Defining a Global Learning Environment in Higher Education:
A Case for the Global Seminar Project

Tamara Savelyeva

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Career and Technical Education

John H. Hillison, co-chair
Daisy L. Stewart, co-chair
James R. McKenna
H. Dean Sutphin

September 11, 2008
Blacksburg, VA

Defining a Global Learning Environment in Higher Education:
A Case for the Global Seminar Project

Tamara Savelyeva

Career and Technical Education

(ABSTRACT)

In this study I defined the global learning environment (GLE) as it appeared in the Global Seminar Project (GSP) to address the issues of change in higher education under the pressure of globalization. The combination of constructivist theory and a Biggs' (2003) deep learning concept provided a framework for answering the following research questions: (a) what project components make the course global? and (b) in what ways does Global Seminar contribute to deep learning? For the purposes of this study, I used three forms of data collection, including in-depth, open-ended interviews of 20 GSP's instructors; 11 direct observations of the GSP classroom; and analysis of GSP's written documents and artifacts. I used the open-coding feature of ATLAS.ti software to analyze the interview data and identify the descriptive themes that emerged from the observations and documents. The interview analyses revealed that the GSP's global learning environment included five areas: (a) course structure and academic leadership/management; (b) stakeholder involvement; (c) institutional support; (d) course conducive content; and (e) teaching and learning practices. Within these five major areas I indicated four "global" categories of the learning environment established in the course: innovative, international, interactive, supported by the culture of mutual learning. Evidence of deep learning included observed development of students' generic metacompetencies, identified components of instructors' teaching quality, and recognized value of the relationships among course participants.

The research findings brought about two co-dependent understandings of the GLE as a conceptual phenomenon and a practical model. As a conceptual phenomenon, the GLE can be defined as a specific property of an educational structure that occurs when teachers and students are engaged in innovative experiences with the purpose of acquiring understanding of complex global-scale issues by means of cross-cultural interactions and on the basis of mutual learning. Applied to an educational practice, this understanding of the GLE forms a constructive and participatory model that provides possibilities for transforming higher education practices: shifting from mass-production knowledge to genuine quality education based on the values of teachers. These conclusive definitions open a dialogue regarding how the GLE can initiate meaningful changes in educational theory and practices.