

CONSTANTINE PORPHYROGENETUS INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION



Journal of Management Sciences and
Regional Development
Issue 4, July 2002
Correspondence: ikarkazis@aegean.gr

<http://www.stt.aegean.gr/geopolab/GEOPOL%20PROFILE.htm>
ISSN 1107-9819
Editor-in-Chief: Arie Reichel

SATELLITE MEDIATED DISTANCE LEARNING IN TOURISM EDUCATION: AN ISRAELI, PALESTINIAN, FRENCH EXPERIMENT

Natan Uriely

*Department of Hotel and Tourism Management,
Ben Gurion University of the Negev
Beer Sheva, Israel*

Joachim Meyer

*Department of Industrial Engineering and Management
Ben Gurion University of the Negev
Beer Sheva, Israel*

INTRODUCTION

New communication technologies, such as computers and satellite telecommunication, provide novel ways for long-distance contacts in various fields, such as politics, business, and education. The term "distance learning" refers to the increasing use of advanced technologies, such as video conferencing, or virtual classrooms, in the field of education (Dede, 1990). The use of distance learning in the domain of higher education is currently evident in various types of academic and semi-academic institutions. In this context, it is worth mentioning that some of the most prestigious universities, such as Stanford in the U.S. and Oxford in Britain, already offer complete academic programs that are based on distance learning. At the same time, distance learning is also intensively used by "Corporate Universities" which are owned by international corporations, such as AT&T, Motorola or Microsoft. Furthermore, the use of distance learning in higher education encourages various forms collaboration between academic institutions. Public and state universities, such as SUNY in New York, or CSU in California, that utilize distance learning across their institutional network exemplify the form of intra-institutional collaboration in higher education. The Virtual University of California (CVU), which offers 1,600 on-line courses from 95 educational institutions, exemplify the form of inter-institutional collaboration in higher education.

The main advantage of distance learning rests on its ability to provide access to education across physical limitations, geographical distances, time constraints, or economic shortages (e.g., Besser and Boom, 1996; Harris, 1996; Barker and Tan, 1997; Nelson, 1997). Distance learning can expose students at various locations to the best teachers in a field without the economic costs that would be required to bring them to all sites. Another advantage of distance learning is related to the general tendency towards globalization and the emergence of a global market which require cross-cultural cooperation (Cooper, 1997). An international classroom which is based on a video conferencing system can serve as a meeting point for students from different countries and cultures. As such, it may provide a concrete experience in intercultural encounters to students in different fields of education. Such an advantage is particularly relevant for the field of tourism education in which intercultural encounters have always been considered to be of major importance. In line with the above advantages of distance learning, Cummings (1997) has recognized its need and potential in the fields of tourism and hospitality.

Tourism involves intercultural encounters between tourists and hosts that might be problematic because of cultural differences and communication difficulties. Consequently, many scholars, educators, and managers in the field of tourism argue that the training of professionals in this industry should emphasize the required skills for intercultural contacts. For example, in the New Horizons Survey of educators and senior managers in tourism organizations 94.7% of the respondents have considered the "international perspective" (including the sensitivity to national differences) as a crucial skill that should be emphasized in the tourism curriculum, second only to "effective communications" (Go, 1994). Academic scholar, such as Reisinger (1994), also suggested that educational and training programs in the field of tourism should include knowledge about other cultures and provide concrete opportunities for cross-cultural interaction. In this context, it should be noted that the literature on student international travel programs indicates that the results of cross-cultural interactions

between students is usually followed by positive results (e.g., Pearce 1982, Welds and Duke 1985, Carlson and Widaman 1988, and Weiler 1989). For instance, Carlson and Widaman (1988) suggested that students who participated in travel programs have showed higher level of international political concern, cross cultural interest, and cultural cosmopolitanism than students who were not involved in study-and-travel experiences. Such programs, in which cross-cultural encounters are based face-to-face interaction, are certainly desirable in the education field tourism and hospitality. Nevertheless, due to economic costs and political obstacles, the accessibility of such educational programs is limited. Instead, the use of distance learning in tourism studies may partly respond to the need for more practical experience in intercultural encounters. Specifically, international joint courses which include numerous sites via video conferencing methods may provide opportunities for virtually mediated interactions between students and teachers from different cultures. Thus, these courses offer a unique experience that combines the study of academic subject matters with the practice of intercultural encounters.

Note, however, that the current use of distance learning in higher education is still embryonic and faces various obstacles. In this context, educational reports indicate that students' success rates in courses and even more so in complete educational programs that are based on distance learning are significantly lower than in traditional academic studies (Beller 1998). In light of these reports, it is suggest that students who participate in distance learning are required to develop a high level of self discipline and special learning skills. Moreover, many of the educational programs that are based on distance learning are accused for emphasizing their technological sophistication on the expense academic quality and control (e.g., Beller 1998). Another source of obstacles in the implementation of distance learning is associated with the above mentioned collaborations between educational institutions. In this respect, such collaborations require a careful definition of their curriculum, and arrangements of cross-institutional and international academic recognition.

The major premise of the current article suggests that more exploratory case-studies on the use of distance learning in the field of higher education are required in order to maximize its potential advantages and minimize its present obstacles.

PURPOSE

The current paper offers preliminary observations on the experimental use of a satellite mediated video conferencing system in an international joint course that is part of the curriculum of a unique tourism and hospitality educational program called the University for Culture, Tourism and Peace. Our aim was to examine the suitability of the system for the use in tourism education by relying on students' evaluations of the experimental course. In particular, we were interested to determine to what extent the video conferencing system was used by the students for gaining additional knowledge about the cultures of their counterpart students in the other sites and for initiating cultural contacts between students from the different sites. We also aimed to lay out a foundation of guidelines for the use of such systems in tourism education.

THE UTCP PROJECT

In January 1997 Gilbert Trigano, the founder of Club Med, established the University for Tourism, Culture and Peace (UTCP). The project was supported by leaders of various nations and international organizations, such as Hassan, the king of Morocco, Jacques Shirac, the president of France, Shimon Peres, then the Israeli Prime minister, Yassar Arafat, the chairman of the Palestinian Authority, Frederique Mayor, the general secretary of UNESCO, and Antonio Sivinac, the general manager of the World Tourism Organization. The UTCP aims to be a Mediterranean basin based institute of higher education in tourism, utilizing new telecommunication technologies, including a satellite mediated video conferencing system. Current participant countries are France, Morocco, Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The project's sponsors include the Rothschild foundation, Gilbert Trigano, the European Community, and local agencies in the participating countries. The program holds a three-year curriculum with various courses on issues of tourism and hospitality, including courses in management, sociology, and history. Students are also expected to acquire practical experience in hotels, tourist resorts or travel agencies. Note that currently only students from Marseilles and Bethlehem are registered to the full program. Students from Morocco and Israel take part only in some of the UTCP courses which are incorporated into the separated academic program of their local university.

One of the motivations for this project was to create opportunities for encounters between Israelis and members of Arab countries as part of the general peace process in the Middle East. There has been some debate on the value of tourism for promoting peace (Var, Ap & Van Doren, 1994), but the premise of the initiators of the program was that both the tourism industry and academia could contribute to the creation of a new and peaceful Middle East.

THE TECHNICAL SYSTEM

The UTCP is based to a large extent on the concept of distance learning. The technology adopted here is a technology of satellite-mediated videoconferences. Each of the participating sites established a classroom, which was equipped with video cameras and large TV monitors.

The cameras could focus either on the lecturer or on the students in the classroom. One camera was the lecturer camera that was located in the left back corner of the class, directed diagonally towards the lecturer. The camera was located in such a way that the lecturer's gaze at the class was also directed towards the camera. The "class-camera" was located in the center of the wall behind the lecturer and was directed towards the students. The frame of the camera included the entire class and could be zoomed to individual students. Four TV monitors were positioned in the class: A large monitor was placed on the stage in front of the students and two smaller monitors were placed in both corners of the front wall. Through these monitors students saw the other classes or the lecturer. An additional monitor was located in front of the lecturer. On this monitor the lecturer could see whatever the

students saw. The lecturer's stand also included a microphone, and additional microphones could be passed around in the class in order to let students ask questions or comment. The video system also served to display the lecturer's overheads, which were displayed through a video projector that was positioned on the lecturer's desk. The projector replaced the traditional function of the board in the classroom. The system was controlled through a touch-screen, positioned at the lecturer's stand. The lecturer could decide what is being seen on the monitors. It was possible to switch among classes, display the overhead, and manipulate the view of the different classrooms. Initially all these tasks were supposed to be performed by the lecturer, yet, in order to avoid delays in the pace of the lecture, a technical assistant was assigned to handle the technical aspects of the lecture. The lectures were transmitted in real time via the EUTELSAT satellite to the different sites.

THE EXPERIMENTAL COURSE

Within the academic curriculum the first author taught a course on the sociology of tourism. The course was held in parallel at Ben Gurion University in Beer Sheva, Israel, the University of Bethlehem in Bethlehem, the Palestinian Authority, and the International Institute for Tourism Training and the Marseille Business School in Marseille, France. Classes held 60 students in Beer Sheva, 15 in Marseille and 13 in Bethlehem. The course consisted of 13 weekly three-hour sessions including a 30 minutes break in each session. Due to the different schedule of the academic year only in 9 of these sessions did all three sites participate jointly. The other four sessions were given separately from Marseilles to the French and via satellite to the Palestinian students and in Beer Sheva only to the Israeli students. The course was taught in English, except for the lectures that were given separately to the students in Beer Sheva. Students were also required to read assigned readings that were available for them in all three sites. In terms of the course's content, the course covered issues such as host-guest relationships, sociocultural trends and their impact on tourism, social inequality and tourism etc. Each session consisted of alternating segments of lectures and interactive parts in which students from all sites were encouraged to comment, ask questions or participate in discussions with the lecturer and mainly with students from the other sites. The proportion of time allocated to the interactive part was about 25% of the sessions. Students were also allowed to use the system during the breaks of each session for initiating contact with students from the other sites.

METHOD

Data was collected through questionnaires that were distributed in the three sites during the last joint session of the course. Students were told that the questionnaire aimed to provide information that should allow us to improve the course in the future. The questionnaire was written in English and consisted of 12 closed and

one open questions. Five questions dealt with demographic information about the students, such as gender, age, education and work experience. Three questions dealt with the general satisfaction with the course in terms of the knowledge provided in the course, language difficulties or other difficulties caused by the equipment. Three questions focused on the interactive component of the course. Specifically students were asked how often they participated in class during the course, compared to other courses and the number of times they interacted with students in the other sites. The answers to the latter set of questions are the main concern of this study. The open question asked for future recommendations and comments.

RESULTS

We received 50 completed questionnaires, 31 from Beer Sheva, 11 from Marseille and 8 from Bethlehem. The demographic characteristics of the respondents were similar in all three sites. Mean ages were 22.7, 22.5 and 20.9 for students in Beer Sheva, Marseille and Bethlehem respectively. Also, the majority of the respondents were female students. Students from Marseille had already two years of higher education, yet none of the participants had completed an academic degree, yet.

More than 60% of the respondents from Israel and from the Palestinian Authority stated that they had no specific difficulty in understanding the lectures, and 45% of the French students indicated the same. Three parts of an additional question aimed to assess the reasons for the expressed difficulties. The French students (73%) most frequently expressed difficulties with the language, while fewer students from Israel (39%) and from the Palestinian Authority (25%) indicated the language as the cause of their difficulties. In terms of the subject matter of the course, 69% of the students from Israel and 73% of the French students indicated that this did not cause difficulties, while only 13% of the Palestinian students stated the same. This may indicate some difference in the educational background of the Palestinian students, compared to the other groups. Most students in all three groups indicated that the technological system caused no difficulties (68% in Israel, 55% in France and 75% in the Palestinian Authority), but still a large proportion of each group considered the system to be somewhat problematic.

One of the major objectives of a distance learning program, as suggested above, is creating opportunities for intercultural encounters and cooperation. In order to assess the degree to which these encounters occurred during the course we asked students a number of questions, concerning their participation in the course and their interactions with students from other sites. With respect to the rate of participation 73% of the Israeli students, 73% of the French students and all Palestinian students stated that they participated at least once during the course. We were also interested in assessing the degree to which students participated in this type of course compared to traditional courses. Among the Israeli students 39% and 36% of the French students stated that they participated in this course more than in other courses, while none of the Palestinian students indicated that his/her participation in this course was higher than in other courses.

In contrast to the similarity in the patterns of participation in the different sites, the findings concerning intercultural contacts revealed clear differences between the

Israeli students and the students from the other two sites. The responses to these questions are summarized in Table 1. While only 19% of the Israeli students indicated that they had at least once spoken with students in the other sites, all students from Marseilles and Bethlehem had done so at least once.

Table 1: Percentage of students who made contact with students from other sites.

	Never	Once Twice	or More Twice	than
Beer Sheva	81%	13%	6%	
Marseille	0%	27%	73%	
Bethlehem	0%	26%	74%	

The low frequency of intercultural contacts made by Israeli students may explain the low degree to which they felt that they had gained additional knowledge about the cultures of students from other sites, not due to the studied material. The proportion of responses to this question is presented in Table 2. Only 16% of the Israeli students indicated that they gained additional knowledge of the cultures form students form other sites, not due to the studied material. In contrast, 72% of the students from Marseille and 75% of the students from Bethlehem stated that they had gained at least some knowledge about other cultures.

Table 2: Percentage of students who indicated that they had gained additional knowledge about the cultures of students from other sites, not due to the studied material.

	Not at all	Some	Much
Beer Sheva	84%	6%	10%
Marseille	28%	36%	36%
Bethlehem	25%	25%	50%

DISCUSSION

Our aim in this case- study was to examine the suitability of video conferencing systems for international joint courses in the area of tourism. The findings reveal that the difficulties experienced by students in understanding the lectures were mostly related to the studied material and the language, rather than to the technological

system used in the course. Specifically, while most students from all sites indicated that the technological system caused no difficulties in understanding the lectures (although a large proportion of each group still considered the system somewhat problematic), about three quarters of the French students suffered from language barriers, and almost all of the Palestinian students had problems with the studied material. With respect to the rate of participation in class, the findings reveal that although most students from all sites engaged in class discussions at least once, but not more than in their other courses. In terms of using the video conferencing system for intercultural exchange, only a small minority of the Israeli students stated that they had initiated contacts with students from the other sites and had gained additional knowledge about their culture. In contrast, all French and Palestinian students indicated that they initiated contacts with their counterparts in the other sites, and most of them stated that they gained additional Knowledge about the cultures of students from the other sites.

In light of the findings regarding the students' difficulties in understanding the lectures, we suggest that such international joint courses should consist of students with equal levels of prior knowledge in the subject-matters taught in the course and with a similar educational background. As stated above, the findings regarding the usage of the system for intercultural exchange are of major importance for tourism education. Yet, the differences between the limited use of the system for this purpose by the Israeli students, compared to the French and the Palestinian students, require some additional explanation. These differences may be explained as a result of the differences between the Israeli culture and the cultures of the two latter groups. However, there are no empirical indications which suggest that Israelis are less oriented toward intercultural encounters or less interested in other cultures than French or Palestinians. Moreover, in terms of national reputation, the French are considered to be culturally more inward oriented than Israelis or Palestinians. Thus, we prefer to relate these findings to structural elements, such as the amount and frequencies of the joint sessions to which the students were exposed, and to the number of students in each site.

As noted earlier, the students from Marseille and Bethlehem are registered to the full program offered by the UTCP. Consequently, they meet each other in more than one joint course several times each week. In contrast, the Israeli students who currently take part only in one course offered by the UTCP program meet their counterparts from Bethlehem and Marseille only once a week. We believe that this is the main reason for the limited intercultural exchange which was practiced by the Israeli students, compared to French and the Palestinian students.

In addition, we suggest that the results regarding the use of the system for intercultural exchange may be related to the fact that the class in Israel consisted of 60 students. This class was about four times larger than the classes in the other sites. Given that at each moment only one or two students in each site can use the system for contacts with students in other sites, the Israeli students had less opportunities to initiate social contacts than the French and the Palestinian students. Accordingly, we recommend that for the purpose of intercultural exchange, international joint courses, which are based on video conferencing systems, should include small classes of similar sizes in all sites. This is sort of a contradiction to the basic goal of distance learning. Frequently it was suggested that one major advantage of distance learning is its ability to expose large audiences to the learning experience with a single teacher. This is not applicable here. If one wants the interpersonal and intercultural encounters, class sizes must be kept small, even if video conferencing technologies are employed.

Our study shows that distance learning that involves satellite mediated encounters between students from different countries can serve as a valuable tool in tourism education. It has the potential to combine academic studies with opportunities for intercultural exchange. However, the value of this tool depends strongly on a careful consideration of the social dynamics that are governed by the structural features of the setting.

Bibliography

- Barker, P., & Tan, C. M. (1997). Making a Case for Electronic Lectures. *Innovations in Education & and Training International*, 34(1):11-16.
- Beller, M. (1998). Teaching from Another World. *Academia*, (4):17-24.
- Besser, H., & Bonn, M. (1996). Impact of Distance Independent Education. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 47(11): 880-883.
- Carlson, J. & K. Widaman, (1988). The Effects of Studying Abroad During College on Attitudes Toward Other Cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 12(1):1-17.
- Cooper, D. N. (1997). The Future of Work in the Digital Diaspora: Economic Restructuring and Education. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 10(2): 139 ff.
- Cummings, L.E. (1997). Distance Education in Focus. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Education*, 9(1), 67-72.
- Dede, C. J. (1990). The evolution of distance learning: Technology-mediated interactive learning. *Journal of Research on Computing in Education*, 22(3), 247-265.
- Harris, H. (1996). The Evaluation of Video Technologies for Distance Learning. *Journal-Society of Motion Pictures & Television Engineers*, 105(12):742-747.
- Go, F. M. (1994). Emerging issues in tourism education. In W. Theobald (Ed.) *Global Tourism: The next decade*. Butterworth-Heinemann: Oxford, UK.
- Nelson, H. R. (1997). Virtual Seminars. *Computers & Geosciences*, 23(5):601-606.
- Pearce, P.L. (1982). Tourists and their Hosts: Some Psocial and Psychological Effects of Inter-Cultural Contacts. In S. Bochner, (ed.) *Cultures in Cintact:Studies in Cross-Cultural Interaction*. New York: Pergamon Press, 192-221.

Reisinger, R. (1994). Social contact between Tourists and hosts of different cultural backgrounds. In Seaton, A.V. et al. (eds.) *Tourism: The State of the Art*, John Wiley & Sons. Chinchester, New York.

Var, T., Ap, J., & Van Doren, C. (1994). Tourism and world peace. In W. Theobald (Ed.) *Global Tourism: The next decade*. Butterworth-Heinemann: Oxford, UK.

Weiler, B. (1989). The Effects of International Travel on the Tourists: Seeing and Clearing International Methodological Roadblocks. *Geo*. 19(3):303-307.

Welds, K. & Dukes, R. (1985). Dimensions of Cultural Change, Coping Styles, and Self-Actualization in Shipboard University. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 12:113-119.