

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN INTER-COUNTER EDUCATIONAL COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND THE PHILIPPINES

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ABSTRACT

The Mission of Jesse H. Jones (JHJ) School of Business is as follows: “The Jesse H. Jones School of Business is a constituent part of Texas Southern University, a comprehensive metropolitan university, located in Houston, Texas. We...provide quality education in an entrepreneurial, global context through effective teaching, theoretical and applied research, and community engagement in a student-centered environment.”. In this paper we will investigate the challenges encountered when students from JHJ attempted to jointly complete a web design project with a web design class at Southern Leyte State University-Thomas Opus in the Philippines. The goal was to provide our students with access to international students to experience the different challenges that occur when working with people in a global environment. As the case will show, many challenges were encountered, both culturally and technologically. Ultimately these challenges were too difficult to overcome at this time to complete the project successfully, however valuable lessons were learned through the process.

INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is a Southeast Asian island country located in the Western Pacific Ocean. The country's name comes from Phillip II who was King of Spain when they colonized the islands in the 16th century. Spanish rule lasted for 333 years followed by American rule for 48 years from 1898-1946. Consequently, the prevailing culture is an amalgamation of Filipino and Spanish Catholic traditions with an American influence. The Philippines is a developing third world county and their education budget reflects this reality. The educational institutions are very resource strapped and, over time, have learned to adapt and function with what is little is available. For example, a classroom may not have enough chairs and desks and the student may have to share one or few copies of the textbook. There is almost no equipment or access to technology to facilitate learning (UNESCO, 2014). However, despite these difficulties or, perhaps, as a result of the same, Filipinos greatly value education. This is reflected in the

extremely competitive job market with even low-level jobs such as at a convenient store or at a fast-food restaurant requiring college degrees.

Filipinos have a deep regard for education, which they view as a primary avenue for upward social and economic mobility (Peng, 2018). Middle-class parents in the Philippines are willing to make tremendous sacrifices to provide higher education for their children. Filipino education is patterned after the American system, with English as the medium of instruction. Schools are classified into public (government) or private (non-government). Many of the universities in the Philippines have begun offering free tuition to give more people the opportunity to get an education. Until recently, high schools only went through the 10th grade. Upon completion of the 10th grade students would enter university education, therefore university students were much younger than what we see in the United States.

At the school level, the Philippines has finally moved to a 13-year system from a 10-year system and was one of the last Asian countries to do so. This will greatly increase their competitiveness in the local and international markets and to attain higher education.

The Philippines uses English as the medium of instruction. As a result of years of American colonial rule, the Filipinos have adopted the same attitude to education as Americans. They emulate the American education system with schools classified as public (government funded) or private. They have a high regard for education and believe that a good education is a path to success and prosperity.

EDUCATION IN THE PHILIPPINES

The Department of Education (DepEd) is the main government agency in the country responsible for the implementation of basic education, particularly primary, secondary and non-formal education, including in culture and sports. Two other government offices are responsible for higher education and skills trainings. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) manages higher education, while the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) administers the postsecondary, middle-level manpower training and development (Phil Ed, 2020).

Admission to higher education requires a High School Diploma. There are no national entrance examinations, however many higher education institutions have their own entrance exams. Standard additional requirements apply to some programs. Higher education in the Philippines is unitary, i.e. higher education institutions (universities, colleges, academies, institutes, schools) offer both vocational and academic/research programs. The Philippines has both public and private higher education institutions. The private sector includes both religious and secular education institutions, both of which fall under the supervision of the Commission of Higher Education (CHED) (Ricafort, 2020).

Higher education is organized in 3 stages: Bachelor, Master and Ph.D. There are also Associate programs. Information on the prescribed scope and structure of a large number of programs can be found on the CHED website. Associate programs last 2 years, are vocational in nature and relatively small in number. Some of the most common Associate programs are in

areas such as hotel and restaurant management, electronic/electrical technology, and information technology.

Most bachelor's programs are of 4-year duration, although some (such as technology-based programs) can take 5 years. Program scope is expressed in units. Depending on the specialization, the scope of a bachelor's program can vary from around 150-210 units. Education in the Philippines is handled by three agencies separated by level of education. The Department of Education (DepEd) is over primary and secondary education, while The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) is responsible university education, and the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) manages technical-vocational courses (Philippines Ministry of Education, 2008).

The Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) was established in 1994 with a focus toward vocational education to develop practical skills in various areas such as computer system servicing, automotive, food and beverage, etc.

The Commission of Higher Education is committed to giving Filipinos access to world class education. They apply a process of continuous improvement to their curriculum and constantly review the same with a goal to aligning what is taught with local and international job market requirements. They strive to provide high quality and relevant education via innovations such as educational collaborations with other countries, joint degrees, and remote education. At present they offer over a hundred programs in various academic disciplines such as Science, Mathematics, Information Technology, Business, Management and Teacher Education (ADB, 2009). The Commission awards scholarships, and faculty development programs. They also offer support to upgrade laboratories, libraries and for development of instructional materials.

TECHNOLOGY

With the continued advancement of technologies, interaction among professors and students can take place without the necessity of being present in the same place at the same time. However, absence of effective communication or poor coordination can result in failed projects (Darling-Hamilton et al., 2014). The inclusion of technology-based learning into school curriculum in the United States along with the integration of the Internet into the learning process has helped students attain far reaching improvements (Thigpen, 2015). Pew Research Center and Elon University predict that in 2025, the Internet will be “like electricity:” pervasive yet imperceptible (Anderson, 2014). Internet technologies provide the opportunity to facilitate communication, interaction, and collaboration among users, and has become prevalent in educational environments around the world (Barjaktarović, L., Stanković, JS, Gavrilović, JM., 2014). Countries that have been able to include technology-based learning, as well as providing internet access to their students, have seen similar success. However, not all countries have had the luxury of the same level of technology. Internet access is limited in some countries, inhibiting students from having access to educational opportunities (Adiviso, 2010). The Philippines is a country where education is limited by the access to technology and the limitation and reliability of the Internet (Globe, 2016).

Per a recent Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines (CHRP) report only 55% of Filipinos and 26% of public schools have access to the internet. As a result, the country failed to achieve its goal of providing digital literacy for all. This severely disadvantages Filipino students to achieve the education they need to be competitive and marketable. The country has been aware of this digital divide long before COVID-19 exacerbated the situation. For example, in 2017 the National Broadband Plan of the Department of Information Communications and Technology (DICT) reported that “The Philippines lags behind its peers in terms of affordability, availability and speed of internet access”. While digital access has improved a lot more needs to be done to bring the Philippines digital access on par with other Asian and advanced countries.

According to internet speed specialists [Ookla](#) the global average download speed as of September 2021 in the United States was 113.25 Mbps on fixed broadband and 63.15 Mbps on mobile. These are both notable improvements over the scores of 85.73 Mbps broadband and 17.95 Mbps mobile just one year earlier in September 2020. As of November 2021, even though the average speed for the Philippines is 46.44 Mbps this takes into account the larger cities such as Manila, where fixed broadband internet is available. Most users do not have access to fixed broadband internet access, even in Manila, so they are forced to use mobile connections, which has an average speed of 18.68 Mbps. The price of the broadband internet is also a deterrent for those in the Philippines. The average cost per month is PHP 2,253 (47.15/month). (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1155438/philippines-internet-connection-speed-by-type-2019/>). While this is significantly lower than the \$ 65.18 in the United States, the income for Filipinos is much less, making the PHP 2,253 unaffordable for most residents. These speeds can drop significantly in the outlying area and in the mostly rural areas of the Philippines, where fixed broadband is almost impossible to obtain, so people are forced to use mobile connections which can be as slow as 3.52 Mbps. All internet activity is accessed over the wireless network where 2g is still the only option available in many areas. There has been a push to upgrade these wireless towers to 3g in the rural areas and to 4g in the larger urban such as Manila and Cebu. While the mobile access is less expensive, users typically purchase their mobile internet access in “loads”, typically PHP 100. These loads may only last one to two days, depending on the type and amount of internet usage. When their PHP 100 load has been depleted, it may take some time to come up with another PHP 100 to purchase another load.

Among the faculty and administrators in schools throughout the Philippines, there is an interest and willingness to adopt new technology-based learning methods. But they cite as a continuing challenge of how to foster this type of innovative teaching because of the limitations of technological infrastructures at their schools (Arinto, 2016). The lack of technology and sufficient internet capabilities is not the only obstacle associated with working with students from the Philippines.

LANGUAGE BARRIER

The language of instruction has been a much-debated topic. For a country dispersed over 7,107 islands, with 11 languages and 87 dialects, colonized by Spain for more than 300 years, and educated by the Americans, the decision to pick a particular language of instruction has been

very controversial. The languages used for instruction have switched from Spanish to *Tagalog*, to English to the local vernacular, including some Chinese languages, and Arabic, which is used in the southern part of the country. In elementary and secondary schools, students are required to take Tagalog, the official language of the Philippines, even in areas where Tagalog is not the dialect that is spoken. These same students are also required to take English. The books and other material for classes are written in English, however Tagalog or another Filipino dialect is primarily spoken in school. Even though English is taught in school from elementary through secondary schools, students don't speak English outside of the classroom or at home, therefore the ability for students to communicate in English is poor.

CULTURE

The joint project between TSU and SLSU-TO promised to be a challenge from the outset. It was clear that technology issues in the Philippines would be monumental. However, the cultural challenges proved to be as defiant. Of course, Geert Hofstede's (2001) research on the dimensions of national culture provided insights about the potential outcome of this joint TSU/SLSU-TO project.

Hofstede defined culture as the collective mental programming of a group of people, not the individual, by the same education and life experiences. He developed five (5) dimensions of national culture. Namely, the following basic value orientations:

POWER DISTANCE

This dimension focuses on the extent to which less powerful members within a country expect and accept the unequal distribution of power. In high power distance cultures such as Russia and China, wealth is concentrated among a small, elite group of individuals where this inequity is accepted as "the way things are." In the United States (US), a low power distance society, subordinates often address their organizational superiors on a first name basis. Independence tends to be highly valued.

Like Russia and China, the Philippines represents a high-power distance culture. High power distance in the Philippines is characterized by strict hierarchies and centralization in organizations. Inherent inequalities are widely accepted. As such, subordinates rarely take the lead on projects, tend to look to their bosses for guidance, as well as hold their organizational superiors in high esteem and not question their decisions. The disparity between the US and Philippines cultures along this dimension is problematic. This Filipino cultural dimension has the potential to (1) stifle creativity, (2) slow project progress and (3) make the organization less responsive to change. Each one of these challenges threatens the success of the TSU/SLUS-TO joint project.

INDIVIDUALISM VERSUS COLLECTIVISM

The US is ranked as the leading individualistic culture. Individualistic cultures are distinguished from collectivistic ones by the extent to which individuals look after themselves compared to their in-groups. Individualism places greater value on one's own decision, whereas collectivism places greater value on one's group such as family, village, or company. The Philippines is considered a collectivistic culture. In collectivistic societies, loyalty to one's group is paramount and overrides most societal rules and regulations. While every individual in the individualistic culture is responsible for him/herself, the group in a collectivistic culture protects its individual members. For example, instead of "looking out for No. 1" as Americans might say, Filipinos are more likely to say, "family first." Based on sources across the web, the US is often cited as one of the most innovative countries in the world. A contributing factor to this innovativeness is American individualism determined to be more successful than anyone else. The Philippines, however, as a collectivistic society would naturally lack this single-mindedness. Collective accomplishments which tend to stifle individual idea are crucial to relationships. In fact, in Japan - - another highly collectivistic culture - - there is a saying that characterizes creative behavior in the Philippines, "the nail that sticks out gets the hammer."

MASCULINITY VERSUS FEMINITY

Masculinity and femininity as distinguished by Hofstede are not limited to gender roles as defined by matriarchal or patriarchal societies. Hofstede defines masculine cultures as ones in which success and being strong and fast are seen as positive characteristics. Whereas feminine cultures tend to distinguish less between male and female roles and see modesty as a virtue. In masculine cultures, men are expected to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, while women are expected to be modest, tender as well as care for the weak. This role distinction is consistent with the matrifocal village life in the Philippines, where women are expected to be caretakers and nurturers.

UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE

Uncertainty avoidance refers to a measure of the extent to which people are threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations. The Philippines, like the US, is regarded as a low uncertainty avoidance society. These societies exhibit a more relaxed attitude in which practice counts more than principles. They believe that rules should exist only when necessary, and that they should be abandoned or changed when they do not work. However, the fact that schedules are flexible, and punctuality does not come naturally is one element that separates the US from the Philippines within this dimension. The US tends to be monochronic - - where time is viewed linearly. Monochronic societies take deadlines and schedules seriously. Conversely, polychronic societies have a cyclic time perception. They consider timeframes useful, but do not see the failure to achieve them as negative.

LONG-TERM VERSUS SHORT-TERM ORIENTATION

Societies with a long-term orientation exhibit a preference to maintain traditions and norms with suspicion toward societal change. While societies with a short-term orientation take a more pragmatic short-term point of view. For short-term oriented cultures, “the focus is on the pursuit of happiness rather than the pursuit of peace of mind (Ebaegu & Stephens, 2014).” Both the US and Philippines tend to be normative in their approach to situations. Exhibiting an ample respect for tradition, these societies are less likely to save for the future, as well as focus on achieving quick results.

Using Hofstede’s dimensions of culture, it is clear that there are a number of challenges that threaten the success of the joint project between the two (2) universities. The drivers of the Philippines culture when compared with those of the US exhibit a divergence for only two (2) of the five (5) of Hofstede’s dimensions. Namely, the cultures of the US and Philippines diverged along the Power Distance and Individualism versus Collectivism dimensions. These two dimensions, however, are crucial to the success of a project such as the proposed joint project. The Power Distance dimension potentially limits creativity and initiative. Subordinates waiting to follow organizational leaders’ instructions have the potential to block or limit creativity, slow project progress and de-rail the success of the project depending on the objectives of individual leaders. The difficulty of this initiating our joint project is further exacerbated by the Philippines’ loyalty to the ‘in-group.’ This propensity can detract from individual self-reflection which is critical to skills development and assessment of effectiveness such as “how can I do what I do better?”

METHODOLOGY

As a research tool, the case study method is both appropriate and effective for investigating complex subjects, especially when the study offers a unique opportunity to observe behavior that is not in a controlled environment. The growing interest in case studies as research tools serves a useful purpose for a phenomenon that (a) is broad and complex, (b) needs a holistic, in-depth investigation, and (c) cannot be adequately studied outside the context in which it occurs (Benbasat et al. 1987; Feagin, 1991; Yin 2003). The case study makes it possible to “retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (Yin, 1984 p14). A holistic, in-depth investigation which follows a naturalistic approach to generating a qualitative understanding of an event or organization, certainly offers advantages. The case research strategy allows for a great deal of flexibility and individual variation. This makes the case study an ideal methodology for investigating the concerns of this project. Events like the one discussed in this paper are difficult to study outside the context in which it occurs (Benbasat et al., 1987). In this case, the event is a onetime occasion and was studied as the project progressed. Therefore, the case study method allows the researcher to conduct probing interviews as well as engage in ethnographic observations.

THE COLLABORATION

With increasing global business opportunities, it is advantageous for our students to be exposed to working with other students from other countries, such as the Philippines. Doing so influences knowledge sharing and enhances the learning process. Based on the technologies of the countries involved, the approach to teaching and learning/collaboration changes (Thigpen, 2015).

To further investigate the opportunities and challenges, a project was started between Texas Southern University (TSU) and Southern Leyte State University-Thomas Opus (SLSU-TO). SLSU-TO is located in the southern Philippines on the island of Leyte. SLSU-TO has over 8,000 students, with degree programs in business administration (management, marketing, accounting, and MIS) and education. Education at public universities such as SLSU-TO is free. The majority of the island is rural and has very limited internet access, even below the average internet speed of the Philippines. The project was to consist of collaboration among MIS students at TSU and SLSU-TO to design and create a web site. Challenges that must be addressed, in addition to internet speed, include the web design knowledge level of the MIS students at the different schools, the availability of technology tools, the teaching methods used at each school, and basic cultural issues.

Web design is a subject taught both at TSU and SLSU-TO. For the successful collaboration, students need to have a similar level of understand of web design languages; therefore, faculty at both universities need to be aware of the different teaching methods and level of instruction at each university. There are many technologies available for web design, but consideration must be given to the cost and availability of technology tools because of the limited resources available for the students in the Philippines. For this reason, free web design software that is available over the Internet was the most appropriate solution. However, the reliability of the internet connection at SLSU-TO proved to be a challenge.

The schools in the Philippines (K-12 and university) are taught in English, so students tend to understand English; however, English is typically not spoken at home, so the students have limited English speaking skills. Because of this, the Filipino students tend to be shy when communicating with native English speakers. The culture in the Philippines is also very casual when it comes to time. If a meeting is scheduled for 3:00pm it cannot be expected that students will be on time. Therefore, synchronous meetings via communication technologies can be frustrating for those waiting for attendees to join. Asynchronous communication was thought to be a more appropriate method, however we still felt we needed to have the synchronous aspect for consistency and for the fostering of a shared project between the two countries.

While other challenges are apparent, this was an opportunity for students of TSU and of SLSU-TO to bridge the gap between two countries and cultures to work toward a common goal. Using technology tools makes this type of experiential learning possible and becomes the foundation to expand the knowledge base of students of both countries.

At the beginning of the project there was a meeting with the teacher from SLSO-TO. The textbook they were using and some of the assignments the students had completed were evaluated. They seemed to be as far along as our TSU students were, and their projects showed

that they had a good understanding of the subject matter. Yet their perception was that they could not match the knowledge level of American students. I've been to this school on several occasions and have given lectures in classes and have spoken to the entire student body on several occasions. They were always very friendly and receptive, as a group, but when it came to one-on-one interaction it was much more challenging.

We attempted to conduct this joint effort, but it was not successful because of the issues mentioned above. We again tried in the following semester but there was not much interested from the students from the Philippines, which can be attribute to their culture issues that were apparent on our first attempt. They were uncomfortable working with students from America because they felt their Filipino education was inferior to that of American students. Therefore, they thought they would be embarrassed. These assessments are not just conjecture. A student who attends SLSU-TO (Menchina) is an MIS major. I was able to get much feedback from her because her English was very good.

Menchina's thoughts were as follows: "...we are not smart like American students. We don't have our own books to use. We have to share them with the other students in the class. The only time we can work on projects is when we are at school with someone who also has a book. We don't have computers at home and we don't have laptops. A couple students do, but their internet connection is so slow that they can't do much more than use Facebook. To communicate with the American students, we would have to come to campus at strange hours, often late in the evening or early in the morning. The busses and multicabs are not running at that time, so unless someone has their own transportation (which would be a motor scooter because cars are not abundant in the area and beyond the affordability of most who live there) then we can't get to school." It should also be noted that this is a small rural area, and this is the only free public university that can be accessed by people who live in the region. Many students come from several miles each day to attend school. There is no dorm living. Students have to take a "multicab" or bus, which they have to catch outside their house every morning. This transportation is not free, so if the students had to come to school multiple time per day for the online meetings, it could be very costly for them, and many could not afford to do so. Often these transportation methods are full, so it is not uncommon to see many students actually riding on top of the busses. I have been to the Philippines many times and I cringe every time I see this.

When asked about her thoughts regarding interacting with the American students she responded "We are all too shy to talk to them during video chat. Our English is not good enough so they may laugh at us. Plus, we don't have nice things to wear so we don't want them seeing us. They are probably so much smarter than we are that we wouldn't be able to do any of the work."

According to a student at TSU, "I thought it was going to be really fun and educational, but it was impossible to get in touch with the students, and when the few times we did we weren't able to get anything done because they couldn't get on the web design site. We were using Weebly to create the website, but they couldn't get it to load on their computers. We also tried Wix but that didn't work either. It was so frustrating. Only one student would attempt to talk with us. The others would just giggle. It was obvious we weren't going to get any work done."

As the instructor of the TSU students, it was evident that the students were growing very impatient. They came in early and stayed late to accommodate the schedule of the students at SLSU-TO. They soon realized that their efforts were in vain, and they quickly lost interest in the project. The project was not a total failure though. The students at TSU got to realize that the availability to technology in America is greater than many other places in the world. They have been using the internet for years and assumed the pervasiveness of the internet was everywhere. A TSU student commented that he “couldn’t believe that these students didn’t have access to the internet. I don’t know how they get their assignments done. I would be totally lost without it.” Another commented “I’ve been using the internet as long as I can remember. I use it for almost everything: social media, shopping, schoolwork and so many other things. I couldn’t imagine my life without it.”

I was very disappointed that we could not implement the joint web design project, as was the instructor from SLSU-TO. The instructor from SLSU-TO stated that “I am very embarrassed that our school and students let you down. We are just so far behind so many other countries, especially America. I fear it will be a long time before we catch up, but we do the best with what we have.” We both agreed it would have been a valuable opportunity for students from both countries. But during the process itself, much was learned about the challenges that can exist when students from two different cultures try to work together. I haven’t totally given up. I would still like to eventually make this project work. I think the outcome would be very promising and be educational for students from both countries. For the students from the Philippines, I think it would give them some needed confidence that they can compete with students from anywhere. I’ve seen their work...I’m sure they can if given the opportunity

CONCLUSION

If we wait for conditions to be perfect, we may never get the opportunity to put this idea into practice. We must start from somewhere. Collaboration between the two schools should begin again. It will be a work in progress and the whole process will only get better with time.

This is a golden opportunity that will benefit many students on both sides of the institution. It will enhance students’ quality of education and expand their horizon of understanding people that reside in a different geographical area, different culture and learning the way other people live.

We understand that the internet might not be fast, that there are challenging living conditions in the Philippines, and communication barrier is significant, but even with that, we believe it is a great opportunity that needs to be pursued. Even though efforts in the past to start this initiative have not materialized, the program needs to begin, and how things evolved will be noted. It will also bring much personal satisfaction and gratification to all the people that subscribed to the initiative. A truly self-satisfaction endeavor.

I can only imagine the great opportunities this program will have in the lives of all the students that will be involved. They will learn something that is very valuable and priceless. A lesson that will yield dividends in their lives in the future. Lastly, we think if one collaborates,

thinks through the issues, and communicates constantly about the program, true solutions will be in sight. Communication is the key to excellence.

I will encourage this idea to take place. Necessity is the mother of invention. If we wait for when everything is perfect to kick it off, that day may never come. As a future possibility, it may be wise to choose a country where the technology is adequate to participate in such a project. Although I have close ties to the Philippines and to the faculty and students involved in the project, too many challenges existed to complete the project successfully. It is my belief that we could have eventually adapted to the cultural issues that were causing some issues, however the access to adequate technology and internet speed was a factor that could not be overcome, thus dooming the project.

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