature (i.e. special student manuals) had a central place as a fall back for those who did not want to leap the full step at once. As of today, the new paradigm is there partly in parallel to the old.

The program is now running in its 9th year and it has now aligned the curricula to even out course content between semesters and reduced dropouts. Number of graduated produced is more than two folds covering less urbanised and rural areas as well as Sri Lankans living overseas.

Approach

The cultural context includes the structural differences of the educational systems. This created a number of challenges. These challenges need to be recognized and understood if the outcome of the evaluations should be of benefit for the study program.

During the project progression the emerging issues has been identified, discussed and adaptations made by all partners to overcome these challenges and understand each others. This process has been necessary in order to produce usable feedback at the same time as it is part of the ongoing evaluation itself.

Quality in e-learning needs to be assessed in several perspectives, the following quality aspects are of importance in online education: 1) Material/content, 2) Structure/virtual environment, 3) Communication, cooperation and interactivity, 4) Student assessment, 5) Flexibility and adaptability, 6)Support (student and staff), 7) Staff qualifications and experience, 8) Vision and institutional leadership, 9) Resource allocation, 10) The holistic and process aspect [5] . In this study we look into these aspects, except for 7), 8) and 9). The creation of this education program however is a result of the vision and institutional leadership of the University of Colombo.

The quality aspects listed are clearly visible in the review template created for the expert evaluation which evaluates areas like the constructive alignment (internal and external) [4] content (printed and digital), assessment and learning activities, quality of presentation and facilitation [6].

Methods

This study is based on multiple data sources and data collection methods. Table 1 below provides an overview of methods and data. Data was collected continuously during the eBIT-project period December 2005-December 2008.

Table 1 Data collection methods employed in eBIT eakuations

Data collection method	Purpose	Who
Field studies/visits in Sri Lanka: Colombo, mountain region, eastern region, western region.	- To get first hand information about project impact, benefits and challenges. - To learn and adapt according to staff and student views. - To understand, and explain, local context and culture. - To identify suitable technology and evaluate	Ken Larsson – 6 visits Annika Andersson – 3 visits Lars Glimbert – 2 visits Henrik Hansson – 1 visit Gihan Wikramanayake – on site Thushani A Weerasinghe – on site

	existing infrastructure capacity.	
Field studies/visits in Sweden: Stockholm, Umeå	a) Post doc b) PhD education	a) Gihan Wikramanayake – 9 months b) Thushani A Weerasinghe – 2 years
Online questionnaires	To obtain quantitative data from students; pre, during and post expectations and experiences of the eBIT program	Lars Glimbert Annika Andersson
Interviews	a) To obtain a student perspective on the online courses, reasons for drop outs. b) To a obtain faculty perspective on online courses	a) Annika Andersson b) All involved
Expert evaluation	Holistic overview of course and program quality	Ken Larsson
Focus groups	Continuous improvement of course design, both pedagogical and implementation	Ken Larsson

Besides this there was continuous e-mail dialogues, skype dialogues and video meetings between partners to further the progress of the project and the evaluations and to clarify questions, in some instances this have also been an informal evaluation in itself.

Findings

Cross-cultural challenges in holistic evaluation

The purpose of the expert evaluation is to give a holistic overview of quality aspects of especially courses. These aspects are covering several different angles like alignment within the course, alignment to the semester and study program, the appropriateness of material, activities and assessments, the quality of implementation and presentation, support and facilitation, student response etc. It is built around the topics that has been dealt with in the knowledge sharing phase of the project and should reflect a cross cultural understanding of central theories in the field of didactics and e-learning.

The challenge in designing the template for the expert review was: 1) to focus on the common understanding of pedagogical and design issues 2) overcoming language differences 3) transform own educational culture to practices and norms in the educational

system being evaluated. To overcome the first challenge the template went through several reviews in meetings with partners from both EU and Asia, both at visits to Colombo and Stockholm as well as in emails and videoconferences. The final version includes guides for each section to overcome all three of these challenges.

Hardest challenge to overcome was probably to transform from one set of educational practices and norms into a different set of educational culture as this included a full understanding of a pedagogical and didactic context and required several visits and interviews with faculty.

Cross-cultural challenges in collecting students' opinions

For the collection of students' opinions a multitude of different methods have been used for reasons of validity and with special consideration to the cross-cultural context.

Major challenges mainly concern the interviews and have been three-fold: 1) getting students to talk; 2) when they talk - overcoming the language barrier; and 3) getting students to honestly speak their minds.

The first challenge - getting students to talk - was encountered at teaching institutes where teachers prompted students to talk in front of the class. When students were too shy to talk, the original data collection design had to be abandoned and students were asked to write letters instead. This approach with writing questions on the blackboard and getting students to write shorter letters in reply actually turned out to be a very effective method and findings have been used for the evaluation of the project and also used in research [2, 3].

As for the second challenge of overcoming the language barrier we have found that cross-language investigations suffer from not having a mutual native tongue. Interviews were not conducted in the native tongue - neither by the interviewer nor by the interviewees - and this challenge was handled by strategically choosing openness in how questions were formulated. The interviews were thus semi-formal were we had decided on the topics for discussion, but still allowed for much openness in how questions were formulated.

Finally, the challenge of getting students to honestly speak their minds. The evaluator found that e-learning had become a very strong norm in itself. During the interviews it was evident that students felt that they should appreciate e-learning and different features of the LMS. A clear separation had to be made between the students own beliefs and what they thought they were supposed to say. This required several follow-up questions and references to the observed behavior.

Expressing themselves is a key cultural issue in Sri Lanka as children are not encouraged to do so in schools. However, we have found some students who are quiet in face-to-face are very active in online forums. However in general most are inactive observers in online mode as well. Forums and all learning in the BIT is carried out in English medium although most students have had their prior learning in their native language, i.e. Sinhala or Tamil. We have had very little activity in the LMS forums and initially the encouragement factor too was missing. For instance, an active forum participant said he decided not to post anymore as his posting on pointing errors in the e-content has been removed after correcting the content, although the instructional designer was thinking that others would get confused if the posting continued in the forum. Similarly the same student argued how he could be assured if the rest of the content is correct or not, highlighting the impact created due to laps of quality control. To encourage forum participation a rewarding program was commended subsequently by recognising best e-learners at the awards ceremony.

Both students and the institutions have well appreciated the e-content and e-activities in the Year 1 LMS and its impact was seen through the threefold increase Year 1 diplomas holders and those proceeding to Year 2. However, the same level of success was not seen with Year 2 as we see the absence of e-content for that year is one of the key reasons for this. Students begin their learning by going through the e-content and thereafter they are in a position to work with the rest of the e-resources. Also the absence of e-content meant that the subject Matter Expert's (SME's) involvement in the Year 2 of the program was minimal as it was handled by the instructional designer instead. Impact of this was seen in the examinations as those papers were not aligned with the LMS learning content.

Conclusions

Being an evaluator in a cross-cultural context is sometimes challenging and it demands a lot of the evaluator to be flexible, open minded and inclined for improvisations. And no matter how close and friendly you become with most informants we still have to realize that our roles have been that of 'outside observers' [7] On the other hand there is always a balance between being an outsider and still open enough to fully understand any informant or situation. What is lost in "closeness" is also gained in form of a "critical distance" that allows you to keep an objectivity that keeps you from getting uncritically absorbed in the projects and the local conditions [1]

There are expectations of consensus, politeness and respect in dialogues both in the Swedish and Sri Lankan culture. But academic dialogue is supposed to be critical, challenging and sometimes provocative in order to sharpen arguments and ideas in the Swedish context. This might be a source of conflict and misunderstanding in a Swedish - Sri Lankan academic discussions and joint evaluations. In Sri Lanka discussions are more structured according to rank than in Sweden, where more spontaneous and informal dialogues are encouraged. Therefore cultural codes of conduct, which often is taken for granted by the evaluator, can not be simply transferred in the practice of evaluation. On a more explicit level there are differences in the form of organisational aspects (how education is planned and managed, financial model, staff responsibilities and duties); and of pedagogical aspects (didactic practices and learning cultures). These are also easily taken for granted and simply transformed between different cultural contexts, which may result in less accurate evaluations.

The findings in this study further the understandings of the complexity when conducting evaluations across different cultural contexts. This understanding is important in order to perform high quality evaluations and should be part of any evaluators' skills when facing similar challenges. The evaluations performed during the eBIT project have been a valuable instrument for the continual improvement of the study program. This is a unique study on evaluation approaches of Sri Lankan online ICT program.

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