ResearchLEAP

Journal of International Business Research and Marketing
Volume 5, Issue 1, 2019
journal homepage: www.researchleap.com

Building a Global Education Collaboration Model Using Experiential Learning: A Fresh Look at Developing Intercultural Competence

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DOI: *10.18775/jibrm.1849-8558.2015.51.3001*
URL: *http://dx.doi.org/10.18775/jibrm.1849-8558.2015.51.3001*

Keywords:
Global Education, Collaboration Model, Experiential Learning, Learning methods, Intercultural Competence, Cultural distance

ABSTRACT

Adapting to global business and interpersonal differences is a challenge in both higher education and industry. International education generally seeks to improve student intercultural competence; that is, improving an individual's ability to work with an international mix of colleagues, customers, and suppliers. Nevertheless, there are many examples where these educational efforts fail. This paper explores virtual team projects, where team members at partner schools in Germany and the U.S. worked together on a joint project, as a mechanism to enhance international education and development of intercultural competence. Using interview and qualitative survey data, we find that these virtual projects offer the opportunity to access different perceptions of problem statements, products and procedures, and apply unique resources and knowledge. We add to the literature by exploring both tools and processes to address improved virtual team collaboration through the lens of intercultural competence. Currently, there are many tools which allow cost-effective communication and document exchange (e.g. Slack, Google Drive, Skype) and facilitate virtual projects. We explore several challenges: the geographical distance (e.g. time zones) combined with cultural distance (e.g. different norms, values, and language) make it hard to establish an intensive, trusting work environment. As global networking increases, universities can better prepare students using cross-cultural project-based learning – a process – that involve university partnerships beyond reciprocal on-campus residencies. We offer a process model and four experiential project-based learning ideas designed to develop cultural competence and virtual team skills, and that address challenges such as differences in academic calendars, student work styles, time zones, and educational norms.

1. Introduction

In many organizations, international collaboration is a component of daily business, whether between co-workers operating on different continents, overseas suppliers, or customers located anywhere in the world. Nevertheless, many collaboration efforts have suboptimal results. This is due to factors such as expatriate failure and an inability of managers to adapt to global or overseas business differences (Johnson et al. 2006). Cross-cultural projects access different perceptions of problem statements, products and procedures, and offer innovative resources and knowledge to emerging new ideas.
Currently, there are several tools (e.g. Slack, Google Drive, Skype) that allow cost-effective communication and document exchange, that can support these globally dispersed, virtual team projects. Nevertheless, these projects can still create challenges for students and instructors. The geographical distance combined with, among others, different manners, wording, precognition, values and difficulties in communicating in foreign languages, make it hard to establish an intensive work environment. As global networking steadily increases, optimizing virtual project outcomes becomes more crucial. Universities can help prepare their students through cross-cultural project-based experiential learning. Learning from experience includes the process of grasping experiences, interpreting someone else's ideas and insights and the ability to reflect via observation (Ng et al. 2009).

This paper gives an overview of the complexity and challenges in cross-cultural project-based learning. It highlights crucial points that have to be considered when doing these international, virtual projects. Furthermore, it offers approaches for the implementation of virtual teams in university projects under consideration of the short overlapping timelines resulting from working with universities in multiple countries. Four

different project-based learning ideas will be illustrated and evaluated through best practices procedures and components. These approaches combine different universities and companies to act internationally to achieve the highest output for student international skills. Guided by the research literature, a model was developed to explore drivers of success and failure of virtual, international teams. Qualitative data, including interviews of key stakeholders, from past collaboration between a small private US university and a German university of applied sciences (Hochschule) of a similar size, was collected and used as a basis for evaluating this model and developing recommendations.

2. Brief Literature Review

Working in global organizations and the increasing use of technology continuously changes the work environment. In many contexts, face-to-face meetings have been replaced with virtual meetings that include participants from many different locations (global virtual teams). These teams require an open-mind and global thinking, which often requires adaptation, flexibility, and enhanced communication skills.

Virtual teams are geographically and/or organizationally dispersed and use a combination of telecommunications and information technologies to communicate in order to accomplish an organizational task (Hunsaker & Hunsaker 2008). The challenge of global virtual teams is therefore to overcome differences in work regulations, decision making and expectations. When the virtual teams are globally dispersed and include team members from different national cultures, complexity increases. These globally diverse and virtual teams are the focus of this paper. If individuals identify with the team, there is a higher degree of trust, commitment, cohesion and dedication (Au et al. 2012). Taras et al. (2013) showed that language differences, cultural diversity, time-zone differences, and communication barriers are external issues while doing an experiential learning project. Coordination, however, was the biggest challenge (Taras, et al. 2013).

Through participating in global virtual teams, participants get firsthand experiences in international and virtual collaboration, as well as cross-cultural encouragement, information exchange and interactive learning (Taras, et al. 2013). Working with people of diverse cultural backgrounds on common goals presents a unique opportunity for learning. Through this interaction, they learn about preferences and make links between culture and behavior. Research suggests that success in virtual global teams is a developmental process that enhances the individual's ability to become culturally competent. To achieve the highest level of cultural competence, a range of learning experiences, ranging from didactic programs to intensive cultural experiences, should be considered (Ng et al. 2009). Didactic programs include diversity or cross-cultural training, which concentrate on knowledge, skills and personal attributes. This training should help to overcome cultural distances by using the appropriate tools, if the environmental barriers require it (Johnson et al. 2006). Training is most successful if the focus is not primarily on culture-specific knowledge and learning modules have a clear structure. At the end, the level of effectiveness has to be evaluated to make sure that expectations and goals were achieved (Johnson et al. 2006). Intensive cultural experiences mean behavioral learning through looking at cultural competence in its entirety through interacting in a foreign working environment. To achieve intercultural competence, training should focus on attitudes, respect, openness and curiosity, knowledge and skills as cultural self-awareness, cultural knowledge and observation skills, internal outcomes as informed frame of reference shift as adaptability, and external outcomes as effective and appropriate communication and behavior (Deardorff 2006).

Individual cultural competence can be enhanced through development of team trust. Therefore, for building cultural competence, trust is even more important than training (Erez et al. 2013). To develop trust, risk and interdependence are two crucial conditions. Trust helps team members to identify themselves with the team and have a feeling of belonging. Trust increases an open communication about values, norms and customs and reduces the risk of closing oneself off (Erez et al. 2013).

3. Working Model

The curriculum of experiential learning should include concrete cultural experiences and reflective observations to improve cross-cultural skills and competences (Mikhaylov 2014). Foundational courses in International Management often serve as focal points in developing cultural knowledge through textbook examples or case studies. In most European and some US universities, these foundation courses are taught alongside foreign language, for example Business English in Europe. Experiential learning differs (and builds on foundational courses) by offering participants the direct opportunity to apply the foundational skills in a real-world context.

3.1 The Virtual Team Project

To help develop cultural competence and virtual team skills, students from the US University and the German University of Applied Science were assigned to a project to be completed in virtual teams. For the US students, the project was part of an international study class that culminated in a three-week visit to Germany. For the German students the project was part of an elective course. Each team included at least two students from each university. The teams were provided with several technological tools to use for communication and document sharing. Teams were given basic instructions on how to work together and what the steps of the project should be. The final deliverable for the project was a team presentation to be delivered during the time when the US students were in Germany.

This specific cross-culture project-based learning encountered problems. To better understand the challenges, students that participated in the past projects at both universities were interviewed by the research team. The main problems reported were related to time, motivation, and unclear tasks with not enough milestones.

Cultural understanding is more likely to occur if participants have enough time to develop relationships (Crossman et al. 2011). As the academic calendars at the two schools were different, there were only short time slots where both schools were in-semester and cooperation between the two was possible. Secondly, the time restrictions meant that students needed more encouragement to interact from the beginning of the project, and more specific instruction on how to understand and manage the initial social and logistic challenges about learning and interacting in virtual groups (Crossman et al. 2011). Consistently, participants at both schools reported that they did not have enough time to build trusting work relationships. Therefore, the most commonly reported issue was time. Even though it is possible to build up a relationship in a short time, a team might fail if they procrastinate on the project (which was common) and postpone this initial team-building processes until the end of the project. Therefore, an open atmosphere and early intervention to develop trust is crucial (Hunsaker & Hunsaker 2008). Some key factors in developing trust are the direct personal contact between professors and learners, the promotion of genuine teamwork between the students, the promotion of active teaching, and quick feedback of the professor on good or bad process development and interim deliverables. It needs instructors who deliver clear messages about the project expectations and give accurate and timely information about the challenges of cross-culture work and learning styles.

The second most common issue was motivation. To develop motivation, it is important that instructors and participants adopt various strategies to foster engagement and formation of relationships. Motivation arises through a common goal, support, an opportunity to develop, a challenge, pressure, and one's own power and incentives. Strategies can include personalization, persistence, and using multiple communication channels. Personalization can be achieved through sending individual communications to group members. Challenges can be addressed by including both positive and negative outcomes in grading criteria and feedback structure, directly rewarding students for engaging in meaningful interactions with the virtual team members (Ng, et al. 2009). Persistence can be created through regular meeting times, including electronic 'drop-in's' by instructors for questions/answers, clarification, and informal feedback. Finally, motivation typically requires common goals. Through having the same assigned project task, and grading outcome weight as a percentage of a course grade, participants typically are more motivated to bring together different knowledge and perspectives. These cognitively complex factors provide some motivational basis for students to develop cross-cultural competence that goes beyond simple rote learning (Taras, et al. 2013).

Another issue identified in the interviews were problems with task clarity and milestones. The course syllabus or project overview should explicitly state the task, milestones and weekly assignments to reduce misunderstandings. Students at different schools should get the same syllabus or instructions. To achieve the highest outcome of experiential learning, a common environment for experiences, thinking, reflection and experiment should be created in both classrooms. For improved understanding of the project, it is also crucial to highlight the difference between "normal" classes and this experiential-future based project, as for some students, this may be a new type of learning experience.

3.2 Framework for Improvement

While the students had the tools needed for a successful cooperation, they needed a more structured process to help them use the tools effectively. Figure 1 shows the four phase every cross-culture learning project should include (based on Hunsaker & Hunsaker 2008, p. 94).

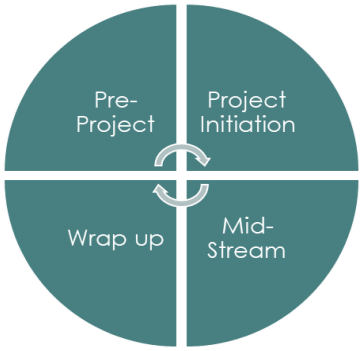

Figure 1: Steps of cross-cultural based learning.

The Pre-Project phase is to get to know each other. In this stage the concrete experience will be presented, general conditions will be established, and project milestones will be explained. Clear communication with specific instructions is required to coordinate the projects' work effort. A fair and equal environment among the team members can be provided through a focus on common goals, equal status, and support from course instructors (Taras, et al. 2013). Specific learning objectives built into these projects should focus on reasoning skills, translating experiences and inductive logic to increase the understanding for other cultures. Specific training aspects built into these projects should recognize global systems, discuss world events, and create awareness of potential differences in values, attitudes, and behaviors. This first phase is the most crucial to identify team classifications and make clear statements to avoid uncertainties in the project.

In the Project Initiation phase, participants are organized in teams and get to know each other. The students can do a fact-sheet about themselves with biographical data, personal interests and picture. Exercises can help to get to know each other on a different, fun level or to understand the cultural differences. The goal of these exercises is to familiarize team members with each other. Right at the beginning, team collaboration rules should be specified. This will help with communication and decision-making early in the team process and should include deciding what virtual collaboration tools should be used (Taras, et al. 2013). A team charter is a good tool to document guidelines concerning scheduling, coordination, workload distribution and work conditions. The longer the period between the meetings, the more the team members and goals drift apart. Attention is, according to social-learning theory, an important factor for learning in virtual teams (Taras, et al. 2013).

The Mid-stream phase is the actual conversion of the task. Teams start working on their task. Tasks can either require use of pre-existing knowledge or require new knowledge acquisition. It might be desirable to generate both self-awareness of existing knowledge resources and gaps through team reflection and assessment. Reflection is an important aspect of intercultural projects. Students should reflect the impact of working on tasks especially with regard to intercultural communication and relationships in online groups. Therefore, course instructors might wish to encourage students to write in a journal to document their learning points and their cross-cultural experiences. Documenting experiences and thoughts helps to compare experiences with expectations (Ng et al. 2009). The journal can demonstrate if students are able to grasp and transform the experiences.

The Wrap-Up phase reviews and evaluates the accomplishments during the project. Therefore, this step mostly consists of feedback and surveys. Students have different perceptions about difficulties before the project and after they participated in the project. Therefore, a Pre-Project and Post-Project survey can evaluate the most relevant concerns. Using common questions in the Pre--Project survey as in the Post-Project survey helps to see the personal improvement during the project. The instructor should give feedback at the end of the project. Feedback can include achieved score and reflections on behavior. It is also important to get feedback from peers. Recognition from peers can have a higher impact and more influence than getting feedback from a professor. Cultural differences in how feedback is given and received as well as clear guidelines and expectations should therefore be focused.

4. Recommendations

In the following section, four different global education collaboration examples will be presented to develop intercultural competence through virtual team projects. Each of the examples uses the basis of the literature review and the four steps of cross-cultural based learning (Taras, et al. 2013) to promote effective use of team collaboration tools and processes.

4.1 Lecture

The first cross-cultural project-based learning idea can be conducted in lecture form. A professor teaches the concepts that are important to execute the project. These classes can be conducted in a classroom or as an online class. Depending on the time, students could teach themselves through collecting information and providing them to teammates. The lecture schedule includes about 16 weeks of classes, whereas typically only 7-8 weeks overlap in the US and German academic calendars. After learning the basic concepts, the students work within the context of the lecture to complete the team project.
Important for students enrolled in this class is that they work together and are supported by professors and perhaps by a teaching assistant (TA) from each country. The key issue in this concept is to find a suitable time to combine learning and working on the project even though the semester schedules are shifted. The lecture project-based learning concept has to include the four steps described earlier (Taras, et al. 2013). Furthermore, the Mid-Stream step was broken down into four phases to specify and understand the different project components (Table 1). In this instance, we show an example from an international sales project, in which teams were asked to analyze US and German markets for a particular product and propose a sales strategy. Each step should take around one week. Even though the goal of these projects is to prepare students for the interaction in a multicultural work environment, knowledge should be transferred and applied to embed into an experiential learning environment. To evaluate if students understand the materials, instructors could assign some exercises that require students to use their learned knowledge in a certain context. This exercise can be for example a recorded Skype exercise where students have to use certain knowledge. Recording the session helps the coordinator to see if students understand the context correctly.

Table 1: Lecture Project time schedule

Pre-project	Project Initiation	Phase 1	Phase 2
Preparation, explanation of tasks and milestones, conduct classes	Getting to know each other, create team charter	Define product and competitors, analyze markets	Market entry strategy, define target group
Phase 3	**Phase 4**	**Organizational Issues**	**Wrap-Up**
Sales strategy and channels, After Sales	Bring ideas together, create presentation	Layout for presentation, clarify guidelines, create personal fact sheet	Practice and record presentation, Feedback, evaluate journals and surveys

4.2 Independent Study

Independent study means that students work together in a small group with a professor on a specific topic which is not part of the normal curriculum. This allows students to choose a topic which they have a passion for and develop this topic for credits independently. Alternatively, students could join a group that has already been formed in order to gain the virtual team experience. We recommend that an independent study group should contain no more than four students, two from each location.

The independent study project-based learning concept has to include the four steps described earlier. The Mid-Stream step was broken down into three phases to specify and understand the different components (Table 2). Each step should take around one week. The whole project should be conducted for four to six weeks.

Table 2: Independent Study Project time schedule

Pre- project	Project Initiation	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Organizational Issues	Wrap- Up
Preparation, explain task and milestones, conduct classes and / or training	Getting to know each other, create team charter	Determine and define topic, start research	Make in-depth interviews about topic	Analyze interview, literature research	Layout for presentation, clarify guidelines, create personal fact-sheet	Practice and record presentation, Feedback, evaluate journals and surveys

Independent studies differ from normal classes because the level of experiences is different due to high student interest in this topic. Normally students choose the topic individually or together with their professors. In the context of cross-cultural based-learning projects, the professor could decide the overall topic and students have to develop their own explicit topic they want to work on. To come up with an answer for the topic, the independent study could include literature research and in-depth interviews to make assumptions through interpreting these results. At the beginning, training could take place to indicate the rules of academic writing. This might, among others, include proper quotations, how to write properly and how to conduct and interpret interviews. As students work independently, it is important to get continuous feedback through the coordinator or the professor.

4.3 Case Study

A case study refers to a real case from the (economic) practice or environment. This is a shorter, more constrained project than an independent study, based on the circumstances described in the case, it will be analyzed and discussed to find alternative solutions. Even though a company's name appears in the case, it does not necessarily mean that the company has to be involved in the project. For the case study students should use their critical thinking and apply intercultural research to solve the problem.

The case study project-based learning concept has to include the four steps described earlier. Furthermore, the Mid-Stream step was broken down into three phases to specify and understand the different components (Table 3). The first two steps should be done promptly, in less than one week. Each remaining step could take one week. Depending on the scope and difficulty of the case, the whole project should be conducted between three to five weeks.

Table 3: Case Study Project time schedule

Pre-project	Project Initiation	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Organizational Issues	Wrap-Up
Preparation, explain tasks and milestones, conduct classes,	Getting to know each other, create team charter	Determine and define topic, Start research	Determine data gathering and analyse techniques	Collect data in the field, evaluate and analyze the data	Layout for presentation, clarify guidelines, create personal fact- sheet	Practice and record presentation, Feedback, evaluate journals and surveys

One idea for a case study could be to develop an idea for a new sustainable product, conduct an opportunity analysis and select a market. The recommended strategy then has to be presented. A best practice example for this concept could be the "X-Culture Project"19. The coordinator has to provide students with ongoing materials and support them with research issues, documentation issues or other issues. If several teams are involved, an online- discussion might be considered to look and evaluate different solutions from different views. Cross-cultural teams could also participate in one of the many case competitions hosted by universities around the world.

4.4 Forum

The fourth project-based learning idea is a Forum. A team of four to five students would work together and deal with a specific subject. The aim of the Forum is to provide students, other members of the university and the interested public with an insight into a current and relevant topic from another perspective. The topic could be a current topic in the fields of business, politics or society. This topic can be presented and prepared in different ways. The four steps for this type of project including three different phases of the Mid-Stream step are shown in Table 4. This is a much more in-depth project that could be conducted over an entire year.

Table 4: Forum Project time schedule

Pre-project	Project Initiation	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Organizational Issues	Wrap-Up
Preparation, explain tasks and milestones, conduct classes,	Getting to know each other, create team charter	Define topic, start Research	Define communication channel to	Prepare technique like writing a newsletter, training, pitches etc.	Implement selected technique, clarify guidelines, create personal fact sheet	Practice and record selected Technique, feedback, evaluate surveys

After the students complete their research, the goal of the forum project is that students will develop a way to transmit the information to other students (at both universities) or to the public. The starting point and the motivation for the topic search can arise externally due to certain circumstances or internally through certain interests. For the success of this concept, students need a clear objective and strategy, an organized planning provided to the target groups, an integration

and demonstration of social responsibility, solid planning and trustworthy communication, and if required, ask and integrate a representative. A representative can be either a spokesperson or a representative from an organization.

The organization team should convince people to get another understanding or another point of view of a certain topic. Therefore, for example, a public panel discussion, a newsletter, pitches, training, or a combination of those could be considered. If a public panel discussion is considered, business cards should be set up and students could try to find a suitable speaker, think about an opportunity to transmit the topic and organize the speech. This panel discussion can either be recorded or each university can organize their own panel discussion, but the content of the presentation should be the same.

5. Conclusion

Global learning is a pedagogic response to globalization processes. Studies show that cross- cultural learning can be best accomplished using experiential techniques (Ng et al. 2009). However, experience showed our research team that specific guidance on both the tools and processes are needed for cross-cultural experiential learning; straightforward "learning by doing" methods can allow too much autonomy that causes disruptions in team process formation, trust formation, and ultimately individual learning and team performance. The process described above should help students more effectively learn intercultural competency, virtual team competencies, and lead to a greater ability to adjust in a multicultural work environment. The experiential dimension of these projects is to find a link between cross- cultural competence and the motivation to work in a multicultural team. Cross-cultural based learning projects can be implemented in a lecture form, in a colloquium form or as a Forum.

As virtual teams normally often exist with participants in more than two locations, future research should focus on how additional universities can be implemented into these types of projects. Even though it could be hard for students to cooperate with more than two different universities, these projects should represent real life cases that happen in companies with which students later on have to deal.

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