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 conceptualize 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 conceptions 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 & Luckmann, 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, & Snow, 1998).

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 increases 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 coordinated 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 solving 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 (Majchrzak, 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 fos-