Virtual Teams: Learning Intercultural Business Communication by Doing

Stephanie Swartz
Mainz University of Applied Sciences

Susan L. Luck
Pfeiffer University

While it is one thing to read about communication and work styles in other countries, experiencing it and working within it while also having to meet expected requirements of your own culture is something different altogether. Engaging students in team projects across borders using digital communication channels enables them to move beyond a textbook understanding of working interculturally in modern day work environments. This paper provides an overview and methodology of experiential international communication learning exercises involving virtual teams, as well as offers suggestions on how to set up similar international classroom learning experiences.

INTRODUCTION

In today's global society, teaching business communication fundamentals to prepare for a global marketplace is more important than ever before. Whether large or small, companies increasingly communicate internationally. Due to cost savings and other factors, a considerable amount of collaboration is carried out in virtual teams with the tendency rising.

Developments in technology, well-equipped universities with technical support and digitally savvy students all add to the mix which allows the conventional Business Communication courses to introduce modern and diverse methods of communication. Instead of sitting through power point lectures on the importance of intercultural competencies, students can make first hand experiences working in multicultural teams without leaving their campus.

PURPOSE

While it is one thing to familiarize students about the theories of (intercultural) communication and work styles in other countries, experiencing it first hand while also having to meet expected requirements of their own culture adds another dimension to the classroom. Adding the component of electronic communication channels, students acquire real-life skills through simulated international working experience. The combination of interaction with other students of foreign countries working on collaborative projects through digital means prepares our students for the challenges of global business.

METHOD

Participants

The American groups were comprised of part-time Masters of Business Administration students taking a degree-earning Business Communication course held by Susan Luck, professor of Business Communication. The German counterparts were part-time as well as full-time undergraduate students taking part in a mandatory Business English and Communication course held by Stephanie Swartz, professor of Business English. Age as well as family status varied between both courses considerably. In general the German students were balancing work with studies and thus were under time constraints similar to real-life project management pressures. It should also be mentioned that the German students had to satisfy an English language level prerequisite of upper-intermediate in order to maintain their admissions so that the level of English knowledge was relatively high.

The Task

Several virtual team scenarios were utilized in the US and German university classrooms which we would like to illustrate here. These scenarios can be adapted or expanded upon. The virtual team projects may involve both seated and online as well as hybrid classes. They also may involve teams across companies, regions and many countries.

One of these scenarios involves engaging two classes (in this case US-American and German) through discussion of a case study such as a cross-border merger. Each class represents the other company's interests and is required to negotiate on several issues such as HR policies or corporate identity using digital communication channels. The collaborations are finalized by means of a teleconference where both teams present their findings to each other and in front of the class.

A further project involves German and US-American classes, which are broken into groups and required to research on German companies located in the US, in this case Charlotte, North Carolina, or American companies located in the Rhine-Main region. The groups collaborate via skype and E-mail on issues such as communication difficulties between their respective parent companies and subsidiaries, lack of brand recognition in the foreign market or loss of image involving incidents such as data protection. Together the groups develop strategies for improving the situation. Their suggestions are presented to their respective classrooms, which serve as the board of directors of the companies involved.

Lastly, another possible form of collaboration involves students from different countries completing several tasks online. These tasks involve building a team, identifying different roles for the players, fulfilling assignments based on a case study and negotiating positions. Finally, results are presented to the class and collected in a collaborative document such as a memorandum to the board.

Method

Instructions were handed out concerning the task, which were purposely broad and open to interpretation. This approach was chosen as the focus was on the interaction between the different groups and not primarily the task at hand. Students were grouped together and were expected to create both a personal profile as well as a Team ID. They were encouraged to be as personal and creative as they cared to be. Then the German students were given the email addresses of their American counterparts and told to make the initial contact with their international counterparts. They were assigned the task of agreeing on a collaborative platform such as google drive to upload and share the profiles and Team IDs, as well as schedule an introductory skype meeting with icebreakers, delegate tasks and agree on a timeline. The instructors asked questions within the classroom setting as to what was happening but also concerning how the students were reacting to what was happening and why. We purposely remained in the background, giving just as much guidance as necessary to keep the project moving but allowing for students to make their experiences and solve issues themselves.

Assessment

The German students were expected to keep a logbook in which their benchmarks and progress were to be documented. All email correspondence or chat threads were to be included as well as personal comments concerning issues or questions that arose. This was to serve as a basis for the final written assignment to be handed in at the end of the project. In this written assignment (memo), students were to summarize the project, relate the subject of their negotiations with the other team as well as analyze their experience, using cultural theory to explain differences in communication styles between the Germans and the Americans. Finally, students were asked to give feedback and constructive criticism, making suggestions how this project could be improved in the future. They were also asked to evaluate the project and determine what value the project had for their academic and professional development. Lastly, students presented their project to the class, which served as a board of directors. The presentations were evaluated according to style and effectivity in convincing the board of their suggestions.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

While the German students were considerably more concerned with their language skills, both groups developed their verbal and written business communication skills. Whereas the German students learned that in an international negotiation small mistakes can be overcome and thus gained in confidence, the American students realized that they needed to limit the use of idioms or humor which could be misunderstood or hinder communication. The students also spent considerable time discussing what each country saw as appropriate for "business casual" and how standard legal requirements, such as random drug testing, taken for granted in America seemed to shock the German students.

Both groups profited from written and spoken communication with "real" Germans and Americans in a simulated business situation. Both gained practical experience in intercultural communication and through positive and negative reactions from both ends, learned important lessons in international negotiations. At the same time, both groups learned to dispose of certain cliches while stepping outside their cultural parameters.

Furthermore, the project demanded certain skills paramount to professional life such as time management, benchmarking, conflict management, project management skills as well as the effective use of digital media in a global format. Many of the students from both groups felt that they had gained invaluable experiences from the project, which would help them later in their professional careers. Once the project was completed, student feedback from both sides of the Atlantic was that they felt this was one of the best projects of their entire academic careers.

The initiators of the project learned important lessons on the application of technology in the classroom and the importance of good technical support, which other aspects to possibly add to the scope of the assignment, and how experiential assignments as applied to intercultural communication can enhance student learning outcomes.

To sum up, virtual team projects in cross-cultural classrooms enable students to move beyond a textbook understanding of working in a global environment and to experience firsthand working with people from another country using the English language as lingua franca but not necessarily native to all. Students become aware of differences in business communication styles and create strategies for effective negotiating across cultures. They also become aware of how many different interpretations of English can exist; not everyone interprets the same words in the same manner. Furthermore, students develop their project management skills, including awareness of scheduling over several time zones, as well as learn to utilize digital communication means effectively to reach a common goal. Lastly, by leaving their comfort zones and interacting with students of another culture, they develop confidence in themselves and learn how to deal with the ambiguity that comes with intercultural relations. To sum up, students acquire intercultural competencies, language and computer abilities as well as project management and negotiating skills essential for success in their future careers as global managers.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In today's global world, the likelihood of our graduates having to work in multicultural teams is almost certain. If the understanding of culture is extended beyond that of national cultures, then it is paramount that our future professionals develop skills with which they can operate successfully in diverse working environments. Language is only one of many hoops to be jumped through. Digital media is intended to make communication easier; however, technical glitches, delayed responses or different approaches towards the use of social media can complicate matters more.

One of the greatest challenges for teachers of Business Communications is making business diversity come alive in the classroom. Discussing language style and potential issues when communicating across cultures is valuable but the question remains whether any of those dos and don'ts are actually applicable once students leave the classroom and face their business partners across the bargaining table.

With this project American and German students learned firsthand how global business communication functions, where the pitfalls may lie and how to overcome cultural barriers while developing intercultural competencies imperative in a global business environment. Through a comprehensive applied project, students acquired skills beneficial for professional life far more effectively than through textbook learning.

FUTURE PROJECTS

While the German and American students experienced cultural differences, they are still both culturally very similar. Both are individualistic and competitive according to Hofstede (1991), as well as linear-active cultures (Lewis, 2006). In other words, while their communication patterns may vary somewhat, they still share very similar core values such as the importance of punctuality and direct communication (Hall, 1990). Adding additional classrooms of students from other parts of the world such as Southern Europe or South America, cultures which Lewis (2006) describes as multi-active, would create a more challenging intercultural experience. With greater emphasis on personal relationships and the more flexible, polychromic treatment of time as found in countries such as Portugal or Chile (Hall, 1990), students could possibly face greater challenges in terms of communication during the project. At present, a Portuguese class from the University of Aveiro and a classroom from the Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen, Scotland have joined the virtual teams' project. Next year a classroom from Universidad del Desarrollo in Santiago, Chile will be joining our collaboration. The addition of Asian and Middle Eastern countries would bring even greater authenticity to the project.

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