INTERCULTURAL STUDENT TEAMS: 
AN INTERNET-BASED JOINT PROJECT WITH 
BRAZILIAN AND UNITED STATES STUDENTS

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Abstract

This paper describes a pilot internet-based, intercultural project involving two teams, each with four senior business students. Half of each team was from Towson University (TU) in the U.S.A., the other half from the University of Sao Paulo (UniSP) in Brazil. Each team collaborated online to prepare a “case” report on a company operating in the U.S. and Brazil. American students analyzed Brazilian environments and business functions. Brazilian students critiqued these analyses. Brazilian students then did the reverse. All students discussed their cross-cultural team experience. This paper reports on student observations, suggests guidelines for using online media and building cross-cultural teams, communications, and student projects.

KEY WORDS: Inter-cultural student teams, student case writing project, international internet-based projects

INTRODUCTION

The paper is divided into four parts. Part 1 sets out the objectives and briefly describes the project. Part 2 details the organizational efforts undertaken by faculty in establishing and then to managing the process. Part 3 sets out the students findings from their case studies. Part 4 suggests guidelines for using online media, building cross-cultural teams, facilitating cross-cultural communications and structuring cross-cultural student projects. A concluding section provides general observations and reflections on the “pilot” project.

PART 1: OBJECTIVES AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The main objectives of the project were to:
1. Offer an opportunity for senior undergraduate students to be in touch with different cultures without leaving their own country. This was a first step before applying for a significant grant which could possibly result in students travel to another country.
2. Share understanding about company employees who have to be knowledgeable not only about the cultures in the countries in which their company does business, but also about their company’s own culture – its identity and ways of doing things. Such employees are multinational
and are responsive to the ways different cultures affect their company and the company’s response.

3. Establish a relationship between two faculty members interested in learning about cultural influences on business through the use of the case method. In designing courses or projects, faculty rarely add cross-cultural elements simply because to do this effectively is difficult. Doing so, however, will add reality to the case.

Guidelines were developed by faculty for an online joint Brazil-U.S.A. student project entitled: “A Comparative Management Analysis of ______ (name of company) Doing Business in Brazil and in the United States”. Two teams, composed of four students each, selected companies with both Brazilian and American operations. The inter-cultural teams selected Black and Decker, Inc. and Walmart, Inc. for the project.

The guidelines instructed the teams to execute the following six-step sequence of activities:

1. Develop a very brief background on the company and its industry.
2. Create summaries of ‘what to look out for’ in the socio-cultural, technological, economic, ecological and political/legal (STEEP) environments. The American team creates a table with information on Brazil with emphasis on the political/legal environment; and the Brazilian team compiles information on the U.S.A.
3. Create summaries analyzing the country’s culture. Brazilian students analyze the U.S.A. and American students analyze Brazil. Use Hofstede’s ‘cultural dimensions’ framework and supplement it with Trompenaar’s dimensions (readings provided online).
4. Summarize the effects of “local” culture on a company’s cross-cultural human resource management practices (including labor relations, staffing, leading, teams), effects of culture on the Brazil-U.S.A. alliance, and on organizational structure. Brazilian students analyze the company in the U.S.A. and American students analyze the company in Brazil.
5. Critique each other’s findings. Within each team, Brazilian students critique American students’ findings relating to the culture of Brazil and company operations in Brazil; American students critique Brazilian students’ findings relating to the U.S.A. culture and company operations in the U.S.A. Then, together, online, each team prepares an analysis of the similarities and differences in company operations.
6. Each student summarizes the experiences in a section: “working as a cross-cultural team.”

Each step of the above sequence contained detailed instructions, including a final section requesting suggested guidelines for action. For example, step five asked: “What guidelines do you suggest for international managers with respect to: (a) cross-cultural communications between the American firm & your country’s customers? (b) which approach to negotiations might work best with alliance partners? (c) cross-cultural communications between the American firm and your country's employees? (You may want to interview a person who has lived in, and worked in the country of operations of your company).”

PART 2: ESTABLISHING AND MANAGING THE PROCESS

The two faculty co-directors of the project met in Baltimore during a conference in March of 2003. Discussions began on a possible project for Fall 2003. Since both were teaching comparable courses, it seemed feasible to build similar class projects into their syllabi. A considerable amount of background work was done during the (U.S.) summer. At the beginning of classes, each instructor asked for volunteers from his senior capstone class. Four students in each country signed on. Some English fluency was a requirement for the USP students (one TU student also spoke Portuguese).

A project plan was developed and approved by the Deans of both Universities. Initially, an agreement between the two universities was contemplated, but not finalized. The co-directors (instructors) decided that conducting a “pilot” test prior to any formal agreement would be useful.

Differences began to emerge during the implementation (see Table 1). Semester schedules differed: UniSP semester begins in August, TU’s in September. Semester breaks and semester ending times also differed.
Table 1 University of Sao Paulo/ Towson University Schedules

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>August 03</th>
<th>September 03</th>
<th>October 03</th>
<th>November 03</th>
<th>December 03</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>semester</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Semester breaks</td>
<td>01 to 07</td>
<td>Final exam</td>
<td>Final grades</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towson University</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2-9-16-23</td>
<td>1-7-14-21-28</td>
<td>4-11-18-25</td>
<td>2-9-16-22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>semester (week of)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Final exam/grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semester breaks</td>
<td>01 (one day)</td>
<td>27 (one-day)</td>
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Arising difficulties, e.g. enrolling in the TU online class conference and communication difficulties caused by language shortfalls, were resolved through frequent telephone conversations and more than 50 emails. A second material difference was that American team members earned 30% of their grade for completing the project, while for the Brazilian team members the project constituted additional work for which they volunteered because of their interest in international exposure. The Brazilian students also were required to write a paper and complete a part-time work practicum in a local company.

Brazilian students were attracted to and signed up for the project early in August. As the semester progressed, they felt overwhelmed by the workload. Difficulties in dealing with the “technology” required periodic meetings with the teams to assist them to logon to the course homepage and to learn to operate in a virtual environment. This task was very labor-intensive for the faculty member at UniSP because the heavy workload and crowded schedule required that the Brazilian students receive individual assistance. Subsequent to the help sessions, team members had to contact each other to schedule joint activities.

PART 3: FINDINGS FROM STUDENT REPORTS

Assignment 1

Students were asked to compare management practices across cultures. Some scheduling and communications problems occurred. Student responses to “Comparative analysis of the similarities and differences in company operations” are summarized below.

1- Walmart Team Members from the U.S.A.

Similarities include the same Wal-Mart strategy applied in both countries. Merchandise, however, is different in Brazil because of cultural preferences. Since soccer is the most popular sport in Brazil, American footballs do not sell well in Brazil.

We suggest that Walmart international managers dealing with cross-cultural communications in Brazil learn what we learned in Multinational Management: Do your homework ahead of time. It is hard to believe that so many multinational companies fail because they do not do research on the culture of the country they are operating in. It is important to remember that every country is not like the U.S.A. One should also be aware of the fact that people act and behave differently in different cultures. Non-verbal actions may have different meanings.

1- Walmart Team Members from Brazil

At first I was very excited about this project because it was a wonderful opportunity to make contact with students of another country. In the beginning of the project I had the chance to share some questions with my American teammates. They responded quickly, leaving a very good impression.

I did my best to gather as much information as possible for this project, spending long hours on the internet looking for pertinent information and formatting it for the project. One unexpected finding was that although the company has a world-wide presence, it is subject to many local influences, which, I believe, are not good for local operations. (The company did not stick to its U.S.A. growth strategy, using a different approach to start-up operations in Brazil, beginning in large cities as Sao Paulo, the biggest city in Brazil).
This project was very important. We were able to see many differences in the same company, and this experience has been very important for my professional development.

**Black and Decker Team**

For Black and Decker, the problem was that information was not exchanged in a timely manner thus aspects of the “critiquing” process could not be carried out.

**Assignment 2**

Students were asked to provide guidelines for working in a cross-cultural team and to summarize their experiences with the project. Here are some (edited) comments from both teams, from both countries:

2- Black and Decker Team Member from U.S.A. (Born in U.S.A.)

My experience with this project was positive. From the beginning, I volunteered for the project because I have a passion for Latin America...The concept of the project is exciting. The idea of comparing your research to the real thing is intriguing. Our research definitely has an opportunity for bias, since it is conducted in the U.S.A., using many U.S.A. institutions and foundations as resources. A comparison with Brazilians about their culture could give great insight and [enable] evaluation of the accuracy of the research conducted.

Having “classmates” and group members living thousands of miles away was an interesting experience, communication was essential, using only the web. You couldn’t call their cell phone or knock down their door to get their attention or their work; you had to have real patience. You just don’t know when you'll get the work you need, or if you'll get it at all. The Brazilian students were very nice, and they seemed very enthusiastic about the project. Their English was very impressive, and I wish the project had gone more smoothly, so we could have worked with them more.

My experience with my teammate ... was also positive...in a sense, we did our own cross-cultural study; we were an American and a Brazilian trying to work together, despite our differences. And sometimes culture did play a role in our discourse throughout the semester. My background in Latin American Studies also was helpful in applying culture to management....

2- Black and Decker Team Member from U.S.A. (Born in Brazil)

“This project has been very informative and intriguing. Having lived away from my country for so long, it was an opportunity for me to gain knowledge of the way Brazil conducts business, and its ins and outs. At first I was very excited to be part of a project in which my language skills and limited knowledge would provide a large assistance and support. With a very bright American partner I was excited that this would give us an opportunity to communicate and be introduced to Brazilian students in Sao Paulo. The fact that a cross-cultural project could teach me so much that I have missed being away from Brazil, was somewhat fascinating to me. I learned the stability of its economy, the risks of investing, and the barriers that culture differences can make. I learned the environment of the industry in Brazil, and most importantly I had a chance to research the Black&Decker Company....

“My advice is for this cross-cultural project to continue being introduced to other classes. I finally got the chance to understand the difficulties of communicating with others, and the cultural barriers that exist when conducting business with other countries.”

3- Walmart Team Members U.S.A.: Born in U.S.A.

At first, I was a little intimidated about doing this project. Overall, this was a great idea and I am glad that I went through with it. I only wished we had more time to fully complete this project. There should be more projects like this in the future because it involves working with the real world. If there were more opportunities given to me throughout my four years here at Towson, I would have been able to put more in my portfolio ...This project will be the only one.

Working with other cultures was a great experience, One of my Brazilian teammates had lived in Baltimore previously, which was something we could talk about in our e-mails... Traveling will definitely be one of my goals in my future career, and Brazil will be one of those countries. Our teammates in Brazil seemed very nice and kind. Time forced us to turn it in unfinished.
Another experience was communicating strictly by e-mail. Usually, I end up being able to meet with the person, but for this project it was impossible since they lived in Brazil. I started out hating it at first but ended up with appreciation. Also, this project gave me a sense of reality. In my other classes all assignments and projects were fake or imaginary. This one was very "real," which is why this will be one of my favorite Towson projects.

4-5-6-7- Brazil: Born in Brazil

Here are comments combined from both Brazilian teams with respect to their difficulties:

1. A lack of communication between the team members
2. Insufficient time to dedicate to the project together with all duties for the final semester. We were responsible for so many tasks, more than we were able to work properly. This project seemed very interesting to us but it needed more dedicated time.
3. The guidelines seemed too long and because of this sometimes were not clear.
4. We needed more advising time and meetings for a more comfortable work.

PART 4: GUIDELINES FOR FUTURE STUDIES

This section begins with a shared conclusion. As students’ advisors for the first time in this project, we had to learn a new process. We had no mental pattern to enable us to plan step-by-step meetings and final products. After reading all the comments from the Brazilian and U.S.A. students we think we'll be more effective for the 2nd Project. We offer the following general guidelines:

Structuring Cross-Cultural Student Projects

This type of ‘international’ project mandates not taking for granted basics such as housekeeping functions, including ‘matching’ schedules for semesters, setting certain times for faculty communications, establishing student requirements and communications protocols, simplifying instructions and requirements, and providing training with various media.

Student comment: Using LearnOnline was easy enough. However, the communication prior to beginning the project was lacking. They (the faculty) didn’t seem to know exactly what to do, or the demands of the project. We later learned that was because they were doing this project outside of their regular course load, whereas for us it was an essential part of our class (or classes).

Student comment: …the project has not been all sunshine. My partner and I have dedicated much time trying to follow an outline that sometimes seemed to be lost in space. Because of the time zone differences, communication fell apart often. Having partners that are very competent and speak perfect English, helped a lot.

Using Online Media

The Towson course using BlackBoard5 acted as online “host” for this experiment. Both instructors had to be clear on online course registration instructions. This was much easier for the instructor and students of the host institution because they had ready access to all general announcements and e-mails.

Online conferences were established for each team. These were intended to facilitate student intra-team communication. However, these were generally not utilized (and no ‘credit’ was given for their use).

Tutorials were available online. The faculty found, however, that simplified, by telephone, step-by-step assistance was required to get students enrolled successfully.

Building Cross-Cultural Teams

Team members were requested to introduce themselves online using both e-mail and online conferences. For this to work, working e-mail boxes were required, which was not the case for one student. Instead of the student pair receiving e-mails and inquiries and files, one team had to rely on just one student. Even several interventions by the instructor did not yield results until the very end of the semester (and the project).

Readings on team-building, cross cultural teams and Hofstede’s dimensions were posted to the class conferences. This may not have been adequate for all participants.
Facilitating Cross-Cultural Communications

Designing and developing effective online courses requires attention to technical execution, adaptation of content and course concepts, attention to motivation, and some degree of interactivity. An investment of time during the development of the online project is mandatory. And more time is required during the project to support student activities. Communication between participants needs to be regular and on-going.

CONCLUSION

It is the view of the authors that the “pilot” achieved its objectives. The project was imbedded in “culture”. Students were introduced to the complexity of cross-cultural studies by being involved deeply in a situation where they had to function together. The relativity of each culture was exposed in the Hofstede sense of national culture and how this might affect the functions of a business. Students also were exposed to a limited probe of other cultural categories such as occupation and corporate culture.

In terms of “pedagogy” the approach was partly based on constructivist and social collaboration, and on action learning principles. Different teaching and learning approaches were implemented, for example, individual work and collaborative group work, as well as various types of communication including asynchronous message exchange and file transfers. And all this was embedded in a “cross-cultural” context.

In terms of media, the project represented a limited introduction to web-based instruction (WBI). In general terms, the world wide web was used to deliver some course content, communications with and among students, and the administration of tutorials. Advantages of using WBI include:

1. The tools provide new ways to accommodate various student needs -- different pace of study, links to source material, closer progress tracking as well as new ways for collaboration with newsgroups, bulletin boards and e-mail.
2. Instruction may be multi-dimensional and multi-referent - many sources can be kept current relatively easy.
3. Students may access the course from ‘off-campus’ locations: home, work, anywhere an Internet connection is accessible.

The disadvantages, however, are equally real. The instructor’s learning curve - time spent ‘upfront’ in learning the tools and in re-thinking course material for new presentation format - requires increasing faculty development support. Technical restrictions may limit the use of teaching methods. And there are other real risks. If a course or course segment is run on the web, what happens when the technology crashes?

The “intercultural” dimension complicates all aspects, or rather, forces a re-examination of every process step and every aspect of teaching/learning.

Technology

There are several issues dealing with the “technology” aspect of the online inter-cultural project. One could be labeled subject/instructor/technology iterations, or perhaps, planning to learn. Something important occurs to the instructor’s view and understanding of the subject as the instructor learns to navigate the way through the new technology. It is this re-visioning of subject (and project) that makes the process so interesting and, potentially, so time consuming. Add cultural differences and these learning iterations involve new dimensions. In other words, it is a relatively straightforward proposition to estimate instructor time, if the only variable is ‘technology’. It takes about three hours to post a project/course on a web site, using standard icons, selecting a few functions and assuming the guidelines are ready to be uploaded. More time is needed for simple edits. It is more difficult to estimate other variables: How long does it take to re-think a course? To re-design student projects? To anticipate problems and develop solutions? Students do not necessarily have equal technical understanding. As the “pilot” project progressed it became clear that more time than anticipated was required just to maintain its flow.

System Interactions

Another aspect can be called “system interactions” as in ‘instructor to instructor’, ‘instructor to student’, and ‘student to student’ interaction. In a web course environment, tools for communicating and interaction need to be designed and tested. And, cultural considerations involve new learning dimensions.
BlackBoard5 has numerous tools, including bulletin board, electronic mail, chat tool, student self-evaluation, searchable image archive, searchable and linkable glossary, student presentation areas, timed online quizzes, external references, automatic indexing and searching, page annotation, and grade tool. For a beginner this can be overwhelming. There are also so-called designer tools which enable the instructor to do progress tracking, give timed online quizzes, perform various student management functions and customize the course look and feel. Outlined below are those tools which might be considered salient to the internet-based Brazil-U.S.A. student collaborative project. This includes tools for communication, course material changes/updates and course management.

The conferencing system (bulletin board, newsgroups) allows communication among all course participants and can be searched for content, sender, and so on. Articles may have clickable URL’s and discussions relevant to particular articles/pages automatically have a dedicated forum. This allows for asynchronous conferencing.

The students’ chat room lists the various chat rooms, names of course participants. The instructor can peruse student exchanges. This allows synchronous or ‘live’ conferencing. The searchable image archive can be uploaded by the instructor for inclusion in a course. Student presentation areas are designated by icons, which serve as a link for student-generated web pages. Authoring privileges may be given to individuals, groups or the entire class.

Measuring Success

Measuring ‘success’ was another objective. Students were required to turn in comments as part of their project. This, of course, could have biased their responses. The next iteration of the project will address this issue through a modification in the assignment.

ENDNOTES

1. An online search Using Google turned up more than 1.2 million references to “online student teams.” Narrowing this to “international” then to “experience with” and to “blackboard” reduced the number to about 17,500 references. A random check of perhaps 50 of these showed few reporting results of experiments with international online student teams and those listed were advertisements for programs, conference announcements and technical advice. Additionally, a program such as that found at http://otis.scotcit.ac.uk/casestudy/scheuermann.doc while appearing relevant provided mostly ‘technical’ claims. The Web Initiative in Teaching (WIT) program, of the University System on Maryland, showed up as a place to learn online team skills.

REFERENCES


