

What's in it for us all? Instructor's Reflection on the realities of delivering Virtual Cross Cultural Experiences between UK/US students and Irish/US Students

Introduction

In an era of globalization, intercultural competency is one of the most important skills firms' desire of business graduates (Deardorff, 2006). These skills are vital as global markets for both products and human resources have become increasingly accessible with advances in information technology. Those employees with strong cross-cultural communication skills, international experience and intercultural savvy will be highly valued in the marketplace (Hopkins, Raymond & Carlson, 2011; Jackson, 2014; Johnson & Mader, 1992; Koenig, 2007). As a result, universities have the responsibility to nurture these intercultural competencies in their business curricula (Aistrich, Saghafi & Sciglimpaglia, 2006; Metcalf, 2013; Tanner, 2002).

In this exercise, we introduce the concept of the Virtual Cross-Cultural Experience (VCCE) as an innovative experience and pedagogical tool to help students develop their intercultural knowledge and cross-cultural communication skills as the context for the instructor reflections (Taras, et al., 2013). VCCEs are projects where team members from two different universities in two different countries form a global virtual team (GVT) using virtual technologies (e.g. Skype or WebEx) to hold group meetings to complete a project. As a result, students are able to obtain international experience, strengthening their cross-cultural communication skills with use of a GVT without the need to travel abroad. This exercise is designed for undergraduate teaching and will reflect on the work of four instructors in three countries who have provided their honest reflections on both the rewards and challenges of these

cross-cultural interactions from both the student and instructor perspective. Recommendations for future VCCE endeavors will also be discussed.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

The theoretical foundations for this study comes from two different research streams. First, experiential learning theory posits that individuals are more likely to learn and to learn more effectively when they are able to engage and interact with others, allowing for personal experiences as well as a period of reflection (Duus & Cooray, 2014; Erez, et al., 2013; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Although among students, global personal experience is most often obtained through a study abroad or international internship, often these experiences are very expensive or may require a time commitment that working students simply cannot undertake (Luethge, Raska, Greer , O'Connor & 2016). In addition, visa issues, language differences and new cultures may present additional challenges for students to gain work experience abroad. As a result, global experiences, such as VCCEs, offer a tremendous benefit to students, particularly as a first foray into international waters.

Another aspect of active learning comes from constructivist learning in the form of experiential reflection. Here we refer to reflection as deep thought and analysis beyond simple recollection of experience, as suggested by Brown (2001). As a form of active learning, reflection allows learners to create their own new knowledge and increase its usefulness by undertaking a deliberate effort to make sense of the knowledge (Ash & Clayton, 2004; Cooperstein and Kocovar-Weidinger, 2004; Good and Brophy, 1994). This learning can be based on personal reflection or the reflections of others (Berge, 2002). We have examined both the reflections of the instructors as well as the reflections of the students as told to the instructors.

We fervently hope that the student reflections have “biased” the reflections of each of the instructors.

A second stream of research related to this study is the area of global virtual teams (GVTs). A great deal of research has investigated challenges of face-to-face teams. Global teams face the challenges of most teams as well as the additional difficulties associated with cross-cultural communication issues. Furthermore, virtual teams face the added struggle of being geographically separated. A GVT faces all three of these sets of challenges (Clear & MacDonnell, 2011). A number of authors have examined GVTs, with many noting that one of the biggest factors impacting their success is the development of trust (Brandl & Neyer, 2009; Cramton & Hinds, 2014; Daim, et al., 2012; Ferreira, Pinheiro de Lima & Gouvea da Costa, 2012; Jarvenpaa, Knoll & Leidner, 1998; Sarker, Ahuja, Sarker & Kirkeby, 2011). Additionally, computer mediated communication (CMC) brings a whole host of challenges to GVTs, further impacting the success of geographically dispersed teams.

This exercise demonstrates the challenges of GVTs and addresses how best to develop experiential learning in a GVT environment using a VCCE. We consider two case studies in three countries, exploring the reflections of four instructors in business classes in Ireland, the UK and the US.

Learning Objectives

1. To educate Lecturers on the role of cross-cultural collaboration within a classroom.
2. To explore the opportunities that present themselves through the use of Virtual Cross-Cultural Experiences (VCCE).
3. To explore the challenges that present themselves through the use of VCCE.
4. To discuss the reflections of Lecturers who have experienced the VCCE.

Exercise Overview

The session will begin by introducing the project goals and rationale for developing two different VCCEs in the three countries. The exercise will be based on two case projects, which the participants will have the opportunity to read at the start of the session (See Appendix A). Since the two projects were slightly different, we will briefly discuss each of the projects, noting that first VCCE was relatively simple, while the second VCCE was relatively complex. We should note that what we learned from the first VCCE gave us an abundance of confidence, perhaps overconfidence, leading us to bite off a bit more than was sensible in the second VCCE. It will be interesting to hear the reactions of the participants in the audience.

The next part of the session will address the reflections from the four instructors in both VCCEs. All four instructors agreed to reflect on a list of eight questions (See Appendix B). The reflections of each of the instructors have likely been impacted by the reflections of their respective students, as each of the instructors spoke extensively with students about their experiences.

We also will address challenges faced in both groups in terms of communication issues, cultural conflicts, and geographic distance. These challenges varied by country and instructor. How we recognized these issues, how culture affected the challenges, what each instructor did to address the challenge and what might be done in the future should provide for a lively discussion.

We also will discuss the rewards gained by both the students and instructors in all three countries. Again, the participants may have some very interesting ideas about possible rewards

that have yet to occur to us. Finally, recommendations for future VCCE projects will be discussed. We believe that our recommendations could be further refined based on the knowledge of individual participants at the conference.

Appendix A- Case Projects

The Context

This innovative experiential exercise was developed in conjunction with a project grant from the Procter & Gamble Company to advance global innovations in curricula, with a focus on innovations that could be transferred across academic fields and institutions. The grant allowed for the purchase of 20 iPads to be used by US students, with each iPad loaded with WebEx software for facilitating virtual meetings. It should be noted that conferencing technology, such as Skype and WhatsApp, are widely available and equally effective, and as a result, grant funds would not be necessary to replicate a project like this. This study was specifically designed to 1) undertake a VCCE in the US and UK, and 2) complete a second VCCE in the US and Ireland, in order to explore whether cultural differences might have an impact in the implementation, effectiveness and challenges of using global virtual teams in the classroom.

Case Project 1- UK / US

The UK/US project was undertaken in two Managing Diversity classes. The UK class consisted of 18 undergraduate students, where the project encompassed 100% of their grade. The US class contained 32 undergraduate students who were enrolled in a traditional face-to-face class, where the project comprised only a portion of their grade. The project required the identification and analysis of an organization with a high profile diversity problem for a firm that operated in both the UK and the US.

Case Project 2- US / Ireland

The Ireland/US project was undertaken in two Global Marketing classes. The Irish class consisted of 101 Irish students, while the class in the US had 30 students. Multicultural teams were comprised of 3-5 Irish students and 2 US students on each team. The project required US teams to develop a SWOT analysis while requiring US individuals to develop target market strategies for a particular problem involving cold water washing (Tide detergent) and marketing mix strategies to solve that problem. The Irish project had students working in teams, but the project deliverable was an individual paper developing a globally scalable conceptual idea and long term activation plan across various touch points that would lead to Tide's objective of converting 70% of wash loads into cold water by 2020 (i.e., changing the consumer habits in the way they do their laundry – switch to cold water washing - using Ariel).

Appendix B

1. Why did you get involved in this project?
2. How did you meet the instructor? What was your initial reaction to the first engagement with co-instructor?
3. What did you see as the purpose of this project?
4. What did you perceive would be the challenge in delivering this project (if any)?
5. What did you see as the advantages or disadvantages of working in mixed teams? (global)
6. What did you gain from this experience?
7. What do you think the British/Irish & US students gained from this experience?
8. If you were to do this project again, how would you do it? (same/different)

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