Does my country's social media work for you? A virtual team project with an international twist.

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Does My Country's Social Media Work for You?
A Virtual Team Project with an International Twist

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"Performance more often comes down to a cultural challenge, rather than simply a technical one."
– Lara Hogan, Senior Engineering Manager of Performance, Etsy

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

According to a 2017 study by Forbes, Inc., in 2016, 500 companies earned roughly two-thirds of GDP in the US and 37% of the world's GDP-- nearly $28 trillion in revenues and over $1.5 trillion in profits.

The world's businesses are just that: world businesses. And to compete and be successful in these world businesses, no matter at what level of employment, employees need intercultural communication competency skills. The days of being fairly confident that employees within a division will share one's culture are over. Without employees who have the ability to understand and work within the framework of each other's cultural communication, those world businesses will falter.

However, although universities are placing an increasing emphasis on providing theoretical education in intercultural competence, studies from the workplace show that this increase in emphasis has not yielded desired results. In fact, the U.S. National Association of Colleges and Employers 2018 Jobs Outlook Survey found, among other results, that the percentage of graduating seniors and young employees who believed that they were proficient in global/intercultural fluency was much higher than the percentage view of employers (Bauer-Wolff, 2018). As both teachers and researchers, the authors believe that part of the disconnect lies in the difference between learning about intercultural differences and actually experiencing those differences.

In an effort to promote intercultural competency in students despite the constraints that might prevent them from studying abroad, university instructors are bringing the world into the classroom through collaborative online international learning (COIL) (SUNY Center for COIL, 2010). International virtual team projects bring students into direct contact with counterparts across the globe and simulate real-life international project experiences. In globally networked learning environments (GNLEs), students are encouraged to apply theoretical knowledge to actual intercultural interactions (Starke-Meyerring, 2010).

OBJECTIVES

As we explored methods of experiential learning, we asked ourselves: W*hat happens when students are assigned to interact with students in a classroom in another country?* To answer that question, the authors designed an experiential intercultural collaborative project to expose students to differences in real-life situations.

The researchers/designers of this project come not only from four different countries —Portugal, Scotland, Germany, and the United States-- but from different disciplines. We are instructors of courses ranging from organizational communication, multicultural teamwork to social media communication, public relations and fashion management. Yet, in all our courses, a common thread existed: developing intercultural competencies and use of digital channels in cross-border communication as well as team project management skills. No matter what field a student enters after graduation, competence in these skills is vital to career success.

METHODS

For this exercise, the authors blended students from universities in these four different countries into one six-week virtual project. To further simulate a real-world experience, the courses all came from different disciplines, mirroring a team project that students would encounter in the real world. Often traditional group projects are comprised of students who are in the same course and hence studying the same material; in the real world, it is not uncommon to have one marketing person, one graphic designer, one finance representative, and so on within a team. By mixing disciplines, the project also enlarged the students' need to explain to the others why the discipline they represented needed the final project to include particular information as well as to work together.

To add to the real-world simulation and learning experience, the authors also blended different types of students. Students who were involved in this collaborative project differed from one another in more than their national culture. Students from the USA were enrolled in graduate programs in the areas of health and business administration; they were professionals seeking to further their careers and were taking part in either seated or online courses. Many of them had families. The Americans were diverse in terms of ethnic as well as regional backgrounds. The Scottish teams involved both seated and online students of public relations as well as fashion management, some of which were not originally Scottish, and long distance learners. The German teams were made up of seated undergraduate students of business administration (sophomores) and applied computer sciences (freshmen). The language abilities of the ACP students varied considerably and the majority were foreign students primarily from Northern Africa or raised in families of non-German ethnic origins. The students from the Portuguese university were undergraduate, primarily seated students of marketing and were ethnically homogeneous. Thus, in addition to national cultural differences, there existed disparities in ethnicity, generation, educational level, professional experience and family status.

The virtual teams project took place over six weeks and involved three phases. In the first phase students formed home teams and exchanged information about themselves using self-profiles in which they volunteered personal information concerning where they grew up, their families, hobbies and professions. These teams were expected to create a team identity with logo, slogan and a short video clip introducing themselves. Also in this stage students held their first icebreaking skype meeting with their counterparts in other countries. They agreed to a collaborative platform such as Google Drive, SLACK, Facebook group, or Google Hangout, where they uploaded their information and shared files, divided up tasks amongst themselves and agreed to a timeline for the project. Slack quickly emerged as the best platform for this project.

Each team was then asked to research a multinational company's online presence. They were to select a globally operating company and analyze components such as the company's web page, Facebook page, Instagram, Twitter feed, and customer blog in a collaborative manner, and share their findings with their teams. They then had to analyze the quality of the company's online presences in the team members' different countries plus identify major conclusions about that company's online presences concerning their cultural appropriateness.

The findings were then used by students in each country to complete a collaborative presentation as well as their respective coursework assignments. The presentation itself introduced the organization and its online communication tools, provided an analysis of its online presence in the different countries, and offered recommendations for improvements. The presentation had to use current software platforms such as Prezi or Sway, again for real-world application, and it had to be viewable completely online, with video and audio from each team member.

Before the assignment actually began, we surveyed the students to find out a baseline of comfort and experience with intercultural communications. Some students had had little experience in working with individuals from other cultures while some students had had a great deal of exposure. We did not differentiate in that experience level in assigning groups; again, that imbalance will exist in real-world teams.

RESULTS

The first essential lesson in intercultural communication is the understanding that different channels of communication, so-called verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal communication differs from culture to culture. Students are to understand that they send out subtle messages over which they have little control and are equally receiving messages from their counterpart(s) which may be misinterpreted (Mehrabian, 2009). Certain cultures may seem reserved, somewhat aloof, especially in the beginning of an interaction. This may be interpreted as disinterest or, at worst disdain, by another culture which is more extroverted, stands closer and volunteers personal information. In fact, cultures which tend to be more careful or possess a high uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1991) might feel overwhelmed and even skeptical of their culturally different counterparts, who from their standpoint are trying to build a relationship.

At the same time, certain cultures place value on direct messages, such as the linear cultures according to the Lewis Model (2012) with a low context communication style as described by Hall (1990). These cultures place less value on interaction to gain trust and their focus is on the task. Hall's definition of high context cultures describes those which expect their counterparts to read between the lines and be receptive to signals which are often hidden to non-natives (1990). These cultures may belong to the multilinear cultures according to Lewis (2012), ones which place high value on getting to know their counterparts and building trust and where communication is intensive in order to build rapport. For these cultures, the task is not in the forefront, at least not in the beginning of the interaction.

Courses involving intercultural competence require examining culture from a more theoretical standpoint. References to the groundwork done by social scientists such as Lewis, Hall and Hofstede to mention a few are helpful in order to recognize patterns in behavior of cultures. With the help of, for example, the Lewis Model students gain insight into the important differences in communication styles of regions and recognize that their own values and behavioral traits are not exclusive. This should reduce the tendency to ignore differences or hold on to notions of exclusivity, superiority and ethnocentrism. Furthermore, students learn to avoid reacting to counterparts along the lines of stereotypes and preconceived notions, which are often transmitted through the

portrayals of cultures in mass media. Students are encouraged to prepare for interactions with other cultures by referring to cultural frameworks and models in order to reduce the chances of misunderstandings and a communication breakdown.

A further goal in increasing intercultural competence is reducing the fear of venturing into the realm of multicultural environments. An increased understanding of cultural differences and their predictability lends a sense of control when dealing with other cultures and reduces anxiety as to how to behave and what to expect. Advanced preparation for an intercultural interaction with the help of cultural frameworks is certainly conducive to this goal. However, theoretical knowledge cannot replace actual interaction with other cultures. Experiential learning through a collaborative project across cultures exposes students to differences in a real-life situation.

The project aimed to develop the above mentioned elements of intercultural competence: an increased awareness of differences in channels of communication (verbal, non-verbal and para-verbal communication); increased appreciation of cultural differences; reduction in ethnocentrism and dependency on stereotypes; a reduction of fears when dealing with different cultures while increasing confidence in intercultural interactions; as well as an increase in the enjoyment of interacting with people of different cultures.

To find out if we had succeeded, the authors also surveyed the students post-assignment to see what, if any, changes had occurred in the students' recognition of their ability to communicate and work in intercultural virtual teams. It would be utopian to believe that a 6-week project could make enormous changes in the development of intercultural competence in our students; nevertheless, comparing the results of the first survey and those compiled after the project, some trends can be seen.

Overall, most students recognized their ability to succeed in interacting with their counterparts, thus increasing their confidence while reducing their fears. By stumbling over intercultural blocks (which are inevitable) and emerging unscathed, students began to appreciate the ambiguity inherent to multicultural interactions. In fact, students began to enjoy the interactions with counterparts of different cultures and recognize the strengths that other members of the team bring to the project, thus raising the value of both the interaction and the behavior of the other culture in their eyes.

Slight changes in attitude and awareness amongst the students before and after the project could be seen. These changes are supported by answers to the qualitative questions at the end of the second survey. While pointing out developments in cultural sensitivity after taking part in the 6-week collaborative project, the need for further data over the course of repeated projects in order to verify any significance this study might have must be stressed.

A look at the answers students gave concerning what they liked and disliked most about the project as well as what they would do differently and suggestions for future collaborations holds some insight. Among the worst or most difficult aspects of the project were mentioned: the different time zones, coordinating appointments to meet with different time zones and schedules, language barriers, coordinating tasks through social media, technological issues, differing expectations and deadlines as well as varying degrees of engagement and reliability between teams, working remotely instead of face to face, and lack of communication and/or organization in and between the teams. Concerning what the students would do differently, many of them criticized their own, their team's and/or their counterparts' lack of effort in managing time, assigning roles and delegating tasks. They stated they would plan better, engage members more, set up more frequent meetings and prioritize the project higher. A few students expressed the disappointment that they did not value the experience as highly as they should have, stating that in future collaborations they would learn more about the other cultures and enjoy the opportunity of working with foreign students more.

CONCLUSION

Today's graduates are entering the work force often with a lack of the skills necessary for success in a global marketplace. In addition to theoretical knowledge, employers are expecting practical skills in virtual project management, digital business communication and intercultural communication competency among others. Through a six-week virtual team project involving four countries, the instructors provided their students the opportunity to develop theoretical knowledge in cultural diversity through a hands-on experience. During this experiential learning experience, students encountered and managed differences in time zones, compatibility of digital communication channels, as well as in cultural approaches to managing time, importance of building rapport, expressing disagreement and so much more. Through discussing the cultural appropriateness of corporate communication, students became of aware of the need to adapt communication styles to another culture in order to be successful.

Results of both qualitative and quantitative research largely validate the instructors' premise that such international virtual team projects increase intercultural communication competency in students. However, further investigations need to be made. Nevertheless, the instructors are convinced that COIL projects such as theirs are valuable instruments for providing classroom experiential learning and developing essential skills for graduates entering the global labor market. Following the lead of universities such as SUNY, these instructors are creating networking platforms such as COIL Fellows at their own institutions in order to share their expertise and encourage colleagues to engage their students in COIL projects.

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