Chapter 66

Facilitating Multicultural Student Team Engagement in Higher Education:
A Model for Digital Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces a three-phase model of multicultural online project team development in order to engage students in digital learning environments in higher education. To develop this phase model, we explored existing challenges and strategies of multicultural digital project teams by conducting a systematic literature review. We examined previous empirical studies, from 1998 to 2014, focusing on culturally diverse online project teams in higher education. The literature review identified several critical factors that affect the processes of culturally diverse online project teams. By synthesizing these critical process factors, we created an integrative phase model within the multicultural online project team processes, categorizing them into either a task or a socio-emotional process. The findings suggested that cultural diversity in teams negatively impacted the process factors, such as communicating, trust building, establishing expectations, intercultural learning, and knowledge sharing.

INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions are continually finding creative ways to effectively serve the needs of digital learners in modern technology-rich classrooms. For the past eight years, online course enrollment has grown at a faster rate than overall enrollment in the higher education sector (Allen & Seaman, 2014). According to Allen and Seaman (2014), "in excess of 6.7 million students were taking at least one online

course during the fall 2011 term, an increase of 570,000 students compared to the previous year" (p. 7). Their survey also revealed that 32% of students took at least one online class, and 77% of educators rated online learning outcomes as equal or superior to that of traditional class settings. This is a significant development in the academic environment. Tracking Online Education in the United States revealed that more than seven million students are now taking at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2014).

In addition, with the continued trend of globalization, the number of international students in higher education is rising. According to the Institute of International Education (2015), the number of international students in the U.S. increased by 10.0% to a record high of 974,926 students. As people from all over the world continue to come to the U.S., working in the diverse cultural environment has become a necessity rather than an option (Zakaria, 2000). This emerging trend is likely to continue, so serious research attention to globalization in education is needed. Specifically, the effect of cultural diversity among team members in higher education has both positive and negative effects. Research regarding international and domestic students in U.S. higher education has indicated that their interactions with each other have positive impacts on gaining educational, social, and cultural experiences (Hansen, 2006; Williams & Johnson, 2011). However, domestic students can feel reluctant to interact with international students due to cultural differences, language barriers, bias, and pressure for academic performance (Kimmel & Volet, 2012).

Despite studies that address the need for higher education programs to prepare students to work in globalized environments (Johnstone, d'Ambrosio & Yakoboski, 2010; Li, 2013; Yu, 2012), there is a dearth of research focusing on the development of online project teaming skills in higher education programs. In addition, framework guiding this digital team learning is lacking. This chapter explores this gap and offers a phase model as to how higher education programs can prepare students to collaborate in online project team settings, create learning environments, and facilitate change. This chapter aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the students' challenges when working with culturally diverse online project team members?
2. What are the best practices for instructors to facilitate a learning environment for cross-cultural project teams?

To answer the questions, literature pertaining to multicultural online project teaming in higher education will first be reviewed. Next, evidence pertaining to the critical challenges on multicultural online project team processes will be examined. Evidence related to the strategies to overcome those challenges in multicultural online project teaming will be listed. A step-by-step framework including illustrative examples for developing multicultural online project teaming skills will highlight the critical need for the online project teams in higher education.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In the "eLearning" era, multi-national virtual classes with computer-based systems support have at least four characteristics: temporary, culturally diverse, geographically dispersed, and relying on computer based communications (Hertel, Geiser, & Konradt, 2005; Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011). According to Palloff and Pratt (2007), the growth in internet use is directly related to the greater demand of online classes. For example, institutions like National University, which is the second largest nonprofit institute

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