

THE LOST DREAM OF THEORY-BASED
INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC INTERNET LEARNING

by

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and with an Annex Case Study

“A Student’s Perspective of Academic Internet Courses
and Their Challenges in Slovakia”

by

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This article defines Academic Courses as those that utilize subject matter theory that can be described as value-laden, reflecting many of the political and philosophical ideals of the society from which it was derived.

More professional, career oriented courses such as medicine, nursing, engineering, computer science, educational technology and business are not included in the “academic” classification here.

I was concerned about the separation of Academic versus Professional classifications, particularly about Business related courses which I think of as a uniquely Western subject which might be value-laden. However, I have found from professors in the field and university catalogs, that Business is a subject whose practical techniques can be applied universally without being considered value-laden.¹

Part One of this article attempts to prove that teaching subject matter theory in Academic courses is necessary for learning not only in the classroom, but also in internet courses. It goes on to show that teaching theory is inextricably linked to “modern” educational methodologies emphasizing participation and interaction. These methodologies are often required in Academic internet classes.

Part Two clarifies “value-laden” theory and paradigms that might contain them—presenting problems with international internet courses internationally, including problems encountered in using the “modern” participatory and interactive methodologies.

¹ Dr. Maureen Hannay, Professor of Management, Troy University. Interview, April 13, 2006.

Part Three was intended to discuss the problems of value-laden Academic internet courses cross-culturally. However, surprising research results have revealed that there are none. Therefore Part Three addresses the question of “Why Academic Internet Courses Are Not Taken Internationally.”

PART ONE

THEORY MUST BE UTILIZED IN THE CLASSROOM AND ON THE INTERNET THROUGH “MODERN” EDUCATIONAL METHODOLOGIES

Good teachers use theory when teaching their courses.

Theory in International Relations courses and most academic subjects is a tool for learning and understanding. Theory can be a rationale, explanation, or interpretation of fairly accepted facts or phenomena, or a conceptual question to be used as a guide by which to order events or facts for analysis.²

“Theory” is sometimes used interchangeably with the term “concept” which is “something formed in the mind,”³ a general idea derived or inferred from specific instances or occurrences.⁴ Theoretical and conceptual frameworks provide opportunities for organization of thought for analysis and avenues of thought for prediction, future research, and application to the real world.

In practical terms for the student, theories or concepts of the subject matter provide a structure in which to deal with disparate information and events. Often in my experience, some students, not agreeing with all of the International Relations theories presented or read, go on to innovate, usually by analysis, synthesis, or some combination or integration of class knowledge and new information, a different theory or concept that suits their research interests. This process is a signpost of understanding.

Advocating the use of theory as a more critical and flexible approach to teaching English Literature, John Lye states that theory “...renews the way texts are read...and explores the full power of meaning....”⁵

Jonassen, speaking of “flexibility” in the learning environment, states that it “Avoids oversimplifying instruction” and that the theory of flexibility “stresses the conceptual interrelatedness of ideas and their interconnectedness.”⁶

We can not deprive our internet students of the benefits of theoretically based learning if theory is intended to increase not only knowledge, but also meaning and understanding. Furthermore it is clear that theory should be utilized not only in the traditional classroom, but in internet courses also.

On conceptual integration in internet courses, Morrison states, “It is not enough to transmit information and content, if the goal is synthesis of ideas and concepts and meaning

² Theory in *The Random House College Dictionary*, Revised Ed. 1984.

³ Dictionary.com/concept from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Ed. 2000.

⁴ Dictionary.com/concept from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Ed. 2000.

⁵ John Lye, “Some Characteristics of Contemporary Theory.”

<http://www.brocku.ca/english/courses/4F70/characteristics.html>

⁶ David H. Jonassen, “Cognitive Flexibility Theory: A Definition,”

http://tiger.coe.missouri.edu/~jonassen/courses/CLE/documents/527/cft/CFT_DEF.HTM

making... Integration of information, constructs, and concepts enable one to make sense of and create meaning from divergent streams of data and non-linear links to ideas.”⁷

Moreover, theory based essay exams address the issue of “rampant cheating” on the internet, particularly in electronically generated multiple choice exams.⁸ Two years of research with over 300 students in my International Relations courses has proved that theory-based questions requiring relationships to be made by the student, in open book essay exams eliminate cheating. They also serve as a capstone for understanding and a truer assessment of learning.

All the literature on educational methodologies over at least the past 30 years advocate understanding in classes and speak against what is informally called the “water hose” or “fire hose” approach to teaching and learning.

The “water hose” and fire hose” are the traditional methods of teaching in which the professor delivers information to the students from “on high.” In English this phrase means from an attitude of superiority, and in traditional classrooms all around the world, the professor literally, does indeed, lecture from “on high,” -- from a stage or platform-- to deliver course content or information to a group or mass of note-taking students.

The “fire hose” method for teaching and learning has been, or is well on it’s way, to being totally discredited by the educational establishment in much of the English speaking world, judging from the literature.

We are moving away from “simple ‘transmission’ of information from professor to students.”⁹ Rote learning is out.¹⁰ “It is not enough to transmit information and content if the goal is synthesis of ideas and concepts and meaning making.”¹¹

Rather, literature on effective “modern” teaching methods encourages educational approaches, mentioning only a few, variously known as constructive,¹² transformative, integrationist, flexible¹³, contextual, interactive, participatory.

PART TWO CLARIFYING VALUE-LADEN THEORY

If the good teacher is using theory in internet courses—

If the good teacher is using some of the more “modern” non-traditional, interactive educational methods in internet courses internationally---

Then, the good teacher has most probably created a cross-cultural problem!

⁷ James L. Morrison, “Conceptual Integration in Online Interdisciplinary Study: Current Perspective, Theories, and Implications for Future Research,” *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, October 2003. <http://www.irrodl.org/content/v4.2/morrison.html>

⁸ A top administrator at my university has said, “Cheating is rampant on internet courses.” The university is aggressively addressing the issue through various means..

⁹ Malcom Brown, “Learning Theory” in *Learning Spaces*, 2005. <http://www.dartmouth.edu/comp/about/pubs/2005-spaces/theory.html>

¹⁰ University College Dublin—Centre for Teaching and Learning---Good practices in Teaching and Learning, The Characteristics of a Strategic Approach to Learning? <http://www.ucd.ie/teaching/good/deep4.htm>

¹¹ James L. Morrison, “Conceptual Integration in Online Interdisciplinary Study: Current Perspective, Theories, and Implications for Future Research,” *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, October 2003. <http://www.irrodl.org/content/v4.2/morrison.html>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See for example David H. Jonassen, “Welcome to the Design of Constructivist Learning Environments (CLEs),” 2002. <http://tiger.coe.missouri.edu/~jonassen/courses/CLE/main.html>

Most of us think of our subject matter theory as a teaching and learning aid. However, closer examination of much of our theory finds that it reflects our biases and values. Most of us do not realize our theory is possibly influenced by our “ideals, customs,” what we think of as desirable qualities, and often by our beliefs and convictions which we hold to be true, sometimes without proof. These (values) can arouse a strong “emotional response, for or against them in a given society or individual.”¹⁴

Some examples of value-laden theory from my International Relations subject matter include the well-known Theories of Idealism (peace through international law and organizations), Functionalism and Integration, all of which promote international cooperation.

Other well known, more political-economic theories include Interdependence, Liberalism and its recent step-child, Globalization (not only free trade, but free international communication is a world good). Then there are various theories of Development ranging from the capitalist to the Marxist-Leninist.

However, opposing all the above is the famous theory of Realism (power politics), which holds that “national interest is defined by power,” and puts forth a solution for world peace based on “balance of power” among nations. But all of these theories were first developed in the West. Therefore when used in a cross-cultural class, an open discussion of their underlying values might create an emotionally charged situation.

THEORETICAL PARADIGMS ARE DIFFICULT TO CHANGE

Even though using theory in academic courses increases understanding, the danger is that subject matter theories can be presented or perceived as within a given “box” or Paradigm in which to mentally operate. Traditional definitions of theory in the West don’t consider it as in a “box” but rather as a tool, an idea or set of ideas, to encourage future theory building “out of the box.”¹⁵

Kuhn’s seminal work on Paradigms (and their constituent theories) claimed that these over-arching theoretical Paradigms did not evolve through theory-building as previously thought, but only changed when they were forced to do so, due to a “discovery or revolutionary event.”¹⁶

The fact that theory in our Western-based academic courses is value-laden and subsumed in over-arching Paradigms, might come as a surprise to many of us.

However, if our subject matter theory is a constituent part of an over-arching theoretical Paradigm, it is difficult or almost impossible to change.

One might reasonably assume that the issues of value-laden theory and difficulty of change apply to learning Paradigms stemming from other cultures also.

The same difficulties of change would apply not only to utilizing subject matter theory but also to the “modern” interactive, participatory methodologies fostered in most academic internet courses.

¹⁴ “Values” partly paraphrased, *The Random House College Dictionary*, Revised Edition, 1984.

¹⁵ Gregory Foster, “A Conceptual Foundation for a Theory of Strategy,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 1990. Reprinted by the US Army War College Strategy Course. He refers to Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962.

¹⁶ Gregory Foster, “A Conceptual Foundation for a Theory of Strategy,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 1990. Reprinted by the US Army War College Strategy Course. He refers to Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962.

Therefore the good teacher, utilizing theory for better understanding and utilizing the “modern” more interactive, educational approaches in academic internet courses might encounter “double trouble” from students and governments from more traditional areas. ----That is, there could be a teaching-learning problems related not only to perceived value laden theory but also because of a traditional student’s discomfort or inability to cope with the interactive requirements of the “modern” teaching and learning methods that are mandated by most US universities in their internet courses.

PART 3

*The MOST significant research finding of this project is that there are **no** US/Western--based, Academic internet courses that are being taken INTERNATIONALLY.*

The OTHER most significant research finding of this project is that even when Western universities have an international partnership for courses to be offered in the classroom in the student’s home country, they are only offering technical, professional courses.¹⁷

WHY AREN’T WESTERN ACADEMIC COURSES BEING TAKEN ON THE INTERNET INTERNATIONALLY?

Part of the answer seems to be that outside of the home country, there is very little interest in Academic internet courses internationally.¹⁸

In Europe students have respected university systems of their own, or they are able to travel to another country to work and take academic or professional courses while learning the language.

(For other important reasons in Europe, see end of this paper for Appendix Case Study on “Internet Courses in Slovakia” by John van Heiningen.)

¹⁷ There are two possible, very limited, exceptions to Western Universities offering Academic courses in real classrooms--One might be the UK based University of Nottingham in Ningbo, China which is offering International Relations, International Organization, Western Civilization, and European History classes. However THE NINGBO GOVERNMENT SEVERELY RESTRICTS APPLICANTS TO 20 PER YEAR FOR THE COURSES ABOVE. <http://www.nottingham.edu.cn/content.php?d=66>

Another exception is the (Jesuit) Wash. DC Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, all Liberal Arts, including Theology and Philosophy, co-educational, in Qatar, with a just-started class of 25, funded by the Qatar “Foundation,” (the Emir) with students from all over the Muslim world, ranging from Bosnia to Bangladesh and some Christians? from Lebanon. <http://www3.georgetown.edu/sfs/qatar/>

(American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates traces its early years back to help from three American universities. Sharjah’s Emir, also University President, appears to be fostering a Liberal Arts, co-educational program with mostly Anglo professors on his own, although mentions local cultural considerations). <http://www.aus.edu/about/sharjah.php>

(SIAS International University in Henan Province, China with some original connections to Fort Hays State University of Kansas, offers only technical courses although they claim they are the first in China to be permitted to offer classes such as Western Civilization, Sociology and Government.) <http://en.sias.edu.cn/aboutsias.html>

(The University of Paris-Sorbonne is planning to open a liberal arts college in Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates, in late 2006. Professors will be from France. It hopes to have 1500 Middle Eastern students eventually in this “secular and co-educational” university.) See “French University to Establish Campus,” in *World Education News Review, Middle East and North Africa*, Oct. 2005. <http://www.wes.org/ewenr/05/middleeast.htm>

¹⁸ In my own experience teaching hundreds of students in both Audio and Web International Relations courses since 1997, I have had only one genuine foreign Distance Learning student—a Turkish colonel who heard about our program when he was stationed in the US, then took his International Relations Master’s with us at Troy University from home in Turkey.

Moreover most European Universities are free or heavily subsidized. This is unlike internet courses from the US where even State universities began internet programs in order to make a profit. They usually charge higher tuition for internet classes also.

(A continuing joke among professors is that we are teaching on the internet to support the university's football team!)

Now, some university latecomers to the internet course bazaar are planning to establish internet programs to make up for lost revenue, due to 9/11 visa restrictions, from foreign students who used to come and had their full fees paid by their governments.¹⁹

My surprise research discovery is that Academic internet courses are not being taken internationally. This points to the Western universities having neglected to publicize that information. However, they apparently have tried to hedge their losses by negotiating partnership programs with countries/universities around the Developing World to offer technical degree programs within those countries. These are apparently largely paid for by the host government, or its locally based corporations as they are in the United Arab Emirates and China.²⁰

Therefore, in most areas of the world it appears that countries have side-stepped the value-laden Academic course question by making decisions in favor of having universities offer only technical, professional courses in locally based classes.

OVERALL, THESE DECISIONS IN FAVOR OF MORE TECHNICAL COURSES APPEAR TO BE BASED ON REASONS OF GOVERNMENT SUSTAINABILITY, NATIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURAL CONCERNS.

A report from the Carnegie Foundation points out the that by providing good, practical internet service, for example in technical subjects like health, even oppressive governments can increase the well being of their people and forestall political problems.²¹

With measured censorship, such as China's arrangement with Google and other information providers, all but the "radical" dissenters can be happy with their better life being provided by the government.²²

China is by far the most advanced in developing its own national educational internet system. Since 1996 they are putting more than \$3 billion into a project that will connect and

¹⁹ "Seeking Foothold in Fast-Growing China, UF Opens Beijing Office," *University of Florida News*, July 11, 2005. <http://news.ufl.edu/2005/07/11/ufchina/> Also see Burton Bollag, "America's Hot New Export: Higher Education," in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Feb. 17, 2006. This fine article was found after my original paper was finished and reinforces several of my points-but does not address my Academic vs Technical courses discussion. <http://chronicle.com/free/v52/i24/24a04401.htm>

²⁰ Sharjah College, supported by its Emirate Princes, has contracted to have Troy University business and computer science classes for Western credit, but apparently only THROUGH a similar partnership arrangement Troy has with the Institute of Technological Studies in Colombo, Sri Lanka. <http://www.shjcollege.ac.ae/aboutsc.htm>

In China, the University of Maryland has been offering an Executive Masters of Business degree in Beijing for 5 years. The price is listed at \$82,000 per student for the year and a half course. Participants have been China Mobile, Ericsson China, IBM, China Metallurgic Construction, and Otis Elevator. All students and arrangements appear to have been pre-qualified by the government.

²¹ Shanthi Kalathil, "Dot Com for Dictators," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2004 or 2005. <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=1207&prog=zpg>

²² "Letters," *TIME*, March 13, 2006, p.11. Letter about the Google censorship from a Chinese name in Brussels says: "In China, people prefer to look forward. But in the West, people like to look back." The writer criticizes Western media for only writing about massacres and dictatorships "in remote countries that most Western readers are barely aware of." About the "great" Tiananmen Square, "Why do Westerners prefer to see the tanks on the street?"

“transform approximately 100 Chinese colleges and universities into research bases” for national development problems. This is leading to the creation of a “superhighway of scientific information and resources...”²³

More recently is news that China is possibly creating its own internet separate from the rest of the world’s—China just officially announced that it had launched its own Top Level Internet Domains (TLDs) registered separately from the rest of the world.²⁴

In addition China is sponsoring cooperative E-Learning conferences in the US and around the world aimed at garnering knowledge and technical information for setting up their own system. This is part of an overall approach that a Westerner in Shanghai has called “techno-nationalism.”²⁵

Even the small, but rich, Middle Eastern country of Bahrain is addressing the possibility of “a smooth transition from traditional modes of learning towards (their own) e-learning delivery, and ...(their own) more robust technological infrastructure.”²⁶

In Vietnam the former traditional universities, presumably based on the French model, are perceived as elitist. Therefore “rational and well-planned use of new and advanced technologies’ in distance education can enable developing countries to break out of offering degrees for social prestige and instead allow ‘true knowledge development’.”²⁷ This knowledge development is linked to employment and globalization.

The need for training in “practical” professional courses in Vietnam is perceived as enormous. One oil refinery complex alone was predicted to need 4,000 engineers and 12,000 skilled workers by 2005. A Fisheries College near Hanoi sought Canadian aid to build a proposed internet system to reach a rural population of “millions” with training in aquaculture.²⁸

Burgeoning populations in much of the Developing World must be kept employed in order to prevent social upheaval. Internet education offers that opportunity and tremendous savings in reaching all those who need “retraining, upgrading and standardizing” which a UN Development Program analyst estimates, out of a population of about 82 million, is about 75% of the Vietnamese workforce.²⁹

In addition to the above National Development and Government Sustainability reasons, there are also Cultural reasons why value-laden Academic internet classes are not being taken internationally.

Within the last year, the establishment of Quaero, a Franco-German public/private search engine to rival Google, was announced in defense of culture, because, “Culture is not

²³ “Five-Year Plan Will Pump \$731 Million Into Higher Education Projects,” and “Academy of Sciences Launches a Long Distance Educational Link,” *World Education News Review, Asia-Pacific*, Sept./Oct. 2002. <http://www.wes.org/ewenr/02Sept/Asia-Pacific.htm>

²⁴ Andy Sennitt, “Root Problem: Is China Planning a Breakaway from the Internet?” *ICANN & Radio Netherlands*, 02-03-2006. <http://www.radionetherlands.nl/features/media/chn060302>

²⁵ “International Property in China,” *The Economist*, April 1, 2006, p.56.

²⁶ Muain Jamian, “Faculty Opinions Towards Introducing e-Learning at the University of Bahrain,” *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, August 2004, p.1. <http://www.irrodl.org/content/v5.2/jamlan.html>

²⁷ Ramona R. Materi and Patrick J. Fahy, “Interim Report: A Case Study of Internet-based Distance Education Program Development in Vietnam,” *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, April 2004, p.2, quoted from Casas-Armengol and Stojanovich, 1990. http://www.irrodl.org/content/v5.1/materi-fahy_researchnote.html

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.4

²⁹ *Ibid.* p.2, quoted from Thai Thanh Son, 2001.

merchandise and cannot be left to blind market forces;” “We must staunchly defend the world’s cultural diversity against the looming threat of uniformity...”³⁰

Nisbett and Masuda have produced a wonderful in-depth psychological and philosophical examination of ancient roots of Chinese and Western culture. This unusual study looks at both cultures in terms, among many others, of collectivism vs individuality, “the middle way” vs contradiction, and even how differently both cultures observe art.

They conclude that Chinese culture is complex, interrelated, very hierarchical, with many social constraints that retain traditional ways, and with a world view very different from the West.³¹

The People’s Republic has it’s work cut out. There are calls for change from the “exam-oriented” Chinese system and “from traditional face-to-face passive learner” teaching and learning methodologies in China,³² and for “cyber-culture literacy” skills for millions of teachers and students.³³

These all would present problems to value-laden Academic theory and “modern” interactive teaching methodologies from the West.

All the literature written by Middle Easterners reflects their Cultural Concerns. One warns about the possible danger of e-learning “when it is applied in different cultural contexts.”³⁴

Another study was of only six Arab Gulf area students studying in the US who unhappily had to take some internet courses within their regular course work in the US. (They were taking Computer Science and Education.)

Their Negative cultural comments about their internet courses concerned:

- “feelings of inferiority due to social distance from approaching the teacher,
- fear of honor degradation if the two women in the study knew that a friend of a husband was on the discussion board at the same time,
- poor time management using the technology,
- feelings of shame expressed by a male student when “inappropriate” words were used in discussion,
- and added difficulty for oral-oriented Arabic speakers due to trying to understand/write English without the visual clues of a real classroom.”³⁵

³⁰ “Attack of the Eurogoogle,” *The Economist Technology Quarterly, Special Section* March 11, 2006, unpagued.

³¹ Richard E. Nisbett and Takahiko Masuda, “Culture and Point of View,” *National Academy of Sciences*, selected April 30, 2002, unpagued. Also listed as PNAS, vol. 100, no. 19, September 16, 2003. www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1934527100

³² Tong Wang, “Tensions in Learner Support and Tutor Support in Tertiary Web-based English Language Education in China,” *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, November, 2005, p.16. <http://www.irrodl.org/content/v6.3/wangtong.html>

³³ Insung Jung, “Book Review of ‘Advancing Online Learning in Asia’,” *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, August, 2004, p.2. <http://www.irrodl.org/content/v5.2/jung-review.html>

³⁴ Muain Jamian, “Faculty Opinions Towards Introducing e-Learning at the University of Bahrain,” *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, August 2004, p.4. <http://www.irrodl.org/content/v5.2/jamlan.html> [sic]

³⁵ Aisha S. Al-Harhi, “Distance Higher Education Experiences of Arab Gulf Students in the United States: A Cultural Perspective,” *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, Nov. 2005, pp. 6-10. <http://www.irrodl.org/content/v6.3/al-hathi.html>

The author concludes by postulating that Arab student reactions to internet courses would be even worse if taken at home within their own more restrictive cultures. Furthermore, the author writes, “This raises questions about potential Western cultural hegemony of distance education.”³⁶

Not mentioned is the over-weaning role of religion in Middle Eastern culture which would tend to make any adaptation to foreign Academic theory and methods difficult to achieve.

CONCLUSION

The findings above serve to prove my hypothesis that value-laden Academic internet courses and their contingent “modern” methodologies do indeed present problems internationally.

Most states protecting their own religious culture are planning to construct their own internet teaching/learning system because they “recognized that they were “outside of familiar meaning systems”... “and struggled with clashing of their deeply embedded, “non-negotiable” cultural traditions”³⁷---as well as clashing with Western “modern” teaching methodologies.

In authoritarian states that are more concerned with National Development, their internet systems are being geared to the technical courses and know-how to facilitate employment, modernization and globalization and to increase well-being to avoid political upheaval and sustain the government in power.³⁸

The US and European Universities that still claim that they are offering Academic internet courses to the world have to disabuse themselves of the belief that the rest of the world is anxious to copy Western Academic education.

The aspirations of my own International Relations value-laden Theory of Idealism, in which one looked forward to a more open and tolerant world community have been devastated by this research.

“The fact is that global competition in higher education has become ferocious.”³⁹ As a result, Western universities are helping foster division around the world by supporting various nationalistic and cultural programs aimed at separatism from the world community.

The prospects are poor for Western value-laden Academic internet courses to ever be taken internationally.

ANNEX---CASE STUDY

A STUDENT’S PERSECTIVE OF ACADEMIC INTERNET COURSES AND THEIR CHALLENGES IN SLOVAKIA

³⁶ Ibid., p.10

³⁷ Michael Grahame Moore, Kay Shattuck and Aisha Al-Harathi, “Cultures Meeting Cultures in Online Distance Education,” *Journal of e-Learning and Knowledge Society: The Italian e-Learning Association Journal*, Issue 3, No.3, November 2005, p.10. <http://www.je-lks.it/archive/02-05/Methodologies1.html>

³⁸ Shanthi Kalathil, “Dot Com for Dictators,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. 2004 or 2005. <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=1207&prog=zpg>

³⁹ “Back to School,” *The Economist, Charlemagne Section*, March 25, 2006, p.58.

by John van Heiningen

I'm an American living and working in Kosice, Slovakia, in Central Europe. After taking real classroom courses at various American universities since 1987, I enrolled in the internet Distance Learning program at Troy University in Florida in May 2005. Since then I have completed ten mostly upper-level courses through their internet Distance Learning program and will graduate from Troy in December 2006 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Political Science.

Troy is an accredited State University with a physical main campus that also awards Associate's (two year), Bachelor's and Master's degrees through Asynchronous, Web-based Distance Learning (as we still refer to it---although the name is changing to e-learning).

Since moving here four years ago, I have taught English to approximately 200 university-educated Slovaks. My classes are not typical language classes because students and I spend time speaking, rather than working from a grammar book. Spending lessons talking has enabled me to get to know my students and their country quite well, and in turn, they have gotten to know me well and my studies at Troy.

My students are amazed that I am graduating from an American university in Florida without ever stepping a foot on the university's campus. Everything necessary for obtaining my four year Bachelor's degree is being done through the web---registering for classes, buying books, participating in 'classroom' discussions, communicating with professors and academic advisor, taking tests, researching for papers, everything.

(I have never even met the professor who asked me to contribute to, and present, this paper!)

Since I teach conversational English, rather than grammar out of a book, I have had numerous in depth discussions with my students about all aspects of Slovak life. When the topic of my distance learning comes up, none of my students can completely believe me when I say that I complete courses via the web without any supervision. I'm commonly asked, "How does the university know you wrote that paper or the test?" I answer that the university doesn't know, but trusts that I did.

(Note that the many professors who demand essay exams with a student's own analysis required, can always spot any cheating. There is also a software program called Turnitin that can reveal any plagiarism.)

After my students pick themselves up from the floor having slipped off their chairs in shock, they often admit that they think Slovak students would take advantage of any cheating opportunity in these internet courses.

The pressures for advanced degrees in Slovakia since socialism, when salaries were more equal, are now tremendous. It now takes an advanced degree to lead the new "middle class" life and afford a flat and car.

But the old system rote methods of teaching and the student comfort of memorizing, and being tested only on short answer facts, still invite cheating. This observation might be backed up by owners of a software firm telling me that, as never before, recent graduates could not do some basic software programming tasks, even though they had recently graduated with that degree.

WHY AREN'T SLOVAK STUDENTS TAKING US INTERNET COURSES?

Slovaks aren't aware that they can get a US degree via distance learning. First of all, they don't realize that US universities will accept enrollment from a Slovak (foreigner). Secondly, they aren't aware that university degrees can even be earned through distance learning. No Slovak university offers such capability.

However, Slovaks are adapting to change and to the global, capitalist world quite well. Just consider that Slovakia has been the only Central European country that has voted in a center-right government two times in a row (this is the case now—but elections in July might change this). All of its neighbors have had such governments in place for one term, then voted back into power left/left-center parties and currently they all have left/left-center parties in power. So my professor's question about fear of the unknown doesn't have much application in Slovakia.

About participatory teaching-learning methodologies and discussion, I would say they will be/are welcomed in Slovakia. Though the most widely used method is rote (because 1.-- most professors are older and continue to teach the way they did during socialism, and 2. --- because there is more money to be made in the private sector and professor positions aren't turning over), but students are exposed to theory based teaching in some classes and the number of these classes seems to be increasing slowly as younger professors do manage to get hired.

One opinion I've heard from a number of students is that the rote method, for many students, is preferred because they don't have to think beyond just memorizing some information. It seems some like it this way—it takes less effort.

Plus, socialism preferred this method because students didn't form opinions. (Opinions come from understanding which, as you know, can't just come from a bucket of disconnected facts in one's head), and without opinions, one can't take a stand on an issue, thus reducing the threat to the system and the authorities.

About the language problem: English is taught at practically all Slovak schools from basic to university. They emphasize grammar and some listening---but not speaking—because few Slovak teachers are fluent themselves and they lack the confidence in leading discussions in English. There are very few native English speakers employed in the public schools because the pay, between Sk12,000--16,000/month (\$413--551/month) is less than half what a full time native English speaker earns teaching at a private language school—though religious ministries try, unsuccessfully, to fill the gap by bringing over English speaking missionaries (usually young adults) to teach English in these public schools for free⁴⁰ (This is one reason why my services are in such great demand).

It usually takes a Slovak to live, work and enroll in a private language school for some time in England or Ireland to gain the language skills necessary to become fluent (though not necessarily perfect (or near perfect) in grammar). Since language schools abroad are expensive in relation to Slovak wages, most Slovaks going abroad must work in order to afford the tuition and living expenses. Relatively few Slovaks do this because they feel (possibly rightfully so) that they lack the proficiency of English to land even a menial labor or service job.

But none of the above reasons for not taking US internet courses comes close to the # 1 reason: It's primarily the COST of the classes.

When the average salary is Sk16,816 Slovak Crowns/month (about \$579/month)⁴¹ they can't easily afford one class and the textbook. If we imagine the cost for a 3-unit class at \$489,

⁴⁰ For public school pay see <http://www.bhhrg.org/mediaDetaqils.asp?ArticleID=952>

plus at least \$50 for a book, that comes to \$539 per term for one class, or Sk15631 per term—or nearly the national average monthly wage.

Also, internet at home costs from at least Sk400-600/month (or \$13-\$20/month) and in the worst cases (usually in villages with only internet access through Slovak Telecom, monopoly land-line provider), \$50/month.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERNET COURSES FROM A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

The lessons to be learned in my final section of the paper are specifically directed at institutions which may be considering offering distance learning in Slovakia.

Such programs may want to steer clear of the rote method of learning, because it can encourage cheating, not only on multiple choice type exams, but actually on learning and understanding.

If the point of education is to understand concepts, draw relations and solve problems through critical thinking, and not just memorize who said what, when, and where, then why not make the exams vehicles of learning while also assessing understanding?

Two aspects of exams that both assess and aid in learning are essay questions and an open-book policy. Contrast this with forbidding the use of the book and emphasizing the memorization of disconnected facts and details. In which scenario would a student find the most incentive to cheat?

For Slovakia, an important complement of distance learning would be the elimination (or at least the extension of) the two year “sabbatical” limit placed on students for all university courses. This limit means that if one takes more than two years off during time at university, usually between the ages of 18-23, one will in most cases, lose credit for the classes taken before the sabbatical. Such policy may discourage continuing education by workers who would benefit from a new career if only they did not have to retake the entire series of university courses.

In America, we have no such limit. Universities will usually accept the courses taken at anytime in the past and apply them toward their graduation requirements. For example, my first college classes back in 1987 will count towards graduation at Troy at the end of this year.

On a personal level, such a system allows for flexibility and adaptability to life’s unpredictability without penalizing.

On a national, economic level, such a system allows the retraining and re-qualification of the work force which plays an important role in insuring the country stays competitive in today’s cutthroat world.

Since my students were shocked about the ability to earn a degree through the internet, employers, too, could well be skeptical of the competency of distance learning graduates. But thanks to a safe-guard already built into employment law—a 90 day probation period for all new hires—most of the concern can be alleviated. This legislatively enacted “try before you buy” experience gives both potential employer and employee a trial period to determine if the relationship will be mutually beneficial during these first 90 days, with no reason given, either the employer or employee can end the relationship with no punitive consequences. For the aforementioned software company, this mechanism has sufficiently weeded out unqualified candidates.

The powerful combination of distance learning, the 90 day probation period and a less restrictive sabbatical policy would open the door of opportunity wider for many Slovaks while

⁴¹ See <http://www.spectatorr.sk/clanok.asp?vyd=online&cl=20822>

maintaining the confidence of Slovak employers that they would be able to honestly evaluate the knowledge of distance learning graduates just as traditional education graduates.

And just as important, it is absolutely critical that professors of distance learning courses become more facilitator than lecturer while building a sense of community, honesty and participation within their classes by actively participating themselves in online discussion boards and providing supplemental materials when the need warrants. Such effort creates an interesting and deep learning experience for students.

I am satisfied with the education I am getting through Troy University's distance learning program and I hope Slovakia soon will have the opportunity that I have had, to learn from a distance.