**New opportunities in challenging times: The story of a virtual cross-cultural service-learning project**

The pandemic has changed the way students experience higher education in many ways. What was supposed to be a time to mingle and make lifelong friends is for some students a dreadful experience that left them abandoned and lonely. To enrich students’ experience during these difficult times, the two presenters teamed up and incorporated a virtual cross-cultural service-learning project into their Business Ethics Syllabus. Even though this project was sparked by the void of the Pandemic, we believe it has potential to supplement management education for year to come. This session will discuss the planning, implementation, and lessons learned from our virtual cross-cultural service-learning project and provide interested educators with a plan to start their journey.

**Introduction:**

International student exchange not only provides students with an extremely valuable learning opportunity but also enables them to immerse themselves into a new culture, increase their professional network, and make lifelong friends. The positive effects of studying abroad on academic achievement, personal growth, cognitive development, and career advancement have been well documented (e.g., Cebolla-Boado, Hu, & Soysal, 2018; Dwyer, 2004a; 2004b; Georgiev, 2014; Lee, Therriault, & Linderholm, 2012; McMillan & Opem, 2004; Mohajeri Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Shenker, 2013). It is therefore not surprising that in 2019, over 1 million international students studied in the United States (Open Doors Report, 2019), nearly 700,000 in Australia, and nearly 650,000 in Canada (CIC News, February, 2020). At the same time, 11 percent of Canadian students, 16 percent of American, and 19 percent of Australian students studied abroad (Government of Canada, 2020). However, the Covid-19 Pandemic turned the student exchange world upside down. With almost no notice, millions of students around the globe had to change their plans and faced an uncertain future. The Pandemic ripped an enormous void and while some students may be able to postpone their exchange, others may never get to experience this opportunity. Consequently, university administrators and educators alike are trying to find alternative ways to add an international experience to the curriculum.

The horrendous effects of the Pandemic were not limited to international exchange programs but were felt throughout academia. With little to no notice, many educators had to find ways to deliver their material online. The switch to the virtual classroom comes with many challenges (Arbaugh, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 2013). However, it also provides educators with great opportunities as it enables students from around the globe to work together and exchange ideas in the virtual space (Hiltz, 1994; Porter, 1997). We realized this opportunity in August of 2020 and have been working together since then to develop a 9-week cross-cultural service-learning project into our business ethics curriculum. The idea was that students from Mexico and Canada work together and provide consulting services to one Mexican and one Canadian Non-Profit organization. However, in January of 2020 (and one week before classes started), the University in Mexico postponed the start of their semester. As a result, we had to reschedule our project, reduce the contact hours to 4 weeks, and focus on supporting only one Non-profit organization. While this unexpected last-minute adjustment was challenging, we believe it demonstrated that even a four-week virtual international exchange can benefit service-learning partners and students alike and can be used in all management and organizational behavior classes at the undergrad and graduate level. While we initially started this collaboration to enhance student experience during the Covid-19 pandemic, we believe that it has the potential to enrich student experience far beyond that. The project is expected to eventually become part of the academic offering of both universities.

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**

Even though international exchange is the best way to develop students’ “capacity to critique the world they live, see problems and issues from a range of perspectives, and take action to address them’ (Leask, 2015, p. 17), the number of students who study abroad is relatively low (Kinginger, 2009; Papatsiba, 2006). To lower the barriers for students, administrators and educators started to take advantage of virtual exchanges, also known as online intercultural exchange (O’Dowd, 2007; O’Dowd & Lewis, 2016), telecollaboration (Belz, 2003; Guth & Helm, 2010), Global Virtual Teams (GVTs) (O’Dowd, 2017), internationalization at home (IaH) (Beelen & Jones, 2015) or Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) (Rubin & Guth, 2015). This virtual exchange can enrich the classroom by adding intercultural interactions with peers from a different cultural background (Dooly, 2017) and, in the past, has been primarily used in university language education (e.g., Brammerts, 1996; Eck et al., 1995; Warschauer, 1995; Shenker, 2013). Virtual exchange projects have also been linked to improved critical thinking skills, intercultural communication skills, and a better understanding of social-political issues (Helm, 2016; Starke-Meyerring & Wilson, 2008) and scholars have already stressed the importance of virtual classroom collaborations as a teaching tool in management education (Taras, Caprar, Rotting et al., 2013). However, O’Dowd (2017), reviewing the literature of virtual exchange in business studies, noted that virtual exchange initiatives in this area, while promising, are “relatively scarce and under-researched” (pg. 16) with only a handful of documented examples (e.g. Duus & Cooray, 2014; Lindner, 2016; Osland et al., 2004).

The Covid-19 Pandemic forced many employees to work from home and attend virtual meetings on a daily basis (Bick, Blandin, & Mertens 2020). While the rapid change was difficult, working from home allows employees to spend less time in traffic and more time with family (Dubey & Tripathi, 2020). The Pandemic demonstrated that many employees do not need to be physically present at work. Hence, we anticipate that many employees will want to work remotely even after the Pandemic is over. Remote work also allows organizations to access a global talent pool - which will likely lead to more multi-cultural teams in the future. We believe that virtual exchange in management education has the potential to effectively prepare students to successful enter such an increasingly virtually connected multi-cultural workforce by developing soft-skills such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, cooperation and hard skills such as the use of advanced technologies.

**Learning Objectives**

* To familiarize students with some of the recurring ethical problems faced by managers in a multi-cultural setting and develop their capacity to identify, analyze, and assess ethical situations using key normative concepts, principles, and approaches
* To allow students to reflect on their personal values and how they relate to their career as a professional business manager in a multi-cultural setting
* to familiarize students with technology essential for multi-cultural teamwork (Google-Meet/Zoom/Skype/Teams, Google-Classroom, Google Docs, Google-Forms, WhatsApp) and develop their ability to communicate and present complex ideas in English to different audiences.

**Exercise Overview**

The development of a cross-cultural service-learning project can - but does not have to be a major endeavor. It starts with finding a suitable exchange partner. In our case, our Universities are partnered with the Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration (CONAHEC). Conahec’s mission is to “advise and connect institutions interested in establishing or strengthening academic collaborative programs within the North American region and beyond”. In addition, Conahec recently announced that it is collaborating with the American Higher Education Alliance (AHEA) to increase their reach to faculty and students. X-Culture (<https://x-culture.org/>) is another organization that will support business faculty finding suitable virtual exchange partners. While working with a mediator provides access to a large network of interested collaborators and speeds up the process, it is certainly not required.

Looking for a virtual exchange partners requires a lot of considerations. Educators need to be aware what they want to get out of the virtual exchange. What learning objectives do you want to achieve? How will the multi-cultural component help you achieve them? How much of your class time do you want to invest? The virtual exchange can be part of the whole course or limited to a project. We planned for a nine-week interaction period but were forced to cut it back to only four weeks. Even though longer exchange likely amplifies the positive effects, there is still a lack of consensus of the right amount of “dosage” of virtual activities for student learning (The Stevens Initiative, 2020).

Once you are clear about your expectations, you can start looking for your virtual exchange partner. As noted, there are different agencies that can provide support, but you may also be able to find a virtual exchange partner at academic conferences such as MOBTS! During the initial meetings with potential collaborators, we suggest going over your expectations to see if the two of you are on the same page. Next, it is time to develop common learning goals and plan your lessons. The mayor challenge is to find a way to ensure students have ample opportunities to interact and work together. We recommend setting up multi-cultural teams ahead of the kick-off meeting and providing them with an ice-breaker exercises. Ideally, all students will share the same class time; however, due to potential time zone differences, this might not be easy. Alternatively, you might be able to introduce flexible class time where the teams can decide when to meet. Either way, we suggest that the teams keep meeting minutes and submit a weekly meeting report to ensure they interact on a regular basis and document the progress of their project.

**Session Description**

Introduction – 5 min:

After briefly introducing ourselves, we will ask the audience to introduce themselves and tell us about their experience with international student exchange and how they integrate a multi-cultural aspect into their Covid-19 syllabus.

What is virtual student exchange and our Journey – 15 min

We will familiarize the audience with the idea of virtual student exchange and see if anybody in the audience has had experience with it or considered it. If no member has implemented a virtual exchange, we will ask them to share their concerns.

Next, we will discuss our journey and welcome comments and questions. Specifically address the following questions:

* What motivated us to integrate a virtual exchange into our teachings?
* How much time did we spend discussing and planning the details of the virtual exchange?
* What precautions did we take?
* What challenges did we face?

Student feedback and conclusion – 10 min

Finally, we will present the good, the bad, and the ugly student feedback we received from our Canadian and Mexican students. We anticipate many questions regarding the development and implementation of the virtual student exchanges and also encourage feedback on how to further improve it. This information will be critical for the improvement and sustainability of the project.

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