

Chapter 18

Exploration of Multi- Cultural Teaching and Learning in a Collaborative Virtual Environment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter presents an experiential case study of a multicultural virtual team project conducted by educators at two countries of three universities whose students came from very different cultural backgrounds. The authors suggest that new technologies present businesses and the institutions charged with training business professionals with a significant paradigm shift. Among the devices enterprises now employ to compete in the global business environment are virtual teams. We submit that it is incumbent upon educational institutions to formulate processes by which students may gain experience in the virtual work environment.

The chapter details the experiences both students and instructors encountered in creating and participating in a cross-cultural virtual team conducted predominantly in a virtual environment. We describe problems encountered and often (though not always) overcome. Students learned both the rewards and the frustrations such teams experience as they learned to participate in and contribute to the collective intelligence of the team.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-599-5.ch018

SETTING THE STAGE

Educational Institutions are being transformed by technological innovations and they have made vital contributions to the process. Institutions must continue to constantly innovate if they are to maintain their relevance. These efforts may have different objectives such as advancing their standing in the educational field, reaching better students, learners, increasing enrollments, enhancing the institutional brand, and/or providing reasonable pricing.

In transnational classes, cooperative efforts and projects provide a richer set of experiences for the educators and learners. As we prepared the class we utilized several collaboration tools such as groupware, Skype, team rooms, instant messaging and presence awareness software. The Yahoo Groups pages worked well as did email, Skype, instant messaging and individual team pages. Synchronous and asynchronous communication methods allowed the teams to connect seamlessly.

Today, virtual teams represent an important constituent for successful and adaptive organizations. Our aim was to develop the abilities of the students to collaborate effectively using virtual tools in a multi-cultural environment and to understand the different circumstances which occurred naturally during the course of the project.

The students of Jacksonville State University in Jacksonville, Alabama shared their experiences with students from Okan University, and Marmara University, both in Istanbul, Turkey in their "Virtual Enterprise"(USA) and "Marketing Management"(Turkey) classes that were offered in the fall of 2006. The professors chose the objectives for the students and established processes for making initial contact and engaging in communication events. The students learned to work with several collaboration tools and with one another emulating a work environment similar to that of international company managers.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the World Wide Web has created an entirely new environment for the conduct of business. One attribute of any business which chooses to enter this environment is this; the business becomes a de facto international business. Markets once unreachable are now readily accessible. Working relationships which only a few short years ago may have been the dominion of only the largest of enterprises are now within the realm of any business – no matter the size – which has a Web presence. In addition, changes in information technology have made global communications virtually cost-free to most businesses.

The full impact of this rapidly evolving new business environment upon management is unclear. Equally nebulous are the best practices for utilizing the new communications tools for strategic advantage. What has been made abundantly clear is that businesses now interact in a global multicultural business environment (Benson-Armer & Hsieh 1997; Borstorff et al. 2006; Clausen et al. 2009; Duarte & Snyder 2006; Gatlin-Watts et al. 2007; Jarvenpaa & Leidner 1998; Johnson 2009; Lisak & Erez 2009; Mihhailova & Piiriste 2008; Powell, Piccoli & Ives 2004; VanRyssen & Godar 2000; Vinaja 2003; Yamamoto & Karaman 2006).

Because of the increasing importance of the globalization phenomenon, it is vital that companies adapt to these changes, or they risk losing their competitive standing. While this environment represents challenges for businesses hoping to compete in the global business arena, it also represents a unique opportunity for business schools who train the next generations of business leaders. Those business schools which recognize this and are transforming curricula to educate managers for the specific challenges of this new environment assume the risk but also gain the advantage of early adaptors. (Featherstone, Ellis & Borstorff 2004). On the other hand, not only the business schools but all universities and/or the institutions that provide the universal information/knowledge

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