Teaching professional communication in a global context: Using a three-phase approach of theory exploration, self-assessment, and virtual simulation

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Introduction

In today's globally diverse society, standard theoretical instruction is not able to expose our students to the realities of international communication, multicultural collaboration, and dispersed global work. Abstract text-based cases are limited in delivering a realistic view of the challenges of working virtually and globally within international teams. In addition to cases, we believe that hands-on experiential, collaborative exercises – combined with the metacognitive exercise of reflective practice – offer greater learning potential. While international collaboration and exercises may take extra time, effort, and cost, the benefits to students can be substantial.

This paper discusses a recent teaching endeavor across three universities in the USA, Finland, and Austria. The authors of this paper collaborated on a project to link business students via a virtual team simulation, called Virtual Teams in International Business (VIBu - http://www.vibu.fi). By examining this pedagogical approach we demonstrate best practices for virtual and dispersed student learning of professional communication as students develop awareness of the challenges of international business, communication across cultures, and

dispersed global work. We posit that exposing business students to the authentic complexity and ambiguity of modern virtual and dispersed work results in relevant learning and deeper understanding of the applicable topics. This case-learning environment requires that the instructor relinquish full control within the learning situation and give the responsibility to the students to act, organize and learn, but the learning that results from this empowerment may be considerable.

In this article, we describe this unique collaboration of four university faculty who combined their areas of expertise (professional communication, virtual teamwork, and intercultural communication) to create a customized pilot project for their students across three countries. First, we focus on behavioral assessment of the intercultural communication skills needed for effective global interaction. Second, we examine the global simulation used in this VIBu project. Finally, we discuss implications and the potential of future pedagogical models, which hold much promise for teaching professional communication in global contexts.

Internationalization of business school curricula

It is first important to make the distinction between functional business skills and other forms of business education. Current discussion about internationalizing the business curriculum highlights the importance of helping students become knowledgeable about doing business globally (Cant, 2004; Gray, 2007; Green & Whitsed, 2012; Kashlack et al., 2011; Ornstein & Nelson, 2006). However, providing students with realistic and worthwhile global experiences is a challenge in today's tight curriculum. Key learning components within today's business school curriculum most often focus on functional aspects of business learning. For example, functional aspects of business would include the operations for mergers and acquisitions; global economies; supply-chain management; international finance; and accounting practices. While these facets relate to global business and are central to business education in general, what often is excluded is even more critical – how to develop intercultural understanding about and the competence to deal with the underlying cultural norms and social practices that ultimately affect business practices.

Without an understanding of such mindsets and behaviors, students are unable to develop the intercultural competence necessary to be global business leaders (Durocher, 2009; Forray & Woodilla, 2009; Jacobsen, et al., 1999) or to link what is learned in the classroom with what is experienced in the workplace (Tuleja, 2008; 2014). Guiding students towards a deeper understanding of cultural differences – and the ability to interact successfully across those differences (otherwise known as *Cultural Intelligence*)—should be a critical component of today's business education.

Cultural intelligence (CQ)

Cultural intelligence (CQ) is the ability to recognize, understand, and then apply knowledge of different values, beliefs, and norms when interacting with people from another culture. CQ is related to emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995; Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008), which is the ability to identify and monitor personal emotions as well as those of others. But CQ goes beyond self-awareness; it is an ability to interact and communicate easily in an unfamiliar culture. Therefore, if CQ is the ability to function skillfully in cultural contexts different from one's own

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(Earley & Ang, 2003; Earley & Mosakowski, 2004; Earley & Peterson, 2004), then the culturally intelligent person will be knowledgeable about differing cultural norms and thus be able to style-switch specific behaviors among people who behave differently. This facility is necessary in order to find ways to elicit the most effective results when interacting in ambiguous and uncertain situations (Ng, Van Dyne, & Ang, 2009).

Van Dyne (2014), a key contributor to advancing the theory of cultural intelligence, identifies four factors of CQ: strategy, knowledge, motivation, and behavior.

> Ï *CQ Strategy* is the process of making sense of unfamiliar experiences by checking assumptions of the situation and then evaluating what happened. Based upon this reflection, the person can choose how to act or react.
> Ï *CQ Knowledge* is what is known about any given culture, the similarities and differences as well as the culture's history, society, values, and language. Foundational knowledge aids in strategic choices.
> Ï *CQ Motivation* is interest in and confidence about experiencing other cultures and interacting with people from those cultures and includes energy for how much or how little interaction will take place when dealing with a cultural difference.
> Ï *CQ Behavior* is the ability to adapt both verbally and non-verbally in different cultural settings in order to behave appropriately. CQ Behavior is a result of CQ strategy, knowledge, and motivation.

Over the past decade, research has shown that the strategy and behavioral aspects of CQ can predict one's performance. A person who is able to be reflective and engage in self-evaluation and then adapt his or her behaviors exhibits good indicators for successful intercultural interactions. In fact, both CQ Strategy and Action have been shown to predict task performance. For example, those who are able to monitor their thought processes make better decisions and perform better in multicultural teams (strategy), and those who are able to adapt both verbal and non-verbal behavior in specific situations have a more flexible repertoire of responses, which improves their task performance (Van Dyne, 2015).

Understanding these four factors—CQ strategy, knowledge, motivation, and behavior—can have important implications for success in an intercultural context. Successful tactics allow one to make sense of unfamiliar situations by challenging one's assumptions, to understand basic similarities and differences of one's counterparts, to engage with and learn from others, and to adapt one's behavior to the specific context and situation. These are crucial factors in being able to perform a specific task, whether it is in business, medicine, education, engineering, law, or any business or profession. Understanding the four elements of cultural intelligence can help business students working in teams on simulations engage deeply in whatever situation they encounter that requires interacting and dealing with cultural differences. The next section examines a global virtual team exercise used with MBA and undergraduate programs in Finland, Austria, and the US to develop this understanding.

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Course model: Delivered in three phases

The series of assignments presented in this paper were part of an intercultural business communication course included in an integrated curriculum developed under the umbrella of Tulane University's Altman Scholar program. This program is a special four-year undergraduate curriculum that integrates liberal arts and business disciplines, extensive language instruction, and two study abroad experiences. Students enter the program in the freshman year as a cohort and take specialized core requirement classes. The Altman program has clear focus in its curriculum to

> Prepare students to become leaders in today's increasingly interconnected world. Such leaders must be adaptable to changing professional and cultural circumstances and need flexible broad-based skill-sets to adjust their professional goals to evolving opportunities and markets. Above all, they also need to communicate effectively with citizens of their own and other cultures. (Tulane.edu, 2014)

During the development of this course, two key factors were considered in designing the syllabus and assignments: First, the course must provide the foundational skills the basic core business communication course offers plus added intercultural communication skills to align with the mission of the Altman program; and second, the course will prepare the students for their year abroad experience that would commence in the following semester. Devoss (2002) notes that "[a]lthough textbook discussions of intercultural communication have improved dramatically in the last 40 years and often provide helpful general guidelines, they are limited in how they help us think about these issues in more detailed and complicated ways" (p. 70). With these factors in mind, the course adopted a three-phase approach that stretched beyond in-class lecture and discussion to include cultural, attitudinal, and behavioral assessment as well as a hands-on simulation exercise to create a fully developed experiential learning module.

Phase I: Conventional lecture, discussions, and assignments

The first phase of the course asks students to read, discuss, and complete assignments on the topic of best practices in business communication through both writing and presenting. Readings and discussions touch on the theories of intercultural communication. For example, two correlating written and oral assignments require students to incorporate Hofstede's (1994) dimension of cultural variability as they analyze a potential international expansion of a U.S fast food chain.

Phase one culminates in a written exam on the theories emphasized in the first quarter of the course. Were the course to end at this point, students would understand the foundation of intercultural communication but may be limited by their own attitudes and beliefs about other cultures. An important next step is to link knowledge of self with knowledge of others (Jameson, 2007).

Phase II: Behavioral assessment instruments

To overcome the limits of studying only intercultural communication theory, the second phase of the course requires that students complete two individual behavioral assessment instruments: the Cultural Orientation Indicator (COI) and the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). Both

instruments are explained in more detail in the following subsections. These instruments provide the students with objective insight into their own preconceived attitudes and thus, their predicted behaviors in an intercultural setting.

Both assessments are administered electronically prior to a special weekend seminar when students are debriefed on their results as individuals and as a cohort. Each of the instruments provide a slightly different, but complementary view of the students' level of cultural competence and attitude orientation at the time of the course, which directly precedes their year abroad.

The Cultural Orientation Indicator (COI)

Based upon the Cultural Orientations Approach (Cultural Orientations Approach, 2015), the COI is a web-based, self-reporting tool designed to foster self-awareness and other-awareness so users can effectively communicate and collaborate in a global team environment. The assessment illuminates an individual's cultural communication preferences through a non-judgmental report that provides recommendations and suggests relevant resources for building effective skills and cultural aptitude. The COI was developed in 1985 by the Training Management Corporation (TMC) and is designed to measure difference in cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes. This assessment tool has been developed by experts in the behavioral science field and demonstrates high validity and reliability. The COI has been translated into 13 languages (http://www.tmcorp.com/About-TMC/History/41/).

The COI's three dimensions provide a way in which users can understand and discuss with their colleagues how they prefer to interact, process information, and view themselves in their work environment. The dimensions include Interaction Style, Thinking Style, and Sense of Self.

> *Interaction Style*: Orientations that impact how you communicate and engage with others in work situations.

> *Thinking Style:* Orientations that impact how you conceptualize and process information in work situations.

> *Sense of Self:* Orientations that define how you view yourself and are motivated in the workplace.

The COI is an assessment tool that helps to identify an individual's intercultural awareness and competence for interacting with people within a diverse workforce. It provides feedback on a person's work-style preferences on three key dimensions of culture that impact the multicultural, global workplace. Because this tool provides an assessment of individual preferences (likings, affinities, biases), it helps people understand themselves as they seek to explore culture-based differences in themselves and others. The goal is to help participants develop cultural competence, the ability to identify, understand, and react to cultural similarities and differences in optimal ways. When there is cultural competence present, individuals, team members, and organizations as well find that they can create synergies and leverage differences at work. In a nutshell, the COI gives a broad overview of three dimensions necessary for communicating effectively with people who are different – these dimensions consist of Interaction Style (how

one communicates and engages), Thinking Style (how one thinks and processes information), and Sense of Self (how one views self in relation to others). Within each of these three dimensions are various orientations—culture-based values or norms—that help us understand differences between communication preferences, such as between being direct or indirect.

Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)

The IDI is also a cross-culturally valid and reliable assessment tool that measures intercultural competence by demonstrating how someone makes sense of and responds to similarities and differences. The instrument creates a profile of a person's level of intercultural competence with a descriptive interpretation of the level of intercultural development and associated issues (Hammer, 2009). It is built upon the theory of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) which focuses on the phases we go through when learning about differences: Denial, Defense, Minimization, Acceptance, and Adaptation (Bennett, 1993). This model identifies specific orientations that range from more mono-cultural to more intercultural or global mindsets. A multicultural perspective indicates that a person has a greater capability for responding effectively to cultural differences as well as recognizing and appreciating commonalities. The premise of the IDI (as with Cultural Intelligence) is that a person's workplace success is only as good as their ability to understand and adapt to differences by responding in culturally appropriate ways.

Once students have taken both of these inventories, they are briefed on their meanings and engage in a number of exercises that focus them on their individual communication preferences and their attitudes towards cultural difference. Students spend considerable time in self-reflection as they think through their potential gaps with international counterparts who will be interacting with them in the simulation.

Phase III: Virtual team simulation exercise and reflection

In this phase, students build on the self-knowledge derived from the assessment instruments and participate in a virtual simulation. Each student is assigned to a team of students from around the globe to complete a simulation in business operations. We see that success of learning will increasingly depend on exploring interrelationships in an information-rich environment. Our focus is on developing the skills related to solving this challenge. What is learned emerges from the activity in relation to the content: the ability to think critically in the content domain, to collaborate with peers, and to use these colleagues to test ideas about the problems faced in decision-making situations. Our basic assumption is that there is learning potential inherent in shared decision-making within complex environments like the virtual simulation in our teaching case.

Simulation gaming environments can be used to engage learners in activities that share crucial features of work contexts but protect them from the more severe consequences of mistakes (Garris, Ahlers & Driskell, 2002). Thus, learners are encouraged to take risks, explore, and try new things (Gee, 2008). Simulations allow experiments to be conducted within a fictitious situation to show the real behaviors and outcomes of variable conditions (Lean, Moizer, Towler & Abbey, 2006). In the educational context, these experiences can be reflected by and connected to theoretical models. Learners need conceptual tools for understanding both practical situations

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and their own activities in these situations. The importance of the integration of theoretical, practical, and self-regulative knowledge for learning and professional development is underlined in a number of studies (e.g., Chi, Glaser, & Farr, 1988; Guile & Griffiths; 2001; Tynjälä, 2008).

Simulations can be used to anchor learning with authentic tasks, help learners to deal with complexity, and facilitate collaboration (Lehti & Lehtinen, 2005). The importance of anchoring learning to authentic tasks and situations has been strongly emphasized in the dominant theories of learning, particularly in cognitive, constructivist, and situated traditions of learning research (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; De Corte, 2003). Simulations can enhance learning through teamwork and group interaction. In this kind of learning situation, the experiential nature, intensity, and motivational aspects of simulation games (SG) are fully leveraged. A dynamic and authentic learning environment provides a self-directed learning experience, where the instructor acts as a facilitator for learning. Group discussions in a simulation training setting help to bring out the tacit knowledge of the members of the group or team. This emphasis on collaborative leadership and shared knowledge is an important challenge for many organizations.

Virtual teams

Work in the 21st century has seen a shift from traditional organizations with a minimum use of electronically mediated communication and coordination to a more extensive use of virtual organizations and virtual working. Virtual organizations can be defined as geographically distributed organizations whose members are bound by a long-term common interest or goal, and who communicate and coordinate their work mainly through information technology (Ahuja & Carley, 1998).

While geographical requirements may require distance teamwork, empirical studies have also shown that virtual teams tend to have high-quality decisions, are more creative, and are more satisfied with the outcome of work than teams in traditional organizations (Rico & Cohen, 2005). While electronic communication in virtual teams involves specific challenges due to increased anonymity and decreased information richness, these aspects can also have specific advantages when used correctly (Hertel, Geister & Konradt, 2005). Virtual teams might find new and even more competitive forms of organizing than direct control and hierarchical command chains.

One expected benefits of becoming virtual is increased innovation. The divisions between communities of practice tend to encourage local innovation (Brown & Duguid, 1998). Furthermore, innovative people tend to cluster, staying close to those who share their visions, understand their insights, and advance their ideas (Brown & Duguid, 2002).

Virtual teams in international business

The simulation environment we have applied in our teaching case is called VIBu (Virtual Teams in International Business) (VIBu, 2014) and is based on a clock-driven business game in which processes evolve in real time, and the participants are in constant interaction with both each other and the simulation game model (Lainema, 2003). VIBu is an experiential learning environment in the way Kolb (1984) describes it: the environment forms a cycle of action taken leading to an observation of the consequences of that action. We believe that learning is neither a transmissive nor a submissive process, but rather a willful, intentional, active, conscious, constructive practice that includes intention-action-reflection activities as described in many educational studies detailing the constructivist-learning paradigm (e.g., Jonassen & Land, 2002). In VIBu, the

identification of relevant information and correct solutions is left open in the instructional situation. In other words, the student teams are self-directed, and the teachers/facilitators of the simulation sessions give only the necessary amount of information with which to start the sessions. The focus is on the skills of reflectivity of the learner, not on remembering.

On a basic level, the case simulation involves manufacturing companies whose core task is to take care of their entire supply chain from suppliers to customers including procurement, inventory management, manufacturing, and deliveries. In addition to these elemental business processes, the companies need to manage support functions like cash management, recruiting, marketing, and product development. Further, companies need to manage these aspects profitably. The simulation environment is complex and time sensitive because different decision areas all have to be balanced within the simulation's clock-driven environment.

The business processes described above create a motivating, immersive, and meaningful operating environment for the students. As such, the environment is an optimal one for something as demanding as international and multicultural collaboration. Students are highly motivated to overcome the obstacles present in virtual collaboration. Their motivation to run a successful business is great, and together they uncover procedures to complete all operational tasks.

In its basic form, the simulation is played locally in teams of three (each cohort steering their own company), and a typical number of competing teams is eight. VIBu extends the basic RealGame platform to include international student teams from different continents, cultures, and time-zones. Here VIBu can be expanded to include 16 companies/teams of up to 10 students apiece for a total of 160 potential students participating at one time.

One student team running one simulation company generally contains 8 to 10 students, all located in different geographical locations as shown in Figure 1. Using remote connection software, each team shares one view of their company and manages actions through this one screen. Within this remote set-up, any team member can make decisions. The shared real-time view of their company interface allows team members to collaborate and negotiate in real-time using Skype, chat, and email.

A simulation session lasts for 10 hours and up to16 hours when the simulation is run in a global session across different continents. In the longer cross-continent session, time zones in different locations require that the students work in shifts. As time passes, all students need to shift responsibility to their European counterparts; later, the European participants shift the responsibility to their American team members. This work of "hand-off" illustrates a real demand of global time differences and presents one challenge of virtual, global, dispersed work. Other challenges of VIBu include cultural differences, language barriers, and technical operational demands.
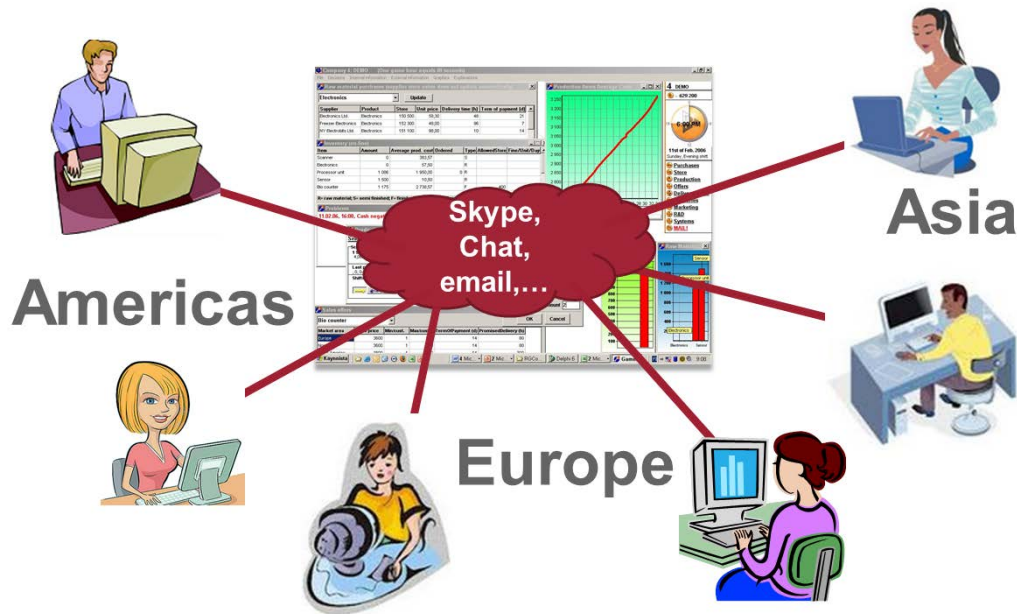
Figure 1. VIBu simulation dispersed communication environment.

Each of these student teams is part of a simulated global supply chain (Figure 2). Unlike conventional business simulations, VIBu players rely on each other as both suppliers and customers. Thus, instead of being simply competitors, the student teams need to collaborate to be successful. VIBu is organized so that some of the companies act as sub-producers who manufacture component parts that are required by other companies who act as manufacturers of finished goods. Throughout the simulation, student teams need to contact their suppliers and/or customers virtually and to react to an ever-changing market as they generate revenue and build their businesses. This dynamic arrangement reproduces the highly networked nature of present day business supply chains.
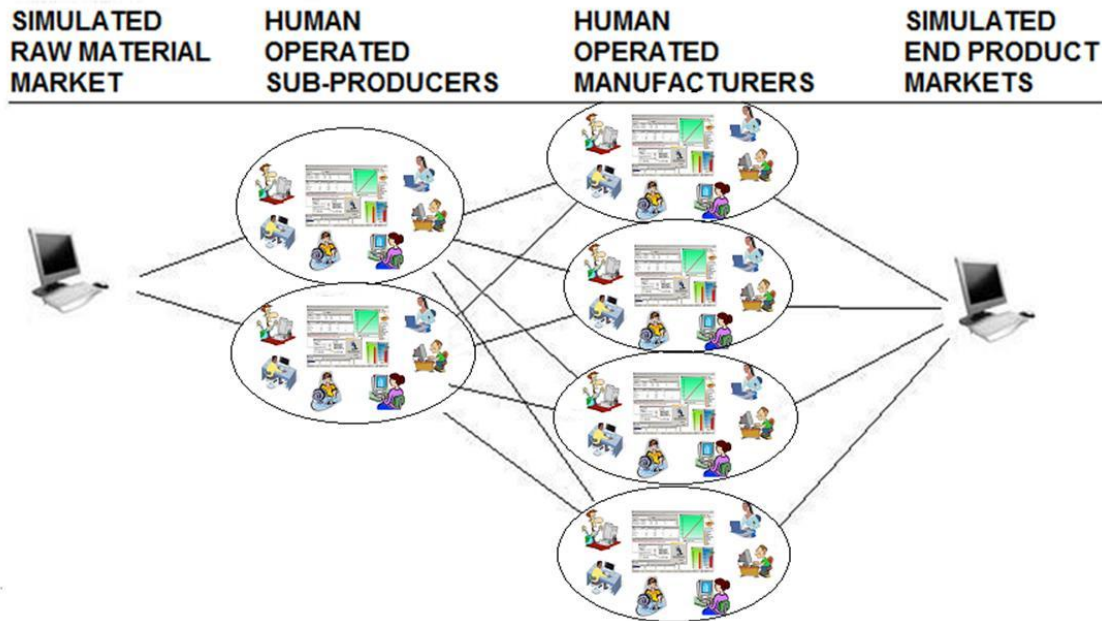
Figure 2. VIBu simulation global supply chain.

Discussion

The environment described above is fundamentally different from traditional business simulations, which are mostly played locally, all students participating in the same place at the same time. If these traditional business simulations are played in a decentralized manner, they seldom include synchronous (real-time) communication between multi-cultural students across different locations.

During the game the participants discuss the characteristics and logic of the environment; they negotiate together, change knowledge, learn from each other, and make decisions. Based on our current experiences, students are open to new ideas, broad-minded regarding new technologies, tolerant of uncertainty, curious about foreign cultures, and motivated to learn new skills. The experiment described in this study includes many of the challenges Kayworth & Leidner (2002) list as present in the virtual context. Still, regardless of all these challenges the students in the sessions almost without exception have been able to overcome the demands successfully. Our case should stand out as an example of how students today may have much more motivation and capacity to take responsibility for their own learning than what many educators may think is realistic to expect.

For this kind of educational experiment, student commitment is an essential prerequisite and it can be achieved by simply offering the student a meaningful collaboration task to be accomplished in an international context. Together student empowerment and commitment will lead to self-organization, resulting in their commitment to the joint task and to a self-directed learning experience in which the instructor plays a minimal role and to openness to each other. The instructor's focus shifts to the closing debrief and facilitating rich discussion of the VIBu experience intended to uncover student learning.

At this final phase, students are able to make connections among what they learned through self-reflection from the two intercultural assessment tools, related lectures, and activities dealing with how to communicate across different cultures. Ultimately, students identify the norms, values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that affect the way people behave. This reflection offers the perfect opportunity to underscore the four factors of Cultural Intelligence discussed earlier. By engaging in this robust, authentic experience, students are able to reflect on their CQ strategy – the process of checking assumptions in order to make sense of unfamiliar experiences. By experiencing the two intercultural inventories our students are able to build CQ knowledge about the various cultures in which they interact. Additionally, students develop knowledge about themselves to understand their own cultural makeup. Their CQ motivation develops both their interest and their confidence; they become intrigued about the communication missteps and the ambiguity and uncertainty that develop across time zones and with other students who speak different languages and have different perspectives on task priorities. Finally, as they learn to adapt through trial and error, they further develop their CQ behavior.

Implications

This international collaboration and its learning implications hold much promise for teaching professional communication in global contexts. Ultimately, through a multicultural and international learning experience we expose the students to cultural diversity and, thus, train our students to the very requirements of the modern, international working life. In a written reflection, one student puts it this way:

> I did not expect that this game [would be] so interesting to me. Before we started the first session, I thought, it [was] just a game for handling a company. But it is much more. It is an intercultural training, where people are under pressure to understand cultures and behaviors, because it is possible to measure the quality of the cross-cultural work in the teams (in a certain way). This game made me more open to make collaborative intercultural decisions. (American female student)

Finally, as educators, we should remember that the present day student generation was born alongside computers and computer networks. As such, younger generations are likely more fluent and more comfortable using modern communication technologies than their teachers. The strength to implement bold innovations may result in something that will be both unique for students and essential to their learning.

Conclusion

This paper examined a recent pedagogical endeavor across universities in Finland, Austria, and the U.S. The authors described a three-phase approach to teaching global professional communication through the introduction of intercultural competence, self-assessment, and then application through a virtual team-building exercise.

Our premise has been that educators increasingly need to expose their students to issues that rise from the internationalization of the world economy. International communication, multicultural collaboration, and the nature of dispersed global work are difficult topics to be taught in theory,

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and we believe that students need experience-based exposure to these issues in order to grasp the nature of these challenges.

One of the basic competences of future international employees is their ability to recognize, understand, and apply knowledge of different values, beliefs, and norms when interacting with other cultures. In our case the aim has been to give the learners an ability to interact and communicate in an unfamiliar culture and to be aware of differing cultural norms and thus be able to adapt behaviors among people from a different culture. In this paper we introduced a three phase model of (i) conventional lectures, discussions, and assignments; (ii) individual behavioral assessment through completing the Cultural Orientation Indicator (COI) and the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) assessments; and (iii) a virtual team simulation exercise and reflection on the exercise. During this process the students build on the self-knowledge derived from the assessment instruments and experience virtual multicultural collaboration in a true international environment.

In our case-learning environment, understanding the different elements of cultural intelligence have helped business students engage deeply in situations that require interacting and dealing with cultural differences. An obvious prerequisite for successful collaboration has been the virtual team members' commitment to the joint task. We have noticed that students are naturally inclined to international collaboration. Surprisingly often they are able to self-organize their teams as a result of active participation, commitment to the joint task, and openness to each other.

Our experiences point out that the group interaction and the intensity of the synchronous exercise provide a self-directed learning experience in which the instructor plays a surprisingly small role. The intensive decision-making challenges and group discussions within the simulation environment help the students to immerse themselves in the challenges of the virtual world.

 Most student feedback and reflective essay assignment quotations on team management and self-organization have been positive, showing different kinds of approaches to successful team dynamics and collaboration. If students are given a meaningful task to complete, they are motivated to make the effort of understanding and coping with cultural differences. As such, these kinds of learning processes are valuable experiences from which the students can learn. The task of the teacher is to take care that these experiences are dealt with in an appropriate manner. In many cases, the students realize how they could have acted in a different manner, leading to better team communication and collaboration.

The premise of our exercise is rich with cultural issues (different language skills, communication patterns, and cultural customs). Students should be exposed to different cultures so that they will achieve the cultural skills needed in the contemporary global business environment. VIBu is the first glimpse on multiculturalism for many of the participants. VIBu is unique because truly working multicultural university exercises seem to be rare (except for, of course, student exchange programs). We have made a strong case that modern technologies can be part of the process of overcoming cultural barriers.

It is very clear that cultural issues become visible in the sessions, although we are sure that in this kind of a short session, the cultural characteristics do not have a chance to fully blossom. The sessions are probably much too short for the participants to get free of or forget about consciously or unconsciously accentuated politeness and correctness. Instead, the sessions work as an icebreaker between the cultures and help initial fictitious cultural stereotypes to emerge so the students can confront them.

It is obvious that the students enjoy the multicultural aspect of the simulation. It fortifies their natural curiosity on foreign cultures and adds an additional level to their motivation. As modern working life becomes more international, it would be short sighted not to include teaching methods that challenge students to face the intercultural challenges real work teams face when working with colleagues from around the globe.

An additional benefit of using the virtual environment is that students can work in a democratic and equal environment since the required technology is not a financial issue in most universities in the world. The virtual environment does not include the physical classroom nor any other physical characteristics, but merely the person with her/his intellectual capabilities. This is an excellent starting point for truly experiential and self-reflective education.

In future work, the authors will discuss the student debrief, review, and reflective assignments used to analyze and assess learning outcomes in the context of improved global professional communication skills.

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