

E-Based Solutions to Support Intercultural Business Ethics Instruction: An Exploratory Approach in Course Design and Delivery

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ABSTRACT. This paper reports on the experiences of international MBA students following a hybrid design for a business ethics course, which combined class-based lectures with "out-of-class" discussion supported by asynchronous communication tools. The e-learning component of the course was intended to generate discussion on the ethical assumptions of course participants, with each individual required to post a mini case study reflecting an ethical dilemma

which s/he had faced at work. Using questionnaire and interview data, we report on the learning experiences of participants following this experimental course. The results reveal a high level of intercultural dialogue between participants, with adopters showing greater awareness of their individual cultural biases in their case writing, a direct consequence of the on-line feedback and case discussion. These findings indicate that asynchronous tools have much to offer business ethics students, supporting ideas sharing and the exchange of cultural perspectives outside the physical boundaries of the classroom.

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Business ethics and multiculturalism

Issues of culture and internationalisation and their impact on learning and working have become increasingly important to academics and business people alike (Schneider and Barsoux, 1997). The continuing trends towards the globalisation of business and cultural diversity within the workplace present challenges for the modern manager, as well as opportunities for educators to address. For the delivery of business education, the message is clear: managers of the future need to understand these trends in order to cope effectively with the pressures of the global marketplace.

As David Harrison has highlighted, three key trends promise to change and shape the economic landscape well into the 21st century:



(1) continued globalisation of business; (2) enhanced information technology; and (3) increasingly diverse workplaces (Harrison, 2000). While these trends are not new, their importance continues to grow. The challenge for modern day business educators is to prepare their students for the challenges and opportunities each of these trends represents.

Cultural plurality affects business ethics in various ways. There is ample empirical evidence to suggest that cultural factors have an effect on the ethical beliefs and attitudes of managers. Hofstede's well-known model of five basic dimensions of cultural values orientations (Hofstede, 1981) has successfully been applied in business ethics many times over (Vitell, Nwachukwa and Barnes, 1993; Nyaw and Ng, 1994; Armstrong 1996). Cross-national variance in the ethical attitudes of managers has been examined on the basis of Parson's model of value orientations (Trompenaars and Hampden Turner, 1997) and Rokeach's values scale (Rokeach, 1973; Bigoness and Blakely, 1996). International guidelines for multinationals have been compared, with a view to establishing consensual international ethical values for business (Frederick, 1991; Getz, 1995; Webley, 1996). A number of cross-national studies have been conducted on specific business ethics issues, such as corporate social responsibility (O'Neil, 1986), the ethics of sales management (Dubinsky et al., 1991), drugs testing and equal opportunities (Mathison, 1993). Jeurissen and Van Luijk (1998) indeed have provided evidence to show that cultural differences also influence cross-cultural peer-perceptions among managers. In a survey among European managers, they observed that Italian and French managers were consistently perceived as being "least ethical" by their peers from 9 EU-countries, whereas German and Swedish managers were perceived as being "most ethical".

From the existence of cross-cultural differences among managers, one may infer that there will probably be cross-cultural differences among management students as well. Indeed, such differences have been found empirically. Nyaw and Ng (1994) revealed the existence of several differences in ethical attitudes among business

students from Canada, Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan. They were able to corroborate Hofstede's theory on cultural dimensions, by showing that Canadian business students stand out in individualism and Japanese students in power distance. They also found specific differences in ethical attitudes. Their results revealed, for example, that Hong Kong students are less likely to react in an ethical manner toward their customers than students from the other three countries.

In teaching business ethics to multicultural groups of students, we should therefore acknowledge that cultural factors will have an effect on student perceptions and the way they deal with ethical problems. Indeed, we may go further in suggesting that an awareness of cultural perceptions is a prerequisite for understanding and interpreting ethical behaviour within the workplace. As Harrison argues: "... an understanding of, and respect for, alternative cultures must be instilled into our students as a core value of business ethics. Cultural literacy is no longer a luxury, but a necessity, in our increasingly integrated and competitive global environment." (Harrison, 2000, p. 45)

Integration through e-learning

Embracing information technology in the classroom may provide a way to realise this goal – an integrated learning approach bringing together business ethics and cultural literacy. Technology provides the scope for enriched learning opportunities, facilitating the sharing of knowledge and understanding among members of a group, increasing interaction between students and supporting higher order learning (Brandon and Hollingshead, 1999; Harasim, 1989; Salmon, 2000; Turoff, 1990). Bailey and Cotlar (1994) and Berger (1999) have suggested that from a learning environment or community standpoint, students have greater opportunities with electronic collaboration tools to solicit and share knowledge, while developing common ground or intersubjectivity with their peers and teachers. The virtual learning space may well then represent a medium for ideas sharing and knowledge

building which can help bring users in contact with a variety of cultural perspectives.

The e-learning approach which we advocate here, represents a departure from traditional applications of technology. Indeed we should distinguish it from conventional uses of the web in universities, which conform more to an "e-teaching" philosophy. E-teaching relates to an automated vision of instruction, as described by Leidner and Jarvenpaa (1995). Here the focus of technology is aimed at knowledge dissemination rather than knowledge creation. This can involve the placing of teaching materials on the web as well as some ancillary (collaborative) web-based activities. A "closed" system allows learners to input information, however the responses to that input are prescribed and predetermined. A computer aided instruction (CAI) environment would suit this type of approach. Instructional interventions using this type of tool would typically aim at controlling the sequence and content of instruction, and seek to map a particular model of thinking onto the learners, offering feedback and prompting to learners (Lin and Hsieh, 2001).

Table I offers a representation of instructional approaches and relevant e-learning applications. The approaches on the left-hand side of the table – "instructional information processing" and "instructional behaviourism" are compatible with e-teaching methods in our estimation. Both of these approaches are based on an objectivist epistemology; knowledge has an objective and separate existence whose attributes, relationships, and structure can be known. The process of instruction therefore focuses on presenting knowledge and modelling its structure in such a way that it can be accurately acquired and reproduced. Learning involves the accurate acquisition and replication of this external knowledge. The approaches on the right-hand side of the table – "personal constructivism" and "social constructivism" are compatible with e-learning methods, according to our learner-centred definition of the term. Both of these approaches are based on a constructivist epistemology – knowledge is not independent of the learner but is internally constructed by the learner as a way of making meaning of experiences. Constructivist instruction is not the

TABLE I
Instructional approaches and their consequences for e-learning

	Instructional information processing	Instructional behaviourism	Personal constructivism	Social constructivism
Philosophy	Knowledge as reproduced cognition	Knowledge as modified behaviour	Knowledge as personally constructed meaning	Knowledge as socially constructed meaning
How to learn?	Learning is processing information (computer metaphor)	Stimulus response learning	Learning is experiencing and reflecting autonomously	Learning is experiencing, reflecting, relative to a social context
Electronic support	<i>E-teaching:</i> Classroom-based learning environments (virtual classrooms, video conferencing) Technologies used as tools in support of classroom activities (e-mail)	<i>E-teaching:</i> Web assisted instruction (CAI environments)	<i>E-learning:</i> Set of manageable content-rich tools (e.g. microworlds)	<i>E-learning:</i> Set of manageable, content-rich tools; and knowledge sharing and collaboration tools (e.g. bulletin boards, chat boxes, computer conferences) contained within VLE's.

process of carefully arranged prescriptive strategies, but of coming to understand how people make meaning, and then to create learning environments that promote this construction (Jonassen et al., 1995).

Our vision of e-learning is based on the application of technology in a such a way that learners are presented with an "open" environment, matching the needs of individual learners and complementing individual learning pathways. An open system fosters personal meaning-making, allowing individuals to construct their own knowledge through exploration and discovery learning. It provides high levels of learner control, allowing users to restructure the learning experience in ways not feasible within closed environments. We may envisage students working with tools such as microworlds in this approach. Jonassen, Carr and Yueh (1998) define microworlds as exploratory learning environments or discovery spaces in which learners can navigate, manipulate or create objects, and test their effects on one another.

An open environment will also support discourse among communities of learners, supporting the social negotiation of meaning. These combined functions build on the social constructivist philosophy of instructional design (Winn, 1993), which focuses on the use of technology to support experiential learning, constructed relative to a social context. There are a wide variety of conversation tools available to support interpersonal exchanges among students, such as chat boxes, for synchronous discussion and bulletin boards and computer conferences for asynchronous discussion. These tools can be used by groups of students to collect information and solve problems (Jonassen, Peck and Wilson, 1998).

Wilson (1996) suggests that virtual learning environments (VLEs) best reflect the open approach to e-based learning, combining a communication dimension with tools for individualised learning. Piccoli, Ahmad and Ives (2001) indeed claim that VLEs provide high levels of student control, support participant contact and interaction throughout the learning process, and provide an opportunity to restruc-

ture the learning experience in ways not feasible with other instructional tools such as CAI.

With the open e-learning approach in mind, we have experimented at Nyenrode University with a new type of hybrid course design, in which e-learning plays a key supporting role in the teaching of business ethics and intercultural management. In this paper we report on the experiences of course participants, their reception of the open e-learning approach and the intercultural focus to the revised course design. We begin with a description of the hybrid course design, highlighting the role of e-learning for student learning. We describe the e-learning tools used in the course and the objectives behind their selection. Finally we report on the delivery of the course, drawing on questionnaire and interview data to illustrate the learning experiences of participants. The last two sections of the paper deal with the lessons learned from this experiment and our conclusions on the contribution of e-learning to business ethics teaching and the development of intercultural awareness amongst students.

Introducing a hybrid design to a business ethics course

The business ethics course described in this paper, was delivered within the International MBA programme (IMBA) at Nyenrode University, a 13 month full-time study programme designed for international managers with an average of 5 years work experience. The purpose of the course is to communicate theoretical and practical insights and developments in the fields of business ethics and sustainable business. Students learn about general ethical theories of business ethics such as stakeholder-theory, theories of responsibility and normative ethical theory. The course also focuses on the competencies necessary to handle ethical dilemmas in a systematic way.

For the IMBA 2002 course, we introduced a new target for student learning, based on the development of awareness of the intercultural dimension to business ethics. Students were

encouraged to identify their own cultural biases and develop a more positive attitude towards intercultural differences. This involved students participating in a discussion on intercultural differences, tackling the whole phenomenon of social behaviour in business. Given the make-up of the 2002 IMBA class, this approach appeared particularly relevant, with plenty of scope for discussion existing between the 18 Dutch participants and 17 international participants drawn from Asia, North and South America and Europe. We anticipated that the class would develop understanding in this new area of the course via a process of discussion and social negotiation of meaning.

The design for this course followed a hybrid or "mixed mode" approach (Hiltz, 1994), involving both face-to-face and virtual learning methods. Participants would thus experience a combination of interactive lectures and group discussions in class, as well as on-line learning activities. By choosing this format we tried to combine the advantages of e-learning with the benefits of class-based learning from lecturers and fellow students.

The class-based learning dealt with the theory of the course, including some general discussion on intercultural issues. The e-learning component of the course was intended to support reflective and critical thinking on individual ethical assumptions. Getting students to think more deeply about how they communicate their opinions and the cultural biases influencing their thinking were key factors behind the selection of a text-based communication medium. We also recognised the value of asynchronous tools which would enable participants to contribute their thoughts at a moment of their choosing, opening up the possibility for multiple lines of discussions outside the classroom.

In order to generate this type of discussion, students were asked to contribute a mini case to a digital archive for the course, focusing on an ethical dilemma in business which they had experienced or observed at work. Accompanying the case they were required to include an analysis of the problem and their own solution. It was hoped that the range of case themes and contexts

presented by participants would help to support a discussion on ethical behaviour, as well as a deeper level of discussion on the cultural perspectives determining the way students interpret acceptable and unethical business practices. Students were asked to comment on at least three cases from the archive, focusing in particular on the cultural assumptions underpinning the author's case description and analysis. They were also invited to consider to what extent the author's case solution was transferable to other cultural contexts. Individuals were instructed to select cases based on cultural contexts unfamiliar to them, so that a cross-cultural dimension was introduced to the activity.

The case-writing activity was designed to take place over the first three weeks of the course (March 4–25), giving participants sufficient time to draft the case, receive feedback from the instructor, before uploading it to the course environment. For the remainder of the course (March 25–April 2), students were expected to engage in an on-line peer review of the cases, as part of their "out-of-class" learning for the course. We scheduled the penultimate class session for the presentation of the most interesting cases, with discussion focusing on the cultural dimension to ethical problems in business.

Role of IT within the course design

Students were presented with a purpose-built virtual learning environment for this course, based on a Whizzdom¹ platform. The environment contained instructions for the case-based discussion activity, along with suitable knowledge-sharing and communication tools. We summarise the functions of these tools and the targeted learning behaviour in Table II (below).

The e-learning environment was designed to support student learning on two different levels. First and foremost, it was intended to encourage students to discuss and raise ethical issues with peers. The environment contained a case directory (digital archive), where each participant could upload a case outlining an ethical dilemma or problem. In addition to this, students were

TABLE II
Role of virtual tools in the course design

Virtual tools	Functions	Targeted learning behaviour
Case forum (individual bulletin boards)	Dedicated area for discussion on cases. Includes summary of each case and area where peers can post feedback on the case.	Critical review of individual cases (reflective thinking; reciprocal teaching and learning). Ideas-sharing and interaction.
General forum (bulletin board)	Posting comments on course (general discussion area for all course issues).	Ideas-sharing and interaction
Plenary case directory	Uploading and downloading individual cases.	Knowledge sharing
Course outline	Reviewing instructions, assignment timetable.	Reference purposes
Assignment instructions	Activities for individual case assignment.	Reference purposes
Resources directory	Uploading and downloading additional course resources (web-links, files, articles etc.)	Knowledge sharing

encouraged to comment on the cases of other individuals, using a discussion forum (bulletin board). The forum represented a place where they could post comments on the content of the case – offering potential solutions to the case, critiques on its structure, or opinions on the cultural assumptions included within the text. By receiving these types of comments, it was intended that individual students would experience ethical discussion more intensively than would be possible within the classroom – given the traditional limitations of time and interaction. The use of the environment would therefore help to increase discussion within the class – students would be able to see an exchange of views taking place on-line.

On another level, we hoped that the use of the environment would help to stimulate discussion on intercultural assumptions and perspectives. Students would be receiving comments and viewpoints on business ethical issues from a variety of cultural perspectives. We hoped that they would engage in an intercultural peer review and exchange of views supported by the e-learning environment. Targeted outcomes from this approach would be greater awareness of the intercultural dimension to business ethics, as well as greater awareness of individual cultural biases. We hoped that the course would help students

to improve their capability to handle/solve intercultural problems by trial and error.

Research design and focus

We selected an exploratory case study design (Robson, 1993; Yin, 1993) in order to research the experiences of the participants following the course. The study aimed at revealing student attitudes towards the delivery methods (virtual environment and asynchronous tools). The investigation also considered the contribution of the tools to student learning – to what extent the tools and resources added value to their learning experiences, supporting an intercultural focus for discussion outside the classroom.

Student learning and assessment of the preparatory phase of the course was recorded using a combination of questionnaire and interview techniques. A *pre-course* questionnaire was designed to gauge student expectations towards the hybrid course design. Students were also asked to consider the suitability of computer technology for course delivery in management education. Through the use of a *post-course* questionnaire, we aimed to revisit student attitudes to the course design and pedagogical approach. Participants were also invited to reflect

again on the suitability of computer technology for course delivery in management education. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale, adapted from Hiltz's (1994) instrument designed to evaluate the effectiveness of an online course. In addition to these instruments, a selection of students were interviewed at different intervals during the course, in order to provide further detailed feedback on their learning experiences. This input was combined with the quantitative evidence acquired from the postings within the directory and bulletin boards to give a rounded view of student learning for the course.

As with all research the study results from this course have certain limitations. The course focused on a small class population (35 students), with no control group included in the analysis. Scope for the measurement of the effectiveness of the course design in fostering intercultural learning was therefore quite limited. Consequently we may offer only general observations on the learning outcomes for this course. Indeed, the research for this experimental course should be viewed as a pilot study, offering a first step in the examination of student responses to a learner-centred course design using asynchronous courseware.

The rationale for the hybrid course design and introduction of e-learning was based though on the feedback received from the previous year's class – IMBA 2001. This class followed a traditional lecture-based approach. The post-course questionnaire feedback revealed a level of dissatisfaction with the opportunities in class to share and discuss work-based ethical problems. The limited use of student experiences in class and the restricted opportunities for peer-based discussion were viewed as the principal weaknesses of the course. Notably only 25% of respondents supported the view that the classes provided opportunities for students to give each other feedback on their work. These findings may serve as a benchmark from which to interpret the experiences of the 2002 IMBA class following the experimental hybrid course design.

Discussing of the course results: evaluation of the contribution of asynchronous communication tools to student learning

Pre-course results

The pre-course questionnaire attracted a low response rate (12 respondents – 34% of the class), however those students who completed the instrument were quite positive in terms of their expectations towards e-learning. 92% of respondents noted that e-learning increases opportunities for students to give each other feedback on their work. Just under two-thirds of respondents (64%) supported the view that e-learning facilitates individual learning outside the classroom, with 58% remarking that it supports ideas and experience sharing and increases opportunities for discussion. These results appear linked to student experiences of an e-learning module immediately preceding the ethics course, in which participants experimented with asynchronous communication tools and a digital archive for knowledge sharing. Students were thus familiar with the use of these tools and “adopters” no doubt took the opportunity to reflect their support for e-learning in the pre-course survey.

Post-course results

Of the 35 students who started and completed the course, only 3 participants failed to upload a case and solution to the case directory. Two thirds of the class (23 students) participated in the on-line discussion conducted between class sessions. Participating students posted the targeted number of 3 messages per person (a mean average of 3.04 per person). The destination of these messages was not evenly distributed however – with some cases attracting considerable interest, whilst 3 cases received no comments at all. Interestingly the three top posters in the class were amongst the most silent members of the face-to-face class discussions – a situation related possibly to language problems in the case of the Chinese students or shyness in the case of the Ukrainian

student. Where the environment appeared to make an impact was in providing these types of students – often marginalised in the classroom debates – with a channel to express their own ideas about the course and share their experiences.

The comments posted by students on the discussion site were, on the whole, intercultural in nature – in line with our expectations for the course. Students used this opportunity to express their own cultural perspectives on the cases presented by individuals – providing a showcase of different interpretations on cultural dilemmas. In total 34 messages dealt explicitly with cultural aspects of cases: 12 messages featured the word “culture”, 22 featured the word “cultural” and 5 messages also included the word “intercultural” in the posting.

Most of the cultural comments involved cross-cultural comparisons of situations and practices, where students commented on a culturally specific aspect of a case, by giving either similar or contrasting examples from their own culture. An example of this type of behaviour may be drawn from the contribution of a Dutch student, commenting on the paper of a Japanese colleague, who had focused on promotion issues in his case. The Japanese case highlighted the importance for an employee in developing and maintaining a good relationship with a superior, in order to get promotion. This extends to socialising after work. This prompted the following response from a Dutch perspective:

“When you talk about the promotion practices in Japan, I have to say that they are quite different in The Netherlands. Of course a good relationship between manager and employee is important, but next to that as an employee I have to perform very well too in order to be promoted. Only maintaining a good relationship is not enough to be promoted. An employee who only has a good relationship can never be promoted when he or she is not showing results. At least not that I am aware of!”

Another example is drawn from a Chinese student’s comments, responding to a Peruvian student’s paper on bribery in the construction industry:

“Your case sounds very familiar to me since I was engaged in construction and engineering projects in my previous company. The company, as a contractor, always had to do something to please the persons who represented the client, either giving presents or inviting them to dinner, to entertainment places or let them reimburse some expenses, but maybe not as serious as what was described in your case.”

Students often commented that they found this type of intercultural comparison interesting and pleasant. “What a nice job to compare these different cultures”, one student ended his message. From a pedagogical perspective, it is of course pleasing when students find an assignment interesting and “fun”. But from a theoretical perspective, the results are somewhat disappointing. We had hoped that students would work the theoretical information on culture and intercultural dynamics, presented in class and in the course reader into their comments. They were indeed explicitly asked to do so in the instructions for the discussion site, which read as follows:

“Comment on at least three cases of your peers, from an intercultural perspective. Consider in particular any cultural factors or assumptions in the case description, as well as in the analysis. Question to what extent the solution to the case is transferable to other cultural contexts. Select the cases you comment on in such a way that they cover different cultural contexts and industry sectors. Your comments should be constructively critical and theoretically informed.”

Interestingly, some students did work theoretical information about ethics into their comments, but not about *intercultural ethics*. Ethics mainly involved the distinction between ethics of principles and ethics of consequences, which was thoroughly explained in class. In hindsight, we may conclude that the quality of the information on intercultural ethics offered in class and in the reader (based on Schneider and Barsoux, 1997) was not sufficient for student learning. Indeed we recognise that the study of intercultural business ethics is still in its infancy. There is well established and empirically corroborated theory on

intercultural value patterns, which can be found in the work of Hofstede and Trompenaars, but the transfer of these concepts to the realm of business ethics has, as yet, not produced a firm body of general knowledge. Indeed we may consult ethical theory on international business (De George, 1993; Donaldson, 1989), but international business ethics has still not been linked in a convincing manner to the intercultural values study of the Hofstede type. Hence, there is little established theory on how intercultural value differences affect ethical judgements, and no such theory was presented in class. Therefore, we should not be surprised to find little theoretical information on intercultural ethics on the discussion site.

Regarding the contribution of the e-learning discussion forum to student learning, we observed that the level of interaction between users on-line was quite low, with few students responding to the comments of peers in the form of discussion threads. Table III summarises the categories of messages recorded in the peer review discussion of the cases.

Student reception of the e-learning phase of the course was recorded using both interview and questionnaire techniques. The post-course questionnaire attracted a far higher response rate (27 respondents – 77% of the class) than the pre-course instrument, and reflected a wider spread of opinions on the e-learning approach. We observed a division of opinion within the class,

TABLE III
Categories of messages posted – Totals

Category	Definition	Example	Total of messages posted
Intercultural messages	Messages offering a value judgement on the case presented – what is the right or wrong course of action; an illustration from a cultural perspective.	<i>"Is it morally admissible that the production manager does not interfere with this policy, although it is harmful for the company and the shareholders on the long run. Let me comment on this from an Ukrainian perspective. In Ukraine it is common to "cook" the records and "boost" the P/L or B/S."</i>	34
Ethical analysis messages	Messages focusing on the ethical analysis within the case – the theoretical reasoning underpinning the case – the merits of the argument presented by the author, in line with the theory presented.	<i>"The pro-arguments seem to be all rational, consequential. The counter argument(s) is principle. According to the literature, you have to base your conclusion on the weighting of the arguments. If the principle arguments lead to a different conclusion than the consequential arguments, the reader says we have to follow the principle arguments."</i>	17
Presentation messages	Messages focusing on the presentation of the case, the way it is written, its structure and the grammar used.	<i>"I would advice you to stick more to the traditional seven-step-model structure in analysing your dilemma. I couldn't find step 3. It would have been better if you would have answered step 6 and 7 separately."</i>	13
Acknowledgement messages	An acknowledgement or reply to messages received from other participants by the author of the case; feedback on the feedback.	<i>"Thanks for your comment. In my opinion, no matter in Dutch or European culture or Chinese culture, the moral issue is stood up."</i>	6

with a third of the class convinced of the relevance and suitability of the hybrid design and the use of e-learning, with a similar sized group of 'traditionalists' disagreeing.

Adopters believed that the hybrid approach helped to support a higher level of feedback for individual learning through peer exchanges (45% of respondents), and felt that this method helped to increase interaction levels between students (41% of respondents). 37% of respondents believed that the delivery method supported a greater level of collaborative learning than that afforded by the class-based approach, with 26% disagreeing. Less support was recorded for the view that the hybrid approach enhanced the learning process and understanding of course concepts, with only 15% of respondents in agreement and 33% disagreeing.

We observed a far more positive reaction from respondents across the class however, when they were invited in the post-course questionnaire to reflect again on the potential of computer technology within management education. Two thirds of respondents viewed the use of computer technology as a relevant and value-adding medium for student learning. 59% of respondents viewed the medium as ideal in supporting peer discussion and ideas-sharing, with only 19% disagreeing. A similar level of support was recorded in favour of computer technology supporting collaborative learning and providing flexibility in the learning process. These results are promising, indicating that class opinion is open to innovation in course design and delivery – when technology is integrated effectively with class-based instructional methods.

Feedback from the interviews

The feedback from interviews, conducted with a third of the class population (13 students), helped us to gain an insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the e-learning approach employed for this course. In particular, respondents highlighted the value of the feedback they received from peers on their cases, suggesting that this input stimulated reflective thinking on their case assumptions:

"E-learning can add value. When you are working individually, you think that you are right – your viewpoint is the correct one. But after reading two or three postings on your case, it gives a different perspective on your case – it shows you that there are different views . . . It draws attention to issues that you may have overlooked in your case writing."

"Based on the responses received for my case, I received a number of different perspectives. The Internet was instrumental in generating a number of intercultural perspectives on the case, which was enriching."

Adopters confirmed the value of the discussion forum as a platform for intercultural dialogue between case writers and readers:

"I like the e-site and the opportunities to share experiences – and the opportunities to read through the cases. The technical set-up could have been improved. It did support intercultural dialogue – e.g. over the issue of bribery. The cases also represent a stimulus for face-to-face feedback – responding to the comments posted on the site. Some comments are cultural in nature, others are not. It is an enriching (learning) approach – although the responses for the cases are not evenly distributed."

"The on-line cases provide the dynamite for discussion (not exploited in the class). They invite multiple viewpoints. The (on-line) content is only as good as the contributions but – I am a believer in 1:1 talking – and I see value in this approach. The on-line cases also stimulate discussion face-to-face between students."

Participants also underlined the value of the medium in giving a voice to the quieter members of the class, who could further enrich the exchange of cultural perspectives with their own input:

"The intercultural perspective does fit the e-learning approach. It gives Asians the time to discuss, think and formulate answers on certain subjects. The platform is not interactive though – there is no real-time interaction. It is good to react – you can see added value – but the platform is not used in the right way yet."

“Going on-line also does have value for the introverts of the class to express their views. In class, there are always the same people discussing – about 10–12 people. The web-site allows others to express their views. . . . On-line they can express themselves. Yoshi’s case provided a nice perspective. I want to listen and learn about these different approaches. I will probably work in an international environment, maybe with Asian or Latin American business representatives or teammates. This is a kind of training. Where do you get this, apart from the MBA?”

However, as the comments above indicate, students also saw weaknesses in the learning experience on-line. Participants noted the lack of interaction on-line, and the uneven distribution of messages to cases recorded within the forum. Students also highlighted the difficulty of engaging users in voluntary interaction on-line. As one participant noted:

“E-learning has a role in full-time MBA courses – but participation – when it is not graded – is not guaranteed. How you promote it is also important.”

Student perceptions towards the e-learning experiences are summarised in Table IV. We have attempted to capture the key issues raised by students in the interviews. The findings are based on a content analysis of the transcripts of interviews, combining the feedback from a total of 13 interviews. The table reflects the strengths and weaknesses of the course design under review. (Key themes are recorded in order of the frequency in which students mentioned them.) The table also displays student attitudes towards the potential of the medium for future courses (opportunities and threats).

Lessons learned: student experiences with the e-learning component of the course

Based on the aggregate questionnaire and interview feedback, we draw the following conclusions on the contribution of the e-learning phase of the course to student learning.

- The e-learning approach employed in this course was deemed to be relevant and value-adding by a third of the class, with a similar sized group questioning its value. Two-thirds of the class saw value however, in the potential of the hybrid delivery approach to enhance their own learning. The scope for e-learning, when integrated effectively with class-based teaching, was therefore recognised by the majority of participants following the IMBA course.
- Adopters noted that the on-line feedback procedure helped to deliver cultural perspectives on the cases – some of which were used to rewrite the text of the original cases. It therefore encouraged a reflective loop in the minds of authors/recipients of these comments.
- The cases encouraged both comments posted on-line as well as discussion in the hallway – face-to-face discussions as a spin-off from the on-line contributions. The mixed-mode follow-up procedure illustrated the complementary nature of virtual and face-to-face learning methods for full-time students.
- The e-learning channel appeared to empower quieter members of the class sessions to express their own views – and comment on the views of others. To some degree it helped to bridge the cultural divide – so apparent in the classroom where Asian participants largely opted out of plenary discussions. It also provided an antidote to the problem of having the same vocal minority of 10–12 voices dominating the class discussions.
- The forum exposed students to the views and insights of people outside their friendship circles. They felt less inhibited about commenting on the work of others within the class. This helped to stimulate the exchange of intercultural perspectives in the class discussion and comments delivered on-line.
- The case directory and discussion forum supported an observational learning process as well. Students could observe the learning and interactions of others from afar – a

TABLE IV
Student perceptions towards the e-learning component of the course

Strengths	Weaknesses
Feedback postings stimulate individuals to review their own work and improve on it (via multiple perspectives recorded within discussion forum) (×11)	Design of environment (login procedure/forum) is not user-friendly (×6)
The environment presents a forum for feedback, ideas sharing – extending class discussion – complementing class-based learning. (×9)	Quality of contributions on-line is not guaranteed – can suffer when quantity of responses is requested/ expected (×4)
Medium in which less articulate class members can express themselves – ideas/insights (×8)	Not necessarily an interactive medium (×3)
Medium presents individuals with a wider exposure to the contributions of peers than would be possible in class (via cases, summaries/overviews) (×8)	Lack of clear guidelines/rules limits student participation/discussion on-line (×3)
Excellent way of giving and receiving feedback – supporting 1:1 talking (×7)	Intercultural perspective not exploited in on-line discussion (×3)
Provides flexibility in learning process – over when and which cases you comment on. (×7)	Use of site is not essential for course (e-mail would work) (×3)
On-line interaction supports cross-cultural ideas-sharing (intercultural dialogue) (×5)	
Postings stimulate follow-up face-to-face discussion/informal learning (×4)	
Environment stimulates sharing of views/discussion outside established friendship circles of physical classroom (×3)	
Giving feedback helps you to assess critically the work of others (×3)	
Opportunities	Threats
Opportunity to create an integrated learning and administrative site across whole of MBA programme (supporting group-work/social activities/feedback etc.). (×3)	Success of e-learning depends on degree to which instructor promotes use of site. Students won't put the effort in without grading to oblige them to do so. (×10)
Opportunity for professors to update site every couple of days, to trigger students to visit site (via added links, comments, articles etc.) (×2)	Learning exclusively over the Internet is not a good thing – you miss the face-to-face interaction (there is a difference between what you say and what you write on-line) (×5)
	Students face competing demands from other courses. High workloads discourage students from investing too much time in this way of learning (×4)
	Cultural mix of class will influence success of e-learning. Cultural issues may affect quality of contributions and interaction on-line (e.g. Asian participants more reserved ; politeness – a barrier to critical feedback) (×4)

dynamic not afforded to them in the physical environment of the classroom.

We observed a number of shortcomings however in this course experiment. Some students noted that the depth of the cultural issues raised on-line could have been developed further within the class sessions on campus. Greater use could have been made in class of the different cultural perspectives expressed on-line. A learning point from this experience is that hybrid course design requires a precise plan, detailing not only how to *introduce* e-learning to class sessions, but also how to *integrate* the e-learning results with the class-based learning. As Sproull and Klesler (1993) indicate, effective e-learning requires the full integration of this learning mode within the instructional design.

Students used the e-learning channel to exchange cross-cultural perspectives on cases, but as we have mentioned earlier, they failed to apply theoretical information on intercultural business ethics in the on-line case discussion. In hindsight, we may view this as a direct consequence of the limited theory offered to students in class on intercultural business ethics. There is little established theory that connects the fields of intercultural values research and international business ethics. For future classes, we will need to provide a stronger theoretical framework addressing these two domains, in order to support participants in the on-line discussion process and critiquing of the cases.

In terms of the organisation and delivery of the e-learning component of this course, there also appears to be scope for improvement. There were a number of criticisms directed towards the voluntary framing of the e-learning activity – and the loophole this provided for students to drop out – and not contribute their thoughts. A more rigorous approach was suggested by participants, whereby they would be compelled to participate. These criticisms suggest to us that a tighter management of the e-learning activities by the course instructor, with clearer instructions to students, might help to deliver wider participation on-line – a learning point for future experiments in hybrid instructional design at Nyenrode University.

Note

¹ A learning platform designed with the latest Microsoft Web-Technology, offering a flexible and open architecture to course designers. See www.whizzdom.nl for further details.

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