

Cross-Cultural Challenges and Synergies Working in an International Collaboration Project

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Abstract This paper provides a general overview of an international collaboration project conducted in an international business module at a private Malaysian university. The international collaboration project is designed to provide students with an experience in working on a cross-cultural virtual team. This study employs a case study which consisted of 34 Malaysian students and the main instrument used in this study is the students' reflective reports. Based on the reflective reports, the paper discusses the challenges and the synergistic experiences faced by the students. In general, students find it interesting to work in this project; on the other hand, students also felt that it is difficult to communicate with others as well as getting the project ready on time. The paper also highlights the benefit of working in this project and some recommendations to academics who wish to embark on such activity in class.

Keywords Cross-cultural • International collaboration project • Global virtual team

1 Introduction

Due to globalisation and the growth of Multinational Corporations (MNCs) around the globe, universities are now offering degrees and masters in the field of international business. Many higher education institutes have also captured quite a large group of students as many believe an international business study enables them to learn about operations in MNCs, various cultural aspects in managing a business, a global outlook and also a possible career with an MNC. Such said experiences could not be easily imparted to students if learning is confined within the four walls of a classroom. Academics could use various methods in teaching, such as case studies,

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videos, role play or business articles, but the learning is still very static and there is opportunity to enhance teaching in international business (Jurse and Mulej 2011). A more dynamic exposure would be allowing our students to gain experience working in real global teams and to acquire the ability to communicate effectively across different cultures. Having such opportunity would certainly enrich the learning experience and would enable higher education institutions to develop a pool of cross-culturally proficient talent (Johnson et al. 2006). Doh (2010) has argued that it is important to have cross-cultural element in a business degree, more specifically in an international business degree.

In view of the importance to have cross-cultural element in studies, it is essential for education providers to embed this critical aspect into the curriculum. Many researchers have argued that good managers cannot be trained purely based on classroom setting (Mintzberg and Gosling 2002). These managers need to be given the opportunity or chance to experience the real context. In order to provide such “real” experience for the students, we have adopted the global virtual teams (GVTs) as a form of experiential learning for our undergraduate students who major in international business. The concept of GVTs in education is very similar to the working world where members of MNCs are required to communicate virtually with their counterparts or even complete a project or task through working on a virtual platform (Zakaria and Al Safi 2013).

GVTs are different from traditional teams as GVTs might consist of people from various background, cultural setting, and time zones and rely heavily on information technologies to communicate, and most probably, they do not have any past working experience before the GVTs were formed (Powell et al. 2004; Fuller et al. 2007; Zakaria and Al Safi 2013). Working in a GVT could be quite challenging as members do not get the opportunity to meet physically to gain trust or to know each other. In fact, members need to rely purely on technology to communicate, and to make it more challenging, members of a GVT come from various countries with different cultural background. In order to execute the project well, GVTs often face tremendous challenges in working together.

The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges faced by undergraduate students while completing their coursework through GVTs from the perspective of a developing country. Furthermore, the study also investigated the students’ cross-cultural experience working in their respective GVTs. The questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. What type of challenges did the students face in their respective GVTs?
2. What cross-cultural experience did the students encounter while working in their respective GVTs?

2 Literature Review

In order to remain competitive in the global market, many educational institutions and organisations are jumping on the bandwagon to set up global virtual teams (GVTs). According to Zakaria and Al Safi (2013), GVTs are becoming “the most widespread and innovative working structure in Multinational Corporations”.

GVTs consist of team members from various cultural backgrounds and locations, with often no prior relationship, who collaborate towards achieving a common goal (Mohd Yusof and Zakaria 2012 as cited by Zakaria and Al Safi 2013). The GVT structure, which utilises computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools, allows diverse team members to operate in distant locations, thus bridging members from various geographical locations and time zones (Egea and Gregor 2002).

The diversity of group members, which is a key feature of globally distributed teams, has brought about many synergistic benefits. One such synergy is the increased collaborative teamwork and communication skills. Team members report bilateral experiences and the formation of strong relationships and continued friendships when working in GVTs (Zakaria and Al Safi 2013). They also feel that their opinions were valued in such teams (Goold et al. 2008) as they actively participated and contributed to the team (Alon 2003). Alon further elaborates that GVT members obtained a “real-world” collaborative experience that provided them with “real-world” skills and abilities that can be reproduced in future GVT tasks. This is made possible as globally distributed teams “gain access to expertise and knowledge that is geographically dispersed” with the potential to leverage knowledge strategically (Garrison et al. 2010). Research also suggests that demographically diverse teams bring about an increase in creativity, decision quality and innovation (Jehn et al. 1999).

The use of technology also enhances GVTs as geographical distance and time zone differences are mitigated. Both asynchronous and synchronous communication which are inexpensive and offer free real-time interaction can be utilised by virtual teams (Pottert et al. 2000; Goold et al. 2008).

Other benefits include formation of emergent leadership, learned diverse managerial styles and competencies skills and international exposure to diverse cultures without the need to travel abroad (Zakaria and Al Safi 2013).

However, various challenges have also become evident among GVT members. Garrison et al. (2010) have raised concerns that the extent of diversity within a team would impede team cohesion and individual performance, thus negatively influencing individual productivity. They have attributed the cause for the decline in productivity among diverse groups to the issues of trust and cohesion, which are found to be lacking. They assert that efforts to enhance the use of distributed teams in a global strategy may, in actual fact, cause a reduction in knowledge sharing, individual productivity and team performance, due to the lack of trust in diverse team members (Nemeeth 1986 as cited by Garrison et al. 2010). In addition, differences in demographic attributes result in less cohesion and social integration and lead to the formation of stereotypes (Horwitz and Horwitz 2007).

Similarly, Goold et al. (2008) consider trust as an essential factor in teamwork. Unlike face-to-face teams, virtual teams may not have sufficient time to build trust among team members due to the slow development of relational bonds among members (Garrison et al. 2010). As a result, the essential stages of group development, i.e. forming, storming, norming and performing (Tuckman 1965), may not have been achieved (Goold et al. 2008).

GVTs also experience many challenges in using computer-mediated technologies. Students involved in GVTs may be resistant to change as it requires much coordination among team members, apart from the necessity to conduct many hours of “searching and researching questions and issues never explored before” (Alon 2003).

In addition, students are challenged by the use of timely email, whereby their preference for a satisfying, productive near-synchronous communication with other team members (Egea and Gregor 2002) is not always achieved. This is due to delayed interactions that hinder and complicate the exchange of ideas among team members resulting in a decline in both individual and group productivity (Garrison et al. 2010) probably due to differing time zones or a GVT member’s attitude towards work.

GVTs also encountered difficulties with differing attitudes of members. The negative attitude of some members was evident in their lack of concern about deadlines and the time taken to respond to the team (Goold et al. 2008). Heavy reliance on electronic communication makes communication difficult when unwilling team members place little importance on responding to communication received (Egea and Gregor 2002).

The difficulty in managing such team members is evident in a number of studies, and Goold et al. (2008) have identified two such groups, i.e. “*lurkers* (individuals who do not actively participate in the online environment) and *shirkers* (those who do not arrive in the online environment)” (p. 349). Thus, challenges arise when GVT members encounter difficulties in reaching out to the unwilling members because of the lack of personal contact which is exacerbated by psychological distance (Zakaria and Al Safi 2013) and geographical distance (Egea and Gregor 2002; Garrison et al. 2010).

Language behaviour presents another challenge in GVTs. Overall understanding may be hindered when there is the absence of a shared language among all members (Garrison et al. 2010). As members have different levels of proficiency in the shared language, a member who is less proficient in the shared language may be perceived as being less competent and less able to contribute to the task (Pottert et al. 2000).

3 Methodology

3.1 Context

The present study was conducted in an international business module at a private university in Selangor, Malaysia. The course was a compulsory subject offered to international business major undergraduate students. The main objective of this assessment was to provide students the understanding of working in a GVT as well as to assess the challenges faced by them. Each student was allocated a GVT and every team had to work on developing an international business plan for an imaginary MNC. These GVTs served as consultants for these MNCs and had to provide a comprehensive expansion plan for the senior executives of these MNCs. The sample MNCs used in the assessment are (but not limited to) Walt Disney, Google Inc, ALDI Einkauf, McDonald's, Toyota and HSBC Holdings.

The project was monitored and administered by the faculty member who is teaching the module. The participation into this project was entirely voluntary. Students from 37 countries and about 81 universities participated in the GVT assignment. Working with students around the globe gave an opportunity for our students to experience a true GVT context. Upon completion of the task, each student was awarded a certificate of participation.

3.2 Participants

The participants of this study were a mix of 32 local and international students. The students were a mixed gender between the ages of 20 and 21 years old. In terms of language, for some of the students, English is their first language, while for the others English is their second or third language. The students were in second year of their studies majoring in international business degrees.

3.3 Case Study Approach

This study employs a case study design because a case study is one type of qualitative research that investigates a phenomenon in a natural setting within a bounded system (Merriam 1998; Stake 1995; Yin 2003). Merriam (1998) states that the case can be a person, particular situation, programme, group or phenomena and it helps to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and the meaning it provides. In this study, the researchers wanted to gain insights on GVTs as a novel platform and the structure of cross-cultural virtual teams using a variety of computer-mediated communication tools. The case study approach also enabled the researchers to

understand the types of challenges faced by the students and the cross-cultural experience which are beneficial to the students in the GVTs.

3.4 Data Collection

The main data source for this study was obtained from the students' reflective report. The reflective reports are important in this study as it provided detailed information on the challenges and cross-cultural experience of the students.

The reflective reports were collected at the end of the semester, in week 12 after they had completed the project with their respective GVTs. Students were informed that the reflective report is part of a research project and their participation consent has been obtained. Several questions were provided to the students in order to gain insight on their experience working in a GVT, such as:

1. What have you learned?
2. What worked well?
3. What are challenges and why?
4. What would you do differently?

3.5 Data Analysis

This research was guided by the constant comparative method set out by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and open, axial, and selective coding strategies (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Analysis occurred at the same time as data collection. The data from the reflective report was arranged and coded into categories. The coding categories were developed through the reading of the reflective journals as relevant phrases and sentences were identified by either underlining or bracketing them and then the meaning of each significant sentence or paragraph was coded in the margin. Once the marginal remarks were coded and written on the reflective journals, a list consisting of all the codes and the page numbers of the reflective journals on which the codes appeared were made.

First, the coding categories for occurring themes were identified through the reading of the reflective journals. The reflective journals were read through individually to develop a system of categorisation. In order to develop an appropriate categorisation, it took several rounds of individual categorisation followed by intensive discussions with two other lecturers until a consensus on an appropriate categorisation model was reached. The data was analysed based on what was the students' challenges and their experience in the GVTs. After analysing the contents of the journals, there were several recurring themes that emerged which were language barrier, time zone differences, different working style, noncommitted and passive group member(s) and email miscommunication, and the students used a

variety of computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools such as Facebook, Google Docs, Dropbox and email; exposed to different and new cultures; learned new and different management skills; and experienced working in a GVT structure. Then, it was grouped into two main themes: group challenges and cross-cultural synergies. These themes will be discussed further in the findings and discussion section below.

4 Findings and Discussions

The findings from the students' reflections indicated that the students had both positive and negative experiences working in GVTs. The experience can be grouped into two main categories which are group challenges and cross-cultural synergies. The group challenges that the students faced were language barrier, time zone differences, different working style, noncommitted and passive group member(s) and email miscommunication. On a positive note, the students mentioned that they have gained positive cross-cultural experience through GVTs such as they used a variety of computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools such as Facebook, Google Docs, Dropbox and email, been exposed to different and new cultures, learned new and different management skills and group cohesiveness and experienced working in a GVT structure.

4.1 Group Challenges

Working in a cross-cultural team will have its pros and cons. This was especially true in the case for our students as they were required to work with team members of different backgrounds and have no face-to-face contact or historical background of working together. Therefore, this study had identified several cross-cultural group challenges working in GVTs faced by our students.

The students highlighted that the first challenge they faced was language barrier. The common language used in their discussion was English as it is the lingua franca of the world. But this became a barrier for some of the team members due to their different levels of English language proficiency. One of the students mentioned that *"some of our members are not fluent in English and it made us hard to interact and exchange opinion"*. This made it difficult for the team members to understand what was being conveyed, and as a result, it delayed the group discussion. The students also highlighted that it delayed their work progress as they needed to edit their team members' language in terms of grammar, sentence construction and word usage. This was mentioned by one of the students, *"Language proficiency was a major problem in my team as two of my team members had poor command of English and the rest of us have to be patient with them to understand what was being mentioned in order to get the project going. We also had to edit their work to ensure that it is*

up to standard". Although language was a problem, the students were able to work together on their project due to patience and tolerance among group members and they managed to complete the given task and submit it on time. This substantiated Zakaria and Al Safi's (2013) view that having different command of English language made it challenging to ensure that everyone was on the same page. It further supports Garrison et al.'s (2010) view that overall understanding may be hindered when there is the absence of a shared language among all members.

The second challenge the students commonly cited was time zone differences. The students found it difficult to find a common time as they were all from different parts of the world. As mentioned by a student, "*We had to agree on a time for discussion as we are from different parts of the world and it is difficult to get everyone in the group chat at the same time. We had to wait for our teammates to respond once we had posted our ideas in the group chat, and if we had encountered any problems during the process, we could not immediately obtain their solutions*". The students also mentioned that they usually need to wait half-a-day or a day to get a response from their team members due to different time zones as mentioned by a student that "*our messages were often corresponded at different timing and we corresponded sparingly due to work commitments and exams*". These findings concurred with Zakaria and Al Safi's (2013) study that their students also had difficulties dealing with team members from seven different countries and they had to wait for their members to respond to messages at their own convenience.

A third challenge that the students found was their team members had different working styles. The students found that working in a cross-cultural team has its challenges as different people have different working styles. It was mentioned by a student that "*their working styles were totally different from my working style as they were more relaxed and took things easy compared to me who was anxious about everything. Hence, because of differences in background, perceptions and preferences, it's a challenge for us to reach an agreement on some issues*". Consequently, some of the students were forced to take up the leadership role due to the different working style as mentioned by one of the students, "*my group members were relaxed about the proposal and the deadline is approaching fast, so, I decided to become the leader in the group and divided the work among ourselves*". In order for a cross-cultural team to be successful, the students need to understand each other's working style and compromise in order to succeed in a cross-cultural team and achieve their goal which is to complete the business proposal.

The students also stated that the fourth challenge they faced was noncommitted and passive group member(s). These noncommitted and passive group member(s) gave the students much headache as they were missing from the group's discussion and the other team members needed to cover the parts that were assigned to them. This was mentioned by one of the students that "*there were two group members who were missing in action in this assignment. It was impossible to contact them or find them since each individual was in different countries. My group leader tried to email them continuously but failed to receive any reply. This did not only cause delay in doing up the assignment but our group leader had to reorganise and re-delegate the tasks among ourselves*". It was also highlighted that these irresponsible

and noncommitted members stressed them out as cited by a student that *“Moreover, some of them did not fulfil their responsibilities to get their job done and they only submitted their assigned task to me on the very last minute as I was in charge of editing and I struggled to complete my task on time”*. This supports Goold et al.’s (2008) claim that the main difficulty of online teams is the management of *“lurkers* (individuals who do not actively participate in the online environment) and *shirkers* (those who do not arrive in the online environment” (p. 349). But all this experience did not demotivate the students to continue working with other members who were committed in their team as a student claimed that *“we had two group members who did not respond to the multiple emails sent to them but they did not hold us back from achieving our target as the others were working hard”*.

The final challenge faced by the students was email miscommunication. It was found that misunderstanding did occur through the use of email as one student quoted that *“it was quite difficult to use email to discuss our assignment because it caused the group members to have some arguments although it was not done on purpose. The leader asked one member to relook at her points presented and this team member misunderstood it as asking her to change her whole write-up”*. Miscommunication was also caused by the tone and words used in the email as another student stated that *“the tone and words used in the email were harsh and some of the group members were upset about it. But luckily, we managed to work things out as our leader explained to us what he meant and wanted from us. I guess it’s a culture difference thing”*. This concurs with Egea and Gregor’s (2002) study that poor communication skills through the use of email can cause frustration to group members and delay in completing the task at hand.

4.2 Cross-Cultural Synergies

In general, the students mentioned that participating in GVTs provided them with a rewarding experience despite the challenges mentioned above. They were grateful to have been given the opportunity to be exposed to such cross-cultural project without the need of travelling abroad. It also exposed them to new learning experience and knowledge which was not possible to gain through a normal classroom setting. The project had provided students with working in new cultures and helped broadened the students’ mind on different lifestyles and work processes.

The first rewarding experience working in GVTs was being exposed to a variety of computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools such as Facebook, Google Docs, Dropbox, Skype and email. A majority of the students mentioned that they were being introduced to the use of different CMC tools for the first time as mentioned by a student that *“I have no idea what or how Dropbox and Google Docs function but thanks to this project, I have now acquired the knowledge of using Dropbox and Google Docs. These tools are helpful and how it could ease in doing a group project which I may be able to adopt in my future group assignments”*. The use of CMCs in the GVTs project also helped the students to improve their CMC

skills as one of them claimed that “...it has improved my skill of using online collaboration tools such as Google Docs and Skype which I seldom use. The online collaboration tools are very important for us to share our information and researches that we had done. This is an important skill as it is a useful skill in the corporate world”. This proves that being able to use a variety of CMC is beneficial to the students as it is an important skill needed for their future working life. This finding concurs with Zakaria and Al Safi’s (2013) study that their students acquired a number of technical competencies through GVT.

The second rewarding experience the students gained was being exposed to different and new cultures. The students had the opportunity of being exposed internationally without having to travel across the globe. A student mentioned that “I’ve gained some knowledge about different countries and people whom I’ve never met before. It was such a thrill to work with people from different countries as I’ve always worked with people from my own country”. Another student claimed that “This is by far one of my best experiences so far as working in a team of six who are from Spain, Brazil, UAE, USA and Indonesia to come up with a business plan. I got to know about their culture and a bit more about their country without the need of going to their country and all this was achieved through the use of online communication”. This supports Zakaria and Al Safi’s (2013) study that the students’ mindset was broadened as they found out about their foreign team-mates’ lifestyles and work processes and it also helped them learn about cultures and habits which were new and foreign to them.

Another rewarding segment of the project which was commonly cited by the students was that they learned new and different management skills. Students gained many new skills: having good time management, gaining interpersonal skills, delegating tasks according to their group members’ strengths and weaknesses, being proactive, and being open-minded were the commonly acquired skills being highlighted by the students. These are all important skills needed for a successful GVT. One of the students claimed that “... it has actually improved my interpersonal skills ... as I have learnt how to communicate with people from different cultural background. Being tolerant and a listener are keys on how to interact with people although we have disagreement on some issues and this is an important skill working in an international group setting”. Another student also cited that “throughout this project, I learnt that having good time management is important to reach our goal of the project as I always procrastinate my work till the very last minute. But, this experience taught me the importance of doing things on time and also I did not want to fail my group members”. This substantiated Zakaria and Al Safi’s (2013) study that “students gained good practice in handling a wide range of people which will prove useful in their future professional lives” (p. 171).

The final rewarding experience that the students had was that they acquired the competence of working in a GVT structure. The GVT experience had exposed students to the skills required to form a successful GVT such as being tolerant and patient, leveraging on team member’s strengths, having good teamwork and possessing good leadership skills. One of the students mentioned that he learnt “the importance of teamwork to produce results as everyone was willing to work together

without any complaints and we completed what was needed within the few hours". Another student mentioned that "there is a team member who took the role of a leader and she had guided us well and managed to resolve our group conflicts. She has been a great supporter, showed us much consideration, assisted us all the time and cared for us and the project throughout the project. She was also in charge of assigning tasks to the group and she did it very fairly. This taught me that good leadership is needed in order for the project to be successful". Thus, it is necessary to have the competence of working in a GVT structure to form a successful GVT which necessitates careful planning and management of resources (Zakaria and Al Safi 2013).

5 Implications

The outcome of this research suggests that experiential cross-cultural-based project is beneficial to the students. Academics should incorporate such cross-cultural project into the curricular. Our findings show that adopting GVT-oriented projects is an effective and practical teaching tool for international business-related studies. Based on the reflective report, students find that GVT provides them with good exposure to various cultural elements and they feel that GVT is an interesting learning platform which they have never experienced before. Besides, through GVT, students are more IT savvy and they are able to use or try various applications that have not been utilised before. This truly reflects that students have benefited from collaborating in this GVT.

Other than the positive findings of adopting GVT as a teaching tool, the findings above have also revealed some light on the challenges faced by students while working in a GVT. Such findings are crucial for academicians to better coordinate and design their assessments. Based on the findings stated above, there is a need to have a cultural briefing or training prior to the start of the project. Such briefings or trainings will help to reduce the level of uncertainty of these students working in a GVT for the very first time. In addition, it will also provide some understanding as to what challenges are faced so that students are better able to manage their time and improve communication.

Next, in terms of assessing the project, academics should take note that working in a GVT requires more effort in coordinating and producing the final output. More often than not, some students feel that they are being penalised for the overall team output. As highlighted in the findings above, some students might have weak English or did not participate much in the project. Therefore, assessment of the project should take into consideration these factors. Academics could consider assessing some components based on individual effort and some as a team. Having a clear marking rubric on how individual contribution is evaluated and how team contribution is evaluated (Goold et al. 2008) is crucial for a fair assessment of each GVT member's performance.

6 Conclusions

The findings from this study clearly indicate that GVT has provided students with valuable cross-cultural experience without travelling across borders, and furthermore, it has provided the students a real-world experience of working in a cross-cultural virtual team. The case study shows how the GVT worked and the skills acquired by the students through GVT. Future research could expand the sample to students from different countries (Gonzalez-Perez et al. 2014). It would be extremely useful if results could be obtained within the same group in order to evaluate the group behaviour over CMC. In addition, future research could also cover the effectiveness of GVT towards one's learning in the future. In other words, researchers could investigate whether going through GVT-based project could really help a student in his or her future study of subjects in international business. Researchers might also explore on leadership styles of Malaysian students and how conflicts are managed in GVTs. With the findings and recommendations provided above, we hope other academics would have a better insight on the challenges faced by students and how it could be improved so that students can gain a better learning experience.

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