Chapter 6
How Similar or Different are We?
A Perception of Diversity in Global Virtual Teams

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ABSTRACT

Global virtual teams are becoming vastly popular amongst public and private organizations. This prevalent way of organizing can be used for students to gain experience in working with various cultures using technology. GlobCom is a global communication project that provides students with this opportunity but also presents them with challenges such as cultural barriers. This chapter explores students' perceptions of diversity in their global virtual teams. It provides insight as to how students overcome issues of cultural differences by working in an online environment.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual teams are becoming almost a fixture of organizations throughout the United States, Europe, and beyond, as a response to globalization. Organizations need to have a wider international reach and be present 24/7. By having individuals working together, but from different parts of the world, they can meet their international 24-hour needs.

The field of public relations (PR) is no stranger to this new way of doing business. Many PR firms are expanding globally. For example, as of 2010, Hill & Knowlton has 79 offices in 43 countries;

Porter Novelli has 90 offices in 60 countries; Weber Shandwick has 121 offices in 76 countries. Similarly, more multinational organizations need to communicate globally by having communication specialists in various geographical locations. These specialists are there to grasp the economic, political and cultural intricacies of their part of the world as PR practices vary in different countries. They work across time, space, and culture to accommodate the needs of these multinational companies.

As PR becomes increasingly international, there is an increasing demand for students to partake and practice international public relations. However, it is rare that students have the

opportunity to truly experience and practice at that level. Most of the time, they tend to work on case studies, listen to guest speakers who have traveled the world, and when possible, they can participate in a study abroad program. These activities are limited in their scope. They do not let students practice their skills and apply their knowledge toward this growing field. Organizing students in global virtual teams, however, allows them to practice these skills. In 2003, VanSlyke Turk & Martin (2004) experimented with that model by grouping students from six different universities, and saw the benefits for students to work at the international level. However, this was a one-time project and was not replicated the following year.

One project that has been ongoing since 2003 and that provides students with the opportunity to develop these skills is GlobCom. GlobCom is an international project that has grown to involve eleven universities in eleven countries on five continents. The students are grouped into global virtual teams (GVT), and each virtual team works on the same public relations brief, developing and submitting an international public relations strategy. The students communicate and cooperate with each other in chat rooms, through email, and/or by Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), such as Skype. At the end the project, the educators and students meet in a symposium where the top teams present their strategy.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe and analyze the global communication student project in terms of diversity. One of the most common and basic issues in GVT is overcoming the challenges of cultural diversity. Rather than looking for differences amongst the various cultures of the team, this research is designed to understand how students perceive their teams and work through the challenges of communicating with a diverse team via communication technology. Through online interviews, students answered open-ended questions that provide an insight into the ways students dealt with diversity and overcame cultural barriers.

The first part of this chapter will provide a brief review of GVT literature and an introduction of the GlobCom project. The second part of this chapter will analyze students' perceptions of diversity. Finally, the author concludes with recommendations for use of GVT in international education.

BACKGROUND

As virtual teams become more common in the business world, education institutions need to prepare students to excel in that environment. Some academic institutions emulate this by creating virtual teams. Students participate in projects with other students using a variety of communication technologies. Only a few projects incorporate a more international component by including students from various countries to create Global Virtual Teams (GVT).

Global Virtual Teams are of great use in the field of international public relations. They offer the responsiveness and expertise needed in certain situations. Jarvenpaa & Leidner (1999) define a Global Virtual Team as "temporary, culturally diverse, geographically dispersed, electronically communicating work group" (p. 792). This definition focuses on three important defining components. The first one is about whether the teams tend to be permanent or temporary. It does not provide a sense of time in terms of length, whether the team will be together one month or one year. However, GVT are usually formed with team members who have no common history and will not work together in the long term.

This definition also emphasizes that GVT members are located in a variety of different countries, but also need to be culturally diverse. A group of American managers located in different countries and working together on a project together would not be considered a GVT, because the members are too similar culturally. The last component of the definition emphasizes that all

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