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Reaching across continents: engaging students through virtual collaborations

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ABSTRACT

Business schools have the responsibility of preparing students for work in multicultural organisations and global markets. This paper examines a situated learning experience for undergraduates through a virtual collaboration between a UK university and a Brazilian university. This facilitated remote communication using social media and smart devices, allowing students from both institutions to enhance their cross-cultural management competencies. A qualitative approach was used for the research, drawing on the reflections of the tutors from both institutions and feedback received from students in the UK and Brazil. This paper provides empirical observations regarding the use of this innovative pedagogic approach, generating discussion of the implications for teaching, thus contributing to the literature on international collaborations in cross-cultural management education.

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Introduction

In the current global economy, graduates are increasingly required to possess intercultural competencies (Catteeuw, 2013; Mellors-Bourne, Jones, & Woodfield, 2015). It is therefore incumbent on business schools to ensure that they reflect increasing cultural diversity and globalisation in their curriculums in order to enhance the student experience (AACSB, 2013). In this paper, we explore a collaboration which took place between a UK university and a Brazilian university, involving students on modules related to cross-cultural management and intercultural communication, respectively.

The contribution of this paper is to engage with the growing body of literature on virtual collaborations in higher education, and thus to examine this approach as a way in which international higher education can prepare students to work in a globalised world, in line with Blessinger and Anchan (2015). We demonstrate how virtual collaborations can develop students' own sense of their skills in relation to cross-cultural communication even when used formatively. Whilst the paper discusses a collaboration which took place between business schools, we feel that global competence (Hunter, White, & Godbey, 2006) is a skill which is relevant to graduates from all disciplines, and thus in discussing our experience of

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such a collaboration, we also highlight some of the challenges which may be encountered and consider potential solutions which are not discipline-specific.

The aim of the collaboration was to create a situated learning experience for undergraduates in the UK and Brazil, and through the process of virtual communication, that our students would enhance their cross-cultural management competencies and cultural intelligence, vital for success in employment as organisations become increasingly multicultural (Diamond, Walkley, Forbes, Hughes, & Sheen, 2011).

Furthermore, we sought to develop their capabilities as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1995). Therefore, in keeping with our interpretivist philosophy, rather than using a test in order to measure cultural intelligence (e.g. Erez et al., 2013), we follow the suggestions of Zainuba and Rahal (2012) regarding self-assessment, as we were interested in students' own understanding and self-evaluations, as this is a skill identified as important for graduate employment (Diamond et al., 2011).

Therefore, as we required students to reflect on their intercultural communication skills, it was necessary to support the process of reflection during contact time in class. We agree with Ryan (2013, p. 154) that 'critical reflection is not an intuitive skill' and although the collaboration itself, rather than reflection, is the primary focus of this paper, we briefly discuss the scaffolding of the reflective process which was provided, given that without proper support, student reflection is frequently of a superficial nature which does not adequately support learning (Orland-Barak, 2005; Ryan & Ryan, 2013).

We allocated the students into small groups of five or six students, comprising of students in the UK and Brazil. For the nine weeks of the collaboration, they were required to communicate with each other remotely, via email, Facebook or other methods of their choosing, in order to discuss theories related to cross-cultural management and intercultural communication and relate them to their own experiences, thus enabling the consideration of theory from a variety of different viewpoints and amongst a more diverse range of participants than would have been possible without the collaboration.

We found that although students initially demonstrated some reluctance to communicate and share experiences and ideas in this manner, overall, the method was embraced by both cohorts, and that they found that the experience had enabled them to develop their intercultural skills, and to gain confidence when engaging with cultural others. Where problems were encountered with the project we outline the nature of the challenges faced and provide guidelines of a practical nature for others interested in engaging in similar activities.

We begin with a brief review of the literature related to key themes of this collaboration, namely cross-cultural management education, group work/participative pedagogies and the use of technology in higher education learning and teaching. After a discussion of our own experiences and those of our students, we conclude with our thoughts on the effectiveness of collaborations of this nature, and offer some practical guidelines for those wishing to consider such an approach.

Literature review

Cross-cultural management education

It has been suggested (Fougère & Moulettes, 2012; Tipton, 2008) that despite the importance of conceptualisations of national culture to the international business discipline, it is an area

that traditional textbooks frequently do not address well. Typically, essentialist, static models of culture are presented to students – for example, those of Hofstede (2001), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012) or the GLOBE studies (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004), however, it has been found (Sizoo, Serrie, & Shapero, 2008) that although this may enable students to gain an intellectual understanding of the topic, it is often insufficient to equip them with the necessary skills to cope in cross-cultural management scenarios when they leave university and move into the realm of employment.

Our aim therefore was to encourage our students to become globally competent, and whilst acknowledging that this is a contested term, here we follow the definition of Hunter et al. (2006, p. 277) that global competence is ‘having an open mind while actively seeking to understand cultural norms and expectations of others, leveraging this gained knowledge to interact, communicate and work effectively outside one’s environment’.

With this in mind, as leaders of modules on cross-cultural management and intercultural communication at our respective institutions, we sought to follow the call by Zhu and Bargiela-Chiappini (2013) for a more situated approach to cross-cultural management education. Whilst not ignoring etic models such as that of Hofstede (2001), which seek to identify universal cultural characteristics (Zhu and Bargiela-Chiappini (2013) and are usually taught to students on cross-cultural management courses, we also wanted to encourage an emic approach, which is defined as ‘the insiders’ perspective on culture (from within a specific culture), which provides insight into cultural nuances and complexities’ (Zhu & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2013, p. 381). Thus, we wished to enable students to consider cross-cultural experiences in the context of real-life practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to facilitate greater understanding. The aim was therefore to provide an authentic activity relating to cross-cultural interactions which would ‘engage students’ lived experience [...] students can find meaningful connections with their current views, understandings and experiences and “newer” views, understandings and experiences’ (Stein, Isaacs, & Andrews, 2004, p. 240). We are in agreement with their findings suggesting that although codified information has always been taught at universities, increasingly, there is a requirement for more tacit forms of knowledge which are equally valued by the business community. This is in line with Flyvbjerg (2006), who suggests that experience is a vital component of attaining mastery of a topic, in addition to rule-based learning, and is an approach which corresponds with the discourse of ‘employability’, which is a particularly strong focus of the UK institution involved in this collaboration (Bailey, 2013).

Group work and participative pedagogies

During the process of module design, we sought to include participative pedagogies in our teaching as this ‘moves dependency of a learner away from the management teacher and shifts responsibility for learning to the learner’ (Currie, 2007, p. 549), and group work is a frequently used method in this approach. Although there has been some criticism of group work in higher education in terms of the value that it provides for the student learning experience (Sweeney, Weaven, & Herington, 2008), times have certainly changed since Elton (1996) noted that group work was used relatively infrequently in academia due to the difficulties of assessing contribution and performance. Thus, we concur with Elliott and Reynolds (2014) that in more recent years, group work has frequently been considered as an important pedagogical tool in maintaining students’ motivation and interest levels, and

is often used in international teams, therefore aligning with the views of Vygotsky (1978) that learning is primarily a social activity. It is of particular importance in the teaching of cross-cultural management as students are increasingly required to work in diverse teams after university (Szkudlarek, McNett, Romani, & Lane, 2013) and so as educators, we need to provide the students the opportunity for experiential learning of this whilst they are still at university, in order that they may have a greater understanding of the issues that multicultural teams face in the workplace (Butler & Zander, 2008). At the same time, we acknowledge that in order to gain depth of understanding, such an approach is one which ideally should be taken throughout an entire degree programme, rather than just on selected modules.

Despite this, we were aware of the challenging nature of the project, as research suggests (e.g. Strauss, U, & Young, 2011) that students may experience anxiety when working in multicultural groups, potentially due to concerns around Foreign Language Anxiety and other related linguistic concerns (e.g. Dewaele, 2002; Henderson, 2005) and that working in multicultural virtual teams (Steers, Nardon, & Sánchez-Runde, 2013) may further exacerbate these concerns – for example, some of the students in the UK initially expressed concerns regarding the level of English of the students in Brazil, and how this may affect their communication. In this way, language can act as a potential ‘faultline’ along which different subgroupings may be formed (Butler & Zander, 2008). As Kimmel and Volet (2012) suggest, concerns relating to language proficiency from students who are working in multicultural teams are a recurrent theme in the literature, regardless of whether deficiencies are real or imagined, and therefore one possible interpretation of such concerns could be to view them as the result of Othering the unfamiliar – essentialising students who were in a place (Brazil) of which the UK students had little prior knowledge and therefore who were initially merely seen to be ‘foreign’ and non-Anglophone. Such essentialisation is frequently done in international business textbooks on culture (Fougère & Moulettes, 2012; Westwood, 2006) thus providing an example of the attitudes and beliefs that we wished to challenge during the project, in line with Ramburuth and Daniel (2011) who acknowledge that an experiential approach of this kind ‘allows students to learn directly from each other about how and why they differ, and challenge assumptions, perceptions, and misperceptions to better manage these differences’ (p. 44).

Our collaboration is also unusual compared to the majority of the literature on intercultural group work, which focuses on collaborative learning where the students are physically present on the same university campus (e.g. Baker & Clark, 2010; Kimmel & Volet, 2012; Montgomery, 2009; Turner, 2009), and therefore, although there is a small but growing body of literature, (e.g. Abrahamse et al., 2015; Chappell & Schermerhorn, 1999; Erez et al., 2013; Gavidia, Hernández Mogollón, & Baena, 2005; Shore & Groen, 2009) which does consider remote interactions in an education setting, this area is relatively underexplored in comparison with the literature dealing with onsite multicultural teams. In our case, although some of the students were on the same campus as other group members, the students from the other institution were not, so in order to encourage an equivalent experience for all members of the group, we encouraged them to communicate with each other solely via virtual methods, as it was the experience of working both remotely and within a multicultural team which we were interested in for this project, in line with the views of Watson, Johnson, and Zgourides (2002) that an ability to work in diverse teams is increasingly an expectation of employers.

Our enthusiasm for the use of participative pedagogies in the teaching of this particular subject area should not be misconstrued as a view that participative pedagogies are a panacea to all teaching and learning needs. We are fully aware of the criticisms of group work, and the problems that can arise as result of this method, such as unequal contribution of group members, in-group conflict, student concerns surrounding assessment and grades and anxieties relating to group work (e.g. Kimmel & Volet, 2012; Livingstone & Lynch, 2000; Sweeney et al., 2008). Therefore, we elected to use group work in accordance with the learning outcomes of our modules, in particular the outcome 'assess the impact of culture/s on business and management'. By providing an authentic experience of cultural interaction, we wanted to enable students to gain a more practical understanding than would be possible solely through the use of textbooks and case studies. We attempted to address some of the concerns around group work in the design of our project, which is outlined in the next section, and through substantial tutor support, as the extant literature suggests that this is vital for the appropriate functioning of group work, whether or not this is of culturally homogenous or diverse groups.

The use of technology in higher education teaching and learning

As tutors, we share the views of Sethi (2013, p. 5) that 'the implementation of technology in enhancing higher business management education is not an option but a requirement' and those of Istance and Kools (2013, p. 55) that 'the fundamental reason to pursue technology rich learning environments is less open to debate: *we live in a digital world*' and this belief enabled us to conceive of the project, as given that the students were located on different continents, there was necessarily a use of communications technology in this collaboration, in order to enable us to bridge the physical distance (Kirkwood & Price, 2005). We would, however, add the caveat that whilst we believe in the usefulness of technology-enhanced learning, we are in agreement with Laurillard (2008) that technology is best used in education in order to address a specific issue or learning outcome, and that we should not simply use it just because the tools are available to us. However, when used appropriately, we concur with Gillispie (2014, p. xvi) that technology can 'create a classroom of students more engaged than you ever thought was possible'.

The existing literature on international collaborations in higher education teaching suggest that asynchronous communication can be problematic (Doerry, Klempous, Nikodem, & Paetzold, 2004) with students electing to engage in the minimum interaction necessary that is required, as interaction of this type does not foster social relations to the extent that synchronous communication would (Doerry et al., 2004). Such an approach contrasts with the views of Kirkwood and Price (2005) who suggest that asynchronous communication can be advantageous because it permits students to reflect to a greater extent on the questions, and thus provide a more measured response. This aspect was of particular interest to us, as many of the students involved in this project were communicating in English as a second or third language, the additional time that asynchronous communication provided was felt to reduce the possibility of foreign language anxiety (Dewaele, 2002), although Abrahamse et al. (2015) found that a mixture of both asynchronous and synchronous communication was appropriate to use for a collaboration between a similar nature between two institutions located in the United States and in Bolivia in which linguistic diversity was also present.

Although we are aware that the use of Facebook in teaching can be a somewhat divisive topic, particularly relating to concerns about appropriateness (Wang, Scown, Urquhart, & Hardman, 2014) and privacy where staff are using this to communicate with students, we believe that we countered this by suggesting that they should use whichever means of communication they felt comfortable with. Our group was there primarily for tutors to stimulate discussion if this was not occurring naturally between the students, and the tutors involved created separate Facebook profiles for university purposes, which did not contain any personal information, and thus ensured that our professional and personal lives were kept distinct (Barczyk & Duncan, 2012; Hutchens & Hayes, 2014). Furthermore, the use of Facebook has been found to be more practical than using online discussion boards which may be unwieldy, and to be more suited to the way in which students prefer to engage with technology (Abrahamse et al., 2015).

We felt that the use of virtual technologies enables us to 'broaden the boundaries of our teaching space' (Proserpio & Gioia, 2007, p. 75) and thus in our case, this signified that the educational experience was not limited to the physical confines of a classroom, or indeed to the timetable of the module itself.

Our experience

For this paper, we have used a qualitative approach with an interpretivist understanding, (Johnson & Duberley, 2000) drawing on the reflections of the tutors on both the modules, and feedback received from our students, from questionnaires which we sent to them, and after having gained the students' permission, we have also used comments about the experience contained in the reflective assignments which both student groups submitted at the end of the module (all comments received from the students are transcribed ad verbatim in this article). As Elliott and Reynolds (2014) suggest, these assignments, which were completed by students in both the UK and Brazil, can be a valuable source of insight into student perceptions about pedagogies used, which may otherwise have remained hidden. Whilst all students were invited to send us this feedback, only a limited number did so, particularly within the UK, where we received 18 responses out of the 50 contacted. As the feedback was anonymous, we are unable to claim that this was a representative sample, however, we of course had access to the reflective essays which discussed this experience from both cohorts.

When analysing this information, we used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in order to identify the major themes which emerged from our students' comments on this project, together with our own thoughts as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1995). Thematic analysis fitted with our interpretivist position and enabled us to explore the lived experiences of participants in their own words, without being too rigidly process driven, which was important given the differences between the two cohorts. We therefore used inductive thematic analysis (Spradley, 1980), incorporating both an etic approach where themes were identified from the literature (Boje, 2001), in addition to an emic approach in which themes were identified which arose from the data itself. For example, we had identified from the literature themes such as concerns about language skills of participants, and students' sensitivity to different learning context, but we identified new areas which were highlighted as important by a number of students, which emerged as themes as we went through the data, particularly regarding the expectations of students about the communication, such as

concerns about lack of engagement from other group members if a response wasn't forthcoming within 24 h. Therefore, the data from each institution was manually analysed by a tutor from that institution, and we then shared notes and discussed areas of commonality and divergence. Here, we attempt to present the key findings from the entirety of the data in order to provide an overview of students' experiences of the project, rather than focusing in detail on one or two themes.

Given that there was a disparity in class sizes between the two institutions – approximately 50 students in the UK and less than 15 in Brazil, we deemed it appropriate to put the students into groups. Although there were seven different nationalities present at each institution, the Brazilian cohort had greater diversity within the small group, as in addition to three Brazilian students, the majority of students on the module were on exchange from European institutions. In contrast, at the UK institution, the majority of students (68%) on the module were British. A further 22% of the cohort were Chinese, and thus the other 10% comprised a further five nationalities. All students were aged between 19 and 25, and 70% of the UK cohort were male, compared to 57% in Brazil. The students in the UK were already in small groups of four or five for assessment purposes, which had been predetermined by the relevant tutors, and so we allocated a student in Brazil to each of the small groups. Although Turner (2009) suggests that groups allocated by the tutor can be problematic, we felt that it was justified on pedagogic grounds, as we aimed to ensure a mix of student nationalities within the groups, in order to maximise the learning potential from the intercultural experiences (De Vita, 2000). We, therefore, felt it was inappropriate to allow the students to choose their own groups, as this ran the risk of having a group consisting of solely international students, or solely UK students, rather than the desired outcome of having a mix of nationalities in the UK student groups. All communication took place in English, as this was the medium of instruction in both institutions and therefore all students, including non-native speakers, had appropriate levels of competence in the language.

Given the increasing use of technology in the workplace and in multicultural teams, we felt it was appropriate to require the students to communicate via whatever medium they preferred, and after obtaining permission, shared their university email addresses with their counterparts in the other country. We also created a Facebook group, of which the tutors were also members, in order to facilitate general discussions in an environment with which the students were familiar, although participation in this group was also optional.

It was made clear, that all students should feel free to interact using the Facebook group, and so communication was not limited to the allocated groups. In this way, the Facebook group was envisaged as a way of scaffolding the project, as a forum in which students could freely interact, and in which the tutors of the groups involved could also have input in order to ensure that the conversations remained relevant. Although the students in Brazil made an introductory video as a whole cohort for the UK students, unfortunately, it was not possible to reciprocate this due to the large numbers of students involved. The UK students therefore used their smart phones or tablets in their small groups to make an introductory video for the students in Brazil.

Given that email is one of the most widely used computer-mediated communication technologies used in business environments (Bovée & Thill, 2013; Byron, 2008; Chelariu & Osmonbekov, 2014; Hung, Kang, Yen, Huang, & Chen, 2012), we felt it appropriate for students to communicate via email if they wished to do so. However, acknowledging that email is not a panacea for international communication, and does have a number of problems,

such its asynchronous nature and limited ability to transmit emotions compared to other forms of communication, we left it to the students to ultimately determine their preferred method of communication, and suggested that in addition to email and Facebook, they could communicate using Skype, instant messenger services such as WhatsApp, Twitter or any other medium which suited their needs.

The students were to communicate with each other in their own time and although we had given some structure and suggestion of topics for discussion, we wanted students to take responsibility and own this experience. The initial plan was for the teaching team to allocate a specific topic for the students to discuss each week, beginning with social introductions, and then moving on to some of the academic concepts discussed in our module, and in the corresponding module at the institution in Brazil. This would enable them to critique concepts from different perspectives, and also gain knowledge of a different culture, of which many of the students had little prior knowledge, beyond the popular stereotypes of Brazil as a beach loving, laid back culture (Steers et al., 2013), as it was exactly these stereotypes which we wanted to challenge via the collaboration.

Therefore, we designated the first week as a socialisation week, where the students were encouraged to get to know each other by introducing themselves and their backgrounds. As establishing a relationship remotely can be challenging, in line with Erez et al. (2013), we wanted to allow a short-time period for the students to break the ice before moving on to the main task, and with this in mind a list of suggested topics were provided by the tutors in order to facilitate this social discussion.

After this, the tutors provided a specific topic for the students to discuss each week which was related to the academic content of their modules. Topics ranged from discussions of the cultural dimensions of Hofstede (2001), and how these dimensions reflected students' own experience of their own and other cultures, challenges faced in intercultural communication, to the nature of and possible responses to, culture shock, and thus by discussing theory in an intercultural setting, students were able to engage in active, experiential learning (Paul & Mukhopadhyay, 2005).

Although we anticipated that the majority of the communication should occur during students' own self-directed study time, for the initial weeks of the project, a short amount of time was provided in class for students to compose their communications, and in the UK, to discuss content with their other team members.

In addition to being a different approach to cross-cultural management education, we actively sought to challenge the Western hegemony in management education by facilitating communication between a diverse student body (Joy & Poonamallee, 2013; Shore & Groen, 2009). Given the nature of the collaboration, we also hoped that it would enable students to communicate beyond the timescales of the modules in question, as cultural intelligence is something which can take time to develop (MacNab, 2012), although, concurring with Shore and Groen (2009) this may have been somewhat optimistic.

A key point to note is that this collaboration did not form part of the summative assessment for the module in either the UK or Brazil. We approached this initiative as an informal collaboration between our institutions in order to provide an authentic experience for students, in line with Bruner and Iannarelli (2011) who highlight the value of partnerships outside of formal, assessed collaborations in order to further globalise management education.

However, a substantive part of the assessment package for both modules included an individual reflective essay where students integrated theory with a reflection on their own

intercultural skills, and students were encouraged to use the experience that they had gained during the collaboration as evidence in this essay, in addition to international experiences which they may have gained outside of the module. However, the quality of the interactions that the two groups of students had, and the content that they discussed, were not summatively assessed. In this way, we hoped to counter some of the problems that can be associated with group work, and given that it was the first time that the tutors had managed a collaboration of this nature, we wanted to ensure that students would not be negatively impacted if the communication was not a success, or if students were not willing to participate because of privacy concerns.

As reflection was an assessed part of both modules, scaffolding of this process was provided at both institutions. In line with the 4R model suggested by Ryan and Ryan (2013) based on Bain, Ballantyne, Mills, and Lester (2002), we took a depth approach to reflection, considering that students should begin with basic reporting and be supported through different stages of relating, reasoning and, finally, arriving at reconstructing, where based on the synthesis of their experience and theoretical knowledge, they were able to reconstruct alternative scenarios and consider how they individually could have approached things different in order to achieve still more successful outcomes.

In the UK, students had previously engaged with reflection on modules in their first year of study, but given the desired emic understanding of culture from this module, further support was provided. Students were required to engage in a weekly recorded audio reflection with a peer which was then sent to the tutor for feedback which was provided electronically each week in order to develop the reflection and suggest other areas which the students could have explored. In this way, we hoped to support the students through the different levels of reflection (Dyment & O'Connell, 2010). In addition, the two tutors on the module in the UK also recorded a weekly reflection which was shared with the students so that they had a model of what audio reflection could look like in relation to the topics studied and tutor experiences.

We used the PEER (prepare–engage–evaluate–reflect) model of Holmes and O'Neill (2012) in order to guide the process of collaboration. Students were encouraged to prepare using Jameson's (2007) framework of cultural identity, in order to enable them to understand their own cultural backgrounds and values, before interacting with a cultural other. Students then engaged during the collaboration, guided by the topics provided by tutors from both institutions. Following this, they could then evaluate the experience, in the light of the discipline-specific theory which was provided on the module, which then culminated in the reflective essays.

In designing this project, the ethical guidelines of Sheffield Hallam University were followed – written permission was gained from students to share their university email addresses with the other cohort, and permission was obtained from students to use their anonymised feedback and quotes from their reflective essays in research outputs of the tutors. Two students did not wish to participate in the project and the module design ensured that their summative assessment was not affected by their non-participation.

The student experience at Sheffield Hallam University

We found that students broadly viewed the project very positively and felt that it had been of use to them in developing their intercultural skills. However, there were initial concerns

about the project, and many students initially found it challenging to establish regular contact with students at the other institution, and felt that additional tutor support would have been beneficial, particularly in order to guide the topics of conversation each week.

We observed the students' initial excitement about working with students in Brazil 'I was intrigued when I found out that we would head [*sic*] with a partner school in Brazil, it gave us the chance to gain knowledge of other cultures in a relaxed setting' (Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) student). At the beginning of the collaboration, we provided a qualitative questionnaire to students in order to capture their feelings on the project, given that this was a pedagogical approach that they had not previously encountered at university. One of the questions we asked was 'what are your initial thoughts about having to discuss cross-cultural issues with students from another country remotely?' The responses ranged from 'nervous' to 'excited'. However, students also demonstrated that they could perceive the benefits to them of this opportunity, as exemplified by the following quotes: 'Good as you can start to understand cross-cultural issues more.' 'Sounds interesting especially as our course is international business.' 'It sounds like a good way to hear new opinions etc. on topics.' 'Interests me, interested in their perception of cultural issues' (SHU students). There was some initial nervousness about whether they would be able to communicate with the students in Brazil due to potential language barriers, 'I think the idea is interesting- although communication could become an issue', but they were reassured that the students in Brazil were studying their module in English.

Many students struggled to overcome the barriers to remote communication, the time difference, personal shyness and their uncertainty of the purpose within the module and their assessment. 'We had to communicate with Brazilian students doing a similar course; this was challenging but allowed us to learn about all the challenges associated with communication' (SHU student). Despite the challenge, as this student and others reflect, they could see, although perhaps somewhat belatedly, the value and purpose, 'from the experience of communicate Brazilian student I find that communicating across cultures are very difficult, in the future if I want to communicate with different culture people, I need to know the culture customer first' [*sic*] (SHU student).

In their final reflective piece, many students reflected on their own learning and self-development through communicating with the students in Brazil.

Because I belong to high context culture, the way of expressing my feelings and transmitting information is more indirect. My classmates are mostly from low context culture they tend to express their feelings directly. Through communicating with my classmates in Brazil, we can understand this more clearly. [*sic*] (SHU student)

Many of the students go on placement in the year following this module and several commented on how this learning would enhance their employability skills in terms of communication. 'My communication skills have also been enhanced through my communication with students from different cultures; my aim is to have the opportunity to work on a global scale within different cultures, this skill will be something I will need' (SHU student).

The students also reflected on the development of their cultural intelligence not only by being in a class with international students, but through the relationship with the international students in Brazil. 'Studying in class with different culture classmates has really helped me to know and think' [*sic*] (SHU student). 'My opinions have changed throughout the module as through learning theories and talking to the Brazilians I have been able to

see cultural management from a new perspective and learnt the importance of cooperation and research' (SHU student).

The majority of the British students only speak English and exposure to international students who speak more than one language has made at least one student consider the value of language capabilities.

The culture differences were clear when talking about different festivities we take part in; one thing I was surprised about is the lack of language barrier, English was spoken well by students in Brazil. This has made me think about learning a different language and the benefits this could bring. (SHU student)

During the course of the module, regular communication between the two groups of students was achieved, and appeared to meet the pedagogic aims of the collaboration, 'Good concept for a module with communication available with students from other cultures'. (SHU Student). It was broadly viewed positively in the module evaluation questionnaires

this activity was definitely one of my most valued as I feel the experience of communicating with people from a different culture has developed not only my communication skills but also my ability to consider different peoples [*sic*] values and opinions. (SHU student)

We therefore use student engagement as evidenced by their comments in order to evaluate the success of the initiative, as the conversations between the groups of students were private, and therefore we are unable to comment from our perspective as tutors on the quality of the interactions that took place.

Out of the two institutions, only two students did not wish to participate in either the Facebook group or by sharing their email address. Being exposed to unfamiliar learning and teaching methods, or 'learning shock' (Griffiths, Winstanley, & Gabriel, 2005) created feelings of anxiety amongst these students. Participative methods can be disorienting for students and cause anxiety (Currie, 2007), however, the aim of this particular module is to prepare students to work effectively in a multicultural environment, therefore, it was expected that students may take some time to adapt to new pedagogies. Learning shock, like culture shock, entails a sudden and disorienting immersion in a new environment where familiar routines and reference points are lost. As in culture, communication with others becomes very problematic at all levels – simple linguistic comprehension, non-verbal clues, jokes, idioms all become challenges and causes of anxiety (Griffiths et al., 2005). We were therefore disappointed that these students did not take this opportunity to move out of their comfort zone given the aims of the module and the focus of the degree. This is something we will address in the forthcoming year and ensure we make clear to students the value of this collaborative learning so that they can make informed decisions. As Elliott and Reynolds (2014, p. 312) suggest 'The interaction between students, and between students and lecturers, in making choices and decisions and being asked to work together within collaborative arrangements involves the students in processes which are more varied than in more didactic settings'. We had embedded reflection on the experience into the module but perhaps had not emphasised enough to the students the value of working on the collaborative project, or placed enough emphasis on the virtual nature of the collaboration. The two students elected not to participate on the basis of privacy concerns already had extensive international experience on which they were able to draw for the reflective assignment, and therefore, we consider that it was indeed 'learning shock' and the pedagogy itself which was disorienting, coupled with the fact that this activity was not summatively assessed, which

impacted on their willingness to participate. We need to heed Baker and Clark (2010) who emphasise preparation and opportunities from students to reflect on their experience of working within diverse student groups.

The student experience at Pontifical Catholic University of Parana

The intercultural communication course offered at Pontifical Catholic University of Parana (PUCPR) forms part of an institutional international initiative 'English Semester', which offers over 20 courses, from all the undergraduate programmes, to be taught in English. This programme targets the international exchange students who attend PUCPR for one or two academic semesters. The particular intercultural communication class engaged in this project had a total of 14 business students, 3 Brazilians and 11 Europeans, comprising seven nationalities in total.

Except for 1 international student who declined participation, all other 13 students were eager to engage in the project. They accepted our suggestion to create a specific Facebook page as a means of communication. They were encouraged to use communication channels they felt most comfortable with. Their enthusiasm to participate was evident by the eagerness with which they made a short video to introduce themselves to the UK students. This was well received by the UK students, perhaps giving them an advantage in overcoming fears about initial communication as they had 'seen' the PUCPR students.

As in the UK, the class at PUCPR met once a week and therefore the tutor could check on the development of communication in each class. During the initial weeks of the project, PUCPR students reported some difficulty in communicating with the UK students 'I tried several times to interact with the students from Sheffield but it didn't work. The biggest problem was that they didn't answer After several tries I gave up' (PUCPR student). Not all of the assigned students had joined the new Facebook page and the ones who had were not yet responding to PUCPR initial messages. Nevertheless, despite the slow beginning, by the third week since the Facebook page was created, PUCPR students started reporting their conversations with UK students.

We talk a few times on Facebook, we talk about the differences to work in Brazil and in England, about the weather that they thought that was sunny in Curitiba, but the weather here it's more likely London. We also talked about the future, what we want to do in future, like to work abroad, or study. [sic] (PUCPR student)

At the end of the module the PUCPR students were asked to write their reflections on this innovative learning experience. Ten students, out of 13 participants, wrote a reflective report. As was found with the UK students they too valued the experience.

For me it's was really interesting this experience to talk to people that applied for the same class, to see the differences between theses cultures, not just in this project, but in the classes, because it's interesting to study with people from another countries, you imagine something and when you meet someone from this culture and realize that it's really different that you thought. [sic] (PUCPR student)

'I have been in contact with three students of the Sheffield Hallam Project. It was really interesting and I learnt something about the English Culture' (PUCPR student).

They also reflected on how the experience could have been better. 'Perhaps it would have been interesting to Skype with the class simultaneously during our classes in order to have some real interaction. (Might be a hint for next time)' (PUCPR student). As reflective

practitioners ourselves we have taken this into account for future consideration. This would give the students another experience and it is interesting that the perception is that this would create 'real interaction', and that perhaps interactions via email or Facebook were not considered fully authentic by the students. The students in Brazil are comfortable using Skype to contact family and friends at home, but it is a very different scenario using Skype initially to establish relationships. However, in international business scenarios, given the importance of virtual global teams who communicate remotely (Steers et al., 2013) it is likely that students will encounter similar scenarios in their future careers.

Discussion

The initial aim of the collaborative project was to provide students with a situated approach to cross-cultural management education. Although this was a small and unassessed part of both modules, as tutors we feel that the project did go some way to meet our aims, and the experiential learning provided was seen as beneficial by the students, as evidenced by some of the above quotations.

The UK students were initially uneasy about making connections with the students in Brazil. On reflection these students realised that this was because we were asking them to come out of their comfort zone not only in terms of the communication but in our pedagogical approach. Several of the students were to study a semester abroad after this module and commented on how this experience had made them think about the cross-cultural communication issues they would be facing, thus demonstrating the practical value of this experience.

The exchange students in Brazil were already living an experience abroad. This learning experience made them more open to engage in this activity. It made more sense to them as they were already having to communicate with students from different cultures, and they were regularly using technology in order to communicate with their families and friends at home, so the idea of using social media or other technologies was perhaps not as alien to them as it was for some of the UK students. Furthermore, given that these students had already elected to study abroad in order to gain international experience, it may have been that these students already had higher levels of motivational cultural intelligence (Ang et al., 2007) than some of the other students involved in this project who had not had this experience.

It was, however, clear that some students would have preferred interaction using methods such as Skype, and felt that it would have been appropriate for the tutors to facilitate this. The fact that we did not perhaps demonstrates a certain naiveté on our part, as we felt that one of the advantages of using technology was the expansion of the borders of the classroom, as discussed by Proserpio and Gioia (2007), therefore, we expected the students to engage in such activities in their own time. However, given the learning shock (Griffiths et al., 2005) which many students experienced due to the usage of different pedagogies, it would have been appropriate for us to further scaffold (Vygotsky, 1978) the activity with a videoconference at the beginning of the collaboration, although a factor for us to consider as tutors would be the logistical challenges due to the time difference between the UK and Brazil, and other timetabled activities which the students were undertaking during this semester, which corresponds with the observation of Gavidia et al. (2005) that visual communication methods are preferable, but not always practical. This also demonstrates the

need for significant tutor scaffolding when engaging in pedagogical approaches which may take students out of their comfort zone, leading to 'learning shock' (Griffiths et al., 2005).

Time differences and the lack of an immediate response was a challenge which was faced by many of the teams during the project, with students expressing concerns that their counterpoints were ignoring them if responses were not received within 24 h. The tutors attempted to manage expectations regarding this, discussing it as a feature of asynchronous communication and other commitments which individuals may have had at the time. However, where it was clear that responses were extremely delayed, and communication was not taking place at least on a weekly basis, then this was brought to the tutor of the individuals/groups in question, who was then able to remind them of the need to participate, and to highlight the anxiety that lack of responses caused to other students. At the same time, we did not wish to intervene too much as tutors, in order to enable students to negotiate their own solutions and choose communication patterns which were appropriate for them as independent learners (Christie, Barron, & D'Annunzio-Green, 2013). However, in order to overcome some of these challenges, short periods of time were provided during seminars for students to communicate with each other using their mobiles – although even then, email was the primary form of communication used.

We did note that the Facebook group was less active than we originally expected it to be, and instead, students preferred to communicate individually within their groups, rather than with the entire cohort. This does link in with the wider debate regarding the appropriateness of Facebook as a medium for formal learning within higher education (Hutchens & Hayes, 2014; Wang et al., 2014). Based on our experience, we would echo some of these concerns, and given the lack of engagement on this medium, we would now suggest that an advantage of not using Facebook would be to alleviate the concerns of those students who did not wish to participate due to privacy concerns. Furthermore, given the speed of change in communications technology, students may prefer to choose other, newer methods of communication, such as WhatsApp, rather than be informed that they should use Facebook for educational purposes.

Furthermore, as this was a formative task, the students were not asked to create media, but simply to engage in discussion. In order to encourage still greater participation, in the future it would be interesting for the students to create an artefact during the collaboration, whether this takes the form of a short report or presentation on the topics discussed, although this would be preferable as a summative task given the tendency of strategic learners (Biggs, 1987) to give greater emphasis to assessed tasks. This would have created an additional dimension to the collaboration, in which in addition to an authentic learning experience (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Stein et al., 2004) would also have permitted students to engage in additional authentic assessment, beyond the self-reflection. In such a scenario, institutional constraints regarding the nature and amount of assessment should be taken into consideration.

Implications for teaching

After reflecting on our first experience of this approach, we offer some practical guidelines based on some of the challenges that we encountered, for those who may wish to introduce collaborations of this nature into their own teaching practice:

- Allow plenty of time in the initial workshop for scaffolding, making sure students understand what is being asked of them.
- If staff are disciplinary, rather than learning and teaching experts, it would be prudent to involve support from this area given the demands of effective student reflection.
- Begin the collaboration with a videoconference.
- Give students clear direction about the topics that should be discussed with the partner institution.
- Do not underestimate the time required in creating the collaboration, and supporting the activities.
- Consider whether it is appropriate to direct students towards the use of certain technologies in order to communicate.
- Try to achieve a balance in the groups of students with and without prior international experience.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

This paper considers the experience of a virtual collaboration in a particular context, that of cross-cultural management/intercultural communication modules taking place at a British and a Brazilian institution, and we would be wary of attempting to generalise our findings to other contexts. This is particularly true given the small numbers of students involved with the project. Whilst these numbers are not atypical for specialist modules of this nature in the UK and Brazil, clearly the project would have been conceived very differently if much larger cohorts had been involved.

Whilst the tutors in this project had educational experience in addition to their disciplinary expertise, we appreciate that this may not always be the case, and therefore, further research which specifically considers partnerships between faculty staff and educational experts, as per Ryan (2013) would be welcome in this area.

Given the interpretivist philosophy of the tutors in this project, we wished to enable students to reflect and evaluate their own competences rather than impose measurements of cultural intelligence on them, particularly given that this was an exploratory project. However, in order to strengthen our findings, further research which does measure cultural intelligence before and after an intervention of this nature would add to the evidence of the efficacy of virtual collaborations and would enable greater generalisability of the findings.

Conclusion

Our aim with this collaboration via mobile technologies was to enable undergraduates of international business to develop their cross-cultural management skills. Whilst there were challenges for both tutors and students in implementing this pedagogic approach, the outcomes were positive: 'through the learning theories and talking to the Brazilians, I have been able to see cultural management from a new perspective' (SHU student) and the students recognised the importance of perseverance and patience in cross-cultural encounters: 'I now understand that by giving up at the first hurdle to frustration, like with the Brazilian student, I will never be a good cultural manager' (SHU student).

We were initially surprised by the student reactions and expectations and how they managed the interaction with the students in Brazil. This appeared to be due to the fact that ‘adopting a new approach that takes the learner out of their comfort zone can have positive and negative connotations’ (Warwick, Blackburn, & Booth, 2014). However, at the end of the module we feel that it had been a valuable exercise, supporting the students in the development of their cross-cultural competencies, as evidenced by student feedback and therefore it will be repeated in the module next year, albeit with some alterations in order to facilitate the learning process. This concurs with the findings of Woodcock, Middleton, and Nortcliffe (2012) that students are interested and open to the potential of using mobile devices to support learning.

Our aim from this paper is not to produce generalisable findings, given that we have considered a collaboration in a specific set of circumstances, but rather to add to the growing body of literature dealing with virtual international collaborations, (e.g. Abrahamse et al., 2015; Doerry et al., 2004; Gavidia et al., 2005; Rutkowski, Vogel, van Genuchten, & Saunders, 2008) with a specific focus on the use of this pedagogic technique in courses related to cross-cultural management and intercultural communication, thus joining the debate regarding the current state of cross-cultural management education. Based on this, we offer implications and guidance for practice which we hope may prove useful for others in the field.

On the basis of this experience, we conclude that situational approaches to learning such as international collaborations enable students to recognise the need for, and develop, their cross-cultural management skills. Furthermore, using mobile devices which are familiar to students who have grown up in technology-rich environments and who therefore possess the skill sets to navigate effectively with smartphone technology and Facebook, can help to facilitate such communications, thus extending the learning space beyond the classroom, enabling deeper engagement with the communicative task.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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