

Using Collaborative Project for Learning Effective Ways of Working Harmoniously with People from Different Cultures

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ABSTRACT

The paper discussed an original collaborative project in the area of intercultural business communication and cross-cultural understanding. Persuasive digital technologies were used to enable intercultural competencies among students across two different countries in teams and helped them find ways to work harmoniously with the people having different cultural backgrounds.

Methodology - The task involved selection of commercial ads (preferably national ones), in which students were expected to find cultural differences in the interpretation between the two countries, India and Austria. Findings were presented in a form of short reports.

Finding - The paper concluded that collaborative projects can be used as an effective tool for developing cross-cultural competencies among students.

Implications - This article provides the rationale for using collaborative projects for better understanding of the cultural diversity in classrooms.

Future Research - The present research may initiate more researches in the area of developing structured exercises like the one mentioned for practical understanding of cultural diversity, better methods for providing interfaces among different cultural groups, selecting standard software packages, etc.

Keywords: Communication, Cross-Cultural Relations, Global Collaboration, Global Teams, International Business, International Management, Leading Teams

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Understanding assumptions when communicating with global colleagues.
- Understanding the cognitive, and behavioral responses to cultural differences.
- Understanding cultural nuances and promote mutual trust.
- Understanding how to better manage the flow of cross-cultural communication.

INTRODUCTION

Work teams in the corporate sectors have become more globalized with the advent of media and internet. Employees are expected to communicate more effectively

and productively irrespective of what native language and culture they share. Collaborating among workers with diverse cultural background is common with challenges; some are visible and can be handled easily, while others may only be recognized after a misunderstanding has already done damage to the business and relations. This has made multicultural team effectiveness an important topic in a period of globalization and researchers worldwide are exploring ways to help multicultural teams reach project success (Matveev, 2004). Project managers worldwide have reported encountering cultural differences which interfere with the success of collaborative projects (Anbari et al., 2004). The authors Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner in their book *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business*, argued that there are major cultural differences between nations and that they affect the process of doing business

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and managing organizations., whereas in this context culture is understood as simply “the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas” (Trompenaars, 1997). They further emphasized that it is of great importance that organizations detect and understand the cultural differences and consequently remember the fact that, due to them there is no “one best way of managing” organizations (Trompenaars, 2004). From time to time, various models of cross-cultural understanding have been proposed (Hall, 1990) (Hofstede, December 1983). They proposed cultural dimensions along which value systems can be studied. Human’s way of thinking, their feelings, acting and behavior can be predicted by understanding these value systems.

More and more organizations with strong success records are finding themselves involved in communication across, between and among cultures. The number of workforce in companies is increasing multicultural. Companies that fail to do well internationally, usually fail as they do not understand the *why* of culture (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2011).

For building the capabilities of functioning appropriately in a wide variety of foreign cultural situations or teams with different cultures, many scholars have identified and examined antecedent and consequences of long-term adaptation of the foreign culture. Some scholars identified the interpersonal, intrapersonal, and technical skills required for long-term expatriate success (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991; Mendenhall, 1985). Researchers have also highlighted the importance of identifying skills (Black et al., 1991; Mendenhall, 1985), providing trainings (Black et al., 1991; Mendenhall, 2000) and generating cultural intelligence (Earley, 2003) for long-term success in working in a multicultural setting. While it is clearly worthwhile to examine the determinants and outcomes of long-term adaptation, it is also critical to understand short-term cultural adaptation as it occurs in single interactions. Work teams in the corporate sectors are becoming more globalized. Collaboration among workers with diverse cultural background is common with challenge. In such a situation, interactions are the micro building blocks of work teams that are occupied in projects with employees from different cultural settings. As individuals learn the rules for appropriate behavior in a foreign setting, they repeatedly face discrete situations involving cultural differences that test their ability to

function successfully in the new setting and their comfort with new cultural rules (Ward & Kennedy, August 1999). The way they react to these situations and navigate cultural differences influences their own effectiveness, as well as the organization’s performance (Black et al., 1991).

Present study responds to debates within the field of intercultural communication about how best to approach developing sensitivity to and understanding of differently situated subject positions. The past decade’s work in intercultural communication focused on emphasizing diversity and isolating differences (Asai & Barnlund, 1998), (Scollon, Scollon, & Jones, November 30, 2011). A book titled *Intercultural Communication: A Global Reader* by Fred Edmund (Jandt, 2004) emerges from a sociological or cultural anthropological perspective and emphasizes deep immersion. Theorists vary in their views regarding how to learn different cultures. While theorists such as David Vicor recommend learning “as much about another culture as possible” before initiating intercultural communication, this methodological approach to developing intercultural competencies leads to the pitfall that researchers (Scollon et al., November 30, 2011) describe as partial attention to specific cultural factors (such as ideology, discourse patterns, and facial features) at the expense of other interpersonal and cultural factors that influence the site of transnational exchange and understanding.

The studies have proved that communication is more about the unarticulated meanings, perceptions and assumptions behind the words than words alone (Paulston, Kiesling, & Rangel, 2012) (Roethlisberger, August 2, 1999). Individual behavior is tuned to his/her mental maps, which includes both cognitive and emotional elements. The mental map is further influenced by the environment, and guided by what is interpreted from the environment. Through the process of interpreting, individuals developmental maps about the various domains in which they operate (Daft, 1984). That is why; individuals with different mental maps will interpret the same stimulus differently, based on their mental environment. A group of people living in a similar environment (e.g. the same country) will usually share similar ways of interpreting and have compatible mental maps. Different groups of people may have different mental maps, because they live in different cultures and so they may have different perceptions. Thus the same stimulus can evoke a different meaning for two groups

of people. But managing cultural differences cannot be based on value judgments. Discussing stereotypes at the extremes can be helpful in understanding different cultures but individual behavior within the culture can also greatly vary. The limitation of stereotype is that they are fixed and rigid. Detailed analysis of mental representations show that different categories are created when we encounter unfamiliar or complex situations. We start categorizing data to make sense out of it. This happens when we cannot generalize. This process is termed as prototype, i.e. mental representations based on general characteristics that are not fixed and rigid but are open to new definitions.

Present study builds upon both the stereotype as well as prototype. Assuming that mental representations are dynamic, they can change with the introduction of unfamiliar experiences, and can be altered to form a new mental categories as more data come in, the exercise was designed to train management students who aspire to be the part of the global corporate organizations in near future. The exercise assumed that everyone has a large data bank of their mental representation. The first step in the designed exercise was to get self-aware. The information regarding culture was gathered from internet, articles and reading material provided by facilitator. After the self-awareness, it was assumed that any unfamiliar encounter will help them understand how their mental prototype is transformed by encountering reality. The purpose was to make students open to new awareness and have a dynamic experience of the transformation of their mental categories.

EXERCISE

Going through the fact that the competences acquired in a classroom will be applied differently by different students in course of their future careers, it is logical to use more than one learning path and accept the fact that more than one result might be correct. “Student-centred learning” is a broad teaching approach that encompasses replacing lectures with active learning, integrating self-paced learning programs and/or cooperative group situations, ultimately holding the student responsible for his own advances in education (Nanney, 2004). Such exercises allow the students to shape their own learning experience. The educator’s role changes from lecturer to moderator or a coach.

Educational institutions all over the world are feeling the need to teach students knowledge that should not already be void when they leave the university. A need has been felt to constantly re-educate, avoid memorization, and start looking up facts to make sure that we have the most updated knowledge (Arbesman, 2012). The paper at hand has the aim to analyze how an exercise, which might only constitute one of many teaching methods in a course, could be setup to generate learning experience that may go long way in the career path of the students.

Experiencing cultural differences and making the cultural lens, which we automatically apply on any perceptions, visible, is a central part of learning about intercultural communication and management. In a course on Intercultural business communication, different methodologies of how to assess and interpret cultural differences are discussed in class. Students were made to read and understand dimensions given in the models developed by Hall & Hall, and Hofstede. Several studies in the past have shown how people from two cultures are different or similar in terms of the meaning they associate with the stimulus words. The exercise was designed to ensure that students experience such situation themselves and develop empathy and real skill. lecturing about sensitivities involved in intercultural and cross-cultural communication is insufficient for people to develop empathy and a clear understanding of the challenges of working with teams with different cultural backgrounds.

SAMPLE

Equal number of participants were selected from two countries (India and Austria) having different cultural background. The study used purposive sampling. The exercise was designed by the two Professors, one from Birla Institute of Management Technology, India and another from FH JOANNEUM (Austria). The application and modification of the exercise was used at post graduate level for two intercultural management classes in New Delhi, India and Graz, Austria. In total, 120 students (60 each from both the countries) participated in the developed learning activities in the years 2016.

Associative group analysis framework was adopted but not used as a survey instrument. Its main goal was to extract subjective inferences through systematically designed exercise. Associative Group Analysis (AGA)

is an inferential approach to analyze people's mental representations. This method focuses on subjective meanings and images to assess similarities and differences across cultures and belief systems. AGA uses language specifically "words" to understand differences in psychological meaning across cultures. It defines the stimulus word as the unit of analysis and as the key unit in the perceptual-representational system. Instead of words, the present study has used full commercials/advertisements as units of analysis.

The AGA approach is closer to anthropological strategies that intensively assess culturally representative small groups rather than to those that use carefully organized large samples. A larger number of subjects are needed if the group is quite heterogeneous with considerable variation among subjects (Kelly, 1982). In this study, respondents are students pursuing management course in two different universities located in two different parts of the universe. Therefore we assume that the group heterogeneity is small.

DEBRIEFING

First Step

The learning activity used advertisements of different companies, which can be easily found on YouTube as learning material.

Six teams comprising 10 students each were made on both the sides. One coordinator from each side for each group was nominated and email ids were shared. The task for students involved selecting two advertisements per group (preferably national ones) of their own choice, in which they were expected to find cultural differences in the interpretation between India and Austria. These advertisements were from different companies, which can be easily found on YouTube and can be used as teaching & learning material. Participating students in India and Austria were supposed to analyze them according to the following questions:

- a) How does your group understand the advertisement and how does it work for you?
- b) How do you think will the other side understand the same advertisements, will there be any difference to your own understanding?

Further analysis was done using perceptual-representational system which includes what people perceive and think about an issue, object, behavior, etc. It is an inclusive worldview, composed of interdependent, representational units. There are three characteristics central to the perceptual-representational system; *priorities*, *affinities* and *affect loading* (Kelly, 1985).

Second Step

The students were expected to interact with one corresponding team on the other side. They got the opportunity to ask the other side for their opinion using self-developed questions. They had to analyze these advertisements according to cultural standards or dimensions (using one or more of the theories presented in the course). To verify their analysis they contacted students from the partner institute and asked them for their understanding of these advertisements by posing concrete questions. The students were instructed to ask for short feedback (only a few questions, which could be answered by both the teams within the given time). In turn they were expected to answer the questions from the students on the other side.

When finished, the students were asked to present their findings, differences they expected, how they tried to check for them and if the answers were as expected. The aim was to leave as much of the communication as possible to the students and not to use specific formats or intervene in any way in the exchange.

At the end they were required to send the results of their analysis to their colleagues so that they could see the result too. The findings were recorded in a form of short reports which teams submitted to the instructors for evaluation.

The research further explored whether there was a "gap" between students' perceptions of cultural understanding and the reality which they in fact received in the post observation. The research was guided by a conceptual framework based on a "gap analysis" model originating from the business and marketing literature. A qualitative approach was adopted and was data derived from the students' teams in the form of a report submission describing the gaps identified in the perception and reality.

Task Flow

- Find two advertisements per group (e.g. on YouTube), which you think will be interpreted and/or accepted differently in Austria and India.
- Send the links (and translation, if necessary) of the two advertisements to your partner team and ask for their feedback.
- Try to verify if the expected differences exist by asking for feedback (via mail, WhatsApp or Skype).
- Ask for short feedback on concrete questions (which should be well thought of), not a complete analysis.
- Answer questions you receive from your partner team.
- Note your interpretations and observations individually and then compile all the observations for the group. The analysis and conclusion can be presented in the form of a report/ presentation.
- The result should be short and precise (half page statements per advertisement) and make use of what was learnt in the course.

FINDINGS

The present study reports the findings of the analysis done by Indian students. Out of all the mini reports submitted, themes were extracted and investigated to identify gaps between perception and reality. The cases provided valuable insights into both cultures mindsets regarding the context being investigated. Commercials were used as stimulus. Each identified gap left students with extra knowledge and information about each other's culture. Findings from each theme are elaborated below:

THEMES AND GAPS IDENTIFIED

- **Violence against Women – (Dolce & Gabbana print ad¹)**

Though the groups on both the sides acknowledged that the people will react strongly, Indians felt and

¹ (https://www.google.co.in/search?q=dolce+and+gabbana+ad+overpowering+womens&rlz=1C1CHBD_enIN7511N751&source=lnms&bm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwik7OLtwaXXAhWEnZQKHfyDC2AQ_AUICigB&biw=1135&bih=457&dpr=1.13#imgdii=oWvdfArmp1F-SM:&imgcr=m21Un1QPhz8dwM):

informed that the reaction in Indian rural settings might not be that intense. This is because women living in rural settings are still vulnerable and can easily overpower. The sad part is they aren't even aware that they are being exploited.

- **Cruelty against animals and religious association – (Adidas Cow heart ad by Lukas Podolski²)**

Teams both the sides disapproved the idea of holding a cow's heart in the hands of the football players to show the toil they put in winning the match but Austrians felt that Indians will disapprove because of the religious sentiments associated with the animal "cow". Indian students disapproved the opinion out rightly. They felt that the advertisement is offensive not because of the showcasing of cow's heart but because it depicts cruelty towards animal in general and bloodshed.

- **Views on smoking – (Creative anti-smoking ad by bored panda website)**

Indian felt that the ad investigated will create a very powerful impact on the smokers in Austria. Unlike their view, for Austrians it will be just another campaign against smoking. Based on the responses Indian learnt that most of the smokers in Austria are quite stubborn and may feel offended by this ad. Almost 30% of the 12-18 year old teenagers smoke regularly; it is just a casual thing, a part of their living style.

- **Political boundaries & friendship – (Google search reunion³)**

Teams on both the sides found the commercial beautiful and heart-warming. Both felt that they were able to connect with the commercial and found that it was really smart of Google to use this plot to promote their search engine. Indians felt that Austrians might relate to the feeling of meeting your best friend after ages but will not understand the political, emotional and social significance of making the two friends one from Pakistan and other from India meet after partition. Unlike their view, Austrians felt

² https://www.google.co.in/search?rlz=1C1CHBD_enIN7511N751&biw=1135&bih=457&tbm=isch&sa=1&ei=SgL-Wa2fF8a40ATPsZugCg&q=football+player+holding+a+cow%27s+heart&oq=football+player+holding+a+cow%27s+heart&gs_l=psy-ab.3...7657.429913.0.430811.78.46.0.0.0.765.8029.2-21j3j-lj1j1.27.0...0...1.1.64.psy-ab..53.16.4696...0j0i67k1.0.60tzCN_cmWY#imgcr=W9BID4kazxZ50M:

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHGDN9-oFJE>

that with the similar historical background (partition), they can feel the connect.

- **Views on marriage – (Platinum day of love ad⁴)**

Since there is a lot of cultural difference with regards to marriages, Indian thought that Austrians will not understand the concept of falling in love after marriage. This was found to be true. Austrians found it very strange. They did not relate with the emotions. They stereotyped arranged marriage and India also found it unusual to fall in love after marriage.

- **Valuing private space – (Incredible India: Indian tourism⁵)**

The commercial depicted eve teasing with foreign tourists. In India such incidents generally go unnoticed unless the situation escalates too high. People do not hesitate to break the private space and push themselves upon others. It is normal among common crowd especially with tourists. But Austrians consider it rude to disturb strangers on the streets. They value private space and do not appreciate intervention. Indian students learnt that there are laws against the common people also if they are present in such situations and do not offer help to the victim.

- **Gender discrimination in household – (Ariel – Share the load⁶)**

Indian students felt that Austrians will find it abnormal that almost all household work is done by females at home. This is because they felt that in western countries gender discrimination does not exist when it comes to division of labor in household. But they learnt that the traditional Indian families and the conservative Austrian families think on similar lines. However, in India, even in urban families, the majority of the work is done by the women and not shared equally by the men folk.

- **Beauty standards – (Olay – Flawless is overrated⁷)**

The commercial showed Olay with overweight female models - In India beauty is judged by the physical appearance and size zero body figures. But

Austrian's being an advanced country with modern thinking might judge the beauty through various other parameters. It was found that like India, in Austria also beauty is judged majorly by physical appearance. Like India even Austria is in a gradual change mode with respect to standards of beauty.

- **Patriarchal Society – (Naya soch/New thinking⁸)**

Ad by cricketers Nay soch (New thinking) - Indian students perceived that Austrians will not understand the concept of displaying mother's name on the T-shirt for the simple reason that they do not have a Patriarchal society. Yes, they were right but in the process of getting their opinion on this theme they explored that though there was no such discrimination exists in Austria, the issue with women empowerment is mainly discussed in connection to the salary.

- **Understanding Indian Festival – (Amazon – Raksha Bandhan ad⁹)**

Amazon India Raksha Bandhan ad. Indian students were sure that the Austrians will not understand the emotional appeal shown in the ad between siblings as they do not celebrate any such day. Yes, they did not understand for the same reason but after trying to understand the concept of Raksha Bandhan they felt that the ad was very beautiful. The process made Austrians enhance their knowledge related to the custom in India that makes people celebrate sibling bonding.

- **Interpretation of the popular word “Juggad” – (Sulekha ad¹⁰)**

In India word “Juggad” is quite commonly used for people who manage to do things with the limited resources around them. There is a negative connotation implied with this word as we perceive that the solution provided is temporary. Though the word Juggad was understood correctly, the meaning perceived by Austrians carried more positive connotative meaning. According to them Juggad means “the act through which somebody fixes problems very creatively and with less money and resources”.

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07Rz_zYJZ_E

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ee5Bq_eBIYM

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJukf4ifuKs>

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1whG-9BjsQ&t=5s>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxE3o8crEes>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhhEMpgDUGQ>

¹⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loumMCQ_eLE

CONCLUSION

Choosing the advertisement to use and the questions and differences to address was the central element in this exercise. The students learnt to understand, that an answer to a specific question might correspond to their expectations now for one specific contact group, but might be different tomorrow or for someone else. In this student based activity, the students designed most of their own learning experience which enabled them to perceive the similarities and differences between their views, their expectations and the reaction of the other side on a very personal level. They learnt as stated by Stephen Covey, “we see the world, not as it is, but as we are or, as we are conditioned to see it”.

The primary lesson of the simulation was to re-create the challenges that global collaborators face when they're working across linguistic and cultural boundaries. For many people, this means working in a geographically distributed, virtual environment. The present simulation made them understand what that was like and developed skills and best practices to manage those challenges. The research on global work and global teams has shown very clearly that one of the biggest challenges people face is that they don't have a clear sense of the context and the situation of co-workers. A second lesson they learnt was the significance of developing empathy about the context in which others operate. The third lesson is about developing global collaboration leadership skills. The leaders tend to ignore social dynamics to try to ensure that the task at hand is completed. Through this simulation students learnt that in a global collaboration scenario, leaders have to be attuned to the social dynamics for the efficient achievement of the task at hand. A cohesive group is a high performing group.

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