Collaboration Among Multicultural Virtual Teams

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INTRODUCTION

Due to the increasingly widespread use of various information and communication technologies (ICT), individuals from different countries and cultures are able to learn and work collaboratively in virtual environments (Mowshowitz, 1997). Electronic communication tools, such as chat, e-mail, and the World Wide Web, now make it possible for students and employees to communicate and problem solve with colleagues irrespective of geographical location (Scott, 2000).

One of the major downsides of this form of collaboration, though, is that members of a virtual team do not have the advantage of face-to-face interaction and communication. Instead they must rely solely upon an assortment of computer-supported cooperative-learning and class-work tools and strategies—some planned, some ad hoc—to coordinate resources (Bichelmeyer, Cagiltay, Evans, Paulus, & An, 2004). Unfortunately, little research has been conducted to systematically investigate the dialectic between culture and computer-mediated communication (CMC). There is currently an insufficient understanding of how individual learning and work, cultural features, and CMC mutually influence one another in a purposeful, virtual setting.

Undoubtedly, the ability to learn and work collaboratively within groups of multiple cultures is critical within and across nations as international workers and their families become more mobile and information technologies permit coordination irrespective of geographic location (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). A greater understanding in this area is especially important to begin to unravel myriad issues regarding group learning, work, and communication in multicultural, virtual environments. Especially important is the ability to cope with the potential negative aspects of cultural differences, affecting the satisfactory and productive partnership among people separated by culture and communicating via ICT.

As a way to begin to address these matters, this chapter reviews related studies in education and business to present the critical issues and challenges of collaboratively working and learning in multicultural, virtual teams. To conclude, it provides strategies to overcome and leverage similarities and differences inherent in team members, and points to the potential for further research and application in this area.

CULTURE AND COLLABORATION

*Culture* is a loaded term because much damage can be done when thoughtfulness, respect, and care are not prime goals. When handled appropriately, the concept of culture permits researchers and practitioners traction on the intangible aspects of coordinated activity among individuals comprising national or professional collectives. At its worst, it becomes an instrument for the clumsy manipulation or management of an important aspect of collaborative learning and work. In
an unsophisticated way, culture is used as a “glue” to
homogenize different views. With tact, it can be used
to appreciate the heterogeneous values and norms of
peoples of the world. It is in this sense that the term
is loaded. However, if we are to make progress in
bringing together individuals from different nations
to learn and work together, a better understanding of
the characteristics and nature of this phenomenon is
unavoidable.

To begin, scientific research on culture, as we con-
ceptualize the term today, began in the 19th century.
In 1871 English anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor
(1871, p. 1) defined culture as “that complex whole
which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law,
custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired
by man as a member of society.” The distinguished
American anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s definition of
culture is perhaps the most well-known. Geertz (1973,
p. 89) defines culture as “a system of inherited concep-
tions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which
men (sic) communicate, perpetuate and develop their
knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”

According to some researchers (Berger & Luck-
mann, 1966; Geertz, 1973), culture is the background set
of assumptions and values that structure our existence
and orient us through the events of our lives. Cultural
elements can only be learned by living in a society
for an extended period of time. Often, many people
unconsciously hold certain cultural beliefs, and this
may easily cause unintended conflicts among people
from different cultures (Hambrick, Davison, Snell, &

According to UNESCO (2000), cooperation and
appreciation among different cultures consequently is
essential for the promotion and building of global peace.
However, realizing this mission is by no means a simple
task. In today’s world—where the threat of terrorism
escapes no one—the need for communication between
individuals from different countries and cultures in-
creases exponentially. As groups and organizations
from different countries increasingly choose to use
virtual teams to arrange learning and work initiatives,
particularly given the availability and widespread use
of ICT, individuals around the globe are beginning to
participate collaboratively in what have been dubbed
multicultural “virtual communities” or organizations
(DeSanctis & Monge, 1999; Riel, 1993). According to
Hofstede (1997), a multicultural team is one composed
of members who have spent their formative years in
different countries and thus have learned different
values, demeanors, and languages.

In this chapter, the term collaboration loosely refers
to the mutual engagement of participants in a coordi-
nated effort to solve a problem. In their description
of a joint problem space, Teasley and Roschelle (1993)
claim that participants are responsible for not only solv-
ing a problem in collaboration, but also maintaining
a shared space where they can work on the problem
together by exchanging ideas. Although collaboration
may, obviously, take place face-to-face, our focus
here is on collaboration mediated by ICT. Examples of
collaboration might include the coordinated efforts
of technicians and engineers resolving problems with
equipment and gear (Evans, in press), high school peers
working jointly on a project to elaborate on national
dialects and customs (Bichelmeyer et al., 2004), and
scientists designing a new propulsion system (Maj-
chrzak, Rice, Malhorta, King, & Ba, 2000).

CRITICAL ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

The literature provides pedagogical recommendations
from several researchers regarding approaches to be
used in online environments in order to facilitate cross-
cultural learning. McLoughlin (2001), for example, has
identified 10 pedagogies for cross-cultural teaching
in online and technology-supported environments,
including creating virtual groups by focusing students
on common learning goals and shared knowledge,
creating learning tasks that foster reciprocal learn-
ing about cultures, and enabling students to present
diverse views.

The literature has also yielded cautionary tales and
advice from researchers regarding barriers and obstacles
to the successful completion of online cross-cultural
learning projects. In a project involving German,
American, and Canadian 11th- and 12th-grade students,
Muller-Hartmann (2000) reported that time constraints
and classroom requirements forced the redesign of
a collaborative project to use more teacher-directed
approaches. Similarly, McLoughlin (2002) reported
that an online instructional project with postsecond-
ary students could have been improved by providing
more specific objectives and more direct intervention
by tutors with discussion groups. In another study,
Cakir, Bichelmeyer, and Cagiltay (2002) reported that
culture may be responsible for differences in e-mail
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