Weaving sustainability in Indian higher education system

Archana Shrivastava

Introduction

On 26 September 2019 was a crucial day for the professors working in one of the private B-Schools in India. They were the part of the meeting that lasted for four long hours. There were two significant agendas: one, exploring the skill-intensive instructional pedagogies which are more sustainable and two, keeping the globalization as a core driver of current trends, exploring the ways to engage academics in the activities with international dimensions. Asserting on how the technological innovation has changed the way students access information, Professor Bose, a faculty in the Business Communication area, emphasized the need to embrace the novel ways of teaching to the generation of students who grew up with the internet, Facebook and smart-phones. The discussion focused on moving toward sustainability in higher education to face the challenges that were stemming in India from the changes happening in the business education landscape across the world.

Professor Bose's profile

Dr Bose is an Associate Professor who teaches Business Communication at Birla Institute of Management Technology (BIMTECH). After completing his masters in Communications, Dr Bose did his PhD from a university in the USA. He has a rich experience of teaching in a few well-known international universities as a visiting faculty. He heads the Department of Communications at BIMTECH and plays a vital role as a member of the committee involved in getting accreditations and brand building. The communication area offers two core courses across the programs and two electives in the Post-Graduate Diploma in Management (PGDM) program. Enhancing cross-cultural communication competence was one of the important elements of the curriculum offered to students pursuing an Internal Business course.

In an endeavor to moving toward sustainable and innovative pedagogies for preparing students of International Business course, Prof. Bose proposed a "flipped classroom" pedagogical approach. He suggested to replace the classroom teaching for developing a global mind-set and enhancing cross-cultural communication competence with a virtual collaborative project. This project will focus on an autonomous learning, where the onus shifts from the teacher who will just be a facilitator to the students. Immediately after he proposed the idea, the room was filled with the questions raised by the faculty colleagues. Prof Anant from the marketing domain reminded Prof Bose about a similar kind of a project which he did in 2016. He asked, "Last time, out of 60 registered students, only 16 could complete it successfully, will the same approach work this time?" Another professor from Strategy asked, "In India, where the dominant teaching methodology has been a classroom lecture, and the instructor is majorly responsible for the successful completion of the

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learning activity, will the students accept it and will this approach necessarily result in knowledge creation?" Prof Devashish from Economics shared inconsistent findings regarding the effects of flipped classroom in student learning, with some suggesting benefits while others reporting negligible improvement over traditional teaching methods and warned Prof Bose to use this methodology cautiously. There were many generic questions raised such as, "Who will oversee the project? How many teachers will implement it? Do we need a new set of technology for every class? If not, how many classes will receive the model change? How many units/classes/curriculums must be altered/modified to suit the flipped model?"

About Birla Institute of Management Technology

The BIMTECH was established in the year 1988 under the aegis of the Birla Academy of Art and Culture. It is supported by the Birla group of companies in India. BIMTECH is accredited by the National Board of Accreditation, as well as the National Assessment and Accreditation Council; both are the highest domestic accrediting bodies. It is an autonomous management institute approved and regulated by All India Council of Technological Education (AICTE). It offers four PGDM (master level programs) and two fellow programs (equivalent to PhD) approved by AICTE [1].

Virtual business professional project

The virtual business professional (VBP) project was started by a small group of business communication faculty at the Marshall School of Business at USC in 2013. The aim was to help students develop skills necessary to succeed in a fast-paced global business environment that is increasingly relying on social platforms and virtual collaboration for their internal and external communication.

In 2015, a partnership was formed between three universities, the University of Southern California, Aalto University in Finland, and the University of Arizona for participation in the global VBP project.

Since then, the project grew with more schools and countries participating every year:

- Fall 2016 participants: 204 students and 51 teams from 6 universities and 4 countries.
- Spring 2017 participants: 415 students and 71 teams from 9 universities and 7 countries.
- Spring 2018 participants: 578 students and 96 teams from 14 universities and 7 countries.
- Spring 2019 participants: 653 students and 116 teams from 14 universities and 9 countries.

The VBP project is a remarkable initiative for all instructors who see the value in teaching virtual communication, social collaboration, virtual leadership and cross-cultural communication skills. Its project partners are Amazon, Google and Starbucks.

The project is designed to develop critical-thinking, communication competence in cross-cultural settings and team-building skills among students with the following specific goals:

1. Help students learn how to collaborate in virtual teams with members located in different geographical locations.
2. Introduce them to a virtual communication platform.
3. Have them assess their effectiveness in the virtual collaboration process.
4. Teach them leadership skills in global virtual collaboration projects.

5. Provide them with an opportunity to examine, analyze and assess external online communication practices of Google, Starbucks and Amazon.

6. Identify recommendations.

7. Collaboratively write a professional report about their findings.

The project will run on MS teams, a unified communication and collaboration platform that combines persistent workplace chat, video meetings, file storage (including collaboration on files) and application integration for all virtual team communication [2]. They will exchange, edit documents, create Wikis and conduct a discussion in forums. Connections will also enable students to hold virtual meetings, chat and send emails. Members of the virtual teams would be placed in "communities," comprising team members from different geographical locations, schools and courses randomly allocated by the organizers of the project. The project activities, grading scheme, and due dates were to be listed and shared with the students through their faculty mentors (Exhibit 1).

Participant's profile

The upcoming international collaborative VBP project will be conducted by the Marshall Business School (USC) along with 14 universities (Exhibit 2) from 9 countries. A total of 653 students across the globe, including 60 students from the International Business course at BIMTECH-India will participate in the project. The average age of participants ranged between 21–25 years. While 8% of Prof. Bose's students had prior work experience of 1–2 years, most of them lacked international exposure.

Why Virtual business professional – professor Bose's argument?

Professor Bose argued that despite being third largest education systems in the world, Indian higher education is grappling with the challenges of adopting the right teaching methodologies. In 2009, the government of India introduced the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, according to which every child has a right to full-time elementary education of satisfactory and equitable quality in a formal school, which satisfies certain essential norms and standards. This act brought a revolution in the Indian higher education sector and witnessed a dramatic growth from 2008–2016 (Exhibit 3). Despite these numbers, many international education ranking agencies have not placed the Indian universities within the list of the best world universities ranking. Studies claimed that the expansion came at the cost of quality. Many graduates took degrees without any job-specific skillset.

Prof. Bose argued that the education system in India majorly relied on classroom lectures, which are "rote, teacher-centric and lacked analytical and critical perspectives." He asserted that the quality of instruction is the central component in raising the standard of any educational institution, and his proposal of introducing the collaborative project for teaching cross-cultural communication to students of the International Business course will be an essential step toward it. Other than cultural aspect, the project aimed at a crucial factor such as developing global mindset in students, which was in sync with the three missions of the school:

1. To create and disseminate knowledge in a global context.

2. To equip students for global business leadership.

3. To develop faculty as global thought leaders.

He insisted that the project has a capacity to be used in other courses also. Though running the project may be difficult, Prof. Bose argued that this step will not just help the institution take a baby step to transit from knowledge-intensive to skill-intensive institution but will also

help in the process of getting accreditation by the international bodies such as AACSB that gives importance to innovation, engagement and impact.

Challenges faced by the students in 2016

Prof. Bose was first introduced to a similar kind of project in 2016. He found it very impressive and implemented it immediately without any prior preparation. A total of 60 students from the International Business course participated. They were made to work in the culturally diverse teams located in different geographical locations and time zones. Each member had different communication style. The virtual meetings between the team members were limited and lasted for short duration. Students were asked to restrict their communications on the official platform; hence creating social connect became challenging. As the lack of geographic proximity, face-to-face and repeated interactions over time were missing, hence for the students, building trust became challenging. Slowly students started categorizing themselves along geographical lines using the primal distinction between "us" (good) and "them" (bad). All this led to the greater conflicts and reduced collaboration. Eventually, 44 students dropped. Mixed reactions came from the students. Few of them shared positive feedbacks like, "It was a thought provoking exercise. We discovered how cultures impact the style of working, communicating and even thinking processes." Another student shared, "The books could have never helped me understand the difference between high and low context culture. I actually discovered it while interacting with my team member from China and the USA simultaneously." There were negative reactions like, "Earlier it used to be in a formal classroom and the instructor was equally responsible for the successful completion of the learning activity. I found it problematic." Another student said, "Despite being highly active and open to collaborate, share views, other members were not responding. I gave up and felt collaborative and autonomous learning may not necessarily result in knowledge creation."

Responding to the colleagues who raised doubts, Professor Bose assured that this time he will prepare a clear roadmap and a strategy to help students face the challenges. He decided to use two established frameworks, virtual team characteristics framework (VTCF) by Powell, Piccoli and Ives (2004) and five centrifugal forces model proposed by Carmel in 1999 to help students successfully complete the project. After much discussion, Professor Bose got a green signal from the authority. While coming back to his office, he was both elated to get the approval and nervous about what he had gotten himself into. He started pondering, trust in multicultural teams is challenging to create and sustain, what steps will he ask his students to follow? To make virtual meetings effective, what factors should students be keeping in their mind? How will he convince them to use one common platform for creating social connect? He will also have to identify probable issues and solutions raised by faculty members immediately.

The road ahead

While he was still searching for the answers related to the project, Professor Bose was reminded of the upcoming challenges in fulfilling bigger goals. As the higher education system is extremely diverse, he knew that the one-size-may not fit all. "Flexible pedagogy" and personalizing the methods to suit the requirements of a majority of the students was the way forward. However, will the students and professors be open to change? Professor Bose yawned and looked at his watch. It was already 6 p.m., the time for him to leave.

Notes

1. www.bimtech.ac.in/Uploads/image/1293imguf_BIMTECH,GreaterNoida,UP.pdf
2. https://products.office.com/en-IN/microsoft-teams/group-chat-software

Exhibit 1

Table E1	Grading breakdown	
Tasks	*Frequency*	*Grades*
Individual meeting preps (4)	4	20
Team meeting reports (4)	4	20
Surveys (pre- and post-) (2)	2	5
Draft report (1)	1	5
Formal report	1	50
Total		100%

Source: Retrieved from www.marshall.usc.edu/departments/business-communication/vbp-project/instructors

Exhibit 2

Universities participated in 2019:
1. Ryerson University
2. Ahmedabad University
3. Utah State University
4. Birla Institute of Management Technology
5. Brigham Young University – Hawaii
6. ONIRIS National College of Food Science Engineering
7. Universitat Jaume I (UJI), Spain
8. Mainz University of Applied Sciences
9. Aalto University School of Business
10. Oklahoma State University
11. Baruch College/CUNY
12. USC
13. Vilnius University
14. Singapore Management University

Exhibit 3

Table E2	Growth in colleges and universities in India (2008–2016)			
Institutions	*2008*	*2016*	*Increase (#)*	*Increase (%)*
Central Universities	25	47	22	88
State Universities	228	345	117	51
State Private Universities	14	235	221	1,579
Institutions Deemed to be Universities	103	123	20	19
Total	370	750	380	103
Colleges	23,206	41,435	18,229	79

Source: UGC India, Analysed by DrEducation.com Retrieved from www.dreducation.com/2017/06/indian-universities-colleges-latest-data-statistics-heera-aicte-ugc.html

About the author

Archana Shrivastava is an Associate Professor and Head of Business Communication Area. She holds 19 years of rich teaching, researching and training experience. She current research and publications are in the area of human communication, virtual collaborations and cultures. She is a recipient of a travel grant awarded by AICTE in 2015 and best paper awards in 2017 and 2018. Archana Shrivastava can be contacted at: archana.shrivastava@bimtech.ac.in