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Lessons from the Field: Teaching a Completely Online “Global Business” Course to African Refugees in Northern Kenya and Malawi

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Abstract

The six authors of this paper taught a completely online “Global Business” course to African refugees in the Kakuma refugee camp in Northern Kenya and the Dzaleka refugee camp in Malawi. The paper summarizes twelve lessons learned by the instructors while teaching the course and offers suggestions for adaptations in future courses delivered in the “Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins” diploma program.

Introduction

The six authors of this paper taught a completely online “Global Business” (BA 335) course to African refugees in the Kakuma refugee camp in Northern Kenya and the Dzaleka refugee camp in Malawi. All the instructors came from the network of Jesuit universities in the US. The course offering was part of a pilot diploma program

offered by “Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins” (JC:HEM) serving those who hunger for education in the rugged environment of the margin. This paper presents the lessons learned by the group of six instructors after completion of the course and suggestions for modifications in future courses offered by JC:HEM.¹

Lessons Learned

Reflecting on the course after completion, the instructors compiled the following lessons learned.

1. **Need for better contextualization:** We had some initial discussions about selecting cases that apply more to the contexts faced and lived in by the students in Africa. We changed some case assignments and some discussion questions in an attempt to contextualize lessons to make the knowledge students gain from BA 335 more relevant to their living conditions and local business environments.

Key Take-away: *Ensure that the content is contextualized and tailored to the situations of the students. This is a continuous process and requires a-priori understanding of the students' environments.*

2. **Need for pre-requisites:** We were adequately forewarned and we actually felt this through our own experiences in teaching BA 335 that English is often the third or fourth language for some of the students. We often had to read a student's online discussion posting or written assignment at least two times to make sense of what had been written. We strongly urge the need for some pre-requisite courses to serve as screens to admit only those who meet some minimum thresholds of English proficiency. This is easier said than done. But the need for pre-requisites, however they are defined, is a sine-qua-non for the success of BA 335 as an effective course.

Key Take-away: *Identify the minimum prerequisite requirements for each course and ensure that student enrollment into completely online courses follow those requirements.*

3. **Container is as important as content:** This is an obvious point for any online course, but is especially poignant for one that is completely online and across national boundaries with significant differences in cultural, language and living conditions. The structure offered by the well-thought out online course design along with the on-site instructor assistants made the implementation

of the course delivery smooth. The "container" which is the course module in the learning management system, in this case ANGEL of Regis University, made the weekly routines and the learning process easier for the students.

Key Take-away: *Recognize that course design is more than 60% of the total effort in the delivery of the completely online course content. Furthermore, make the course design a living process that will continuously improve subsequent renditions of the same course.*

4. **Structure is a liberating force:** Too much structure can be overpowering and could potentially stifle creativity; and too little structure can lead to unmanageable chaos. An appropriate structure with enough room for maneuverability is the best middle ground. The course syllabus provided the right level of structure leaving enough room for flexibility for the students. Specifically, the whole course had a neat fractal structure that repeats itself in each week. Readings, discussion questions, cases, project milestones nicely spaced across the weekly schedule kept the tempo of learning on a pace that minimized surprise for all. Choice to pick one of the two weekly discussion questions allowed flexibility to the students. However, rubrics were not posted at the start of the course.

Key Take-away: *Post the rubrics along with the syllabus at the beginning of the course. Keep revisiting the question of using structure as a positive force (reducing complexity) and not as an inhibiting force (disallowing freedom of thinking) as perceived by both students and instructors.*

5. **Checks for plagiarism:** There is little or no awareness amongst students regarding ethics in education and in particular the dangers of plagiarism, and how it can be detrimental to the learning process. Students need to be alerted that there will be severe penalties for plagiarism. Some advance lessons in ethical principles in education must be conveyed to the students. Again, easier said than done.

Key Take-away: *Devote at least half a class period in any course to introduce/refresh the*

importance of ethical principles in education and to minimize plagiarism.

6. **Epistemological relevance:** Some thought must be devoted to the relevance of the knowledge that being conveyed to the students in refugee camps through courses such as BA 335. This class was essentially about global business issues that are predominantly at the level of the firm or industry or the country. We are not saying that BA 335 is irrelevant to refugees, but we need to tailor the content and scope the unit of analysis to new start-ups and entrepreneurship in a global context. The unit of analysis is something the course designers should reexamine and not be straitjacketed by a western textbook like that used now in BA 335, even though an international edition is being used.

Key Take-away: *Ensure the relevance of the course to the program. This is a program-level insight. The diploma program should align its choice of courses to meet the stated goals of program.*

7. **Potential co-optation from African Universities:** We felt that some African Universities are already addressing the above issues, and perhaps our program can stand on their shoulders and leverage their knowledge in the JC:HEM online course. Some examples of African Universities that may be interested in collaboration are the Open University in Africa and American University Nigeria.

Key Take-away: *Identify African/ local universities which are willing to collaborate with the JC:HEM program. Plan such collaborative efforts to leverage what JC:HEM alone can accomplish. This should be replicated in other countries where JC:HEM expends (i.e. Syria, Thailand).*

8. **High commendation for the current efforts at JC:HEM in general and BA335 in particular:** We are full of awe for the great efforts on part of JC:HEM for initiating such a unique and fulfilling experience for all of us, and in particular for the BA335 team of six

instructors from the United States Jesuit network. We are extremely grateful for the opportunity given to us by JC:HEM, and collectively promise to continue our engagement with JC:HEM in future delivery of BA335 course or other courses as asked of us.

Key Take-away: *Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as JC:HEM provide opportunities to channel the energy and eagerness to serve of many faculties in the network of Jesuit universities in the US. If that were combined with the global Jesuit network of NGOs, the potential to harness faculty energies would be tremendous.*

9. **Self-critique for continuous improvement:** Right from the outset, the group of six realized that all the six sections should be taught in a similar manner with more or less the same content, the same discussion questions and the same cases. In the spirit of continuous improvement, we engaged in self-critique and have come to the conclusion that standardization of rubrics, discussion questions, cases and reading materials across all sections of online “Global Business” course was very helpful. However, in order to improve the pedagogical effectiveness and efficiency of the online “Global Business” course, the lead and/or team must engage in content review in greater depth and revise the rubrics, discussion questions and cases.

Key Take-away: *At the end of each course, engage all the instructors to document “lessons learned and recommendations for improvement.”*

10. **Resources required to sustain the online education effort:** In our reflective thought, we recognized that there are several resources required to sustain the online education effort as represented by our online “Global Business” course. To be specific, faculty resources are needed to teach the course and to continuously improve the course content; Information Technology help to build, maintain and improve the “container” for the course; financial resources for JC:HEM to seed, sustain and spread its educational reach at the margins; and thought leadership to

devise programmatic initiatives (e.g., different diplomas or “knowledge clusters”) that are most appropriate to the diverse environments in the margins, etc.

Key Take-away: *We recommend a plenary session at one of the national Jesuit conferences to address this topic as a focused theme.*

11. **Graduating students as permanent ambassadors:** We felt that the benefits of the educational program for the graduating students go beyond benefitting the individual students. The graduating students have the potential to become permanent ambassadors of the basic idea of imparting knowledge at the margins. The course instructors and JC:HEM should imbue this spirit of sharing amongst the students and also enable them to be effective and efficient ambassadors. One specific way we can enable these graduating students is to provide *life-long* access to the online course materials even after they graduate from the course.

Key Take-away: *We recommend giving life-long access to course materials to all graduating students. We may do this by creating a course library (data warehouse for course content).*

12. **Unintended Consequences:** We are humble and do not profess to know everything, and especially the unintended consequences of what we purportedly do with good intentions. Education is a huge game changer in the lives of many downtrodden, but it comes at some cost and time which are precious and limited resources for those at the margins. Another unintended consequence could be the sharing of intellectual property by universities in making their courses free and open to those at the margins. Trade-offs and tensions must be thought through as part of the thought leadership required to grow these educational efforts directed at the margins.

Key Take-away: *We recommend a real-time and continuous feedback and communications across all stakeholders with a clear intent to improve the status-quo.*

The late Cardinal and noted Jesuit theologian, Avery Dulles, stated that a gift of grace is conferred not for one’s personal sanctification but for the benefit of others.² Thus teaching courses to those at the margins is tantamount to God’s grace in action. However, doing that activity is only the start of a journey, which should improve over time and repetitiveness. Our experience with the teaching of a completely online “Global Business” course is just the start; and we believe that our lessons from that experience, detailed above, contribute to improvements in repeating that teaching experience for others. 

Notes

¹ An earlier, unpublished version of this article was distributed at the First International Think Tank, “Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins,” Regis University, Denver, Colorado, March 4 to 8, 2012.

² Avery Dulles, “The Ignatian Charism at the Dawn of the 21st Century,” *Jesuit Journeys* 15, no. 2 (2007): 10.

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