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Building intercultural competence through virtual team collaboration across global classrooms

CABS Chartered Association of Business Schools

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The Global Workplace

In 2016, the Fortune 500 earned two-thirds of the US GDP and 37% of the global GDP, with 28 trillion in revenue and 1.5 billion in profits.

- These companies employ 67 million people in 34 countries.

- The number of US workers employed by foreign-owned companies rose 22% over an eight-year period; compared to an average 3.6% increase in employment in U.S.-owned firms (Pew Research Trust 2017).

Intercultural competency shortfall?

- Theory vs competency
- Intra-university projects, UK based clients
- Mismatched student and employer perceptions
- Need for more intercultural, experiential student projects

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)

- Globally Networked Learning (GNL)
- Experiential Learning
- Heterogenous Groups
- Problem solving and innovation
- Emerging communication and learning technologies
- Cost effective and inter-disciplinary

COIL Project Learning Outcome

To develop intercultural communication knowledge, sensitivity, understanding and competency

Project Aims

- **Improve English language skills**
- **Improve the ability to work with non-native English language speakers**
- **Promote the use of digital channels in cross-border communication**
- **Cultivate team project management skills**
- **Develop an understanding of the communication challenges facing companies operating in a global context**
- **Improve collaborative writing and speaking skills**

International, virtual collaboration

- Four countries: Scotland, Germany, USA, Portugal
- October to November 2017 and 2018 – six week project
- Over 100 students in virtual teams
- Global industry clients / brands

Stephanie Swartz, Professor of English and US-American Culture at Mainz University of Applied Sciences in Mainz, Germany



The Student Brief:

In virtual teams:

- Research a named company operating in more than one country
- Identify corporate communication issues and solutions
- Prepare team presentation
- Submit individual reflective summary

The Process

The project involved three main phases:

- **Initial team building and role allocation**
- **Secondary research into the client**
- **Information sharing among the team and creating the combined presentation**

Project Challenges

- Different university schedules
- Varying course requirements
- Built-in project vs. add-on activity
- Diverse student backgrounds
- Various UG/PG and online/offline disciplines
- Different evaluation needs

Research Question

Do experiential international classroom projects using virtual team collaborations increase intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence in students?

Literature Review

Intercultural Sensitivity (Chen and Starosta, 2000)

Intercultural Communication Competence (Arasaratnam, 2009)

Mixed Methods Approach

- **Online survey based on IS and ICC scales taken before and after project**
- **Post-project qualitative questions to ascertain feelings towards the project and identify areas for improvement**

Measurement Criteria

- 1. increased awareness of verbal, non-verbal and para-verbal communication;**
- 2. increased appreciation of cultural differences;**
- 3. reduction of ethnocentric tendencies and stereotypes;**
- 4. reduction of fears and increase in confidence in dealing with other cultures;**
- 5. increased awareness of difficulties in dealing with other cultures.**

Survey Results

- Increased awareness of verbal, non-verbal and para-verbal communication
- Increased appreciation of cultural differences
- Reduction of ethnocentric tendencies and stereotypes
- Reduction of fears and increase in confidence in dealing with other cultures
- Increased awareness of difficulties in dealing with other cultures

Qualitative Responses - Positives

- new experience and opportunity to work with people from another culture
- friendly and inviting atmosphere
- real life scenario, finding solutions and solving problems
- 'forced' to work outside comfort zone
- experiential 'learning through doing'
- meeting new people, discussing cultural differences, engaging with another culture and hearing other points of view
- meaningful changes in their own approach to other cultures

Qualitative Responses - Negatives

- coordinating appointments due to different time zones and schedules
- language barriers
- coordinating tasks through social media
- technological issues (different levels of internet savviness)
- differing expectations and deadlines and difficulty agreeing what to do
- varying degrees of engagement and reliability between teams
- working remotely instead of face-to-face
- lack of communication and/or organisation in and between the teams

Qualitative Responses – Future Learning

- more effort in managing time, assigning roles and delegating tasks
- plan better, engage members more, set up more frequent meetings and prioritise the project
- value the experience more highly
- learn more about the other cultures and enjoy the opportunity of working with foreign students more

Conclusion

- Virtual team collaboration can develop intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence
- Valuable contribution to experiential learning pedagogy
- Significant potential for enhanced employability and graduate preparedness for the workplace.

Future Projects and Research

- **Improve timing, composition, task distribution and support for student teams**
- **Strengthen communication platforms and preparation**
- **Develop more consistent, integrated assessment criteria**
- **Include more frequent multi-way tutor communication**
- **Evolve and refine evaluation methods**

Relevant Literature

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Thank You!

Questions

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