Designing Cross-Cultural Distance Education Program for Facilitating Pedagogical Change: Challenges and Strategies

Thomas Duffy and Gihan Osman
Indiana University

Azerbaijan is rapidly building its technical infrastructure for intra and internet capabilities. This three-year project is a central effort to establish Azeri capability to develop distance education competencies. This project entails developing the in-country skills in pedagogy, consulting, and managing the DE technology.

At the same time, the Azerbaijani government (the co-PI on the project is the Minister of Information Technology and Communication) sees distance education as a vehicle for changing the pedagogical model in the country from the Soviet didactic instruction to a more learner-centered approach.

The goal of the project is to:
- build a series of six courses the DE Center can offer to help faculty in Universities throughout the country develop distance education courses
- train the Azeri members of the Center in distance education, pedagogical, and consulting skills so they can administer the courses and also consult directly with faculty.

We are seeking to accomplish these goals through:
- the use of Oncourse as a team work/learning environment during the academic year
- face-to-face workshops in both countries during the summer.

The presenters will discuss issues in establishing the center – the selection of people, the competing demands, and the Center resources. Although highly educated, Azerbaijan is a developing country with very limited resources. Further, this project pays primarily for travel between the countries. Hence, careful planning of responsibilities and goals is necessary. And those goals are driven by political, service, and pedagogical concerns.

Another benefit is the issue of conceptual change involved in this effort. Our focus is pedagogy and not technology. Yet the Azeri team and faculty had been steeped in a very didactic approach to instruction, one in which DE is seen as a self-study environment. Even as those perspectives begin to change, the Azeri and the US teams worry about the faculty they will be supporting.

This understanding of the conceptual issues extends to the very process of instructional design. Instructional design is not a part of any programs in Azerbaijan and hence the framework and strategies are new to Azeri team.

We will also discuss the value of Oncourse CL (Sakai project) as the delivery platform in Azerbaijan. One key feature that is attractive is the ability to edit the language in the interface. Azeri is the language in the provinces and thus must be part of the distance education system.