Building Academic Capacity with Cultural Relevance:
A Cross-Case Analysis of Transnational Partnerships

Michelle Loo
University of South Alabama
165 South Monterey Street, Suite 14
Mobile, AL 36604

Phillip J. Ward
University of South Alabama
165 South Monterey Street, Suite 16
Mobile, AL 36604

Yolany Lagos
University of South Alabama
133 East Drive, Suite 501
Mobile, AL 36608

Nataliia Volkovetska-Ireland
21st Century Community Learning Centers
100 Burbank Street
Pittsfield, MA 01201

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Abstract

This cross-case analysis of building capacity for the effective adaptation of professional development content for educators across different cultural contexts was an international collaboration conducted between an instructional design team, two cultural consultants, and two international educators. Capacity occurs at three levels—*individuals, work environment, and institutions* (Malyan & Jindal, 2014). This cross-case analysis is divided into two phases, and delves into the first level: the individual. Phase One (P1) of this research involved a team of U.S. instructional designers and a Ukrainian educator introducing Ukrainian graduate students to the world of online learning. Phase Two (P2) expanded upon P1 with the addition of two cultural consultants to the team. Cultural consultants are individuals with an extensive knowledge of their own culture and community, and understand how services can be best presented to meet the needs of that community. P2 is an ongoing collaborative initiative between the Innovation in Learning Center (ILC) at the University of South Alabama (USA), Ivano-Frankivsk National Technical University of Oil and Gas (IFNTUOG), and Universidad Pedagógica Nacional Francisco Morazán (UPNFM).

The purpose of this cross-case analysis is to provide insight in building capacity. Capacity occurs at three levels—*individuals, work environment, and institutions* (Malyan & Jindal, 2014). This cross-case analysis delves into the first level, the individual, for the effective adaptation of professional development content for educators by integrating technology and learning strategies across different cultural contexts.

Building capacity refers to the effort put towards improving the abilities, skills, and expertise of a school or individual to accomplish or execute specific goals (Wing, 2004). It is the process to assist a school or college's ability in accomplishing its mission by combining elements and resources within an institution to benefit all stakeholders. The purpose of building capacity is to create and implement programs that will allow individuals to grow their own knowledge, skills, and abilities. For capacity building to be sustainable and remain effective, all stakeholders must invest in the improvement of the institution through collegial efforts. Change agents become strong leaders who can exemplify their expert knowledge to those around them, encouraging learner-centered approaches with performance-based settings that incorporate varied pedagogies and techniques that promote student learning and success. In order to begin capacity building, we divided this project into three different phases. Phase

One (P1) involved establishing rapport, relationships, and a pilot study of the online environment. Phase Two (P2) involves revisions of the data obtained in P1, along with additions to the research team.

Completed in May 2018, P1 was a collaboration between an educator at the Ivano-Frankivsk National Technical University of Oil and Gas (IFNTUOG) in the former Soviet Republic of Ukraine and a team of instructional designers at the Innovation in Learning Center (ILC) at the University of South Alabama (USA). P2 is an ongoing collaboration between the ILC and IFNTUOG, while expanding that partnership with an instructor at Universidad Pedagógica Nacional Francisco Morazán (UPNFM) in La Ceiba, Honduras. Working with IFNTUOG and UPNFM, both educators in Ukraine and Honduras were faced with the overlapping themes of little support from local administration and had few resources at their disposal despite originating from two completely different cultures and geographical regions. This research was conducted as a collaboration to share faculty development content and provide access to educational technologies. It serves to establish the aptitudes, resources, relationships, and its facilitating conditions to effectively build academic capacity.

Phase One

Many international students come to the United States with little to no online learning experience. Online instruction can be different from what international students are accustomed to in their home countries. Adjustments associated with learning in this format could put global students at a disadvantage. P1 of this research involved an instructor at IFNTUOG and two instructional designers. This phase involved introducing Ukrainian graduate students to the world of online learning. Prior to introducing the students to their first online course, the instructor was trained and certified to teach in the Learning Management System (LMS).

P1 indicated that success and sustainability are contingent upon the students, as they are the end consumers of this educational experience. Phase One data were collected through a series of video interviews and qualitative questionnaires. It revealed linguistic, social, and academic barriers the Ukrainian students faced as inexperienced online learners. An interview conducted with the instructor revealed evidence of bureaucratic resistance to change of the status quo due to lack of training and development of competencies. This response was to be expected as much of the literature has indicated these challenges were a particular problem (Blayone et al., 2018).

The researchers found that implementing new approaches to learning content had a positive effect on students; however, the push from new educators who wish to expose their students to experiences that help them become more competitive in the global market, while also inspiring their administration to do the same, has proven to be a difficult task. Their efforts to serve as a change agent and transition into the second level of capacity building, bringing their colleagues forward in utilizing new learning technologies and strategies, and changing the old paradigmatic mindset of teaching and learning, has not gained much traction in terms of faculty development (Fink, 2013).

Phase Two

Cultural Consultants

P2 expanded upon P1 with the addition of two cultural consultants. Cultural consultants are individuals with an extensive knowledge of their own culture and community, and understand how services can be best presented to meet the needs of that community. These individuals provide region-specific socio-cultural and linguistic knowledge, information, and advice that could only be acquired by living in an area or studying it for several years (IOR, 2018). Thus, the Ukrainian and Honduran team members served as cultural consultants and worked with an international partner in their home country.

Linguistic and academic differences can be obstacles when developing, designing, and delivering content as the international partners differ greatly in academic language, interpersonal communications, and teaching practices from the ILC instructional design team. New technologies in teaching and learning have allowed for more impactful transnational relationships that result in frequent interaction and deeper engagement between international partners and the instructional design professionals who hold essential knowledge of specific academic cultures. The cultural consultants are natives of Ukraine and Honduras, and have both worked extensively in education. Their expertise provides much needed insight and input for the U.S. instructional designers to provide support that is conducive to the linguistic, academic, and cultural environment of the institution. As cultural consultants, they both served a formal and informal role in the professional development of their international counterparts. The international partners benefit from the working relationship with a cultural consultant who can expertly navigate the socio-cultural differences and serve as a mediator; therefore, bridging the gap between innovative technological

tools and instructional strategies used in the United States to the unique cultural needs and contexts of the international partner's own culture.

The cultural consultants worked with international partners to integrate content developed by the U.S. instructional design team by providing guidance and adapting instructional content to be culturally relevant to the faculty development needs of their respective countries. Utilizing cultural consultants will provide a sense of connectedness and belongingness which facilitates a sense of relatedness to their international counterparts. Evidence has shown that individuals are more likely to participate in actions valued by others to whom they feel a connection (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As a member of the target culture, establishing relationships between the cultural consultant and the international partner is essential to connecting to the academic endeavor. The researchers utilized cultural consultancy as a method to provide global guidance to ensure a seamless transition in overcoming existing cultural, technological, and academic barriers with the participants. The personal familiarity between the cultural consultants and international educators narrows the gaps of the cultural-specific needs and goals of the students involved in the research to sufficiently begin creating cultural relevance in an academic capacity. Both international educators proactively reaching out to create sustainable relationships through international collaboration serves as groundwork to inspire educators and students through global inclusivity.

Implementing Phase Two

P2 is an ongoing collaborative initiative between the ILC and IFNTUOG, while expanding this partnership to include an instructor at Universidad Pedagógica Nacional Francisco Morazán (UPNFM) in La Ceiba, Honduras. Academic reassessment requires partners embarking on a joint venture of exploring the quality of professional development, leading to mutual transformation of teaching effectiveness. As stated previously, this begins at the individual level of building capacity. To address the gap, this phase was designed as a cross-case study to examine the perceptions of international faculty from two different countries with distinct social cultures and similar academic cultures.

This part of the research involved the work of six individuals: two instructional designers from the United States; two academic professionals representing two global partner sites; and two cultural consultants acting as liaison within the collaboration. The Ukrainian and Honduran partners share the desire to enhance the educational practices at their respective institutions to provide innovative and meaningful learning experiences for their students. Qualitative data from P1 was analyzed through open coding (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) through interviews held periodically throughout the course. At the end of each interview, data were compared to the information gathered previously. After the completion of the final session of the course, all P1 data were collectively analyzed. Themes that emerged from the existing literature, along with the data collected from P1, indicated a gap existed in institutions regarding building academic capacity for their faculty. P2 of the study addresses this gap, using multicultural perspectives to guide the process of transnational educational partnerships. Some of the challenges to e-learning P2 will be addressing are (Blayone, et al., 2017):

- Low-level digital readiness for online learning of the students, teachers, and administrators
- Faculty and administrators' lack of training to guide students in the world of online learning
- Unreliable internet access and availability
- Lack of experience in self-guided and self-motivated learner-centered curriculums

Both Ukraine and Honduras face these challenges. The processes of P2 will be successful if the partnership shows outcomes of increased capacity, with changes in attitudes and behavior that indicate that the future relationship will lead to sustainable, long-term connections that benefit *all* stakeholders.
Three questions will be addressed in this study:
- To what extent do the international partners feel competent to integrate the instructional practices introduced to them from the intentional, ongoing, and systemic professional development support partnership with regards to building capacity?
- To what extent are the *students* of the international partners impacted by the changes in teaching practices made as a result of the partnership?
- To what extent does the use of cultural consultants impact the cultural relevance of the outcomes of the transnational partnership?

International Partners' Sense of Competence

With the robust development of instructional technology, education in a globalized world has been challenged to quickly adapt and offer learning models, which would diminish time, spatial, social, and cultural boundaries of the traditional classroom (Vonderwell, Liang, & Alderman, 2007). These circumstances present the potential to embrace a broader diversity of learners. The effective implementation of change in the delivery of learning places greater responsibility on the instructors, who have to create and facilitate effective online learning modes, inclusive environments, and design curricula that respond to competitive professional market's requirements.

Data collected in P1 indicated that the level of instructor pedagogical and technological readiness had a negative influence on instructor satisfaction for pre-course delivery for the Ukrainian partner. She stated that the lack of technological expertise and understanding of online delivery was a source of anxiety and resulted in lower confidence in her ability to successfully teach in an online format. After the second online experience within the course, anxiety levels decreased, and she reported an increase in the level of satisfaction with the collaboration. Each learning experience throughout the course concluded with a debrief through online interaction via web conferencing tools. The debrief included feedback on delivery of the course content using the tools within the learning management system and suggestions of additional instructional strategies to utilize for the next online session. The partner gained certification for online course development through the ILC. She successfully completed the same e-learning training course that instructors at USA must complete before teaching online, with coaching from the ILC e-learning specialist. At the end of P1 of the online experience, the Ukrainian partner reported e-readiness, but identified a deficit in pedagogical readiness items. She wanted to seek to academic capacity and continue building global connections, however realized that international educational settings did not conform to the traditional Ukrainian educational setting. To avoid making assumptions about what will and will not work in this international collaboration, the instructional design team decided to seek the assistance of a cultural consultant.

Students of International Partners

Education in the 21st century requires students to develop their skills to become self-directed learners and develop into self-growers of constructing their own knowledge through self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation. As international partners reach the level of academic capacity that allows them to develop learning experiences that promote a sense of relatedness, measured in terms of teacher-student relationships, the sense of belongingness and connectedness amongst students increases (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The learning experiences that satisfy the basic need of relatedness have been linked to self-efficacy, engagement, interest in course content, higher scores, and student retention (Beachboard, Beachboard, Li, and Adkison, 2011; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Ryan and Deci, 2000) The purpose of education becomes more about the intrinsic value of learning rather than the consumption of knowledge (Burke, Lawrence, El-Sayed, & Apple, 2009). This is a paradigm shift from the conventional educational customs from the Ukrainian and Honduran contexts. This conventional method of education is also commonly shared across other cultures as well.

Common themes were found through the online interviews conducted with the students, they expressed the importance of learning in an online environment; they were in different and usually low level of digital readiness for online-learning (Synytsya, K., & Manako, A, 2010). They felt challenged, because of this novel experience and also the internet access and availability. Despite the technological challenges students faced, we had our partners accommodate lab time use to ensure that they would have access to the internet and were able to complete the online activities, and also hold synchronous meetings with the cultural consultants.

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Next Steps

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The goal of this ongoing project is to infer technological and logistical feasibility, sustainability of established relationships with an outcome of increased academic capacity, and the development of culturally relevant content. After evaluating and completing P1, the researchers have determined that P2 is a feasible endeavor. The research has demonstrated itself to be effective, able to be implemented in a real-world setting, and serve as a model of a worthwhile sustainable approach to building academic capacity with cultural relevance. Feasibility was determined through feedback in P1 in relation to the students' satisfaction with the setting of the course, learning content, and support of instructional designers. Feasibility was also determined by the barriers encountered during the project, technological implications, and organizational support. After uncovering the gaps from P1, we developed a strategy to fill those gaps with additional resources needed to successfully begin P2: creating academic capacity at the first level with the individual.

The sustainability in progressing through all three levels of academic capacity is a long term goal of our partnership. This goal lies in providing the tools and support our partners need to continue building capacity in their

work environment and institutions, along with the opportunities we can facilitate for the Ukranian and Honduran institutions to collaborate with one another in the future. Some critical factors in sustainability were discovered in the initial phase of the project. The difficulty in obtaining support from the administration and institution has not garnered much attention in the past for the international partners. However, the passion for improvement from both international educators has presented them as community leaders committed to achieving academic capacity. To counteract the threats to sustainability, the next step for this project to achieve the milestone levels of building academic capacity is through varied strategies of ownership. As the first level of capacity is established with each international partner, the second level begins. As the partners invite colleagues from their organizations to join their efforts of professional development, with the aid of the cultural consultants and the instructional design team, this initiates the transfer of ownership from individual to the work environment at the second level of academic capacity.

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