IDEA GROUP PUBLISHING
701 E. Chocolate Avenue, Suite 200, Hershey PA 17033-1240, USA
Tel: 717/533-8845; Fax 717/533-8661; URL-http://www.idea-group.com

ITB12885

This paper appears in the book, *Emerging Trends and Challenges in Information Technology Management, Volume 1 and Volume 2* edited by Mehdi Khosrow-Pour © 2006, Idea Group Inc.

Course Management Systems: A Tool for International Student Collaboration

Diane Boehm, Saginaw Valley State University, SE 123, 7400 Bay Rd., University Center, MI 48710, dboehm@svsu.edu

Lilianna Aniola-Jedrzekjek, Poznan University of Technology, Pl. M. Sklodowskiej - Curie 5, 60-965 Poznan, Poland, lilianna.jedrzejek@put.poznan.pl

University faculty around the world share responsibility to help their students learn how to interact and communicate successfully with those from other cultures. Since the beginning of this new century, the world has seen "the creation of a global, Web-enabled playing field that allows for multiple forms of collaboration—the sharing of knowledge and work—in real time, without regard to geography, distance, or, in the near future, even language," according to New York Times bestselling author Thomas Friedman in *The World is Flat* (p. 176). Consequently, college students today must prepare themselves for such sharing of knowledge, as well as for work in a global marketplace, where highly educated and culturally aware knowledge workers will thrive, and where those who lack these capabilities will see their options shrink.

Students can most successfully develop strategies for international collaboration, we believe, by actually engaging in such collaboration. One strategy to accomplish this goal is to design online collaborative projects involving students of different countries. Modern technological tools, such as course management systems, offer a structure that enables both synchronous and asynchronous student interactions to be conducted successfully.

For the past several years, we have used the Blackboard course management system to conduct student online collaborative projects, linking students in writing courses at Saginaw Valley State University, a regional state university in Michigan, USA, with students in English language courses at Poznan University of Technology, Poznan, Poland. (PUT students are enrolled into the SVSU course.) Our collaborations have been marked by both challenges and rewards; the greatest reward has been seeing students learn firsthand about collaboration across cultures, even as they were learning more about themselves and their own culture in the process.

The challenges can indeed appear formidable. When we have discussed past collaborative projects with colleagues from other universities, one experienced teacher indicated she had twice attempted similar projects; in both instances, "the students ended up hating each other." Clearly this was not the outcome intended! Hashimoto & Lehu identify three special challenges for virtual working groups to be successful: careful attention to language and tone, given the lack of non-verbal cues; a need to develop rapport and trust when physical interaction is not possible; and agreement on a method to accomplish tasks in spite of individual and cultural differences.

Our experience has identified a number of additional factors that must be taken into account when planning virtual crosscultural student collaborations to achieve desired outcomes. First and foremost is that many students have had limited experience working successfully in teams or groups; this is especially true of many international students, who come from a higher education experience with little or no emphasis on group functioning. Bosworth's Taxonomy of Collaborative Skills (1994, p. 27) identifies five capabilities students need to collaborate successfully:

- interpersonal skills to establish effective relationships
- groupbuilding/management skills to organize work and maximize participation
- inquiry skills to elicit, clarify and critique ideas
- conflict prevention/resolution skills to handle inevitable differences that arise within a group
- presentation skills to synthesize and communicate information in various formats.

For virtual collaboration, technology skills are also required. Not all students will possess all skills, nor be equally motivated to develop them. Because group participation is inevitably uneven, group tensions may directly affect project success. Thus the course instructor would be wise to assess students' skills and design course activities to develop needed abilities. These skills should also be taken into account when forming the crosscultural student groups and planning their interactions.

Equally formidable are project timelines. Explicit timetables are essential if groups are to meet project deadlines. However, because universities in other countries function on a calendar different from the USA, semesters in different institutions may overlap by only 5-6 weeks, a very short period of time when students must progress from initial contact, to working together as a team, all the way through to presenting a finished group project. Time differences create further complications, making any synchronous communication difficult to schedule.

Other obstacles may also present themselves. Whereas most US students have ready access to computers and the internet, that may not be true for students in all other countries. In addition, English language proficiency, a critical factor if work is to be conducted in English, may vary widely within any group of international students. (And unfortunately, few American students are fluent enough in another language to be able to conduct work in any language other than English.) These factors likewise must be considered when developing a collaborative project.

Furthermore, there is always the challenge of developing an engaging, relevant assignment that will interest students from different cultures, be manageable for students at different levels of English language proficiency, and be able to be accomplished in the time allotted. Generally, we have had the most success with differentiated assignments, with each cultural group contributing different components to the collaboration. Polish students brainstormed ideas with US students, conducted research and developed summaries or bibliography annotations, responded to questions and drafts, located graphics, and created Powerpoint presentations. SVSU students also brainstormed ideas, conducted research and wrote summaries or bibliography annotations, then synthesized research from both groups, drafted documents, and developed edited text to be converted to Powerpoint presentations.

Finally, there is the need to surmount cultural differences, differences which for most students will be invisible and intangible, but which could have significant impact on group success. Rains & Scott argue that for "globally dispersed virtual classroom teams, additional training is perhaps most needed to address cultural differences," since "virtual team members are most likely to blame members from other cultures for problems" (p. 284). Since cultural characteristics are likely to be

invisible to those from any given culture, resources such as *Culture, Leadership and Organization: The GLOBE study of 62 Societies* may provide a starting point for instructors. To date we have been unable to locate any useful inventory of cultural characteristics that could be used to help students identify and understand cultural differences; such a tool would be invaluable, since it would help students learn about their own cultural biases as well as the many unique ways in which cultures may differ.

All of the factors above, then, demand thoughtful consideration to lay the groundwork for effective collaboration. Based on our experiences with multiple international student collaborations over a period of several years, certain processes must occur during the interactions for a collaborative project to be successful:

- Build community within the group and establish group identity
- Generate ideas and determine project outcomes and tasks
- Arrange division of tasks
- Develop project materials, files, and presentations
- Evaluate outcomes.

Fortunately, course management systems such as Blackboard can provide a framework and tools with which to accomplish these tasks and provide a record of interactions, so previous interactions and conversations can easily be revisited. Though synchronous tools offer appealing immediacy, time differences as discussed previously necessitate that asynchronous tools will most likely be employed to enable the necessary processes of ongoing collaboration, as the chart below suggests:

Tasks	Tools
Build community within the group and establish group identity	• Personal webpages • Posted video self-introductions • Virtual chats (archived) • Discussion boards
Generate ideas and determine project outcomes and tasks	• Virtual chats • Discussion boards • File exchange • Email • Models posted to Course Documents
Arrange division of tasks	• Virtual chats • Discussion boards • Email
Develop project materials, files, and presentations	• Virtual chats • Discussion boards • Document file exchange • Email attachments • Powerpoint file exchanges
Evaluate outcomes	• Survey functions

As open-source course management software becomes more sophisticated and readily available, these functions may be expanded to include other technological tools, such as blogs, instant messaging, and voice-over Internet protocols (we plan to experiment with Skype in the future). If technology is available, we would also like to experiment with audio- and video-conferencing (e.g., Microsoft NetMeeting). All of these tools offer exciting possibilities, but require access, training for both instructors and students, and thoughtful integration into group processes. Nevertheless, it is exciting to envision the type of cross-cultural interactive learning experiences we may be able to offer students in the near future. We hope also to identify or develop a cultural inventory that can be used to help students develop awareness of cultural characteristics and differences.

Are virtual international student collaborations worth the extra investment of time, planning, and problem-solving we have described? We are convinced that such collaborations provide a learning experience unlike any other. Some problems are inevitable; these too provide a necessary learning experience. Ultimately, the multiple dimensions of such a learning experience will benefit students long after a course concludes.

When we read students' anonymous reflections on their collaboration experience (most recently, for example, from an SVSU class of first semester freshmen), we know that it was worth any extra effort. Students reflect on many discoveries: "the outside world pays more attention to us than we do them. People in Poland knew about our weather and disasters and everyday news"; "I never realized how much I didn't know about other countries' cultures and how much they know about ours. Yes, I know about current events happening overseas and historical events, but I don't know much about the actual culture, such as their customs, language, traditions, etc. I was surprised when the Polish students even knew that Eminem came from Detroit"; "just talking with them a few times made me realize how different simple things are viewed in each culture! I am not that naive to think everyone is the same in all countries, but it never really hit home until this project began."

Student collaboration across cultures using virtual tools can be the first step to a lifelong experience of learning about and valuing people and cultures from every corner of the world.

REFERENCES

Bosworth, K. (1994). Developing collaborative skills in college students. In K.

Bosworth & S. J. Hamilton (eds.), *Collaborative Learning: Underlying Processes and Effective Techniques* (pp. 25-31). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Friedman, T. L. (2005). *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century.*

New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Hashimoto, K. & Lehu, J. (2006). Students international collaboration project (SICP): A

cross-cultural project using virtual teams to learn communication styles. In S. P. Ferris & S. Godar (Eds.), *Teaching and Learning with Virtual Teams* (pp. 221-244). Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing.

House, R. J., Hanges, P. J., Javidan, M., Dorfman, P. W., & Gupta, V. (2004). *Culture,*

leadership and organization: The GLOBE study of 62 societies. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rains, S. A. & Scott, C. R. Virtual teams in the traditional classroom: Lessons on new

communication technologies and training. In S. P. Ferris & S. Godar (Eds.), *Teaching and Learning with Virtual Teams* (pp. 268-292). Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing.