

Design and Delivery of an Online Course with an International Perspective:
International Social Work: Russia

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The Relationship between ISU and TSU

The relationship between Indiana State University (ISU), Terre Haute, IN and Tambov State University (TSU), Tambov, Russia began at the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) Conference in 1995. Robyn Lugar, Chair of the Dept. of Social Work at ISU approached the Director of the Institute of Social Work at TSU after hearing her presentation at NASW. The result of that discussion was the birth and fostering of a student exchange program that occurred the following summer.

The relationship between TSU and ISU has been fostered on both continents and has continued to grow. TSU students have benefited as they have completed both graduate and undergraduate degrees at ISU. ISU students have participated in several summer exchanges. Relationships, marriages and friendships have developed globally. Delegations from the City of Terre Haute, IN and Tambov, Russia have made reciprocal visits culminating with a Sister City agreement between the two cities in 2002.

Additionally, there have been faculty exchanges, joint research projects, publications and international conferences. Most recently (Nov, 2003), the authors traveled to the Conference of the Tambov Association of Social Pedagogues and Social Workers, Tambov State University, Tambov, Russia. Professor Lugar presented on the topic, "Developing Distance Education Course in Social Work" at the Plenary session, during which time she outlined the process of the development of such a course and lessons learned in trying to provide an international distance education course.

The Instructional Designer at ISU presented to the faculty of TSU and to the conference participants on the following topics: *"Modern Information Technologies: Attracting the Population to Social Action"*, and *"Distance Education Technologies in Higher Education"*. In May, 2004, Professor Lugar returned to Russia to continue working on the collaborative development of the internationalizing of the freshman learning community course. Lugar met with the Russian faculty and students who participated in last year's course. Technological issues and problems were discussed. Strategies to handle the problem in synchronized learning and computer access limitations were developed.

Benefits of a distance education component for ISU students

Even though the Dept. of Social Work at ISU had actively provided opportunities for students to travel abroad as well as experience Russian culture and lectures within the ISU classroom there was still a need for an integrated international learning experience. There was also a need for the American social work student to experience a global non-ethnocentric world view. The use of instructional technology and the opportunities to reach out and have more and continued contact among Russians and Americans existed. This project insures that all social work students have a personal international experience without the cost of traveling abroad. The combination of real time lectures from social work faculty and discussions with students allowed us to provide a simulated international course experience.

Benefits of a distance education component for TSU students and Russian society

As with ISU students, the ability to finance a trip abroad is only possible for a select few. For social work students at Tambov, this is most likely the only opportunity they will have to interact with Americans. Many have studied English and this is their first time to actually be able to use their knowledge. An interesting side benefit for TSU, is the collaboration within their university. For the first time the foreign language and social work departments worked together to achieve this project. The foreign language department provided the social work department with two of their most outstanding students (for these students it was in the form of a year long internship) to provide translation and English assistance to the social work students. Through this collaboration, the social work students' English skills increased significantly. It also provided the foreign language students with a valuable internship experience.

The Planning Process: TSU and ISU Faculty

Lugar et al (2004?) outlines the adopted process model for the design, development, evaluation and revision of the online course. The overall goals utilized Forster & Washington's (2000) four stages of developing a distance education program, which consisted of course design, development, evaluation and revision (pg. 152). The course was designed to provide students with a comparative look at social welfare and social work in the United States and Russia. Students would learn about another country's lifestyle through contact with Russian students and faculty. As a result of this course, students would gain an international perspective that highlights the social work profession and its practice. To accomplish this, two lessons were designed with the following objectives:

Objectives for Lesson 1:

1. Define social welfare in the U.S. and Russia.
2. Describe the goals of social welfare in the U.S. and Russia.
3. Compare the views of social welfare in Russia and the U.S.
4. Compare the relationship between social welfare and the following disciplines in Russia and U.S.:
 - a. Sociology
 - b. Psychology
 - c. Psychiatry
 - d. Political science
 - e. Economics
 - f. Cultural anthropology
 - g. Social Work
 - h. Social Pedagogy
5. Compare the professional groups that work within the field of social welfare in Russia and the U.S.
6. Compare the development of social work and social welfare in Russia and the U.S.

Objectives for Lesson 2:

1. Define the profession of social work.
2. Describe the structure of social work education.
3. Describe Generalist Social Work Practice.
4. Describe the common social work activities.
5. Describe the roles of the generalist social work practitioner.

The Instructional Design Process

Professor Lugar initially applied for a grant through the Indiana Partnership for Statewide Education to fund the development of the modules for this online course. As a result of that effort the learner analysis, goals, objectives and plan for the course were in place. Professor Lugar met early in the process with the Instructional Designer and also enrolled in the Course Transformation Academy (CTA), an eight week training program designed to convert a face-to-face course or a newly delivered course for online delivery. As a result of an early start in determining the course site structure and course tools to be used, Professor Lugar's training during the CTA was personalized to meet the needs of her course design. Professor Lugar and the Instructional Designer worked closely together as the professor developed the online course. Online pedagogy was always paired with tool usage to demonstrate sound principles and practices in instructional design. WebCT was chosen as the course management system.

Course Components and Design

Syllabus Design for the Online Course

In addition to attending the CTA, Professor Lugar also attended the WebCT Institute which consisted of 1-2 hour sessions designed to teach advanced uses of WebCT tools. One of the session topics at the WebCT Institute was the online syllabus presented within the WebCT content module. By having the learner work through the syllabus presented within the content module the syllabus served as an advance planner. The learner would have the opportunity to become familiar with the Content Module and its navigation, the Action Menu, posting to the discussion board, and accessing audio files for example, all before being exposed to the content itself. The learner could review the syllabus as many times as required to become familiar with the way in which content would be presented. Ideally, during the presentation of the syllabus in this manner, the learner can also complete the download of any needed plug-ins or viewers for certain file types (eg.: .wav, .avi) or particular documents (eg.: .pdf, .doc). The use of the syllabus as an advance planner not only presents the syllabus in the form in which it is intended as a contract, a permanent record and a learning tool (Parkes and Harris, 2002) but also teaches the student the technology of WebCT in a non-threatening manner. A rubric for discussion board can also be included within the syllabus as well as a number of other elements specific to an online syllabus. The role of the learner, the learning event and the learning environment identified this process (Magnuson-Jongsma, July, 2003).

Professor Lugar decided to incorporate this process within her course and used the content module to present the online course syllabus. The information was chunked for the learner and links were included to familiarize the student with the technology as well as provide needed information. Netiquette for the discussion board was included along with criteria for evaluation of the postings and a rubric. Additionally, netiquette for the chat was also included within the syllabus along with many of the traditional elements of a syllabus. In a document produced by the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at Indiana State University (2002), a review of the literature revealed that the components of the traditional syllabus were delineated into four main areas: course information, instructor information, policies and support for students along with subordinate components under each of the main areas.

Content/Subject Matter Preparation

During the summer of 2003, a TSU social work faculty member with excellent English speaking skills came to ISU and worked with Professor Robyn Lugar and this Instructional Designer. Professor Lugar and Oleg Shadsky (TSU) worked on and through many pedagogical issues in terms of content presentation as well as developed content for the course. The Instructional Designer worked directly with the TSU faculty member providing training in the pedagogy of online course design as well as the procedural elements specific to WebCT. A team of social work faculty at TSU worked throughout the summer sending course content to ISU. The ISU team worked on translating the materials from Russian, incorporating it with the U.S. content and transforming it into WebCT course module format. Two lessons were completed that summer in preparation for teaching the course SOWK 101 Freshman Learning Community during Fall 2003.

Content Presentation

The content module was the chief way in which the content/subject matter would be presented. The Action Menu is included within the content module in WebCT. A variety of additional elements can be linked from the Action Menu. Such additional elements include: self-tests, a glossary, student annotations (take notes feature), quizzes, links to the discussion board topics as well as audio files and resource links. Professor Lugar chose to include many of these elements within her course. Additional tools would be situated on the homepage and these were discussed in terms of their contribution to the course site (My Grades, Quizzes, the Assignment Tool and the Compiler).

To cross check the integrity of the module, Professor Lugar used the compile tool to compile the content for each module. In this manner, she could then print out all the relevant .html pages and review them according to the objectives for that lesson/module/unit. Other file types were noted but only .html file types could be printed out using the compile tool functionality as it existed within WebCT. Revisions were made as needed.

Incorporating the Discussion Board

Within the design of the course, the discussion board would be utilized to allow students to post in an asynchronous (delayed) manner to questions posed by faculty. Discussion board questions were linked from the Action Menu to provide the student with active as well as experiential learning opportunities. Experiential learning incorporates knowledge, activity and reflection (Institute for Experiential Learning, 2004). Questions were presented that directly related to the level of content presentation based on a cognitive scale (such as Bloom's Taxonomy, 1956). The level at which the content was presented determined the type of question asked. For example, if content was presented at the point where analysis, synthesis and evaluation must be demonstrated then the discussion board question would focus on a critical thinking question. Students interacted by responding to the instructor's original post as well as to other students' responses, thus generating a dialogue.

Incorporating the Chat

Chats (synchronous discussion) would occur throughout the semester to provide students from TSU and ISU with direct (synchronous) contact time with each other. The professor utilized a developed discussion board strategy to present the topic. Specifically designed goals and objectives were defined before the chat took place. A methodology for content presentation was also determined and then utilized. The instructional designer attended a number of the chats to provide input regarding specific chat management strategies, the use of the tool and its archive.

Assignments and Assessment

A rubric for the discussion board was developed and included in the syllabus. (See Appendix 1: Rubric for the Discussion Board). Also included was a section clarifying netiquette for the chat room experiences and posts to the discussion board.

To evaluate student learning, a quiz was developed for Lesson 1. Discussion board posts were also assessed. To evaluate the student experience, an anonymous survey was administered in the WebCT format to assess student satisfaction, content clarity, and difficulty of lesson expectations. Modifications to the lessons would be made based on the responses to the survey.

Teaching the Course

This course was taught as a part of the freshman learning community course during the Fall 2003 and a similar version for a senior social work elective during the Spring 2004. The Russian students participating remained constant. The first semester allowed our freshman students an international learning experience. The content focused on an overview of social work and social welfare in Russia and the USA, which paralleled their learning in their introductory social work course. The second semester allowed our senior students to share their field practice experience, and have the opportunity to learn about the parallel social work system in Russia.

Additions to the Course: Interactivity

As the course progressed, Professor Lugar continued to seek additions and wished to further promote interactivity within her online course. Discussions regarding pedagogy in the area of interactivity took place over time between Professor Lugar and the Instructional Designer. A plan of action was determined.

Moore and Kearsley (1996) refer to three types of interactivity: instructor to learner, learner to content and learner to learner. This course provided opportunities for students from both TSU and ISU to interact accordingly. The chat room experiences were exemplary in their ability to provide all three types of interactivity among the participants.

Interactivity: Learner to Content:

As previously discussed in this paper, much of the content was presented in content modules as .html files. Since the content module within WebCT includes the Action Menu and the addition of linking video is possible, two flash movies (.swf) were developed that would encourage learner to content interaction. The content and plan were conceptualized by Professor Lugar. Under the direction of the Instructional Designer, the flash movies (and the images within) were then built by a graduate student at the Faculty Computing Resource Center at Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN. One of flash movies focused on the many disciplines that interact with the field of Social Work. The task itself for one of the activities was to match the definition of the discipline with the discipline itself, all of which are related to the field of social work. See Figure 1: Social Welfare and other Disciplines: an interactive learning task used as a self-test.

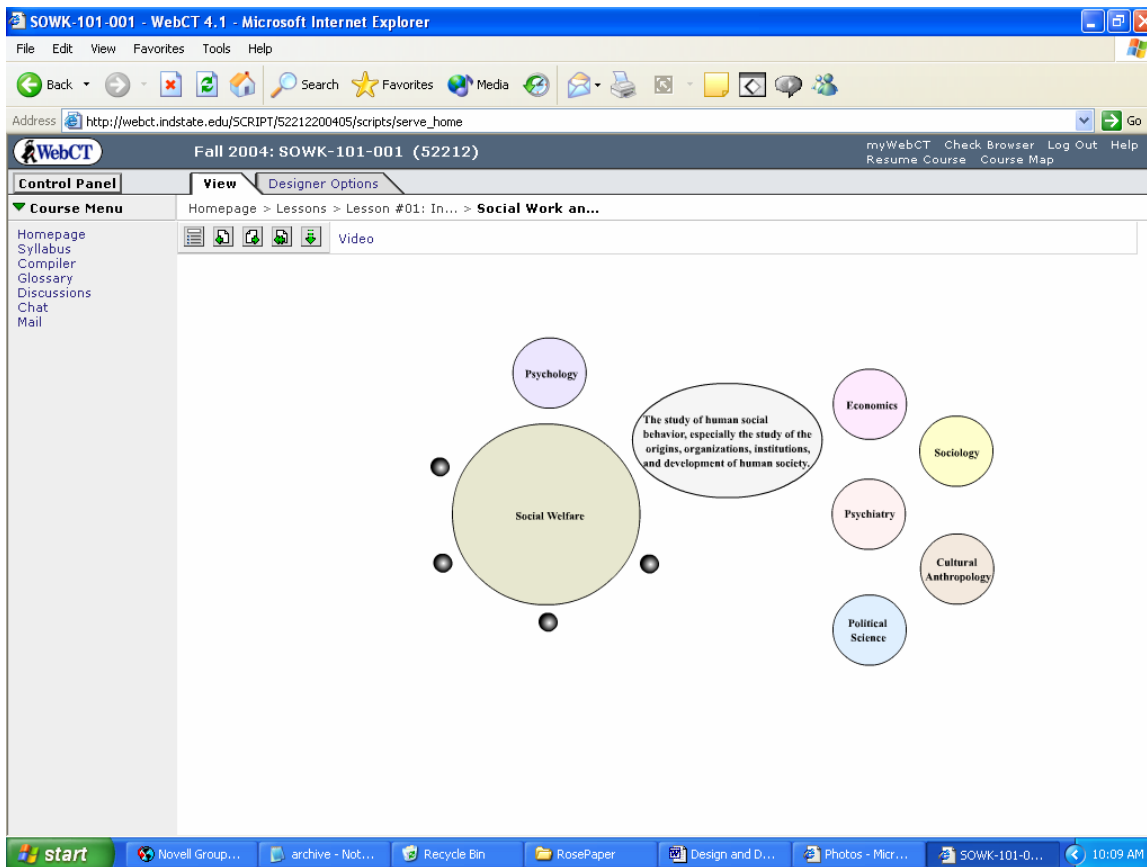


Figure 1: Social Welfare and other Disciplines: an interactive learning task used as a self-test. This is a Flash movie (.swf).

Directions on how to access the interactive model were provided to the learner within an .html content page. The learner would then click on the Video link contained within the Action Menu to access the link to the flash movie. Once the flash file (.swf) opened, the learner would match the definition presented after mousing over the “hot spot” where a balloon filled with text would appear. The learner would then click on one of the disciplines located on the right hand side that matched the content in the balloon. If the choice was correct, the balloon identifying the discipline would appear where previously the hot spot had been. The learner progressed from 12 o'clock to 1 o'clock and so on until all of the disciplines were arranged around the Social Welfare circle. If the

student chose the incorrect answer then the “discipline” identified did not move to match the text “hot spot”. At the time of this writing, this task does not record the student’s score and is largely utilized as a self-test contained within the content module. Similarly, see Figure 2: Social Welfare and the Professions. This is a second interactive learning task that was also conceptualized, formulated, produced, beta tested and then uploaded to Professor Lugar’s course and used as a self- test.

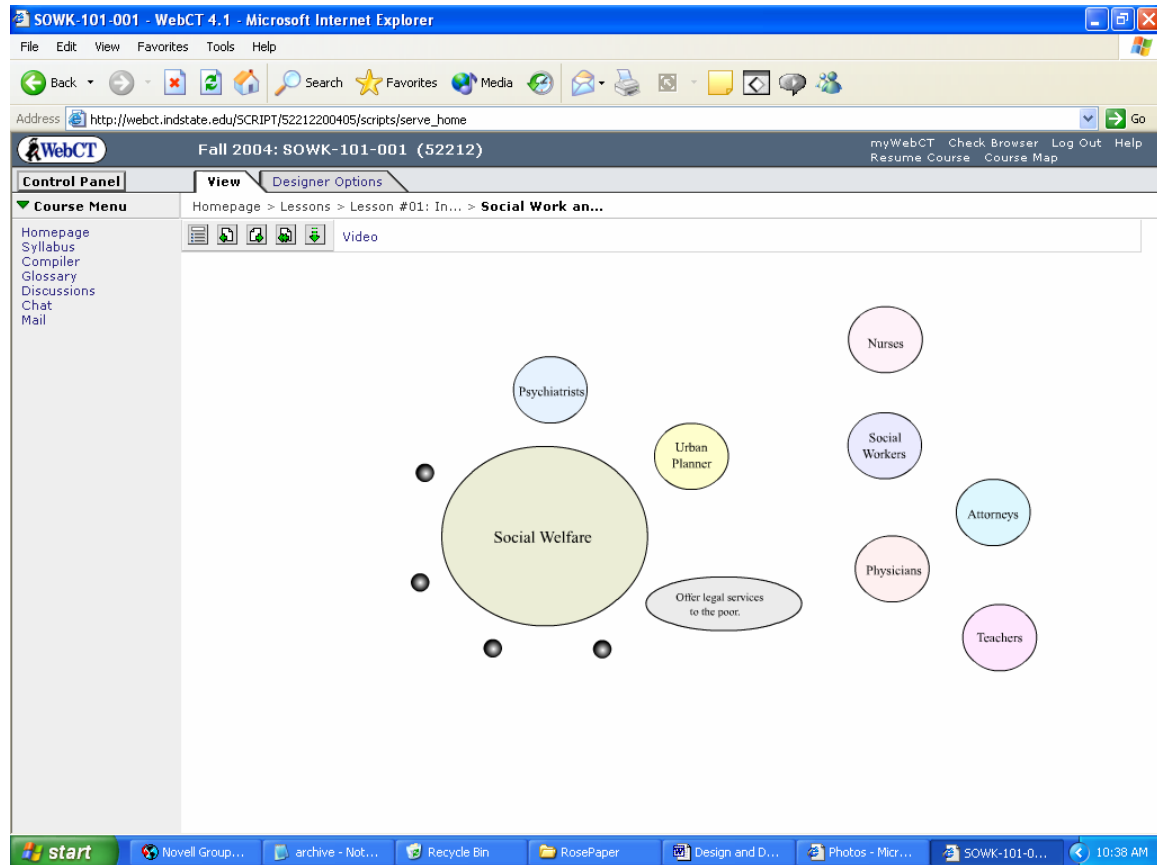


Figure 2: Social Welfare and the Professions: an interactive learning task used as a self test. This is a Flash movie (.swf).

The ability to provide a kinetic experience for learners was a challenge, but seemed effective to highlight the narrative content of definitions. It also allowed us to depict visually the relationships between concepts. In addition, it lead to a useful discussion on the limitations and inaccuracy of such a depiction, which encouraged critical thinking and questioning of what initially seems to be correctly presented material but on closer scrutiny is too simplistic in nature.

Interactivity: Instructor to Learner and Learner to Learner

The instructor used a variety of ways to interact with TSU and ISU learners: discussion board, email and chat. Each module was released with an accompanying email sent to students introducing the lesson. Each lesson had a series of discussion topics for students to respond. Students were expected to respond to each other as well as the topic. The instructor posted responses and sent emails to the individual students related to their postings.

The instructor used a highly involved structured first chat as the content from students were hesitant and minimal. The second chat was much more student directed, with minimal involvement from the instructor to summarize points and to move on to other topics as a topic became exhausted or there were pauses. The third chat was led by a student, which allowed the instructor to take a much more observational and supportive role. In addition, at the end of the session the instructor provided the topic for the next discussion to serve as an advance

planner so both TSU and ISU students could prepare ahead of time. Knowing the topic ahead of time encouraged the completion of readings and preparation of questions especially on the part of TSU students who had to become familiar with the English vocabulary specific to that assignment.

Archives

Since WebCT automatically archives the chat when it is conducted in rooms 1 - 4, the instructor could retrieve the chat log from the File Manager, review it and then reflect upon the dialogue. The chat log was sent to the TSU social work faculty. All chats were posted for those social work students who were not participating, so they could benefit from the content as well. In addition, the chat logs were used by TSU faculty to help students review their English skills. TSU faculty also plan to use the logs for future reading assignments for their students (allowing them to not only gain content but to develop their English skills). Emails were sent to all students with a copy of the log as well as a narrative follow-up on the points that were still unclear and a review of the key points discussed. The discussion continued in the discussion board modality.

Challenges for Faculty and Students

Lugar et al. (2004?) has clearly identified the challenges and limitations of this particular distance education course. Challenges such as differences in the professional writing styles have been documented as well as how this particular course will be incorporated within the social work curriculum at TSU vs. ISU. Both ISU and TSU students had to work with the time differences to accommodate the chat (synchronous discussion) into their schedules. Approximately an eight hour time difference existed between Tambov and Terre Haute, thus requiring students at ISU to be present for chats at 8:00 am and for TSU students to be at the Institute of Social Work at 5:00 pm. Although TSU students could theoretically access the distance education course from any computer, their English skills were limited and foreign language students served as interpreters for the students. Additionally, the TSU faculty was present with the students to oversee their work with the ISU faculty and students. This required a commitment on the part of the TSU students to be at the Institute in Tambov which is located away from the main TSU campus. As of Fall of 2003, TSU students access the Internet utilizing dial-up modems which does limit the technological design of the course at this time.

Unexpected Benefits

This course has generated much interest in the area of distance education and what it can do for the region of Tambov. The Lt. Governor of Tambov attended the plenary session at which time Professor Lugar presented her paper in November of 2003. Tambov television interviewed both Lugar and Magnuson during their visit to Tambov in November of 2003. There is a determined interest in how distance education can contribute to and/or improve the lives of Russians on a day-to-day basis. The Dept. of Social Protection in the Tambov region has expressed interest in distance education as a possible means of training its social workers who are presently in the field.

Future Plans/Possibilities

Revision is a key component in the design and delivery of an online course. This course will not be an exception and will experience additions and changes as further content is added, modified and/or deleted. Lesson 3 and 4 are expected to be added for Fall 2004.

As mentioned by Lugar et al. (2004) should a faster connection (vs. dial-up modem) be established at the Institute of Social Work in Tambov, several additions in the area of technology become possibilities. Such additions could include video streaming, movie files (.avi) as well as more complex interactive components (.swf). Such additions can be made at this time to WebCT for access by ISU students who may have a high speed connection. An alternate format can also be provided to both Russian and American students who do not have high speed hook-up; the multimedia files could be burned on a CD and sent via mail to Russia for use at the Institute. Similarly, the multimedia CD can also be provided as part of the materials for the course for ISU students.

Additional existing tools within WebCT can also be utilized depending upon the amount of internet access time that TSU students have available to them. At present, TSU computer network personnel sign on to the internet using an access card which must be purchased to obtain time online.

One of the existing tools within WebCT, that could foster additional American and Russian learner-to-learner interaction is the designation of specific groups using the Student Presentations tool. This however, does require that students work together to plan how they will present their work to the instructors. Asynchronous communication such as email and the use of a designated discussion board group that includes the instructor(s) and 3 - 4 students per group could serve as the planning vehicle for the student presentation site prior to upload to that particular group's presentation site. The use of the student presentations tool will require that students have some knowledge of how to design and deliver a web page even if it is as simple as an MS Word document saved as an .html page.

Such an activity requires planning time on the part of the instructor to craft the ill defined problem that promotes active and experiential learning as well as set up the technological components. The technological components would include designating small groups for student presentations as well as possibly designating small group discussion boards. It is advantageous that both the small group list the individual group members as well as the instructors; instructors can then monitor the progress of the learners as they embark on a collaborative process.

Should the instructor wish to have each of the groups present their projects to each of the other groups vs. just to the instructors, the instructors can again use the discussion board. The instructor can set up a large group discussion board as a method of mass presentation to all course members. The .html pages can be included as attachments to the discussion board.

Conclusion

Distance education provides instructors with the opportunity to use a new medium presenting essentially the same information in the online environment as in the face-to-face classroom. It is the medium that changes. It is not the quality of the information that changes nor is it the learner's commitment to learn or the instructor's commitment to teach that changes in the online environment. The computer mediated environment, in this case the WebCT course builder became the medium through which the instructors presented the subject matter or content. The tools existed within the course builder but the instructional design required careful planning and the use of sound principles to determine effective use of these tools. The content in this case was jointly developed by both the ISU faculty member and the TSU faculty. The design was strongly focused on the needs of the learner and the relationship between the learner and the content, the learner and other learners, and the learner and the instructor Moore and Kearsley (1996). The discussion board and email allowed opportunities for the learner to communicate asynchronously (delayed) whereas the chat was synchronous.

This article has discussed the continued relationship between ISU and TSU culminating to this point in the development of an online course which has been taught during Fall of 2003 and Spring 2004 and will be taught again during Fall 2004. The instructional design process has been described as well as the programs which the faculty member enrolled (CTA and the WebCT Institute) and the way in which the content was cross checked for integrity with the objectives after its creation. The use of the tools to encourage active learning were also discussed as well as the way in which the chats themselves evolved from initially being instructor led, to less structured and finally student led and instructor managed. This particular course has been highly interactive in nature encouraging and nurturing the learner. This course has been innovative in that not only were the instructors able to listen to the students but faculty and students from two different nations interacted with each other across the globe and truly listened and reflected.

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Appendix 1: Rubric for the Discussion Board

Quantity	
Criteria	Score
Student contributed regularly.	4-5
The student's level of contribution was average/acceptable.	3
The student hardly contributed.	1-2
The student did not contribute at all.	0
Interpersonal Communication	
Criteria	Score
Student offered considerable constructive feedback and engaged others' ideas frequently.	4-5
Student engaged some ideas in depth and offered an average amount of useful feedback.	3
Student offered very little useful feedback or discussion, sometimes personally attacked others, or did not engage the ideas and concepts of other discussion members.	1-2
Student offered no feedback, did not engage the ideas of others, or frequently personally attacked other discussion members.	0

Quality Criteria for Postings:

- Is the contribution mechanically clear enough for readers to understand the points being made?
- Is the contribution on time?
- Does the contribution reference assigned readings or other resources?
- Does the post contain “critical thinking” that is indicative of the paradigms in the field?
- Are the ideas communicated with respect for the reader?

Quality Criteria for Replies:

- Is the reply mechanically clear enough for readers to understand the points being made?
- Is the minimum number of replies written?
- Does the tone of the reply demonstrate respect towards the author of the original post?
- Does the reply inspire further discussion among the class?

Evaluation of Discussions:

- Regularity of contributions
- Length of contributions
- Links to the comments of other students
- Sharing of own ideas and experiences
- Reference to assigned readings
- Demonstration of critical thinking in response