Chapter XII

Help Me, Help You: A Triple Track Approach to Maximizing Collaborative Learning in Complex, Cross-National Virtual Teams

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Abstract

Reporting on a nine-year case study of collaborative learning in cross-national and cross-university virtual teams, this chapter calls for what it defines as a triple track approach to the opportunities and challenges of cross-cultural collaborative learning. Such an approach involves the concurrent focus on student, faculty, and administrative roles in developed and developing nations. The authors analyze alternative delivery modes, identify best practices, and highlight critical success factors including trust-building, cross-cultural communication, and collaborative learning champions. Finally, they examine trends such as increasing cross-sector collaboration outside of academe and suggest needed additional research.

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Introduction

Some of the most exciting developments in international communication today involve the increasing convergence of lessons learned from the diverse—but related—interdisciplinary fields of computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW), computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL), and international studies. This convergence is evident in a number of ways, including new studies of how transnational civil society organizations use information and communication technologies to coordinate their geographically distributed participation in global policy processes such as the UN World Summit on the Information Society (Cogburn, 2002; Jordan & Surman, 2005; Klein, 2004; Selian, 2004; Siochru, 2003), distance-based capacity building for such complex policy areas as Internet Governance (Cogburn & Kurup, 2006; Kleinwächter, 2004), and in the implications of ICT use in cross-cultural distributed environments (Abbott, Austin, Mulkeen, & Metcalf, 2004; Cogburn & Levinson, 2003; Zakaria & Cogburn, 2006). Many of these amazing developments are due to innovative applications of the Internet and the increasing availability of advanced commercial and open source information and communication technologies capable of supporting the synchronous and asynchronous needs of diverse, cross-national collaborative learning teams.

Building on what Hollan and Stornetta (1992) presciently described as the “beyond being there” effect that is possible with the appropriate use of ICT tools to support distributed collaboration, this chapter reports on lessons learned from nine years of offering an advanced cross-national, graduate level interdisciplinary seminar focusing on “Globalization and the Information Society” and facilitated by computer-supported collaborative learning approaches. The Globalization Seminar involves graduate students at up to six universities (three in the United States and three in South Africa) who work for a full semester in one of five cross-national, virtual teams called “Global Syndicates.” Each “Global Syndicate” represents a different stakeholder group in the “Information Society” and has a mix of students from each of the participating universities and countries.

Reviewing findings from our nine-year study indicates that what we call “triple track learning” is present in these learning environments, and must be considered in any identification of best practices or lessons learned. This “triple track learning” involves a concurrent focus on the perspectives of students, instructors, and administrators as we analyze the opportunities and challenges of collaborative learning in complex, cross-national virtual teams.
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