Learning to collaborate across borders: Insights from the X-Culture Project and the emergence of global virtual teams

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Abstract:

Global Virtual Teams are being increasingly employed in organizations worldwide, a trend that has been strengthened by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. We present the X-Culture Project, a large-scale cross-border collaborative project designed to provide students with a first-hand experience of international collaboration through work in GVTs on an international business consulting project. We review the advantages and overall organization of this experiential learning-based project, as well as potential challenges - and best practices to minimize their impact on participants′ experience and satisfaction - associated with cultural, language, and time-zone differences, social loafing, plagiarism, peer-evaluation collusion, and cyberstalking.

Keywords: x-culture project | global virtual teams | cross-cultural collaboration

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1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns imposed in the majority of the countries is still having a huge impact on the way people behave and interact. Perhaps nowhere else was this impact felt as strongly as in the workplace. As social distancing was mandated and physical proximity discouraged, a growing number of companies shifted to remote work whenever possible.

Global Virtual Teams (GVTs), which were already widely used in many organizations pre-pandemic (up to 87% of all white-collar workers participated "at least sometimes" in GVTs (CultureWizards, 2018)), became an ubiquitous necessity prompted by the impossibility of co-location. Defined as "temporary, culturally diverse, geographically dispersed, and electronically communicating work group[s]" (Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1998, p. 792), GVTs allow for the achievement of a common purpose by relying on information and communication technologies (ICTs) that permit interactions through interdependent tasks (Lipnack

and Stamps, 1997). Among their many advantages, GVTs allow savings on the commute, the ability to hire talent globally regardless of the person's location, and most importantly, bring the diversity afforded by the international dispersion and access to a variety of professional networks, cultures, and knowledge silos (Taras et al., 2013; 2019; Jiménez et al., 2017).

Over the decades, the development and ubiquity of ICTs have significantly changed work structures and dynamics within organizations, leading to an increasing use of GVTs (Webster and Wong, 2008; Jiménez et al., 2017). The current COVID-19 crisis is likely to further accelerate this process to benefit from the advantages of remote collaboration. Thus, GVTs allow circumventing geographic and time boundaries, reducing not only travelling time and costs, but also the cost of immigration or expatriation. Furthermore, due to the diversity of backgrounds, the diversity of the resources available to the team rises (van Knippenberg et al., 2004), and enhances the ability to solve problems (Taras et al., 2019). Online communication can also reduce conflict and social fragmentation in an intercultural context (Stahl et al., 2010), and even the team members' greater autonomy can lead to enhanced motivation and job satisfaction (Nurmi and Hinds, 2016).

However, GVTs also face challenges of increased coordination costs due to time-zone differences (Sutanto et al., 2011), communication barriers, social categorization, biases, and lower trust (Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1998; Klitmøller et al., 2015). Together with the increasing stress as a consequence of the uncertainty that the current COVID-19 pandemic is triggering, working in a GVT is far from being simple and not something most employees can quickly adapt to.

Overall, the necessity to work and collaborate remotely, already important in the last decades, becomes vitally important during the current crisis, leading to a "master GVT, or perish" world. In contrast, despite some efforts in universities and business schools to include GVT training in their curricula to learn how to deal with these challenges (Taras et al., 2013), the majority of workers are not fullyaccustomed to it. In this chapter, we describe the X-Culture project, an international business competition where students work in GVTs, thereby experiencing the challenges and learning the best practices of international collaboration, as well as the potential challenges that instructors need to be aware of in order to extract the most benefits from this experience.

2 The X-Culture Project

The X-Culture project (www.X-Culture.org) is a large-scale cross-border collaborative project designed to provide students with a first-hand experience of international collaboration through work in GVTs on an international business consulting project. Launched in 2010, the project has grown exponentially over the years. Nowadays, every semester more than 6,000 students from around 170 universities in 40 countries on every continent participate in the project.

In a nutshell, students enrolled in the X-Culture project are randomly assigned to a GVT (typically seven students per team, all from different countries) and solve real-life challenges presented by real-life corporations that partner with the X-Culture project. Typically, the task requires to develop a new market expansion strategy, develop new economically viable products or product features for the client company, conduct opportunity analysis, and choose a market where the product is most likely to be successful, and/or write a new market entry plan that details the recommended market entry mode, staffing, and marketing strategies. The active phase lasts eight weeks, although with the pre-project preparations and post-project presentations,

it takes up most of the semester. The students also have live webinars with their client companies, where they have opportunities to ask questions about the task they are working on and share their ideas and receive feedback from their clients.

During this time, the students meet regularly and comply with intermediate deadlines. Instructors receive detailed weekly reports on the performance of each of their students, while students also receive weekly feedback, suggestions, and updates on how their teams are doing compared to other teams. While most of the organization of the project is centrally conducted, the role of instructors is critical as they communicate with their students regularly, provide coaching and guidance, and often spend a few minutes of each lecture discussing student progress and answering questions. At the end of the project, the teams submit their consulting reports, which are <

3 Challenges and best practices

Despite the multiple advantages previously mentioned, participating in the X-Culture project is not free of challenges. While our aim is not to provide a comprehensive list of all the potential problems that may arise during the project, we describe five sources of problems that are often observed as well as some tips to minimize their impact on the students´ experience and satisfaction.

First, a common and probably expected set of problems stems from team members' differences, including cultural diversity, language issues, and time zone dispersion. Importantly, experiencing the challenges of differences is one of the key goals of the project. These are the challenges faced by all GVTs, and thus learning how to deal with them allows students to acquire the necessary skills for international collaboration that they surely need later in their careers. To help students cope with the challenges stemming from diversity, the project provides pre-project training materials and regular webinars during the time the teams collaborate with the objective of increasing cultural awareness and tolerance. Yet, the role of instructors is critical in mediating and solving issues when they arise. Besides, and despite English being the working language, the majority of participants are not native English speakers. This leads to situations in which some students feel uncomfortable or unable to properly communicate with their teammates. Once again, the role of instructors here is critical in encouraging students not to be shy and express their ideas. Similarly, instructors of native English speakers need to help their students understand and empathize with their team members from non-English speaking countries, use plain language, and facilitate discussions and knowledge sharing.

Finally, another source of challenges stems from the time zones differences that are inevitable when team members are dispersed across continents. While sometimes synchronous meetings are convenient or even needed, deciding the most appropriate time requires the proper organization as well as understanding among the members (to prevent situations in which teams decide to meet regularly at a very inconvenient time for one of their members), training on asynchronous communication is essential and pre-training materials include some tips about various platforms and online communication tools.

The second source of challenges that instructors need to be aware is related to social loafing (aka free-riding, freeloading, or shirking). As the GVTs rely on collaboration among members, it is often frustrating when a student signs up for the project but puts in a limited effort or does not collaborate with the rest of the team. To weed out the potential freeloaders, instructors and students are required to review X-Culture training materials and take a

readiness test prior to the project's start. Some students seem to lack motivation or self-discipline to devote the necessary time to the test, which probably means neither will they have time for team meetings and research and writing required by the project. Still, a small but still noticeable percent of students pass the readiness test, yet work on the project only half-heartedly. Admittedly, often this happens for causes beyond the student's control, such as personal circumstances, busy schedule, or sickness that prevent students from being able to dedicate the necessary time to the project.

When freeloading happens in the earlier stages of the project, the team member is usually substituted. However, if it happens late, the option often is for the teams to continue and finish their project, relying on the remaining active team members. The biggest problem, though, is usually related to students who do not work as hard as the rest of the team or provide reasons (sometimes legitimate) why they were unable to do what they originally planned to do. Although considering the number of students involved in the project, it is inevitable that a share of students will simply not do their share of work, it is critical that instructors motivate students to actively participate in the project. Also, it is highly recommended to keep a copy of the emails sent to their teammates or other records that show their efforts in case of disputes. Unfortunately, there is no perfect solution that fits all cases, but usually, instructors mediate in case of conflict, and peer evaluations are used to reflect the level of involvement of each student. In any case, this challenge is only a reflection of the accurate representation of reality that the project provides to students, as this is a problem that professionals also face when working in teams.

The third source of potential problems may arise from plagiarism issues. To minimize this possibility, the reports are scanned using plagiarism-detection software. Yet, and despite this being known by participants from the very beginning, it is important that instructors raise awareness and train students accordingly. Sometimes plagiarism issues are linked to cross-cultural or institutional differences, as what is understood as plagiarism is not the same way universally, as well as to English skills, as students with lower English fluency find it harder to rephrase literal quotations.

The fourth source of challenges stems from occasional peer evaluation collusion where team members agree to give each other perfect peer appraisals, thinking that this will make them look good and not realizing that such practice makes it impossible to detect problems when they arise and provide help, as well as provide fair grades/marks at the end of the semester. Although such collusions are usually difficult to detect unless one of the participants raises the alarm, this problem has not been frequent, perhaps because each instructor can decide how they want to use peer evaluations to mark their students. The recommendation is not to take them into consideration, but not as the main component of the final grade. Furthermore, it could be advisable to drop the lowest and the highest peer evaluation grade. Finally, to encourage students to evaluate their peers in an objective way and reduce any potential bias in this sense, individual peer evaluations can be kept secret, with students only able to see the average score.

The fifth source of challenges observed in team-based international student projects is cyberstalking. Its occurrence is extremely rare, but it happens something, and when it does, it could lead to some confusion and conflicts caused by differences in cultural protocols and traditions related to informal communication. When young people come together, as is the case in collaborative student projects, it often happens that one student takes a romantic interest in another. In most cases, students continue focusing on the task, remain professional, and make no romantic advances. However, naturally, some try to flirt, and strictly speaking,

there is nothing inherently wrong with young people flirting with one another. However, due to the international nature of GVTs, the protocols and traditions related to such encounters could vary drastically for different cultures represented on the team. In some cultures, such as those in the U.S. or Japan, romantic encounters on the job are considered inappropriate, and the work team members are encouraged or even required to keep their personal matters out of the workplace. Any signs of romantic advances could be perceived as unprofessional in the workplace context, and many organizations may even have policies for punishment for such instances. Other cultures might allow more flexibility when it comes to personal matters in the workplace context, as is the case in some Latin American or African countries.

These differences in workplace protocols and traditions could create certain misunderstandings and even serious conflicts. Occasionally, we see cases when one student complains about excessive signs of affection, such as one student "liking" every photo on Instagram and Facebook of another student, sending repeated personal messages, and engaging in other forms of courting. We have never seen cases of actual sexual harassment, but there have been cases of excessive attention bordering on cyberstalking by the standards of the plaintiff's culture. Notably, when we reach out to the student accused of displaying unwanted attention and the student's professor, as we always do when we receive these sorts of complaints, we are met with genuine puzzlement and confusion. Not only the student in question, but also the student's professor, acknowledge the issue and promise to stop the unwanted behavior, but also note that they do not quite understand what is wrong. As they typically explain the issue: one student likes another and tries to show this interest and perhaps start a romantic relationship – what is wrong with young people falling in love? In private follow-up conversations, one party often complains and expresses frustration about the very restrictive rules when it comes to emotional involvement and romantic encounters in the workplace, which clearly seems wrong according to the traditions in their own culture.

Resolving these issues often requires extra sensitivity and care. It is usually clear from the onset that all parties act in good faith, and nobody means harm. If anything, the accused party is trying to be very nice and courteous, it is just by the standards of the other party, such niceness and courtesy are considered inappropriate. So, conflict resolution must be very careful to ensure a comfortable workplace for everyone, a productive team, while avoiding unnecessary offending either party.

Despite the aforementioned challenges, the majority of participants, both students and instructors, consider that the advantages of the project largely exceed the challenges. We, therefore, hope participation in this project increases even further, especially for students whose circumstances make it not possible to enjoy cultural immersion and encourage interested instructors to give it a try!

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