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Chapter 10

Promoting Global Virtual Teams Across the Globe: Cross-Cultural Challenges and Synergies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a preliminary understanding of cross-cultural challenges and synergistic experiences of multicultural students engaged in Global Virtual Teams (GVTs). In this case study, we introduce the GVT structure as a novel learning platform which utilizes Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) tools as part of its virtual-based learning. We administer the case study with 30 students (n=30) in the United of Emirates (UAE) who engage in GVTs across the globe—encompassing 26 universities and 22 countries. Qualitative data is collected in the form of documents—reflective reports of the students' experiential learning over a 10-week period. We content analyse the reports based on the thematic analysis with two distinctive categories—cultural challenges and cultural synergies based on the first seven weeks of the experiential learning process. In this study, we find that students experienced challenges such as managing technical difficulty, language barriers, deteriorating motivations, geographical distance, time differences, and non-committed and unresponsive attitude. However, students also experience synergies from the GVTs such as strong relationships and continued friendships, formation of emergent leadership, learned diverse managerial styles and competencies skills, varied use of varied CMC tools, and international exposure to diverse cultures without the need to travel abroad.

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INTRODUCTION

Global Virtual Teams (GVTs) are becoming the most widespread and innovative working structure in Multinational Corporations (MNCs). GVTs are composed of people from different cultural backgrounds, working at a distance, collaborating using varied communication technologies to achieve their goals, and who often have no historical work relationship (Mohd Yusof & Zakaria, 2012). The availability of new information and communication technologies combined with increasing pressure for globalization is driving the growth of GVTs. In addition, a new social context also arises in GVTs, since the ability to share knowledge is no longer constrained by geographical distance and time.

When considering GVTs, one must recognize such teams differ in many aspects from traditional teams. GVTs fundamentally diverge on two distinct dimensions – the sophistication of their communication tools, and the time spent working apart (Griffith & Neale, 2001; Powell et al., 2004; Fuller, Hardin, & Davidson, 2006; O’Leary & Cummings, 2007). The purest GVT is the one which collaborates while team members are situated in different locales, totally working apart, and depending entirely on computer-mediated communication tools. Thus, there are some inevitable challenges in building a sustainable learning and knowledge-sharing base between diverse members of GVTs. For instance, it is clearly noted in several studies that this type of virtual collaboration results in heightened challenges for organizations to manage due to cross-cultural differences and such teams also differ on managerial requirements and strategies from the onset and throughout the team’s life cycle (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000; Furst, Reeves, Rosen & Blackburn, 2004; Montoya, Massey, & Lockwood, 2011). Yet the advantages of such teamwork continue to be promoted in multinational organizations because of its significant work structure (Araujo & Chidambaram, 2008; David, Newell, & Resende-Santos, 2008; Griffith & Neale, 2001).

Distributed Work Structure

Empirical studies have examined the emergent structure of GVTs, but limited research has fully examined the impact of culture on GVT effectiveness (Evaristo, 2003; Gillam & Oppenheim, 2006; Shachaf, 2008; Zhang, Lowry, Zhou & Fu, 2007; Zhang & Lowry, 2008). The understanding of what is the cross-cultural challenges and how cultural factors influence the effectiveness of GVTs around the world has not received sufficient attention, particularly from scholars in interdisciplinary fields such as information technology and information systems, CMC, cross-cultural management, and international management. The increasing use of GVTs in MNCs strongly implies these and similar emerging work structures are, and will continue to be, heavily dependent on electronically collaborative tools such as e-mail, videoconferencing, teleconferencing, instant messaging, chat, and many more (Zakaria & Abdul Talib, 2011; Weimann, Hinz, Scott, & Pollock, 2010).

With these tools, additional problems and challenges will emerge when managing a distributed work structure, including the many complex dimensions of cultural values. For instance, problems with communication and collaboration using CMC will surface because not all people are comfortable working with others through a medium with limited non-verbal cues such as email. Yet many people find email an efficient tool to operate across the globe despite its technological limitations (DeLuca & Valacich, 2006). Indeed, with the rise of the global market and the global information society, it is likely that workers will encounter more, and more different, cultures than ever before.

In this chapter, the purpose of our study is to examine the significance of working in GVTs as a new educational platform in providing practical knowledge. We will explore the phenomenon of collaborating with team members who are totally ‘strangers’ to each other—thus introducing twofold of experiential learning and experiences—cross-cultural challenges encountered and synergies

obtained. Based on the idea of ‘working with a stranger,’ we thus recognize the team members in our case study were engaged in a pure virtual environment. Thus, we anticipate the students will experience learning in GVT which is lived through and, as a result, allows students to obtain knowledge and information. Additionally, it also allows students to obtain experiences while undergoing the process itself, benefitting from the ‘hands-on’ value. For example, members have never met with one another face-to-face at any point of time—be it prior, during, or after project completion. In essence, this study aim at focusing on the challenges and best practices of virtual-based learning to explore GVTs as a novel educational environment in which to understand participant recruitment, effort coordination, learning and transfer of training to real-life settings, student feedback and challenges, and use of large-scale student collaboration projects for teaching, research, and inter-institutional and professional networking.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

A Case of Virtual-Based Project

Since this project is the first of its kind in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), our goal was to understand to what extent virtual-based learning imparts practical knowledge to students who can then capitalize on such experience in a future work setting such as in the MNCs. This virtual-based learning project was first launched in the Autumn semester of 2011 in which the team members came from 22 countries and 26 universities¹ (refer to Table 1), thus truly reflecting the cross-cultural component. The primary objective was to offer a ‘hands-on’ as well as global and virtual experience to the students.

The project was administered by the faculty and instructors on a voluntary basis and participation in the project was completely free for the

students and their institutions. In this project, student teams were assigned to a hypothetical consulting company; their company was then approached by a hypothetical multinational corporation with a request to conduct a market analysis and provide suggestions for their next ‘big’ idea. The following are some of the well-known MNCs used in the study:

- ALDI Einkauf GmbH & Co. oHG., one of the world’s largest retailers, www.aldi.com
- BP p.l.c., one of the world’s leading oil and gas companies, www.bp.com
- Google Inc., the world’s largest IT company, www.google.com
- HSBC Holdings p.l.c., the world’s second largest banking and financial services group, www.hsbc.com
- McDonald’s Corporation, world’s largest restaurant chain, www.mcdonalds.com
- Toyota Motor Corporation, world’s largest automobile manufacturer, www.toyota.com
- VF Corporation, world’s largest clothing company, www.vfc.com/

Table 1. Participating Countries for the Cross-Cultural Project

Participating Countries	Participating Countries
1. Austria	2. Romania
3. Colombia	4. Lithuania
5. Ecuador	6. Mexico
7. France	8. New Zealand
9. Germany	10. Poland
11. Ghana	12. Romania
13. Indonesia	14. Slovakia
15. India	16. Spain
17. Japan	18. UAE
19. Korea	20. UK
21. Kosovo	22. USA-HI, USA-IL, USA-MA, USA-NC, USA-NJ

- Walt Disney Company, world's largest media conglomerate and entertainment company, www.disney.com

Each of these companies offers a wide range of products and has clients in just about every country around the world. All these companies are public and details on their history, products, corporate structure and earnings are readily available on the Internet. For this project, each GVT was free to choose any one of the abovementioned companies. They were then asked to develop a business proposal for a product or service in which the company of their choice should invest. Teams were free to choose any product or service, whatever offered the greatest economic potential for their client. The product or service could be produced or offered in any location, not necessarily limited to the countries represented by the members of the team.

For the final assignment, teams needed to submit a business plan which provided a general description of the product/service and its development and marketing strategy. The business proposal had to detail the following areas: product/service, target market, production site or service personnel location, market entry mode, staffing, marketing, payment arrangements, capital requirements and other likely challenges. Teams also had to provide an economic justification for the product or service.

QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

Case Study

To explore the phenomenon of virtual-based learning in a specific educational setting, we decided to employ a case study methodology. According to Yin (2009), a case study is most appropriate when the researchers need to develop an in-depth or rich understanding of an observed behavior or

environment. The case study approach is also an effective methodology when a researcher wishes to gain new insights into a phenomenon. In our research, we wanted to obtain a preliminary understanding of GVTs as a novel platform and structure of working at a distance with diverse cultural backgrounds team members using varied form of CMC.

Data Collection

We collected data in the form of reflective reports written by a total of thirty (30) students based on their early stages in the first seven weeks out of ten weeks of participation in the cross-cultural project. The students underwent five phases or milestones of virtual-based learning experiences which include pre-project survey, establishing contact with teammates, agreement of company and idea for business proposal and write-up of reflective report on GVT experience, business proposal report, and post-project survey. Each milestone carried different report requirements and allocated marks.

In this study, we used a set of qualitative questions to elicit data from the respondents (students) where the purpose was to obtain a preliminary understanding of their first-hand and unique virtual experience in working across a distance and with the diverse cultural backgrounds of the six other team members from 26 participating universities around the globe. The questions were given to the students to enable them to reflect their learning experiences in the GVT environment over the seven week period. Students were asked the following questions specifically on cross-cultural teamwork to explore their perceptions of the synergies as well as the challenges they experienced in this new learning platform:

- What were the most effective cross-cultural teamwork experiences during the project preparation, and why?

- What were the challenges/problems (if any) during the team collaboration and why?
- How did each member contribute to the preparation of the team project?
- What did you learn during the virtual collaboration?
- How could the virtual-based learning been improved—e.g., what would you do differently next time?

Content Analysis

For this study, we conducted content analysis based on their cross-cultural reflections report once they developed the novel idea for their business proposal, and before they submitted their finalized business proposal report. Content analysis is a common and widely used methodology in qualitative study to obtain in-depth understanding of the subject matter through rich descriptions of an observed phenomenon (Krippendorff, 2003). However, it can also be used in the quantitative study with the purpose of evaluating and interpreting the phenomenon under study numerically (i.e., using numbers and figures [Nuendorf, 2001; Weber, 1990]). In this study, we chose to conduct content analysis qualitatively. Specifically, the objective is to provide a detailed description of the GVT experience in relation to cultural challenges and synergistic values. For the data analysis, we first reviewed and content analyzed all 30 essays to obtain the general themes and patterns of the reported experiences. Then we coded the experiences into the abovementioned two categories. To further narrow down the themes, we further sorted the experiences into specific aspects of either challenge or synergistic value. The coding process was developed based on two hierarchical layers:

- **First Layer:** Challenges encountered and synergies obtained
- **Second Layer:** Sub-challenges and sub-synergies

RESULT

Overall, our study found that students reported bilateral experiences when working in GVTs. On one hand, participants experienced varied challenges such as managing technical difficulty, language barriers, deteriorating motivational level over the time span of ten weeks, geographical distance, time differences, and non-committed/unresponsive attitude. But, students also expressed their optimism regarding the multicultural experiences obtained through GVTs, such as of developed relationships and continued friendships even after the semester ends, formation of emergent leadership-- practicing leadership without a formal appointment, learned diverse managerial styles and competencies skills such as planning, organizing and coordinating, varied use of varied CMC tools other than email such as Facebook, Skype, Instant Messaging, Twitter, etc., work in GVT structure, and international exposure to diverse cultures without the need to travel abroad.

Cross-Cultural Challenges

Challenges are inevitable in any group interaction, but this is particularly so when members of the group come from various backgrounds and where the members have no real face-to-face communication or historical background of working together. Our study identified several obstacles faced by GVTs in this cross-cultural project (refer to the summarized finding in Table 2).

First, students expressed difficulty with managing the requisite technology. For example, cases of non-working e-mail addresses delayed initial contact between participants. A few team-members experienced power cuts or outages in their countries which, coupled with inconsistent internet access and fluctuating internet speeds, served as bottlenecks to project progress. Although the majority of the participants were comfortable using common social networking tools such as Facebook, some expressed privacy concerns and

Table 2. Thematic Analysis based on Cross-Cultural Challenges

Cross-Cultural Challenges	Quotations from Documents
1. Managing technical-oriented difficulty— non-working email addresses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “An initial issue faced was couple was members responded late, and one of the members email address was invalid and we could not get in touch.”
2. Language barrier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Some members have a very hard time understanding and communicating in basic English, which led to a team member not being able to even communicate his proposal of a business idea due to his bad English”
3. Decline of motivation over time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Another difficulty was how the excitement seemed to wane as the weeks went by and very little had been done.”
4. Non-committed and indifferent attitude, irregular responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Some members barely knew anything about what had to be done and how it is to be done.”
5. Geographical distance— working with strangers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The international project seems very interesting at the first blank, but it's very complicated to communicate by the people around the world.”
6. Time zone differences-- Coordinating meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It is difficult to get everybody online together because of the time difference”

as a result some of them had reservations. They asked the team to choose an alternative mode of communication and collaboration that suited their own preference of working together.

Another difficulty commonly cited by participants in this cross-cultural project was the inconvenience of dealing with different time-zones because the team members originated from seven different countries. Arranging video-conferencing or mere online chat meetings proved to be problematic and challenging. Although a handful of teams managed to schedule meeting times that satisfied everyone, most teams had to contend with waiting for members to reply to messages at their own convenience.

Apart from the time zone differences, another barrier was language. English as a universal language was naturally the language used for communication amongst team members. However, as it was common for a single team to harbor first, second and even third-language speakers, variations in language made it challenging to ensure that everyone was on the same page. Not only did this sometimes cause misunderstanding of the content of messages, but it also discouraged struggling speakers from expressing their ideas and opinions openly.

Students also clearly stated their motivation seemed to decline over time. For example, some of them said that keeping all team members constantly motivated was a difficult task, and even more so over a long duration and without the aid of tangible interaction. Most teams reported very high enthusiasm levels at the start of the project, which eventually declined as they neared the end of the project. A few participants showed non-committal attitudes, evident through irregular responses and indifference during brain-storming sessions. Yet this did not seem to significantly demotivate the participants, who continued working as a team with committed members.

Due to the various countries participating in this project, each member of each team reported to his or her own instructor. This led to misunderstanding of the elements of the project and related deadlines, despite there being a single instructions file which was to be used by all instructors. Issues such as mismatches in time orientation resulted in delayed submission of the proposal, though the milestones were clearly outlined in the first few weeks of the class.

Cross-Cultural Synergies

Generally, students reported being deeply satisfied with their experiences despite the challenges and obstacles along the way (refer to the summarized finding in Table 3). Students felt very fortunate to have had the opportunity to be exposed cross-

Table 3. Thematic Analysis based on Cross-Cultural Synergies

Cross-Cultural Synergies	Quotations from Documents
1. Developed relationships and friendship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Rapport building and collaboration came to us naturally as most of my team members shared the same type of enthusiasm and openness to a global atmosphere.”
2. Practiced leadership without a formal appointment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Our group dynamic is great, in normal circumstances one person assumes leadership based on a variety of characteristics, but since this project has so many elements, there has already been a few leaders from a group as little as 7.
3. Learned new and different management skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “People in the group have different skills that when put together is our main strength.”
4. Utilized varied form of CMC tools, i.e. Skype, Facebook, Instant messaging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Facebook had proved to be an essential tool for group work to be successful, helping us get in touch easier and even vote better and fasting using its embedded voting application.”
5. Exposed internationally without travelling across the globe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The best thing about working with six different people around the world is that, first; I have never worked with so many different nationalities at once.” • “I've developed some knowledge about different countries and people whom I've never seen.”
6. Acquired competence in working with GVTs structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I also started to learn the way of communicating with different people residing in different parts of the world” • “You get to know their way of working and culture, which makes it easier for yourself to work at your workplace in the future.”

culturally without the need to travel. Although Dubai is a melting pot of various cultures, the range of backgrounds in the population is still relatively limited. The experiment exposed participants to individuals from countries with whom

they had not previously interacted. Working with new cultures added an extra flavor to the team experience, broadened participants' minds by educating them on lifestyles and work processes different from their own, and most importantly helped dispel previously-held stereotypes about the cultures they were dealing with.

What many participants found the most rewarding segment of the project was the opportunity to form friendships with their team-mates which extended beyond the scope of the project. Most communication between team members seemed to be casual and free-flowing, reflecting informal relationships even from the start of the project. A majority of the participants reported still having their team-members listed as a Facebook friend, with a few continuing to remain in touch with each other after the semester ends.

Students also learned new and different management styles and skills. A GVT necessitates careful planning and management of resources. As a result of the experiment, students gained good practice in handling a wide range of people which will prove useful in their future professional lives. Participants were educated through practical means on how to delegate tasks effectively by making the best use of members' strengths and weaknesses and following up on progress. Apart from basic management skills, student also learned a number of technical competencies. For example, all participants were comfortable using computer-mediated communication tools to contact their teammates, attesting to the technology-driven generation to which they belong. There were no difficulties related to technical know-how with any of the tools chosen, whether it was social networking, e-mail, video-conferencing, voice chat or document sharing.

The most important thing students observed was some of them emerged as leaders in this virtual environment. In the beginning, no leaders were assigned after the random appointment of teams. This left each team with the responsibility of selecting its own leader, whether through actual

appointment or spontaneous leadership through natural abilities. A significant number of the students from Dubai showed initiative in leading their teams, which gave them the upper hand in propelling the project forward and keeping the project's progress in control.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

With the widespread use of computer mediated communication technology tools, GVTs are becoming the most popular and innovative learning structure in many educational institutions. Such teams are composed of members from different cultural backgrounds, working at a distance, collaborating using varied communication technologies to achieve their goals, and often with no historical work relationship. Based on our case study, we found many challenges stem from such a learning structure, yet students also see many advantages to GVTs in the context of the learning environment. With this preliminary understanding, the study has provided us with insights into both the challenges and synergies present when using GVTs as a learning platform. We suggest future research should be undertaken to understand several additional or deeper aspects, such as:

- What are the motivating factors for an educational institution to employ GVTs as part of its practical learning environment?
- How might GVTs provide an opportunity to harness cross-cultural experience among students?
- How might GVTs provide a learning platform for students that will promote collaboration without geographical barriers?

CONCLUSION

This case study offers many valuable insights into whether or not and how educational institutions might promote GVTs as part of learning in order to capture the synergistic values of cross-cultural experiences, as well as give students experience in handling the challenges of a working environment that is prevalent in corporate settings. We have conducted a thematic analysis to identify what students perceived as the challenges and synergistic values of the cross-cultural collaboration project. Although this was the first time the students had participated in a GVT, our exploratory understanding concludes that students reported bilateral experiences encompassing challenging issues such as managing technical difficulty, language barriers, decline of motivation, geographical distance, time differences, non-committed and unresponsive attitude, but they also felt optimistic about several aspects such as formation of relationships and friendships, emergent leadership, managerial competencies, varied use of CMC, work in GVT structure, and international exposure to diverse cultures.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Case Study: A research methodology that is often used to obtain in-depth insights about a phenomenon, individual or organization. It is a powerful method when such phenomenon offers unique and interesting aspects to investigate.

Culture: Shared values, beliefs, attitudes, norms and practices of a group people who work together. Culture is a collective phenomenon and it affects people at a group level, and not an individual level.

Content Analysis: It is widely used in qualitative method to analyze secondary data in the form of text such as interview transcriptions, newspapers, books, and/or manuscripts.

Computer Mediated Communication Technology: Use of computer technology with strong function for communication and collaboration at workplace.

Experiential Learning: Learning experiences that is lived through and as a result allows people to obtain knowledge and information. In addition, it also allows people to obtain experiences while undergoing the process itself, benefitting from the 'hands-on' value.

Global Virtual Teams: A global virtual team is a geographically dispersed team, has diverse cultural backgrounds, communicates and collaborates using information communication technologies, and has no prior history of working together.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ To protect the confidentiality and identity of the universities who participated in this project, we will not disclose the name of the universities. However, we are only able to disclose the participating countries in this cross-culture project as to highlight the range of team members' diversity and degree of cultural distance of the participating countries in terms of cross-cultural differences.