Chinese and American Students: Analyzing a Case Study in a Virtual Environment

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In the summer of 1998, Dowling College began an MBA program at Yanshan University, the People's Republic of China. Yanshan University is located in Qinghuandao, a resort city of 500,000 located 150 miles east of Beijing. Yanshan University has over 10,000 students, but no graduate business program. Thirty students, who were required to first pass the TOEFL test, were admitted into the program. The students committed themselves to a year-long residence at Yanshan University.

The curriculum in China was identical to the American program of study with one major difference. Instead of having a traditional semester, each course was offered over a four week period. The textbooks were shipped to China before the course began, along with a complete syllabus and required assignments. Students were asked to read a number of chapters and stay in email contact with the instructor for the first week. The instructor was in China for two weeks, during which classes were actually taught. Classes met for 3 hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon. At the end of the two week period, the instructor went home and the students completed work on remaining assignments.

The author taught the core IS course in the MBA program, both in China and in the U.S. during the Spring, 1999 semester. Each American student was teamed with a Chinese student and asked to work together on a case study analysis.

The text used was "Management Information Systems", 5th edition, 1998 by Laudon and Laudon. The case study to be analyzed was Glaxo's Data Warehouse Prescription, pages 294 – 295. The case study describes the company's experience with an information system based on a data warehouse. Students were asked to answer the following questions:

1. List the management, organization and technology problems that GlaxoWellcome had. The Chinese team members are to develop this list first and email the list to the American team members. The American team members can then add to the list what ever they feel is missing.
2. List the benefits to the new information systems. The American team members are to develop this list first and email the list to the Chinese team members.
3. Share your opinions with your virtual team members regarding the extent to which selection of a data warehouse application is a decision to be made by technicians and to what extent it is an important business discussion.
4. Has your organization or department (past or present) had similar problems to GlaxoWellcome? Describe. How could a data warehouse, or the use of any other information system, made a difference?

There were a number of technical problems for the Chinese students. The server at Yanshan University was often down and when it was up, response time was extremely slow. It could take up to an hour to access the inbox and read email. There was an Internet café right next to the University which charged $2.00 an hour for Internet access. Although that is a paltry amount in American dollars, it was a large expense for the Chinese students. Partly because of this, and partly because both American and Chinese students were not always quick to meet their obligations, communication between students often did not occur in a timely manner. This resulted in a large number of complaints to the instructor. There were a few language problems, although some American students were astonished at how well their Chinese team mates were able to communicate in English.

Possibly due to cultural reasons, there was a difference in expectations between the Chinese and American students. Chinese students saw this assignment as a way to make friends, but most of the American students just wanted to complete the assignment. The Chinese students were quite disappointed in this and could not understand why the Americans would not share any details of their personal lives.