Chapter 11

Teamwork and Project Experiences in Multicultural Environments for Computing Students

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents several multicultural education experiences in Higher Education devoted to computing education and developed under IP and other international specific sessions where students’ teamwork is analyzed while developing a case study and was supported by the use of technology. This enables a reasonable management of workshop data to allow auto-evaluation as well as a joint discussion of the benefits of the work. The collaborative and e-learning environments also covered the support of work before attendance during the intensive weeks. The chapter presents results of the analysis of behavior of students showing the influence of gender and cultural background in individual and group performance. In general, data and information from 6 editions (Amsterdam, 2005; Sundsval, 2006; Copenhagen, 2007; Spain, 2008; Michigan, 2009; Espoo, 2010) are included and show how these experiences have positive effects on students’ perception of teamwork and collaboration in multicultural environments.

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INTRODUCTION

As a consequence of the general structure of IT activity and globalization, computing students should face the challenge of working in multinational and multicultural environments within the daily dynamics of projects and companies. Globalization, international business, and cultural awareness are concepts most in the business and professional world accept as facts of life. AACSB (2006) considers global awareness to be of great importance and its eligibility and standards document states “Every graduate should be prepared to pursue a business or management career in a global context. That is, students should be exposed to cultural practices different than their own.” Cant (2004) has explored the cultural aspects of global awareness and has identified five key cultural competencies needed by successful global managers: cultural self-awareness, cultural consciousness, ability to lead multicultural teams, ability to negotiate across cultures, and a global mindset. He also found out that simply addressing these aspects as part of a course or degree is not enough for the required level of exposure to multicultural issues to get the necessary level of practical ability. If language trainers agree that immersion is the best way to learn a foreign language, then study/work abroad experiences could be the best way to gain cultural understanding a foreign culture. All stakeholders in the higher education learning process should care about global intercultural collaboration due to different reasons (Pears, 2010).

Real internationalization for students, teachers, and institutions is the challenge for European universities after consuming so much time in the minimum step that represents the simple coordination of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Fortunately, different options for helping in this process to internationalization were implemented many years ago in the EU. Therefore, they are currently available for helping students to experience such type of situations, especially in Europe. The Erasmus Programme is a cooperation and mobility program in the field of higher education aimed at enhancing students and teachers mobility in Europe while promoting intercultural understanding through co-operation of the different countries. As the most known option, Erasmus offers university-level students the chance to go to another European country to study and do work placements (traineeships); these periods abroad contribute to qualifications at home and help students get to know different cultures and languages as well as gain vital experience for their professional and personal development. In total, by mid-2010, 2.2 million students have done one of these Erasmus periods (from 3 to 12 months). In this sense, funding from the EU Erasmus program has helped many students to study abroad during a semester or a year, and really big numbers are involved in the statistics (European Commission, 2007, 2010): 168,193 students in academic year 2008-09 (last available statistics) studying abroad plus 30,330 doing traineeships (placements) in other countries (it was 144,037 in 2004-05).

Notwithstanding this, this type of experience still represents a huge challenge for many students due to different reasons so a good number of them tend to reject this line of action for experiencing internationalization. In fact, a long lasting study abroad experience for all students is optimal, but unrealistic due to costs, time commitments, and other responsibilities. However, there is an alternative, which many students consider more convenient because it represents a more guided option, while it is EU-funded: Erasmus Intensive Programs (IP). It allows a more intensive exposure to work in multicultural environments. An IP is a short programme of study, which brings together students and teaching staff from higher education institutions of at least three participating countries. It has to last from a minimum of 10 continuous full

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