



<http://www.diva-portal.org>

Postprint

This is the accepted version of a chapter published in *Cases on Professional Distance Education Degree Programs and Practices: Successes, Challenges, and Issues*.

Citation for the original published chapter:

Beers Fägersten, K. (2013)

A Case Study of a Distance Degree Program in Vietnam: Examples from a Learner-Centered Approach to Distance Education.

In: Sullivan, Kirk; Peter E. Czigler; Jenny M. Sullivan Hellgren (ed.), *Cases on Professional Distance Education Degree Programs and Practices: Successes, Challenges, and Issues* (pp.

233-257). Hershey, PA: IGI Global

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4018/978-1-4666-4486-1.ch009>

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published chapter.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:sh:diva-19857>

THIS VERSION MAY DIFFER FROM THE FINAL VERSION – DO NOT QUOTE!

A case study of a distance degree program in Vietnam: Examples from a learner-centered approach to distance education

Kristy Beers Fägersten
Högskolan Dalarna

Abstract: The English Department at Högskolan Dalarna, Sweden, participates in a distance learning program with the Faculty of Education at Vietnam National University. Students who enroll in this program are teachers of English at secondary or tertiary institutions, and will study half-time for two years to complete a Master's degree in English Linguistics. The distance program, adapted specifically to accommodate the Vietnamese students in terms of cultural differences as well as inexperience with distance methodology, is characterized by three design features: testing, technical training, and fostering a community of learners. The design of the courses also reflects a learner-centered approach that addresses common problem areas in distance education by promoting interactivity. Central to the overall program is the maintenance of different channels of communication, reflecting an effort to support the students academically and socially, both as individuals and members of a learning community. In this way, the effects of physical and cultural distances are minimized.

Keywords: distance education, distance learning, online learning, Vietnam, intercultural communication, learning community, community platform

1. Introduction

The principles and techniques of distance education enable the processes of teaching and learning without the requirement of shared physical space. In other words, education can be delivered across great distances, and historically, distance education has meant that learning need not be confined within geographical or political borders. Significant advances in information technology have also greatly facilitated interpersonal interaction, awarding distance education the potential to be a more communicative experience. Consequently, distance programs are increasingly serving as forums for intercultural communication and exchange.

Accounting for different cultural traditions of education, however, can pose a challenge to the administration of any academic program, and distance programs are certainly no exception. Not only do instructors need to develop their teaching methodology and course content for the distance platform (or, indeed, adapt existing techniques and materials), they must also consider the profile of their students in terms of how familiar they are 1) with the educational culture specific to the degree program and 2) with distance education practices in general. The combination of distance-oriented methodology, disperse geographical locations, and different cultures or traditions of education can be likened to a pedagogical perfect storm. Course and program design should therefore reflect an effort to prevent the demands of teaching from being compounded by physical and cultural distances.

The English Department at Högskolan Dalarna, Sweden, participates in a distance learning program with the Faculty of Education at Vietnam National University. Students who enroll in this program are teachers of English at secondary or tertiary institutions, and will study half-time for two years to complete a Master's degree in English Linguistics. The program includes a total of six graduate-level courses in applied linguistics, and encompasses

a Master's thesis, which the students write during their last term of study. The program is run as a modified, or hybrid, distance program, with students and Högskolan Dalarna's linguistics teachers and course coordinators participating in semi-annual visits at the VNU-Hanoi campus. Coinciding with the start of each academic term, these visits serve both to introduce new courses to existing cohorts of students, and to administer a new intake of students, approximately 25-30 students per semester.

This chapter presents Högskolan Dalarna's Master's degree in English Linguistics as a case study of a distance degree program. The focus of the chapter includes both the creation of the program and design of the distance courses, each of which illustrates a learner-centered approach to distance education. In creating the degree program, several features emerged as defining characteristics; these are presented in section 3 of the chapter. Section 4 is a presentation of general course design, in particular how technology can be used in distance courses to deliver content, facilitate communication, and foster a learning community. While the chapter is based on experiences specific to Högskolan Dalarna's distance degree program for students in Vietnam, the issues, concepts and practices presented can be applied to other distance programs, in particular those which are administered in Asia or in an intercultural context.

2. Background to the study

The Vietnamese education system is overseen by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), the resulting governmental institution after the combination of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education in 1990. One of the directives of MOET was to require a minimum of a Master's degree for all teachers in higher education and ultimately even a PhD for teachers at the university level. After the issuing of this directive, a number of university graduates found themselves in need of a post-graduate education. Teachers of English, for example, were required to earn a Master's degree in English in order to retain their current teaching positions. To this end, many Vietnamese university administrators turned to foreign universities for the provision of qualified and reputable degree programs in English.

A representative for the Faculty of Education (FoE) at Vietnam National University (VNU) initiated collaboration with the English Department of Högskolan Dalarna (HD) in March 2006, via VNU colleagues who had contacts within another department at Högskolan Dalarna. The Faculty of Education at VNU had, at that time, collaborated for many years with a university in Australia, but were interested in finding a Master's program that better suited the needs of their students and was more economically feasible.

The Master's degree program in English at VNU's Faculty of Education would ideally target teachers of English at colleges or universities with non-English major students. The FoE was therefore interested in offering their students a Master's degree which reflected a focus on applied linguistics, and could complement the students' TEFL backgrounds. However, the FoE was looking to avoid the high costs incurred via the existing degree program in Australia. The basic program design proposed to Högskolan Dalarna was to host HD teachers in Hanoi for extended periods of on-site teaching. Due to professional schedules as well as personal commitments, this solution was not accepted. Instead, Högskolan Dalarna proposed a web-based, distance degree program. By 2006, the linguistics courses offered by the English Department at HD were nearly all web-based, in that materials were available online, and both campus and distance students participated in web-based coursework. Making the entire degree program web-based would require very little adjustment or redesign.

Furthermore, the web-based nature of the collaboration would represent a cost effective alternative, as tuition in Sweden is free.

The Faculty of Education was reluctant to accept this proposal: web-based education was an unfamiliar concept, and the FoE students had no experience of this kind of learning. The system of education in Vietnam is similar to other communist-influenced systems in that it is centrally controlled via a ministry, such as Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training, and stipulates intense student-teacher contact. The proposed web-based program thus posed a threat to the traditional system, and the FoE was skeptical if not fearful of foregoing face-to-face instruction and the personal contact of on-site teaching.

It was important to convince the FoE administration of the feasibility of the distance, web-based format, and assure them that personal contact would not be significantly compromised. The solution which was eventually negotiated between Högskolan Dalarna and VNU's Faculty of Education was to run a hybrid distance program, with two-week, on-site visits to the Hanoi campus at the beginning and end of each term, regular (weekly) web-based lessons for each course throughout the term, as well as additional web-based support and interaction. To facilitate and optimize web-based contact, students admitted to the program are required to arrange for regular access to a computer with a high-speed Internet connection and audio-video capabilities.

The Master's degree in English Linguistics accepted its first cohort of VNU students in the Autumn term of 2006. The cooperation has since seen 6 cohorts accepted, three of which have already graduated. The collaboration contract period will come to an end in the Autumn term of 2010.

3. Creating the distance degree program

On-campus instruction and face-to-face communication no longer constitute the only modus operandi of universities and other institutions of education. Advances in technology have enabled and facilitated distance education practices, many of which have been integrated into the design of traditional courses. In fact, examples of distance education practices¹ in classroom-based courses (e.g., chat, as discussed in Abrams, 2003; Chun, 1994; Sanders, 2006) are so common that they may not be immediately recognizable as hallmarks of distance teaching: assignments are delivered by email, post-lecture discussions are conducted on online message boards, or course literature is accessed via the Internet. The first step in the creation of a distance course or program, or the transformation of existing, campus-based courses or programs, is therefore often (mis)understood as an exercise in fully incorporating these and similar practices into the course or program design. It is important, however, to avoid making the mistake of equating the creation of a distance program with simply devising a way to package and deliver course content. While the ever-increasing usability of information technologies encourages a focus on the *how*, this should not be at the expense of the *who*, in other words, the students, who, after all, are the very reason for educational programs.

Traditionally, distance courses and degree programs assume a generic adult learner, so the primary design focus remains on course content and delivery (Sherry, 1996). It is only recently that distance programs have begun targeting specific and varying student groups, ushering in the trend of learner-centered design and methodology. Thus, while technology continues to be singled out as a key component to distance education, meeting the instructional needs of students is increasingly recognized as the key to success in distance programs (Howard et al, 2003; Schamber, 1988; Sherry, 1996, Strauss, 2002).

In the case of the MA program in English Linguistics offered by Högskolan Dalarna to students at Vietnam National University, program design and structure are learner-centered. Prior to VNU's initiating cooperation, the MA degree in English Linguistics was not offered by distance, nor was it learner-centered in terms of being designed for a specific, homogenous student group. Furthermore, the degree included courses in both theoretical and applied linguistics, and stipulated a number of pre-requisite courses as well. In its original state, the program was not suitable for the VNU students. As certified teachers of English as a foreign language, the VNU students wished to enroll in an MA program primarily to receive practical training in applied English linguistics. Högskolan Dalarna's MA program in English Linguistics thus needed not only to be redesigned as a distance program, but also reconfigured to meet the professional needs of the VNU students.

In terms of content, the reconfiguration process required very little effort. Only one preparatory course was created specifically for the VNU students. This course is mandatory during the first term of study, ensuring a shared knowledge-base at an early point in the program. No other new courses were created, and choice among electives was limited. In this way, the program curriculum could be oriented towards applied linguistics, and the content changes to the program were in effect limited to the addition of one preparatory course. The total number of required courses and the total credit hours for the degree remained constant, as did individual course requirements. Content had not been compromised, and no program requirements had been relaxed. Accreditation and approval of a new degree program were therefore not an issue. Furthermore, most of the course material was already web-based, with basic distance-learning practices also in use. Thus, the general redesign of the program for distance learning did not prove to be problematic.

The most challenging aspect of creating the distance degree program was determining which methods and techniques would be appropriate for the VNU students, which in turn meant knowing the learners. It has been argued that distance education programs should reflect a focus on the learners' instructional needs (Sherry, 1996; Shneiderman, 1992), taking into consideration personal information such as their ages, interests, and levels of education, but more importantly, their familiarity with distance education methods and cultural backgrounds (Schamber, 1988). These last two learner qualities, familiarity with distance methods and cultural background, were particularly influential in the creation of HDA's distance program for VNU students.

3.1 Defining features of HDA's distance degree program

Before launching the MA degree in English Linguistics with Vietnam National University, little was known among the program teaching staff about Vietnamese culture and traditions of education. Additionally, among the Vietnamese students, there was little familiarity with distance education methods. In recognition of the importance of knowing the learners and engaging them in active involvement in the learning process (Webster and Hackley, 1997), the distance program was designed to accommodate cultural differences as well as inexperience with distance methodology. The most significant cultural differences between Western and Eastern systems of education include the level of independent thinking required of students, the degree of autonomy that is expected or cultivated, and the social distance of student-teacher relationships. Western systems of education encourage more independence of thought and autonomous learning behavior, resulting in greater social distance between students and teachers. The web-based format of instruction lends itself well to these circumstances, but does not correspond as well with the Eastern culture of education, which, on the contrary, values conformity of thought, group mentality and close student-teacher

relationships much more highly (Brislin, 1993; Hofstede, 1991; Smith & Bond, 1993; Triandis, 1995). The difference in educational philosophy might best be expressed in terms of the amount of independence that web-based learning either *affords* students or *requires* of them. In acknowledgement of the different approaches to education as well as the advantages of each, the distance degree program was designed to accommodate the students' cultural backgrounds while maintaining the hallmarks of Western education. Three design features thus emerged as the cornerstones of the program: testing, technical training, and fostering a community of learners.

3.1.1 Testing

The cooperation with Vietnam National University has ensured a steady supply of students to the MA degree program in English Linguistics, and each term approximately 25-30 students enroll. Eligible students are those who are certified teachers of English at secondary or tertiary institutions. The nature of the coursework, however, requires that each accepted student also have a high level of proficiency in English, as well as good analytical skills. Potential students are therefore tested in order to assure that each participant in the program is in fact capable of understanding and performing the assignments and completing course requirements.

The Faculty of Education students have all completed a Bachelor's degree program in English. However, teachers of English in Vietnam are traditionally non-native speakers, and thus their students (who may become teachers themselves, as in the case of the VNU students) often receive little to no exposure to native-speaker English. Although the Bachelor's degree fulfills a formal requirement for acceptance to Högskolan Dalarna's Master's degree program, there are practical aspects to consider for these non-native speakers, most significantly their ability to adjust to the linguistic level of instruction among the native-speaker teachers of the program.

Since the distance program began in 2006, testing has always been done on site at the VNU campus in Hanoi. Teaching staff from Högskolan Dalarna travel to Hanoi to meet potential students, all of whom are prepared to take part in testing over a 2-day period. In addition to testing linguistic proficiency and analytical skills, potential candidates to the program are interviewed, primarily to assess their oral production and comprehension skills, but also to inquire about their living and work situations as an indication of their personal commitments, professional goals, connectivity capabilities, and potential to cope with the demands of and ultimately succeed in a 2-year distance program. Testing and interviewing also help to preserve the integrity of the degree program, such that only those candidates who are judged to have sufficient academic qualifications and the potential to complete the program are ultimately admitted. Finally, once the testing is completed and students are notified of their acceptance to the program, there is an opportunity for the new cohort members to meet with each other and the teachers, while still on site in Hanoi.

Since the inception of the program, testing has proven to be critical for assuring a shared level of proficiency and similar capabilities in each cohort, which in turn positively affect the overall completion rate and general success of each student. In the early stages of the program, several students were accepted at the encouragement of the VNU administrative staff despite test scores which were below the desired level for admittance. These students struggled from the beginning, needing increasing amounts of guidance and tutoring from their teachers. They were ultimately unable to perform adequately, fell behind the rest of the cohort, and eventually discontinued their studies. This is not to suggest that testing can categorically weed out students who are incapable of successfully completing the program, as other students have also found themselves unable to continue their studies, even despite quite

good performances. Nevertheless, the testing methods for acceptance into the program have proven to be reliable as a means of achieving relative stability in the student cohorts, predicting overall success among individual students, and maintaining integrity in the MA program.

3.1.2 Technical training

Acceptance to the program is a testimony on behalf of Högskolan Dalarna to each student's capabilities and potential to succeed in the program. Participation and commitment are both supported and fostered by membership in the program, the program cohort and the cohort subgroup. Despite these favorable conditions for success, taking part in a distance program also requires a certain amount of familiarity with information technology. As a minimum requirement, each student accepted to the MA program must have access to a computer with reliable, high-speed Internet capability, and be able to perform basic Internet navigation. This requirement applies to all students enrolled in web-based courses.

The degree program utilizes a number of different web interfaces for disseminating program information, providing access to literature and other course materials, submitting assignments, participating in seminars, and conducting research. For example, program information, course materials, and bulletin boards are available via the online learning platform Fronter, which is accessible by teachers and students via a login name and password. Lectures are available for downloading as PowerPoint files with audio recording. Seminars are conducted as text chats via Skype, and occasionally students may take part in video-conferences using Marratech software, including whiteboard and chat capabilities. Research can be conducted via the Internet, but also through Högskolan Dalarna's library services, including access to e-books and online journals. For someone new to distance education, this combination of information technology may be overwhelming and perhaps difficult to navigate. For this reason, all new students attend a training session while on site in Hanoi, where each of the interfaces is presented, detailed instructions are provided, and hands-on exercises are supervised. In fact, participation in similar training sessions are required of all students of web-based courses offered by the English Department.

Technology training builds confidence in one's abilities to utilize and interact with technology (Compeau and Higgins, 1995), which in turn "plays a significant role in user's expectations and performance." (Webster and Hackley, 1997:1284) Students' opinions of and attitudes towards technology and its use in distance education may also affect their performance (Webster and Hackley, 1997; Davis et al, 1989; Zoltan and Chapanis, 1982). Common training sessions allowing the students to familiarize themselves with the technologies used in the program help to improve their capabilities, ultimately raising their confidence levels and fostering positive attitudes towards distance education practices.

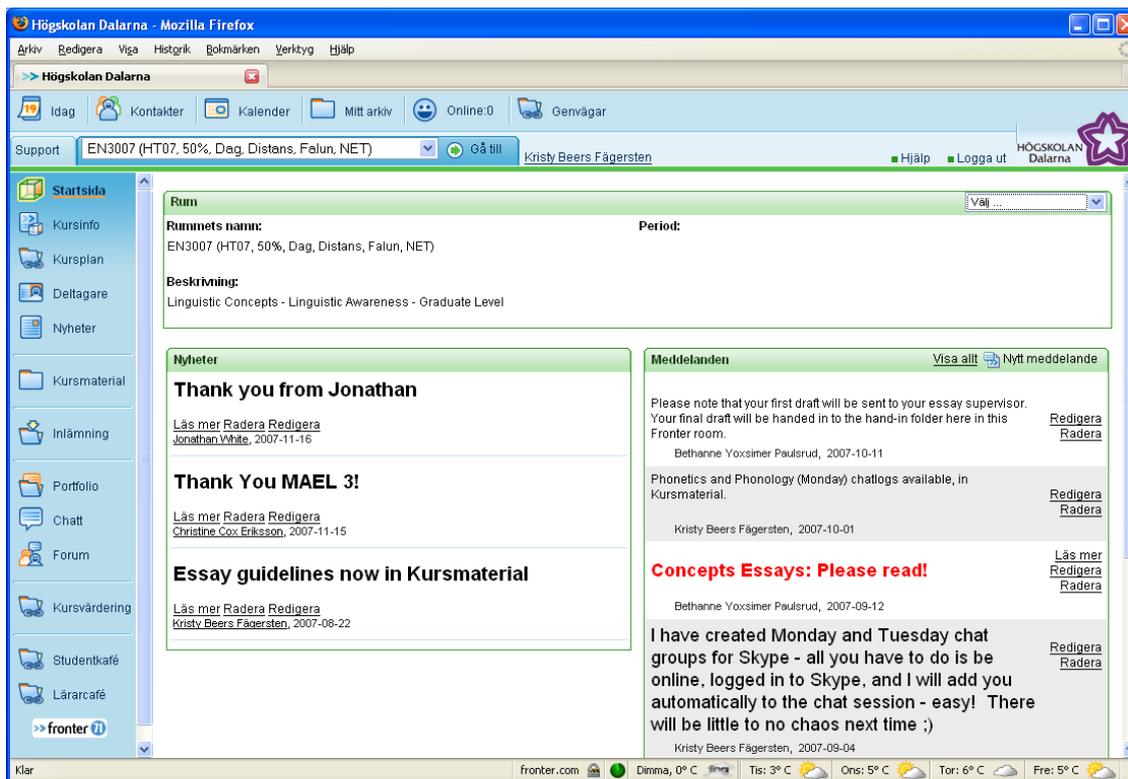


Figure 1: A screen-shot of the web learning platform, Fronter.

3.1.3 Fostering a community of learners

Pursuing a Master's degree is demanding, even without the challenges of participating by distance, in a foreign language, and while juggling work and family responsibilities. While testing the VNU students helps to identify candidates who will most likely be able to cope with this conglomeration of demands, it is important to create a favorable environment of learning that is conducive to success and, ideally, does not in any way add to or intensify the challenges of the program. The organization and administration of the MA distance program endeavors to promote independence and individual accountability in each of the students, but it is just as critical that measures are taken to foster a cooperative, supportive learning community.

The support systems that are available to students in traditional campus-based education are often absent in a distance learning program. In the traditional classroom, for example, the teacher is present, and students interact as classmates, rendering the learning process a socially embedded experience. Furthermore, through the habit of meeting face-to-face in a regular place at a regular time, classmates reinforce their own and each other's commitment to the course (McBride and Beers Fägersten, 2008). Distance education programs must somehow provide students the kind of support that promotes this sense of connection with a distinct learning community.

In Högskolan Dalarna's Master's program in English Linguistics, the sense of belonging to a community is created via group membership, and students are members of at least three different groups. One cohort of 25-30 Vietnamese students is accepted to the program per semester. Admission to the program is announced after testing, while students are still present at the Hanoi campus. Upon admittance to the program the students are

collectively welcomed to the Master's Degree in English Linguistics and, more specifically, as members of a program cohort. Thus, from the moment of admission to the program, group membership is established on two levels: overall program membership and specific cohort membership. Each cohort is named systematically, according to the program call-letters and the numerical position of the cohort in the program, e.g. MAEL1 is the name of the first group to be accepted to the MA in English Linguistics distance degree program. Each cohort is further divided into four sub-groups of six to eight students per group. Sub-groups are named after the seasons: Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. Cohort and sub-group naming greatly facilitates administration of the program and student identification, but also contributes to fostering a sense of community. The students can easily identify themselves by group membership, and can immediately enjoy a sense of belonging in a social network. Ceremony is valued in the Vietnamese culture, and the act of naming and formally welcoming the students into the different groups is a gesture of respect for their new status. The different groups of which they are members constitute communities of learning, while membership encourages cooperation, mutual support and commitment to the program.

Finally, the practice of establishing a culture of groups and fostering learning communities is a way of acknowledging the students as members of a pre-existing group, namely, the Vietnamese student speech community. According to Gumperz (1968/71:114), a speech community is "any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage." In other words, a speech community involves a group of people who partake in regular interaction which can be characterized by linguistic features. A further feature of speech communities is the aspect of shared rules "for the conduct and interpretation of speech, and rules for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety." (Hymes 1967/72:54-5). The Vietnamese students thus represent a speech community by virtue of their shared ideas for language usage in the context of education and learning.

Should cultural differences or linguistic difficulties give rise to confusion, insecurity, or other problems during the program, the VNU students can consult each other for discussion and support. In-group communication is facilitated by the appointing of a group leader, whose responsibility it is to establish and maintain contact among their group members throughout the duration of the Master's program. The group leaders also act as liaisons between their fellow group members and the teacher. In effect, group leaders are the spokespeople for their groups. If a student feels uncomfortable, insecure, or embarrassed approaching the teacher with a problem, the group leader can represent the student, or the group as a whole.

4. Distance course design

Although distance education is not a particularly new concept in the field of pedagogy, it enjoys a state of steady renewal, due to the rapid pace at which distance education technologies are developing. It is thus a dynamic form of education, in particular when compared to traditional forms of teaching and learning. As the newer, less conventional form, distance education is easily assumed to be the inferior one, and particularly disadvantageous to students. Galusha (1997) identifies five problem areas and barriers to success in distance education in particular, including "costs and motivators, feedback and teacher contact, student support and services, alienation and isolation, and lack of experience and training." (p. 6) Costs refer to both financial burdens as well as the amount of time a distance program requires, which may be at the expense of the student's work or family responsibilities. Demands on time and resources combined with a lack of personal or professional support for one's distance studies may result in insecurities about learning (Knapper, 1988) and low

motivation. The “perceived lack of feedback or contact with the teacher” (Galusha, 1997:6) is a concern among distance students who may not be able to self-evaluate, in turn leading to insecurity about their performance. Furthermore, the lack of regular face-to-face contact with the teacher can be perceived to impair communication and serve to isolate the student. The third problem area identified by Galusha, lack of support and services for the distance student, refers to the need to involve tutors, academic planners and technical assistance into distance programs. Without this network of support, the distance student is believed to be put at an unfair disadvantage. Similarly, the lack of a tangible learning community can lead to the distance student experiencing a lack of social support, ultimately leading to alienation and isolation. Finally, the fifth problem applies to new distance students, or students faced with new technologies, who may not have the technical skills necessary to participate and be productive in their distance courses.

Sherry (1996) identifies successful distance education systems as ones which “involve interactivity between teacher and students, between students and the learning environment, and among students themselves, as well as active learning in the classroom.” (p. 342) The design of the courses offered by distance in Högskolan Dalarna’s MA in English Linguistics reflects a learner-centered approach that addresses common problem areas in distance education by promoting interactivity. Central to the overall program is the maintenance of different channels of communication, reflecting an effort to support the students academically and socially, both as individuals and members of a learning community. In this way, the effects of physical and cultural distances can be minimized, and the experience of a meaningful, professionally relevant, and socially embedded education is maximized.

4.1 Community platform

Many distance students can be disadvantaged by geographical isolation, such that basic administrative tasks, such as contacting teachers and administrators or accessing course materials, are difficult to perform (Meacham & Evans, 1989). The isolation resulting from physical distance can also contribute to a feeling of social isolation, putting distance students at risk of becoming solitary students, with no connection to a scholarly community (Galusha, 1997; Kirkman et al, 2002). Social integration is therefore key to success in distance education (Tinto, 1975). The feelings of inadequacy and insecurity resulting from a lack of social stimulation are particularly relevant to the Vietnamese students, who may already be coping with insecurities about cultural differences and language proficiency. Combined with the physical distance between Sweden and Vietnam, the different time zones, and the general dispersion of fellow students throughout Vietnam, a ‘solitary student syndrome,’ in other words, the lack of motivation which can accompany a feeling of isolation, is all too likely to affect the Vietnamese students. To prevent them from feeling isolated from their teachers and from each other, it is important that the MA program cultivate a learning community to facilitate contact and encourage communication.

Vital to the maintenance of the learning community for the MA in English Linguistics distance program is the use of Fronter, an online, open learning platform. Fronter serves as a virtual meeting place, where students and teachers can post news items or messages, course materials can be downloaded, assignments can be uploaded, questions can be posted to a forum, or chats can be conducted. Fronter is also the main locus of general-interest interaction for the students and teacher outside of their courses and, together with email, serves the majority of asynchronous communication needs.

The training session, which is offered on site in Hanoi to the newly admitted students, includes an introduction to using the Fronter learning platform. Students receive hands-on instruction as well as the opportunity to click-and-see by accessing Fronter pages for MA program courses. This kind of practice session with supervision reflects the ideology that “technical barriers must be made a non-issue” (Galusha, 1997:6), by minimizing the problem of a lack of experience or training. As students become more familiar with and competent in using Fronter and its various features, their confidence levels increase and, consequently, individual Fronter activity increases. The more individual activity there is, the more Fronter becomes a community platform.

All students are encouraged to check Fronter several times a day for news, important updates, course materials, or new discussion threads. Students can see which other students have been active, or even who is currently online. The use of Fronter as a community platform can be thought of as providing distance students with a virtual campus, a place to visit on a regular basis and conduct normal school business, such as check the bulletin board for new information, take part in an on-going discussion, pick up course materials, turn in assignments, or chat with fellow students. It is these activities which contribute to the experience of being part of a learning community. Fronter represents an educational tool which can provide “a sense of personal involvement between the student and the institution,” (Galusha, 1997:5) thereby addressing the solitary student syndrome, that is, the problem of alienation and isolation which may affect many distance students (Huang, 2002; Spitzer, 1998).

As a community platform, Fronter offers social support and encourages both productivity and commitment. The different kinds of communicative activities available via Fronter are examples of what Nipper (1989:63) identifies as the “third generation” of distance education, characterized by the use of computer-mediated communication technology, which “enables greater communication with learners and among learners.” (Harry and Khan, 2000:124)

4.2 Lectures

The courses in the distance MA program are run as series of lectures complemented by seminars (see section 4.3 below). Each lecture consists of a PowerPoint presentation with audio recording, varying in length from 20-45 minutes. Students can download the lectures from Fronter once they are made available, which is normally two to three weeks before the teacher-led seminar. The PowerPoint lectures can be controlled entirely by the student. They can be stopped and re-started at any time, and any part of the lecture can be replayed as often as the student likes. The audio recording lets the students hear their teachers’ voices, which personalizes the experience and, in the case of the VNU students, provides training in aural proficiency and exposure to native-speaker English.

Lecture viewing is not time-tabled, nor is it possible to enforce viewing. Instead, the lecture phase of the program courses awards the students control over their own studies, determining for themselves how, when, and how often they want to view the lecture. In this way, the program encourages autonomy, vital to the development of the students as individuals and critical to their success in distance education (Beers Fägersten, 2008; McBride and Beers Fägersten, 2008).

4.3 Pre-seminars and seminars

In addition to PowerPoint lectures, the distance MA program courses are designed to include a schedule of pre-seminars and seminars. Pre-seminars are student-led meetings, attended

only by members of cohort sub-groups. They are conducted as text chats, using Skype, and are required to last between 60 and 90 minutes. Before the pre-seminar, the students are to view the lecture individually and on their own time. During the pre-seminar, the students work together to complete an assignment based on the lecture, which generally consists of application of theory to linguistic data. Group work has been shown to have pedagogical value (Bhattacharya and Chatterjee, 2000; Long and Porter, 1985; Shaban and Head, 2003) and places learning in a social context (Vygotsky, 1978). Long and Porter (1985) also suggest pedagogical arguments for the use of group work in second language learning; this can certainly be applied to the VNU students as speakers of English as a foreign language. Group work has furthermore been found to be conducive to collaborative learning (Apple, 2006; Huang, 2002; Kitade, 2000), an important principle of social constructivism, where learning is viewed as a natural outcome of negotiation and interaction with other people (Bonk and Cunningham, 1998; Jonassen, 1994; Petraglia, 1998).

At the end of each pre-seminar, one student saves the entire chatlog and then uploads it onto Fronter. Once the chatlog is available on Fronter, both the teacher and the students can access it to review the discussion. The students' work, ideas, and pre-seminar discussions are then developed further in the teacher-led seminars. Timetabled by the teaching staff, the teacher-led seminars are conducted using text chat via Skype and attended by individual cohort sub-groups. The seminars allow the teachers a chance to comment on the pre-seminar chatlog, not just in terms of addressing student questions and concerns, but also by confirming or correcting answers, discussing individual student's ideas and opinions, and giving praise or positive feedback.

The distance courses in the MA program were initially conceptualized as a series of synchronous, online, voice-chat seminars, but text chat was later introduced to complement voice chat, and eventually replaced it entirely due to limited connectivity between the students' homes or workplaces and the campus in Sweden. The program-wide adoption of the text-chat format has entailed added benefits to teaching and learning. First, text chat can be beneficial to students communicating in a foreign language in that the text-chat environment minimizes inhibition. In their study of classroom and online interaction, Hudson & Brockman (2002) identified inhibition as an obstacle to participation in the foreign language setting. The text-chat environment, however, has been shown to minimize inhibition and increase student participation (Hudson and Brockman, 2003; Roed, 2003; Suler, 2004; Warschauer, 1996).

Second, chat frequently results in more equitable participation. Students who are quiet during face-to-face classes tend to produce more in chat (Beauvois, 1992; Bump, 1990; Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1996), and students in general have been found to take greater initiatives to communicate in chat (Beauvois, 1992; Chun, 1994; Darhower, 2002; Deusen-Scholl et al, 2005; Kern, 1995). Given the increased number of student turns in the online environment, as compared to the classroom environment in which student turns may be fewer due to teacher dominance, text chat represents a form of interaction which can be characterized as "egalitarian participation" (Hudson & Bruckman, 2002:121).

Third, the text-chat format produces a written record of both pre-seminar and seminar activity. Turoff et al (in Howard et al, 2003) note that, particularly in advanced level courses with "high pragmatic content [...], students are required to utilize problem-solving approaches to evaluate the tradeoffs between conflicting objectives.[...] Reviewing the transcripts of class discussions can provide insight into the approaches students are taking to master the material." (p. 2) During pre-seminars, students collaborate in a type of collective scaffolding (Donato, 1994). This, in turn, prepares

them for the application of knowledge and independent participation in teacher-led seminars, where they will receive feedback on their performance. For this reason, the seminars are of particular importance to the VNU students, who see their teachers as ultimate authority figures. As representatives of expert knowledge, teachers have much to offer through their presence –real or implied– in chat sessions, particularly in the foreign language setting (Ene et al., 2005; Goertler, 2006).

The students look forward to the seminars as opportunities for social contact with their teachers and a chance to be acknowledged and appraised (Beers Fägersten, 2008; McBride and Beers Fägersten, 2008). This regular contact between the teacher and the students in the seminars serves to remedy the problem of the “perceived lack of feedback or contact with the teacher” (Galusha, 1997:4) that many distance students may experience.

Both the pre-seminars and seminars create and maintain a link between the teacher and students. The recording of the chatlogs awards the teacher a pseudo-presence in the pre-seminars, and students are therefore more likely to engage in discussions which are meaningful and useful. The seminars render teacher presence more salient, reflecting “overt institutional efforts” (Galusha, 1997:4) to re-establish the link that the separation of students and teacher imposes on distance education programs (Keegan, 1986). Even if students are encouraged to learn from each other in the pre-seminars, the subsequent teacher-led seminars ensure that they are not made responsible for teaching each other.

The lack of student support with regards to academic planners and tutors which Galusha (1997) identifies as one of the five barriers to success in distance education is addressed by the combination of individual lecture viewing, student-scheduled pre-seminars and staff-scheduled seminars in the distance program course design. The three phases offer the students flexibility in and control over their studies while assuring a steady progression via deadlines and time-tabled meetings. Although proper tutors are not involved in the program, the inclusion of pre-seminars gives students the chance to meet in a socially embedded context, and learn from each other in a supportive environment. Questions and uncertainties can be aired during these sessions, and students can either receive answers and explanations from their fellow students, or find company among others with similar concerns. Seminars ensure that students have regular contact with the teacher, receive feedback on their work, and, ultimately, achieve an understanding of the course content.

5. Discussion

The creation and initial broad design of Högskolan Dalarna’s distance MA program in English Linguistics for students of the Faculty of Education at Vietnam National University were primarily influenced by organizational and administrative concerns, which ultimately affected a number of standard program features. The most influential factor of the program, however, has been the target group of students, whose rather homogenous composition has encouraged a learner-centered approach to specific program and course design. The Vietnamese students all share the same culture and educational background, and they all have similar goals with regards to enrolling in the MA program. The design of the program reflects a conscious effort to acknowledge and accommodate the VNU students in terms of their educational backgrounds, professional goals, and, significantly, their culture.

A noteworthy feature of East Asian cultures is their tendency towards a collectivist orientation (Brislin, 1993; Hofstede, 1991; Smith and Bond, 1993; Triandis, 1995). Whereas individualists focus on self-actualization, a feature associated with Western cultures,

collectivists tend to see themselves as members of a group and prioritize group needs before their own (Littlewood, 1999). Collectivist cultures are typically composed of members who more often exhibit interdependent than independent behavior, such as conforming to group opinion, supporting group goals, cooperating with group members, respecting social status differences, and preserving face (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). East Asians tend to perceive themselves as interdependent.

In a cautiously general characterization, the Vietnamese culture and people can be said to exhibit collectivist orientation and interdependent tendencies (see Jamieson, 1993; Kramsch and Sullivan, 1996). This is perhaps an even more reliable statement in the context of education, where students are expected to work together and help each other. In their study of English language teaching in Vietnam, Kramsch and Sullivan (1996) identify the notion of ‘classroom-as-family’ as one of three defining aspects of Vietnamese educational culture:

[S]tudents are placed into classes of approximately twenty or thirty when they enter the university. Members of these classes often live, study, and play together. The associations students form are more akin to Western notions of ‘family’ than ‘classmate’. In many cases students in the same class will continue close relationships throughout their lives, forming ties that encompass financial, familial, and social obligations. (p. 203)

The VNU students of Högskolan Dalarna’s distance MA program could be similarly described. Each cohort consists of approximately 25 students, who, throughout the course of the two-year program, spend a significant amount of time interacting. During this time, classmate relationships can become friendships, and group membership indeed takes on aspects of belonging to a family. The VNU students do not, however, live together, and only seldom do they meet face-to-face. Furthermore, the majority of communication, in particular the synchronous chatting, takes place only among sub-group members. As participants in a distance program, the students receive no regular, face-to-face interaction within their cohort or even sub-group. The distance format can therefore represent a challenge or even a threat to Asian collectivist orientation or student interdependence. The learner-centered design of Högskolan Dalarna’s distance MA program reflects a prioritizing of a culture of groups and a learning community specifically to minimize this risk. The program is designed to foster a learning community composed of students who are academically equal and trained to participate actively in the web-based environment. As a whole, the program reflects an effort to maximize the chances for communication, thereby avoiding the imposition of a Western individualist orientation, and preventing students from feeling isolated. Different technologies are incorporated into course design, facilitating interaction, collaborative learning, and group work.

Interestingly, it has been observed that Vietnamese students prefer to act as members of one large group rather than be divided into smaller groups, which can “be divisive and inhibit learning.” (Kramsch and Sullivan, 1996:203) This kind of sub-grouping, however, seems to refer to in-class grouping, which can be more conspicuous and thus more disruptive than in distance education. In the case of Högskolan Dalarna’s MA program, meaningful communication, for example interaction via text chat, would be nearly impossible to accomplish if it were to include entire cohorts. The sub-groups furthermore enable a greater amount of participation by each student, without necessarily compromising the collectivist orientation. Collectivism and interdependence are acknowledged via collaborative learning and student teamwork – both of which were identified in studies by Hiltz (1994) and Hiltz and

Wellman (1997) as features of the educational methodology which most significantly contributed to establishing distance education as “good as or better than face-to-face courses.” (Turoff et al, in Howard et al, (2003:3)

Course and program evaluations from the Vietnamese students enrolled in Högskolan Dalarna's Master's of English Linguistics program reveal two significant strengths of the program design: availability of materials, and accessibility of staff. The orientation towards web-based course administration prioritizes availability and accessibility. In terms of course materials, it is a general rule of the Master's in English Linguistics degree program that only electronic books and articles accessible through the university library (e-brary) be assigned as course literature. Furthermore, course syllabi, handouts, lectures, feedback, and administrative materials are all provided in electronic form, assuring availability as well as convenience to all students. Having such materials available online increases student autonomy while (ideally) reducing the amount of administrative contact with teachers or other staff.

The web-based administration of the program in general provides for reliable communication between students and teachers or staff via the establishment of asynchronous communication as the standard, out-of-class communication type. The expectation of immediate contact with staff or with teachers outside of seminar sessions is minimized due to the extensive use of asynchronous communication on course forums, bulletin boards, or in email exchanges. Whereas the possibility of traditional, face-to-face meetings is extremely limited or non-existent for distance students, web-based, asynchronous communication allows for mutually convenient accessibility among students and staff. Students have expressed great satisfaction with the accessibility of their teachers via asynchronous communication.

It is important to consider, however, that although the immediacy and proximity of face-to-face communication can be compromised or even excluded by the distance design, a certain degree of promptness in interaction response is generally expected by students. It is therefore recommended that measures be taken to temper these expectations accordingly, as teachers may find themselves with an unreasonable amount of communication to maintain in the wake of the impression of constant accessibility, emerging as a by-product of the distance program design.

In the case of the distance degree program run by Högskolan Dalarna in cooperation with Vietnam National University, the preference for intense student-teacher contact often resulted in a high amount of teacher-directed communicative efforts among the students. It is not surprising, therefore, that the evaluations have revealed one consistently identified disadvantage to the program design, the small amount of face-to-face, student-teacher contact. While the strategies employed to cultivate a web-based, interactive learning community among the students have succeeded insofar as they have been acknowledged as benefiting the collective efforts of the group, the students of the program do not feel that the nature of the contact they have with their teachers benefits their professional development as teachers themselves. The general consensus among the Vietnamese students is that it is only the on-site visits at the beginning and end of each term which award them the opportunity to observe Western teaching techniques, which is of particular interest to them in their professional development. In the end, the degree program was delivered as a web-based program to enable communication and education across a great geographical distance. The importance of face-to-face contact and even the form and quality of ersatz communication modes should be critically evaluated before committing to a distance program.

6. Conclusion

When considering distance education, there is a tendency to problematize it. This is mostly due to an equally prevalent tendency to compare distance education to campus-based education, especially from the perspective that sees the latter as the superior form of learning. Some research suggests, however, that in terms of effectiveness, distance education rivals traditional classroom-based programs. Specifically, the use of resources and technologies in distance courses creates a learning environment that is not possible to achieve in the classroom (Turoff et al, in Howard et al, 2003). As for the student experience,

[p]eople usually assume that students in distance education programs are at a disadvantage. On the contrary, it is probably not the distance student who is disadvantaged, but rather many face-to-face students. Learning is enhanced by the physical and social technologies typically used in distance education. Students in distance programs have access to tools that allow them to repeat lectures and interact with their fellow students and faculty. Contrast these students with a student sitting in a 500 student lecture. Which student is most at a distance? (Turoff et al, in Howard et al, 2003:2)

Obviously, not every campus course is designed as a 500-student lecture, just as not every distance course is effectively enhanced by physical and social technologies. For educators and researchers, it is important to resist the futile exercise of comparing the best of one form of education with the worst of the other.

Distance education should instead be acknowledged as another valid form of education, equally subject to scrutiny, with the goal of identifying and developing ways to make it more effective. This case study of Högskolan Dalarna's distance MA program in English Linguistics represents an effort to contribute to the improvement of current distance education programs and encourage the development of future ones. As the number of distance education programs increases, educational systems are evolving from being teacher-centered to technology-centered (Strauss, 2002). The further shift to learner-centered programs is currently being promoted and practiced, particularly in distance programs: "Ultimately, education needs to become learner-centric, using the teachers and technology to unleash students' natural desire for knowledge." (Beck & Schomack, in Howard et al, 2003:121) Högskolan Dalarna's MA degree in English Linguistics in cooperation with Vietnam National University reflects a learner-centered approach to education, in order to acknowledge and mitigate the plethora of challenges the Vietnamese students might face as participants in the program. These challenges include, among others, an unfamiliarity with distance education, the use of English as a foreign language, and, most significantly, cultural differences. The distance format can be effectively exploited to overcome such challenges and ultimately enable successful intercultural education.

References

- Abrams, Z. I. (2003). The effect of synchronous and asynchronous CMC on oral performance in German. *The Modern Language Journal*, 87(2), 157-167.
- Apple, M. (2006). Language learning theories and cooperative learning techniques in the EFL classroom. *Doshisha Studies in Language and Culture*, 9(2), 277-301.
- Beauvois, M. H. (1992). Computer-assisted classroom discussion in the foreign language classroom: Conversation in slow motion. *Foreign Language Annals*, 25, 455-464.
- Beck, C. & Schornack, G. R. (2003). Theory and practice for distance education: A heuristic model for the virtual classroom. In C. Howard, K. Schenk & R. Discenza (Eds.), *Distance Learning and University Effectiveness: Changing Education Paradigms for Online Learning*. (pp. 119-143). Hershey, PA: Information Science Pub.
- Beers Fägersten, K. (2008). Discourse strategies and power roles in student-led distance learning. *Tidskrift för Lärarutbildning och Forskning: Proceedings of Identity and Power in the Language Classroom*, 15(2), 11-24.
- Bhattacharya, M. & Chatterjee, R. (2000). Collaborative innovation as a process for cognitive development. *Journal of Interactive Learning Research*, 11(3), 295-312.
- Bonk, C. J., & Cunningham, D. J. (1998). Searching for learner-centered, constructivist, and sociocultural components of collaborative educational learning tools. In C. J. Bonk, & K. S. King (Eds.), *Electronic Collaborators: Learner-centered Technologies for Literacy, Apprenticeship, and Discourse* (pp. 25-50). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Brislin, R. 1993. *Understanding Culture's Influence on Behavior*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace.
- Bump, J. (1990). Radical changes in class discussion using networked computers. *Computers and the Humanities*, 24, 49-65.
- Chun, D. (1994). Using computer networking to facilitate the acquisition of interactive competence. *System*, 22(1), 17-31.
- Compeau, D. R. & Higgins, C. A. (1995). Computer self-efficacy: Development of a measure and initial test. *MIS Quarterly*, 19(2), 189-211.
- Darhower, M. (2002). Instructional features of synchronous computer-mediated communication in the intermediate L2 class: A sociocultural case study. *CALICO Journal*, 19(2), 249-278.
- Davis, F.D., Bagozzi, R. P., & Warshaw, P. R. (1989). User acceptance of computer technology: A comparison of two theoretical models. *Management Science*, 35, 982-1003.
- Deusen-Scholl, N. V., Frei, C., & Dixon, E. (2005). Coconstructing learning: The dynamic

nature of foreign language pedagogy in a CMC environment. *CALICO Journal*, 22(3), 657-678.

Donato, R. (1994). Collective scaffolding in second language learning. In J. P. Lantolf & G. Appel (Eds). *Vygotskian Approach to Second Language Research* (pp. 33-56). Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Ene, E., Goertler, S., & McBride, K. (2005). Teacher participation styles in FL chats and their effect on student behavior. *CALICO Journal*, 23(3), 603-634.

Galusha, J. M. (1997). Barriers to learning in distance education. <http://www.infrastructure.com/barriers.htm>. Accessed 06.February, 2009.

Goertler, S. (2006). *Teacher participation and feedback styles during classroom synchronous computer-mediated communication in intermediate German: A multiple case study*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Arizona, Tucson.

Gumperz, John. 1972. "The speech community." In P.Giglioli (Ed.) *Language and Social Context* (pp. 219-31). New York: Penguin.

Gumperz, John. 1971. *Language in social groups*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Harry, K. & Khan, A. (2000). The use of technologies in basic education. In C.Yates & J. Bradley (Eds.), *Basic Education at a Distance*. Vancouver, BC, Canada: Commonwealth of Learning and London: Routledge Falmer.

Hiltz, S. R. (1994). *The Virtual Classroom: Learning Without Limits via Computer Networks*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Hiltz, S. R. & Wellman, B. (1997). Asynchronous learning networks as a virtual classroom. *Communications of the ACM*, 40(9), 44-49.

Hofstede, G. (1991). *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. London: McGraw Hill.

Howard, C., Schenk, K. & Discenza, R. (Eds.). (2003). *Distance Learning and University Effectiveness: Changing Educational Paradigms for Online Learning*. Hershey, PA: Idea Group Inc.

Huang, H. (2002). Toward constructivism for adult learners in online learning environments. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 33(1), 27-37.

Hudson J. & Brockman, A. (2002). IRC Francais: The creation of an Internet-based SLA community. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 15(2), 109-134.

Hymes, Dell. (1972). "Models of the interaction of language and social life." In J. Gumperz & D. Hymes (Eds.), *Directions in sociolinguistics: The ethnography of communication* (pp. 35-71). London: Blackwell.

- Jamieson, N. (1993). *Understanding Vietnam*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Jonassen, D. (1994). Thinking technology: Toward a constructivist design model. *Educational Technology* March/April, 34-37.
- Keegan, D. (1986). *The Foundations of Distance Education*. London: Croom Helm.
[HTTP://www.csu.edu.au/division/oli/oli-rd/occpap17/design.htm](http://www.csu.edu.au/division/oli/oli-rd/occpap17/design.htm). Accessed 06.02.2009.
- Kern, R. (1995). Restructuring classroom interaction with networked computers: Effects on quantity and characteristics of language production. *Modern Language Journal*, 79(4), 457-476.
- Kirkman, B. L., Rosen, B., Gibson, C. B., Tesluk, P. E., & McPherson, S. O. (2002). Five challenges to virtual team success: Lessons from Sabre, Inc. *Academy of Management Executive*, 16(3), 67-79.
- Kitade, K. (2000). L2 learners' discourse and SLA theories in CMC: Collaborative interaction in internet chat. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 13(2), 143-166.
- Knapper, C. (1988). Lifelong learning and distance education. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 2(1), 63-72.
- Kramsch, C. & Sullivan, P. (1996). Appropriate pedagogy. *ELT Journal* 50(3), 199-212.
- Littlewood, W. (1999). Defining and developing autonomy in East Asian contexts. *Applied Linguistics*, 20(1), 71-94.
- Long, M. & Porter, P. (1985). Group work, interlanguage talk, and second language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19(2), 207-228.
- Markus, H. & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion and motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98(2), 224-53.
- McBride, K. & K. Beers Fägersten. (2008). The students' role in distance learning. In S. Goertler & P. Winke (Eds.), *Opening Doors through Distance Learning Education: Principles, Perspectives and Practices* (pp. 43-66). San Marcos, TX: CALICO.
- Meacham, D. & D. Evans. (1989). *Distance Education: The Design of Study Materials*. Open Learning Institute, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga.
- Nipper, S. (1989). Third generation distance learning and computer conferencing. In R. Mason & A. Kaye (Eds.), *Mindweave: Communication, Computers and Distance Education*, Oxford: Pergamon Press. Available HTTP: <http://www-icdl.open.ac.uk/mindweave/chap5.html/>

- Petraglia, J. (1998). The real world on a short leash: The (mis)application of constructivism to the design of educational technology. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 46(3), 53-65.
- Roed, J. (2003). Language learner behaviour in a virtual environment. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 16(2-3), 155-172.
- Sanders, R. (2006). A comparison of chat room productivity: In-class versus out-of-class. *CALICO Journal*, 24(1), 59-76.
- Schamber, L. (1988). Delivery systems for distance education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 304 111).
- Shaban, S., & Head, C. (2003). E-learning classroom environment: Description, objectives, considerations and example implementation. *International Journal on E-Learning*, 2(3), 29-35.
- Sherry, L. (1996). Issues in Distance Learning. *International Journal of Educational Telecommunications*, 1(4), 337-365.
- Shneiderman, B. (1992). *Designing the User Interface*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Smith, P. B. & Bond, M. H. (1993). *Social Psychology across Cultures*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester.
- Strauss, H. (2002). New learning spaces: Smart learners, not smart classrooms. *Syllabus*, 16(2), 13.
- Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *CyberPsychology and Behavior*, 7, 321-326.
- Tallent-Runnels, M.K, Thomas, J. A., Lan, W. Y. & Cooper, S. (2006). Teaching Courses Online: A Review of the Research. *Review of Educational Research Spring*, 76(1), 93–135.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89 – 129.
- Triandis, H. C. (1995). *Individualism and Collectivism*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Turoff, M., Discenza, R. & Howard, C. (2004). How distance programs will affect students, courses, faculty, and institutional futures. In C. Howard, K. Schenk & R. Discenza (Eds.), *Distance Learning and University Effectiveness: Changing Education Paradigms for Online Learning* (pp. 1-20). Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing.
- Warschauer, M. (1996). Comparing face-to-face and electronic discussion in the second language classroom. *CALICO Journal*, 13(2-3), 7-25.
- Webster, J. & Hackley, P. (1997). Teaching effectiveness in technology-mediated distance learning. *Academy of Management Journal*, 40(6), 1282-1309.

Zoltan, E. & Chapanis, A. (1982). What do professional persons think about computers?
Behavior and Information Technology, 1, 55-68.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge.

Author Biography

Kristy Beers Fägersten received her PhD in Linguistics from the University of Florida in 2000. She is currently an Assistant Professor at the School of Arts and Media at Dalarna University (Sweden), where she teaches courses in Applied Linguistics for the Master's Degree in English Linguistics. Kristy's research interests include sociolinguistic analyses of swearing (with particular focus on gender, race and native-speaker status), discourse analyses of media appropriation and intertextual quotation, conversation analyses of synchronous, online communication, and pragmatic analyses of multimodal, online communication. She is currently concluding a research project funded by Sweden's Knowledge Foundation (KK-Stiftelsen) on the language of the Need for Speed racing video game series.

ⁱ In this chapter, the term distance education is used in a general sense and includes the concepts of online courses and web-based instruction. For a discussion of the different methodologies associated with each of these terms, see Tallent-Runnels et al, 2006.