Is It Time for Webcam Instruction?

Dr. ROD JENSEN

International Consultant for University Continuing Education

Based upon recent news reports the majority of higher education administrators in Vietnam are sincerely interested in improving all aspects of university education. The Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), rectors and presidents of universities and colleges as well as faculty of all rank have identified many challenges facing higher education now and in the future. And in response they have collectively established many ambitious goals. In the document "Continuing Education in Vietnam" prepared by MoET in 2006 it is stated that "Distance-learning programs (should) be promoted and strengthened through the improvement of equipment and resources. The development and renovation of curriculum and

of great importance." Developing distance learning systems is a laudable goal but if only a few universities in the county explore its instructional potential waiting in line for the transference of lessons learned could limit long-term participation. In response to MoET's statement, perhaps it is time for universities and colleges in Vietnam to experiment with simple applications of distance learning as a means of improving classroom instruction. Instructional innovation within university classrooms could become a common occurrence once distance learning is introduced into the educational process.

Vietnam has historically used rudimentary forms of distance learning, consisting of print-based instructional materials delivered by post, to provide needed educational opportunities to students located vast distances from any university or college. In more recent time several universities in the country, such as Hanoi Open University (HOU) and Ho Chi Minh City

Open University (HCMCOU), both members of The Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU), have been looking at ways to deliver academic coursework using delivery technologies that have successfully been used in other countries. Two years ago a Korean academic from the University of Sungkyunkwan in Seoul reviewed the state of distance education in Vietnam and discovered that "e-learning in Vietnam is still in the infant stage; therefore, it requires a driving force now to develop" (Vietnam Development Gateway, October 1, 2008). In an attempt to gain an assist for early development a select number of Vietnamese universities have established programming partnerships with universities and academic institutions throughout the world. Unfortunately not all of these partnerships have been made with reputable institutions and as a consequence they have failed to serve their instructional purpose.

Even though distance education is not unknown in Vietnam, it is still difficult to identify many distance education success stories among the universities and colleges in the country. Success stories which have occurred and could be copied and used by other schools have not been plentiful as noted by the following quote from a recent news posting. "Many universities worldwide have offered e-training classes for a long time, but few universities in Viet Nam do" (Viet Nam News, August 20, 2010). Until more universities have achieved significant educational gains in using distance learning and an acceptable mechanism for sharing the learning experiences has been

established in Vietnam, it may be best for individual universities to develop their own experimental successes.

Most universities in Vietnam already possess some of the rudimentary technological requirements for initiating experimental distance learning initiatives. The term experimental may be viewed negatively by some administrators and faculty, but in reality if viewed from an educational standpoint it should be considered as a constructive approach to attain distance learning expertise. Distance learning does not have to be costly or resource dependent to be effective. There are select applications which can actually enhance and expand the instructional value of a traditional classroom. One of these applications is the use of a simple webcam and microphone that are focused on a presenter sending information (real-time course instruction) via the internet to a large screen monitor located in a university classroom in Vietnam. Students at the receiving end would then have the ability to immediately respond to the instruction in a question and answer format thereby greatly expanding the instructional applications of the day's lesson.

Webcam instruction could in a small way could overcome a current and growing shortage of classroom faculty possessing advanced degrees. In spite of the benefits of using webcam instruction it needs to be clearly stated that the use of webcam teachers will not replace the existing lecturer/professor in the university classroom. Rather the webcam instructor/contributor would serve as an augmentation

to the faculty currently working in the university classroom. The use of highly qualified and educated faculty from distant locations could add value to a local university's instructional lessons and increase the depth of program curriculum. Pairing distant faculty, who may possess in-demand subject area expertise, with existing university faculty could also result in a collaborative intellectual experience for both groups of participants. Other options for using webcam instruction could include team-teaching a course, using a webcam instructor to exclusively teach a course with support of a classroom teaching assistant, or establishing an interactive English language learning workshop with off-campus native speakers.

The simplicity of application is what makes webcam instruction an immediate consideration. Lets assume for a moment that a university in Vietnam is offering a course on intercultural communication--a growing field of inquiry for organizations involved in international collaboration/business. The teacher of record in Vietnam is a bright young faculty member with an MA/MS degree from a well-known national university in Hanoi. Her teaching ability is very good and she is quite knowledgeable in regards to the subject matter and the course curriculum. Her key area of weakness is a lack of direct experience working with people from other cultures and limited research in the field of cultural intelligence. But in order to augment the instruction for the course the chair of the academic department which monitors the course has

worked with the instructor to identify a group of individuals throughout the world who have additional levels of expertise and/or real world experience working in a multi-cultural workplace. After using a world-wide network of professional colleagues and contacts, the chair and instructor have managed to contact and convince three individuals to serve as guest speakers/presenters during the semester-long course. Each of these individuals would be scheduled according to their area of expertise, time zone considerations, and the applicable lesson according to the course outline. In the comfort of their home or office, in front of his/her computer webcam, perhaps thousands of miles away, the guest speaker would use a web conferencing product/software (of which there are numerous products to choose from) to connect with the classroom in Vietnam. At the receiving end the course instructor, or technology assistant, would have been trained to connect the guest speaker's webcam presentation with a large classroom monitor. At that point the guest speaker may deliver an agreed upon lecture, offer insights on the latest research in the field, and/or open the session for follow-up discussion and questions from the participating students.

A recent issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education contained an article concerning the webcam's use as an instructional tool at many universities in the United States. According to the author, professors "frequently bring in guest speakers using the technology, letting students interact with experts they otherwise would only read

about in textbooks" (Young, January 30, 2011). The benefits of being a webcam guest speaker are numerous, they "don't have to prepare a talk, and they get to interact with really smart students who are familiar with their work--and they don't have to travel" (Young, January 30, 2011).

The mechanisms for a Vietnamese university to acquire webcam participants may involve a degree of creativity in addition to maximizing a university's international connections. As a component of the ceremonial agreements of partnership, frequently signed between Vietnamese universities and their global university partners, provisions could be made that would provide access to international faculty. A participating university would agree to assist the Vietnamese university in recruiting a select number of volunteer faculty to serve as guest speakers. Additional provisions could make it administratively permissible for the Vietnamese university to recruit and to hire resident faculty from the partnering international university for potential employment as part-time webcam instructors. Other sources of guest speakers and instructors include textbook publishers (who may sponsor the presentations of textbook authors), Viet Kieu faculty or subject area experts, and retired university professors from Western nations who may be willing to teach a number of courses from the comfort of their homes via webcam. The cost of employing overseas faculty to teach via webcam does not need to be prohibitively expensive but it nevertheless will be higher than the

fees currently paid to Vietnamese instructors. Rationalizing higher stipends or teacher salary for off-campus web instructors may be supported by the level of education these foreign faculty have acquired in addition to notable expertise in a particular field of inquiry. Some concern would need to be paid to the differentiation of instructor pay between Vietnamese faculty and webcam instructors in order to avoid any internal competition and/or resentment.

From the perspective of the university the advantages of augmenting university classroom instruction with webcam teaching by faculty from overseas are too numerous to ignore. Even though there may be additional compensation costs there are no additional expenses associated with bringing expert faculty to Vietnam and hosting them for a significant period of time. Travel and location costs could actually outpace the actual salary being provided to a foreign instructor making webcam instruction a relative bargain. Using faculty with advanced degrees from overseas is also a limited yet reasonable response to the growing need for classroom instructors with doctorates. In addition, using guest speakers in the classroom provides students with opportunities to listen and question, in real time, well-known experts in their field of inquiry. Experts, who without the use of webcam instruction, would not be able to visit the university classroom and provide students with the benefit of their knowledge. There may be occasional issues concerning language of instruction with English being dominant. Real-time in-classroom

translation could work well for guest speaker assignments but for teaching semester length classes consistent translation from English to Vietnamese could become cumbersome.

The technology for bringing webcam instruction to the classroom most probably exists at a majority of the universities in Vietnam. There are numerous software programs which can be used to enable a systemized approach to webcam instruction and campus instructional technologists assuredly have already developed a level of knowledge with several of these programs. What appears to be lacking at many universities is an administrative understanding on the potential of webcam instruction followed by campus policies and faculty commitment to incorporate guest speakers or team teaching into their course lessons. Administrative policy development is an important aspect in developing webcam instruction on any campus. Numerous logistical and compensation issues as well as administrative decisions covering programming policies should be considered in advance of webcam instruction. As an example, should a campus record all webcam lessons and make them available for later viewing on a closed campus website or should only select instructional sessions be recorded? Administratively how would that be determined?

Even though webcam instruction is a simple application of distance learning technologies it would still require enterprising administrators and faculty to forward its implementation. "The most recent data from the Faculty