



Intercultural Perspective in Blended Mobility

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	ABSTRACT
<p>2016 Research Leap/Inovatus Services Ltd. All rights reserved.</p> <p>DOI: 10.18775/jibrm.1849-8558.2015.54.3001 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.18775/jibrm.1849-8558.2015.54.3001</p>	<p>Blended Mobility combines physical mobility and the blended learning approach. In a blended mobility setting the students can get international experience without spending a full semester abroad. Typically, the students will participate in a project (learning) for several months, communicate virtually, and are abroad for a shorter period (for example, two weeks). Blended mobility has many positive impacts on students and their careers. With blended mobility, we foster internationalization of education, promote students' employability through non-formal learning not requiring curricula changes, promote international experience of undergraduate students and boost the provision of professional skills, support collaborative learning and critical thinking. By participating in the blended mobility, students also have to cope with the intercultural perspective. In the case of physical mobility for a full semester, they have to cope with different language, culture, way of life, food, daily communication for example. However, while students are physically present, they are able to cope with this on the basis of observing their new cultural environment, they can ask home students and other people for help, but when students communicate virtually, they have less possibilities to recognise the before mentioned differences. They can still ask others, but they cannot observe the cultural environment of others, or only with a very limited view. In addition, if they are physically present for just a short time – for example, one or two weeks, the intercultural perspective can be quite a challenge for them, not only because of the short visit in another culture(s) (two weeks physical mobility can be connected to two different locations and cultures), but especially because, at the same time, they also have to cope with the many different cultures of other students involved in the same project (learning). They are also faced with different cultures of their teammates during the virtual period, and this is a special challenge as well. Because of that, we have to prepare students on blended mobility even more carefully than for the long-term physical mobility. In the paper, we will present our experiences with intercultural perspectives in blended mobility in the frame of the blended AIM project. We will present the state-of-the-art in the project, cultural preparation and students' opinions, as well as teachers' observations.</p>
<p>Keywords: Cultural Environment, Blended mobility, Cultural communication, Cultural differences</p>	

1. Introduction

In the literature, we can find descriptions about blended learning with different definitions and understanding (Okaz 2015), (Zacharis 2015). In our contribution, blended learning is a part of blended mobility inside the blended AIM project (Blended Mobility 2018), Application Form blended AIM (2016). It is presented as a combination of everything, from face-to face education at home and abroad, working in a virtual environment, using tools and platforms, as well as being involved in different communicational and organizational situations, supported by technologies like Skype, (Skype 2018), Slack, (Slack 2018) and Trello (Trello 2018) in which participants have to communicate in different languages, or at least in a language which is not their mother tongue. Last but not least, in the case of blended learning, mostly no one mentions cultural diversity, although from a technical point of view we are faced with different cultures (different tools and support), but we can also expect participants from different

nationalities as well as professional areas (Christensen and Delahousse 2003) Further, in blended mobility, the intercultural perspective is one of the facts that the participants have to face. Meeting participants with different cultural background (national identity, different areas of expertise) can be an important challenge, especially in the case of communication in a virtual environment, which is an essential component of blended mobility and should, therefore, be duly taken into account. Before introducing the details of those problems, we want to introduce and define the concept of intercultural perspective and culture through different definitions and authors (Welzer and Družovec 2017).

The word culture has grown over centuries to reach today's broad understanding and meanings. It has been conceptualized in many ways from art through culinary and sport. It is also known as a set of customs, traditions and values of a society (ethnic groups, nations). It is a system of meanings, it is

everything that is human made (Gudykunst 2003). Culture is also introduced as the set of knowledge acquired over time. It is not something that we simply absorb, it is something that we have to learn and absorb (Welzer et al. 2013).

In the present paper, we refer further to well-known researchers in culture, cross-cultural communication and intercultural perspectives. Between them, we have to point out Geert Hofstede (Hofstede 2001) and Richard D. Lewis (Lewis 2012). Hofstede defines culture as a collective phenomenon, because culture is shared with people who live or lived within the same social environment. According to his definition, culture consists of unwritten rules of a social game. It is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes a member of one group or category of people from other groups or categories (Hofstede et al. 2010). The other well known researcher in the field, Lewis, presents culture as an integrated pattern of human knowledge, core belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for symbolic thought and social learning (Lewis 2006). In his model (the Lewis Model of Culture), Lewis focuses on communication and interaction skills. He classifies cultures in three categories: Multi-active, linear-active and reactive, or dialogue-oriented, data-oriented and listeners (Lewis 2012).

Besides definitions given by both mentioned leading authors, many other descriptions of culture are available, so the concept of culture is also defined as an cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notion of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe and material objects, and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of a generation through individual and group striving (Welzer et al. 2013). Last but not least, culture can also be defined as a particular way of life of a group of people, comprising the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, traditions, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, worldviews, material objects and geographic territory. (Welzer and Družovec 2017).

On the base of culture, many other concepts were defined and introduced. Intercultural perspective, for example, is viewing a situation or concept through the eyes of an individual's native environmental and social influence. It is the influence that a culture and society has on a person's worldview and perspective. Intercultural perspective is an important concept in social sciences, because it is important to consider how an individual or group may perceive something based on the cultural and societal norms that they are used to. Intercultural describes communities in which there is a deep understanding and respect for all cultures (Cultural Perspective 2018). Intercultural communication is also connected to perspectives, and focuses on the mutual exchange of ideas and cultural norms and the development of deep relationships. In an intercultural society no one is left unchanged, because everyone learns

from one another and grows together (Spring Institute 2018). Cultural perspective also refers to the way in which individuals are shaped from their surroundings and, through this, develop their point of view on culture (Jandt 2004).

In our contribution we also have to be familiar with the concept of awareness. No, or poor cultural awareness, means poor understanding of the cross-cultural dialogue, which can lead to blunders and damaging consequences, especially in business, management and advertising, where cultural awareness seems to be of key importance for success. Foundation of communication and ability of observing our cultural values, beliefs and perceptions which, from the outside, are defined as cultural awareness (Quappe and Cantatore 2005). Finally, we can conclude that the culture is communication and communication is culture (Hammerich K. and Lewis R.D.(2013) Further, in our contribution, we will present the blended mobility through the blended AIM project and introduce cultural preparation of students.

2. Intercultural Perspective in Blended Learning and Mobility

Nowadays we treat research, as well as teaching, as global activities which are performed all around the world (Welzer et al. 2009). In both we have to deal with many associates from different cultural, language and professional groups (Porter and Graham 2016). We have to be aware about that, and we have to prepare scenarios on how to cope with problems that could appear in such situations, especially if students are involved in the mentioned activities. The mentioned situations are exactly situations of blended learning and mobility, so we are surprised that is hard to find such cases described in the literature.

There is a lot of research about structures, strategies and support in blended learning and mobility, as well as methods, but no discussions about intercultural perspectives in blended learning and mobility. Scenarios that we would like to point out are dealing with intercultural perspective in connection with the technology based obstacles. Distance learning, using Skype and Moodle, as well as some other more sophisticated tools, are enabling activities that we could not have expected not so long ago, but we also have to be aware about different (new) ways of teaching activities and communication. Further in this Chapter we will introduce the blended AIM project details and experiences collected during students' cultural preparation.

2.1 Blended Mobility

In the period in which we were celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Erasmus+ programs, students and other learners were looking for opportunities to benefit from such a mobility that enabled them to spend most of the time physically at home, where they also have opportunity for virtual mobility. Those decisions are mostly based on economical situation, family reasons, and other personal decisions. On the other hand,

students are more and more interested on cooperation in different international projects, where they expect to be involved on the base of blended learning situations, which means mostly or partly virtual inclusion in cooperation and minimal face-to face participation, mostly with home researchers. Actually, international projects are more or less organized in that way. Once or twice per year, partners meet face-to-face in selected meeting locations, report about their research work and results, and discuss open questions and further plans. During face-to-face meetings they also work in workshops on selected problems, that can include desk research, design and, last but not least, also programming and similar more technical oriented activities. After the meeting everyone goes home and reports to the rest of the national teams, which are further cooperating collectively. In such scenarios, misunderstandings, culture differences, as well as expert differences can appear easily. We have to deal with project teams that are usually multi-expert teams, not only multinational and multicultural teams. Those diversities can also appear inside national teams. All these are also characteristics of the blended AIM project - blended Academic International Mobility (Application Form blended AIM 2016). The Project started in 2016 and will finish in 2018. Blended AIM is the sequel of former collaborations between several European universities. One of the most valuable predecessors was the MUTW project (Multinational Undergraduate Team Work - funded by ERASMUS KA2 - 2009). This Erasmus project's main goal was to strengthen the students' communication skills by organizing them in an international, multicultural team. In the very first phase this was just an international team of IT students working together on a common project, collaborating mainly online. As a second step, the student team was extended with members from other study areas. Next to IT- students, designers got involved, as well as students from Business Development and Management. The technical outcome was enriched with design, and the resulting product was accompanied by a real business plan. Students learned to communicate throughout the borders of their own discipline. In between the former MUTW project (2009-2011) and the new blended AIM project (2016-2018), several editions were carried out just by involved partners without any EU financial support. During this period, goals were extended by involving companies as providers for real project proposals. With this professional involvement, students got a context which is international, multicultural, multidisciplinary and professional (Blended Mobility 2018). In the blended AIM project 10 partners are involved from 8 HEIs, 1 is an association and 1 is a company. An additional 3 associate partners join during the project from 3 HEIs. Altogether 10 countries are participating (Portugal, Belgium, Germany, Austria, the UK, Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Iraq, Slovenia). In each year's edition, 20 students are involved actively, as well as teachers from participating HEIs. Students are mostly undergraduate students from the last year of study, but, in some cases, also master

students are involved. The students are challenged by a company with a real-life problem. In each edition, students meet 2 times physically for a week and work face-to-face during the kick-off meeting and final meeting. In between these 2 meetings, they work together in a virtual way from their home HEI (University, Institution). Connection to the company (companies) is also mostly virtual and face-to-face during the mentioned meetings. The students are from different fields of study, such as: Business Development, Management, Electronics, IT & Design (Application Form blended AIM 2016) (Blended Mobility 2018).

In the first edition in 2016, there was no preparation for students in the field of intercultural issues and perspectives. Students were coming not only from the mentioned partner countries (8 of them), but also from some others, while they were studying at partners' HEIs but originating from other, not in the project, involved countries. In 2016, the decision was also made that two associate partners with their students from Iraq and Slovenia would join in the 2017 edition. All this and some experiences showed that students did not understand each other, either according to the national, nor the professional cultures, leading to the introduction of cross-cultural preparation of students in 2017. The preparation had two parts. In the first one technology was used. A PowerPoint presentation was distributed among students electronically and through the Slack system, e-mails with expectations and tasks were delivered, and students communicated virtually, not knowing each other in person, to prepare presentation for the kick-off meeting. Namely, among students, a short PowerPoint course about Cross-cultural communication was delivered, and countries were assigned to students to search about them with the point on stereotypes. In 2 cases from the same country, students were coming from different HEIs, so they had to cope together on the same assignment. In the PowerPoint course the following topics were discussed: Cultural awareness and cooperation, basic definition of cultures, misunderstanding situations, cultural stereotypes and cultural models (G. Hofstede model, R.D. Lewis model). In the assignment, students had to do the country presentation and point out the stereotypes. This presentation they did on the site of the meeting location in the face-to-face presentation to all other participating students and present teachers. Students from the original countries presented the comments on stereotypes. In this part the discussion was quite strong, with quite a few disagreements. After the presentations, the summary from the responsible teacher was performed, first on the presentations and comments (some comments were given also during the discussion and also other teachers were involved), and then a second cross-cultural lecture followed. It based also on the PowerPoint, but it was performed face-to-face, with the main topic working in culturally different teams. During the presentation, the following was pointed out: Communication Patterns, Concepts of Time, Concepts of Space, Lingua Franca

and Leading Teams. On the base of the given blended learning about intercultural perspectives, students have to work during the whole semester. Differences between them were present the whole time and, in some points, they limited their work, but, according to the in the first edition participating teachers in 2016, the communication was already less complicated. We found that we were not completely successful with the introduction of intercultural preparation of students, since the timing of live activities was not the most effective. Due to the preparation for another activity, which students assessed as more important, they were not collected, and focused on intercultural challenges.

On the base of those experiences we prepared the second edition of the cross-cultural preparation of students for the project edition 2018. Contents and assignments remained the same, just adjustments were done according to participating partners (one country less, one HEI more from an already existing country) and experiences from the previous edition (more time for students to prepare and communicate virtually, e-mail communication with the responsible teacher, a more appropriate schedule for students). Also, the content of the virtual and live PowerPoint presentations was improved (additional explanations, more focused content, orientation on positive stereotypes). The preparation has, so far, been very successful. Students were interested in the preparation and very motivated during virtual activities, as well as during the live session. Also the teachers were very much involved, more than in the previous edition. But more detailed estimation will be possible at the end of the first semester, when we will finally have the results of student cooperation and work at a distance. During the second face-to face meeting we plan to do some summary of intercultural perspectives, that students learn, as well as an evaluation questionnaire will be prepared.

3. Conclusion

As we described in the paper, blended mobility is accepted very positively by students, while they are able to get the experience of being mobile and abroad during the study period. Additionally, students also accumulate very valuable experience in working, collaborating and communicating remotely respectively in virtual environments, which, in global co-operation, research and teaching, is a precarious daily necessity, which involves more and more people. According to experiences that we collected during a longer period (Welzer et al. 2013a) many of participants in such activities, as well as some of our own in blended AIM projects, participating students believe that cross-cultural preparation is not needed and that they are culturally aware. However, most of the participating students, according to non-formal interviews and off-the-record communication, confirm that the preparation is welcome and helpful, especially in situations in which they are not able to communicate face-to-face with each other, or if they are using just audio connections. The preparation in its second

edition was also accepted very positively by teachers. As mentioned already above, we are collecting results, comments, reactions, and waiting on final reports, opinions, as well as on summaries that students had to prepare during their second meeting in June, 2018. Namely, on the base of the task that they have to present the assigned country by stereotypes, we expect that they will present the countries now by facts collected during the work on the project and two live meetings. We will conclude the cross-cultural activities with a short session in which we will present participating countries by results achieved from G. Hofstede and R.D. Lewis models and their comparison to the students' results.

We also plan to prepare an evaluation questionnaire to collect data about students and teachers experiences acquired during the preparation, all with the goal to improve the preparation in the next editions of the project. Namely, the consortium is also planning to work on the project activities after the EU funding, and cultural preparation will remain one of crucial objectives. Namely, the concept of culture does not represent an entity; in an independent object world it is more production and exchange of meaning or signifying practice, leading to what is distinctive about a way of life (Barker 2012). This is also what we can understand as cultural awareness (Quappe, Cantatore 2005). Last but not least, cultural awareness means that, already in the moment when we are planning blended mobility, we also have to think about the cultural awareness and build it into the programme. Appropriate timing of activities seems to have an important role.

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