Chapter XVIII

Seven Principles of Good Practice for Virtual International Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents seven principles of good practice for conducting virtual international collaborations with students. The authors have conducted such collaborations with several different groups of American and Polish university students using different models. The collaborations were the basis for distilling these seven principles: develop cross-cultural awareness and mutual understanding of the culture of each group; create a multifaceted virtual environment; coordinate calendars; require intermediate level of English language proficiency; create relevant, engaging collaborative assignments with rubrics and shared understandings for evaluation of student work; establish methods for successful group interactions, including information-sharing and relationship-building; evaluate project outcomes. These seven principles of good practice can assist instructors to develop successful virtual intercultural collaborations that prepare students for the workplace of the 21st century.

INTRODUCTION

“Think globally—act locally.” This slogan, popular among environmentalists, has equal validity for today’s institutions of higher education, where preparing students for the future must embrace both the global and the local. As we teach and mentor young people preparing to enter the workforce, we act locally to prepare them for a
global community very different from previous generations. It is clear that the workplace of the 21st century will increasingly demand employees who bring a global perspective as well as a multiplicity of abilities to their work, including an understanding of world cultures, an ability to work collaboratively, and the capacity to integrate technology into many facets of their work.

If students are to develop these capabilities, they must have real-world learning experiences, including opportunities to develop understanding of the barriers that can complicate intercultural interactions:

At the present time there is a greater need for effective international and cross-cultural communication, collaboration, and cooperation, not only for the effective practice of management but also for the betterment of the human condition. Ample evidence shows that cultures of the world are becoming more and more interconnected and that the business world is becoming increasingly global. As economic borders come down, cultural barriers will most likely go up and present new challenges and opportunities in business. When cultures come into contact, they may converge on some aspects, but their idiosyncrasies will likely amplify. (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004, p. 1)

The desire to give students real-world experience in surmounting cultural barriers as they developed collaboration and technology skills became the impetus for virtual international collaboration between university students in our two countries, the U.S. and Poland. Saginaw Valley State University (SVSU) in Michigan is a regional state university with about 9,450 students. Poznan University of Technology (PUT) in Poznan, Poland, is the fourth largest technological university in Poland, with about 20,000 day and weekend students. PUT is likewise regional, as the majority of its students come from the west-central Wielkopolska region. It also has students from small towns in northern Poland, and a small number from eastern Poland. Over the span of the past several years, we have conducted English language cross-cultural collaborative learning projects with students from both universities in multiple online contexts and, by trial and error, have learned a great deal about what makes such collaboration successful or not.

Recognizing that globalization has permanently changed national perspectives as well as international relationships, the idea of collaboration between students of both our universities has focused on two goals. Our first goal has been to build mutual understanding and openness to other cultures. This understanding of other cultures, already familiar to most Polish students who have traveled to neighboring countries, has become a priority for Poland, as it entered the European Union on May 1, 2004. Such understanding is equally important but less common for American students, whose sphere of interest may stop at U.S. borders, with limited awareness of the dramatic changes globalization has already begun to bring about within and beyond those borders.

How can students build cultural understanding and openness in this new international environment? What has changed? What has stayed the same? Journalist and historian Tom Friedman, in The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization (2000), provides some context. Friedman has charted the beginning of this era of globalization as the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall, which permanently shifted not only political boundaries but also human possibilities. Friedman contrasts the image of the ultramodern Lexus luxury automobile, representing ever-evolving global technologies, with the gnarled roots of the ancient olive tree, a symbol of the age-old needs for community and personal freedoms characteristic of human learners. Friedman cautions thoughtful world citizens to weigh priorities in this new global environment:
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