

International collaboration in distance education for geography students – experience of Vilnius University

Donatas Burneika

assoc. prof. of Vilnius University

Dep. of General Geography



The aim of the presentation

To present experience of Vilnius University in using distance education methods for teaching bachelor students

Geography in Lithuania and at Vilnius University

- 48 high schools in Lithuania :
 1. 15 state Universities and 6 non-state universities
 2. 16 state colleges and 11 non-state colleges
- Just **3** of them have geographical departments and geographical disciplines in their study programs!!

Personal structure of Department of General Geography of Vilnius University

Level	Number of persons	Remarks
Bachelor studies	110	Every year 30 students enter to the department and approximately 25 receive bachelor diploma. It is 4-year studies.
Postgraduate (Masters)	30	Up to 18 students enter the master programme and approximately just 12 receive master degree.
Postgraduate (PhD)	6	Every year one or two persons enter to the postgraduate studies, which last usually 4 years. VU is the only institution with the right to prepare PhD students in geography in Lithuania.
Staff	18	Stable number. Assistant professors prevail in the teaching personnel.

Geography teaching in VU

- The methods of teaching are very traditional - old fashioned lecturing dominates. Other teaching methods involve seminars, practicals, field practice and self-learning (particularly when preparing project work) but their significance is less important.
- reasons why traditional lectures dominate are related to the lack of possibilities for self-learning

International collaboration

- Colleagues from **Turku University** (Finland) raised idea to involve distance education methods for international collaboration in geography teaching in 1999.
- The project was organised as a part of the Baltic Sea Region Studies Programme and involved Universities from Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania

The main idea of the project

- to employ distant education techniques and methods for international collaboration in preparing geography students through international studies via virtual reality without physical journeys.
- The Internet and audio conferencing were the main tools of learning
- It was decided to try to develop international collaboration, to exchange experience and learning without expensive travelling costs

Course design and

- Elaboration of the idea
- Finding “hot” topics and course design
- Choosing teaching technique and main tools
- Organizing study process

Topics

- Finally two different “hot” disciplines of human geography were designed and have been completed several times during the period between 1999 and 2004
- A course in urban geography “Transformation of Urban Space” was chosen to be the first to be prepared. Later another course in regional geography “Region Development and Region Policy” was produced

Organisational aspects

- team meetings in Finland - persons from each of the universities involved were presented with the idea and main principles of distant learning and audio conferencing.
- Some practice of audio lecturing was given for tutors. Also the course content was discussed and established.

Experience

- It turned out that these meetings were not critical, particularly if there is one leading department, whose experts prepare the course content and takes all the organisational responsibilities and the other university partners accept this content and the design of the course. On the other hand collaboration happens more smoothly if all the persons involved know each other through face-to-face meetings and not just virtually.

- Design of the course was prepared both by the experts of distance education and geographers. Though the main initiators of the course were distance education centres, later their involvement in course development was not so dominant and the role of the geographers increased.
- Departments of distance education in the universities were responsible for the technical aspects of the project – they provided the equipment necessary for audio conferencing and web based tools

Audio conferencing should just be an additional learning tool, while the main accent was related to active self-education and communication via the Internet. Later experiences showed that the proportion of audio lectures could have been reduced even further

Learning process

- Tutoring (not lecturing, just helping students);
- Audio meetings:
- Independent learning;
- Internet based learning.
- Group work (preparing common projects)

Tutoring

- Promotion of the idea of the course among the students played an important role and this was one of the tasks of a tutor. (formation of a group of 6 – 12 English speaking persons interested in the topic was not an easy task)
- to lead conversation during audio conferences, assist students with their assignments, to present study material, to explain Internet-based learning environment but not to give lectures
- Actually good tutoring was essential and the tutor involved needed to be a well motivated person interested in new technology like the Internet and the subject, urban geography in this case

Independent learning

- the main way of that the students gained knowledge. It was based on study materials, which were provided for the students (copied articles, relevant chapters from different issues of full textbooks etc.)
- course requires independent work from students collecting additional information on the course subjects and especially preparing project work. The given material concentrated on general theory, main trends in the urban or regional geography, so students had to find information concerning their own city or region to supplement it

audio meetings

- The number of **audio meetings** varied from 7 in 1999 to 4 in 2004. Firstly audio conferences used to take place every two weeks, lasting two academic hours, but it became evident that the attention needed for this type of learning was too great
- At the beginning five audio meetings were devoted for lectures (including of course some discussion on related topic) and there were two for the presentation of projects prepared by different student groups.
- Finally there were only two short audio lectures – one for presenting the general ideas of the topic and second for explaining some special cases, both were given by an expert on the subject. And the next two were devoted for presenting project work, which were to be placed on the Internet.

Internet based learning

- **Internet based learning** was organised by our colleagues from Turku University. Web course tools were used for communication between students, tutors and experts. All written material was presented there as well as useful links and other related information so every participant was able to use it and to give their remarks. WebCT also provided space for presenting project work. Students had to use the site several times each week to find out the tasks given by experts or answer questions given by other participants.
- *The problems with Internet accessibility in Baltic countries as well as rather poor computer skills were the main difficulties at the beginning of the project*

Group work

- There were two **assignments** to be made during the course. First of all local **groups** prepared project work concerning some local case, placed it on WebCT and presented it during the audio conference trying to compare different cities. Usually every student had specific tasks depending on their skills. Students had to collect information, make analyses, to write in English, to put the presentation on Internet and to present it during the audio conference.

Group work

- For the second assignment groups were formed from students from the different participating universities and they had to work together on some specific problem in the different cities.
- International collaboration was very interesting for students though the organisation of work was rather difficult. *The number of students involved from the various countries differed considerably, as well as their skills and motivation so the results were very unpredictable and the quality of the project work was very different.*
- Finally, after two years the idea of working in international groups was rejected purely because of these reasons.

Conclusion

In general such way of learning opens a lot of new opportunities for students and teachers. Students can obtain various skills in very different fields - understanding geographical subjects, developing communicational abilities, improving English, group work skills, and so on. Also in some cases it is an appropriate alternative to expensive international travel.

Conclusion

There are some organisational issues, for example it is rather difficult to include such subjects into the regular curriculum, because it depends on the will of many participants, finding finances for such activities and there is always some uncertainty concerning sustaining the activities. However notwithstanding some negative features, in general, such methods of learning enrich the usual ways of learning very effectively. The experiences, which students and tutors obtained, helped everybody to improve their geographical knowledge and learning skills.

Thank you for your attention !!!

Future contacts:

donatas.burneika@geo.lt

