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# Building intercultural competence through virtual team collaboration across global classrooms.

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# Building Intercultural Competence through Virtual Team Collaboration across Global Classrooms

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Stephanie Swartz, PhD Mainz University of Applied Sciences, Germany

Susan Luck, PhD Pfeiffer University, North Carolina, USA

Belem Barbosa, PhD University of Aveiro, Portugal

Izzy Crawford, MA Robert Gordon University, Scotland, UK

## Research question

Do experiential international classroom projects using virtual team collaborations increase intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence in students?

# Literature Review

Intercultural sensitivity is “the ability to recognize differences in behavior, perceptions and feelings during the process of intercultural communication.” (Chen and Sarosta, 1998)

Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (Chen and Starosta, 2000)

Intercultural communication competence is “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across culturally diverse environments.” (Arasaratnam, 2009)

Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) scale

# Methods

- Instructors in four countries (the USA, Scotland, Germany and Portugal)
- A 6-week cross-cultural virtual teams project
- Students in business programs and disciplines ranging from organizational communication, multicultural teamwork to digital marketing, public relations and fashion management
- online survey based on Intercultural Sensitivity and ICC scales taken before and after project
- post-project qualitative questions as to their feelings towards the projects

# Methods

Responses pre- and post- project were analyzed according to five tendencies of intercultural sensitivity and communication competence:

1. increased awareness of verbal, non-verbal and para-verbal communication;
2. increased appreciation of cultural differences;
3. reduction of ethnocentric tendencies and stereotypes;
4. reduction of fears and increase in confidence in dealing with other cultures;
5. increased awareness of difficulties in dealing with other cultures.

# Challenges of the project

- each university had different semester schedules and varying requirements for each course
- built-in project vs. add-on
- evaluation of students
- students differed in age, family status, professional careers, ethnic backgrounds as well as English language abilities
- courses involved various disciplines within undergraduate and graduate business programs and were taught either online or seated

# Learning outcomes

In addition to increasing students' intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence, learning outcomes included:

- ✓ improving students' collaborative writing and speaking skills
- ✓ developing teamwork skills
- ✓ using digital channels in cross-border communication
- ✓ developing skills in communicating with individuals whose native language is different from the other team members
- ✓ familiarizing students with common business communication practices
- ✓ honing their project management skills



# The assignment

- Students investigated potential difficulties that companies experienced on the foreign market, such as ALDI or LIDL in the United States, HUGO BOSS in the UK or Walkers Shortbread in Germany
- Difficulties could encompass brand recognition, human resource policies or competitors.
- Students analyzed these difficulties with the help of modals such PESTLE or SWOT and agreed on possible solutions.
- Their analyses as well as suggestions for changes were presented to the classroom; the other students functioning as a board of directors and ideally subjecting the presenters to critical questioning.

# Team interaction in three phases: Phase 1

- Students formed local teams of approximately 2-3 members and created a team identity with logo, slogan as well as a short video clip introducing themselves. Instructors randomly assigned their local teams to those of their international partners (two nationalities per team).
- Teams exchanged information about themselves and held their first icebreaking skype meeting with their counterparts in other countries.
- They agreed to a collaborative platform such as Google Drive, SLACK, Facebook group etc. where they uploaded their information and shared files, divided up tasks amongst themselves and agreed to benchmarks along the project timeline.

# The assignment: Phases 2 and 3

- The teams focused on the assignment, exchanged information and created presentations as well as wrote debriefings on the results.
- Students presented the results and gave feedback on the collaboration.

# Research method

- Students completed an online intercultural sensitivity survey based on the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale created by Chen and Starosta (2000), which comprised 24 items divided into five factors: Interaction Engagement, Respect of Cultural Differences, Interaction Confidence, Interaction Enjoyment and Interaction Attentiveness and were asked to respond to each item on a five-point Likert scale of 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = uncertain, 2 = disagree and 1 = strongly disagree.
- Items from the Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) scale were utilized in the survey (Arasaratnam, 2009). Students were asked to respond along the same five-point scale to statements concerning the cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions of intercultural communication.

# Examples of questions: Intercultural Sensitivity Scale

ISS\_F1\_33[I often give positive responses to my culturally different counterpart during our interaction]

ISS\_F1\_35[I am open-minded to people from different cultures]

ISS\_F1\_39[I often show my culturally-distinct counterpart my understanding through verbal or nonverbal cues]

ISS\_F1\_41[I have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between my culturally-distinct counterpart and me]

ISS\_F1\_42[I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures]

ISS\_F1\_43\*[I avoid those situations where I will have to deal with culturally-distinct persons]

ISS\_F1\_44[I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally distinct counterparts]

ISS\_F2\_6\*[I don't like to be with people from different cultures]

ISS\_F2\_14\*[I think my culture is better than other cultures]

# Examples of questions: ICC Scale

ICC\_Cognitive\_6[I often notice similarities in personality between people who belong to completely different cultures.]

ICC\_Affective\_2[I feel that people from other cultures have many valuable things to teach me.]

ICC\_Affective\_4\*[I feel more comfortable with people from my own culture than with people from other cultures.]

ICC\_Affective\_7\*[I usually feel closer to people who are from my own culture because I can relate to them better.]

ICC\_Affective\_10[I feel more comfortable with people who are open to people from other cultures than people who are not.]

ICC\_Behavioral\_3\*[Most of my friends are from my own culture.]

# Post-project qualitative questions

- Students were asked about their personal feelings towards the project, what they found most difficult, their satisfaction with the project, and what they would do differently next time.
- They were asked to rate the activity and evaluate both their own and their team members, both at home and abroad, concerning commitment and active participation.
- Their answers were compared between native team members and also between international counterparts to see whether tendencies arose concerning positive or negative attitudes towards the project.

# Results

## Increased awareness of verbal, non-verbal and para-verbal communication

- Students reported increased sensitivity towards subtle meanings conveyed by their counterparts during intercultural interaction.
- Students displayed a greater understanding for the need to watch their counterpart's behavior more closely to determine their meaning.
- Students placed more importance on making affirmative responses during communicating.



# Results

## Increased appreciation of cultural differences

- Students reported a positive if slight increase in enjoyment towards differences between culturally-distinct counterparts and selves.
- Students displayed an increase in respect for the way people from different cultures behave.
- A tendency to avoid those situations where students will have to deal with culturally-distinct persons marginally increased.
- Students reported slightly more antipathy towards interacting with people of another culture.
- Students stated that they felt more comfortable with people from their own culture and preferring friends from own cultures.

# Results

## Reduction of ethnocentric tendencies and stereotypes

- Students registered less openness to diversity and foreign ways of thinking and behaving
- Students displayed less value for opinions different from their own.
- Students affirmed less difficulty differentiating between similarities in cultures such as Asians, Europeans, Africans, etc.
- Students displayed a marginal increase in their feelings that people from other cultures have many valuable things to teach them.

# Results

## Reduction of fears and increase in confidence in dealing with other cultures

- Students responded that they found it less difficult to talk in front of culturally different people.
- They felt less discouraged or useless when engaging with people of different cultures.

# Results

## Increased awareness of difficulties in dealing with other cultures

- Students reported that they enjoyed the interaction with people from different cultures less and would avoid such interactions more.
- Students signaled a decrease in respecting the values of those people after the project.
- Students also noted a decrease in informing themselves more when interacting with other cultures.
- Students reported an increase in frustration when dealing with people of other cultures.
- Students responded that they were less open-minded to people of other cultures.

# Results of qualitative investigation

The most difficult or negative aspects of project were:

- the different time zones
- coordinating appointments to meet due to different time zones and schedules
- language barriers
- coordinating tasks through social media
- technological issues (different levels of internet savviness)
- differing expectations and deadlines as well as difficulties agreeing on what to do
- varying degrees of engagement and reliability between teams
- working remotely instead of face to face
- lack of communication and/or organization in and between the teams.

# Results of qualitative investigation

What students would have done differently:

- Students criticized their own, their teams' and/or their counterparts' lack of effort in managing time, assigning roles and delegating tasks.
- They stated they would have planned better, engaged members more, set up more frequent meetings and prioritized the project higher.
- They expressed the disappointment that they did not value the experience as highly as they should have.
- In future collaborations they would learn more about the other cultures and enjoy the opportunity of working with foreign students more.

# Results of qualitative investigation

## Positive aspects of the project:

- The students considered it a new experience and opportunity to work and exchange perceptions on the topic with people from another country and another culture.
- They appreciated the friendly and inviting atmosphere interacting with the foreign counterparts.
- Students valued working in a multicultural team in a real scenario, finding solutions and solving problems.
- They appreciated being “forced” to work with different people.
- The experiential learning aspect was considered as the most valuable part of the project as well as ...
- ... meeting new people, discussing cultural differences, engaging with another culture and hearing other points of view.
- They recognized meaningful changes in their own approach to other cultures.

# Discussion

- Positive developments in the areas of Interaction Attentiveness and Interaction Engagement went hand in hand with statistically marginal but nevertheless negative developments in Interaction Engagement and in Respect for Cultural Differences after interacting with people of other cultures.
- While many of the negative responses in the areas of Interaction Engagement and Respect for Cultural Differences would appear to defeat the goals of increasing intercultural competence, there are results which give support to belief that intercultural collaborative projects such as this one can impact students positively and more effectively than classroom instruction.



# Discussion

- When comparing the results before and after the project, students appear to have gained an understanding of cultural differences through their interactions and experienced a rise in sensitivity concerning their own communication styles as well as the differences in styles of their counterparts.
- The difficulties of the project itself, the pressure of wanting a good grade on the project for some, whereas others not receiving a grade at all, the disparities in motivation among team members as well as language skills etc., could all have had an influence on the positive or negative perception of the culturally distinct counterparts and thus on the values reported in the surveys.

# Discussion

- Seemingly negative tendencies in some of the results after the collaborative project may indicate a rise in consciousness concerning the difficulties of real interaction with other cultures. What appears simple in theory to students before the project becomes more daunting when put to the test in a real-life situation.
- Further reasons for negative trends proceeding the project may be found in the results concerning what students disliked most about the project (time zones, diverging deadlines and expectations) as well as what they would do differently (invest more time) and their suggestions for future collaborations.
- Nevertheless, the negative results certainly run counter to the objectives of an intercultural collaborative project and need to be investigated further.

# Conclusion

- If intercultural competence can be seen as involving an understanding that cultural differences do exist, that there are potential pitfalls involved in interacting across cultures and that awareness of these factors can better facilitate successful collaboration (Deardorff, 2006), the findings confirm that a virtual team collaboration, however short and small in scope, develops intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence in students.
- While the project was time-consuming and sometimes difficult to embed it into an already demanding curriculum, the instructors consider the project a valuable contribution in experiential learning and will continue to incorporate the project in their courses.

# Future research

- Future collaborations will ensure more equal conditions among the teams: aligning the project content, syncing the time line and assignment deadlines better and adjusting the assessment criteria so that demands on students are similar.
- Tasks should be divided across locations, creating a closer dependence on each other for project success. Inclusiveness should be promoted with the help of digital means, for example through the use of a single platform, SLACK, to collaborate as well as using ZOOM to record teleconferencing sessions in future projects.
- After improving project conditions, data from pre- and post surveys from future collaborations will be compared with the results of initial data to examine whether there are significant differences in results.

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