Spanning Boundaries: The Case of an Intercultural E-Consulting Experience[1]

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Abstract

The purpose of this case study is to understand ways to plan, organize and facilitate experiences in which experts who are geographically dispersed act as effective consultants. Graduate students enrolled in an advanced course in instructional technology at a large university in the Midwestern United States interacted with colleagues studying at a highly regarded university in Turkey. Students in Turkey provided professional and expert advice at a distance to their peers in the United States. The experiences, challenges, tensions and strategies for effective consulting relationships heavily supported by computer-mediated communication in international contexts are discussed.

Introduction

The ability to learn and work collaboratively within groups from multiple cultures is becoming critical, nationally and internationally, as workers and their families become more mobile and information technologies permit for coordination of activities independent of geographic location and time zone (Cagiltay et al., 2005). Information and communication technologies offer one of

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the most exciting and effective ways to collaborate by connecting people around the world. Collaborative learning and working become challenging when professionals who are working together come from different nations with diverse cultures, histories and socio-political beliefs. Such an environment can only be productive if everyone is well-equipped to face potential problems and ready to take necessary actions in advance. Computer-mediated communication adds an extra layer of complexity to this phenomenon.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study is to understand ways to plan, organize and facilitate experiences in which experts who are geographically dispersed act as effective consultants. Graduate students enrolled in an advanced course in instructional technology at a large university in the Midwestern United States interacted with their counterparts studying at a highly regarded university in Turkey. The students in Turkey provided professional and expert advice at a distance to their peers in the United States in order to complete a semester-long instructional design project. The research questions are focused on the points of view of the consultants in Turkey:

1. What challenges did the consultants face when providing professional and expert advice to the students in the United States?
2. What strategies were used to establish an effective e-consulting relationship? How was it different from a face-to-face consulting relationship?
3. How were the consultants' contributions taken by the students in the United States? Was the consultants' professional advice taken into consideration? Did the consultants feel ownership of the product and processes of instructional design?

Theoretical Perspectives

In order to foster students' global awareness, experiences that integrate intercultural communication in K-12 and higher education contexts have been conducted recently (Seo, Sowa and Schmidt, 2008). Correia, Baran and Yusop (2007) found that through intercultural online collaboration, students value "the wealth of expertise, experience and culture that each of the members offered and was willing to share and learn from each other" (p. 1776).

Consulting is defined here as the application of expertise and experiences to improve a client's condition and help the client to solve its problems (Bellman, 2002; Wang, 2007). In the context of instructional technology, consulting is the collection of practices that aim at solving "clients' learning and performance problems through the application of the consultant's expertise and experiences in instructional technology" (Wang, 2007, p. 301). The cultures of consultants and clients affect their relationship substantially in the context of international instructional technology consulting practices due to the complexity of interactions across different cultures. Wright (1997) has suggested that instructional technology consultants should be aware of the effects of different cultures when consulting in settings involving different cultures. Wang's (2007) study explored the instructional technology consultancy in two different cultural settings: China and the United States. The findings of the study revealed that meeting expectations, using creative and practical strategies, working in teams, developing trust, defining needs, and dealing

with ethical issues are the core elements of instructional consulting. Exploring the experiences and feelings of consultants, Wang indicated that an effective instructional technology consultant needs to have crucial soft skills in addition to technical and specialist skills and competencies.

Methods

Case study research (Yin, 2003) was adopted due to the exploratory nature of this study. This approach was chosen because little is known about creating and maintaining consulting relationships in international contexts that are heavily supported by computer-mediated communication.

Context

This study took place in the context of an international project aimed at connecting expertise through the use of contemporary technologies between two large research universities in the United States and Turkey. It was expected that this project would infuse international perspectives into learning, teaching and research plus initiate a long-term partnership between the two institutions. The host of this international collaboration was a course designed to mimic a small, multi-team instructional consulting company that produced professional-level service free of charge. Graduate students in this course worked with local organizations (e.g., city governments, community-based organizations, local schools, and emergency management agencies) to address some of these organizations' instructional problems. Teams of two students (referred to as collocated consultants) created effective instructional interventions to address their clients' needs and problems.

Traditionally, students in this course were advanced students with a strong interest in instructional consulting. Some students aspired to start their own businesses and/or pursue entrepreneurship in the context of non-profit organizations. However, such semester-long projects could be quite demanding and daunting even for these types of students. As a way to obtain additional assistance on these projects, a pair of consultants operating from Turkey (referred to as remote consultants) was assigned to three different teams of students working as consultants for organizations located in the United States (Table 1). The remote consultants' role was to help the teams be successful in their projects, including the consulting relationship with their clients. Remote consultants provided professional advice and guidance at all stages of the projects' design and development. In turn, the remote consultants were able to immerse themselves in academic and professional practices used in the United States through a variety of technologies. The main platforms used for online synchronous and asynchronous communication between the students in the United States and Turkey were: (a) the learning management and delivery system, WebCT; and (b) a web-based videoconferencing tool, Acrobat Connect Professional. The interaction between students was not limited to these tools; instead they were encouraged to use other online communication platforms to further support the collaboration (e.g., Skype, Google Docs, and Spreadsheets).

Table 1- Student teams, projects developed and consultants assigned to each team.

Collocated consultants	Remote consultants
Team 1: Cleo and Paul *Project Description:* A local e-learning company requested help creating a demonstration of the interactive capabilities of their course development software, such as virtual role-play and voice recording. The demo focused on corporate situations addressing specific interview protocols for management training. This demo became an important resource for the company to show to its prospective corporate clients in marketing opportunities and business conferences..	Sonia and Saul
Team 2: Yasemin and Peter *Project Description:* A local organization that delivers instructor-led computer training specifically for individuals aged 50 and over decided to expand its offerings by including an intermediate-level course on Internet use. The team designed and authored a four-session course to address specifically the needs and interests of this age group. Instructor and student manuals were created along with a website that contained links to materials used in and out of the classroom. The course instructor was also given training on how to update this website as the course evolved.	Gene and Aurora
Team 3: Hannah and Bruce *Project Description:* A local emergency management agency wanted to develop an online training and informational website for residents of the county. The website was designed to educate the public on what to do in an emergency, when to shelter in place or evacuate, what supplies people would need, where to go in an emergency, and where to look for more information.	Brianna and Karen

Participants

Six graduate students acted as consultants working from Turkey. They were all originally from different parts of Turkey and their age ranged between 27 and 32 years. Four were female and two were male. They all were doctoral candidates in instructional technology and had extensive experience in the field. Of the six graduate students working on the instructional projects in the United States, four were originally from the United States and the remaining two were from Taiwan and India. Their ages ranged between 26 and 50 years. Three were female and three were male. Four of the six U.S.-based participants were pursuing masters' degrees and two were earning doctoral degrees. All twelve participants were highly proficient in using contemporary technologies for communication and collaboration.

Data Sources

The data sources used in this study solely captured the views of the consultants in Turkey. Data collected included (a) 45-minute semi-structured interviews; (b) online reflections shared in WebCT; (c) individual reflections submitted to the instructor at different points in the semester (beginning, middle and end); and (d) anonymous feedback on the e-consulting experience posted in WebCT. Continuous input was requested from the consultants as an opportunity to be proactive and make improvements as the experience moved along. The data collection took place

between January 2008 and May 2008. To prevent the identification of the students, pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.

Major Findings

The findings in this study are organized by research question.

What challenges did the consultants face when providing professional and expert advice to students in the United States?
One of the challenges reported by the consultants was being able to offer a constructive critique on the instructional work that their counterparts were doing in the U.S. Due to cultural differences, consultants tended to focus their feedback on not so strong points of the design, which could be misinterpreted as abrupt or harsh. Gene, one of the consultants, said during his interview, "I learned to critique the project not the person. It is a minor but important nuance for the consultancy process that I learned with this experience."

Language issues also posed frequent challenges. Another participant wrote anonymously, "The most challenging part of this project is ENGLISH. Since it is my second language, giving feedbacks or sending messages takes too much time as you expected. Also sometimes I am in doubt whether I can explain my ideas as what I thought." Due to an eight-hour time difference, the teams needed to rely on asynchronous communication platforms, which affected the nature of participation. The same participant continued:

> … if we don't understand some part of document, instead of sending another message (e-mail or forum) to the team, we try to make different interpretation about it. If we send another message, we think receiving reply makes the process longer and sometimes the part that we didn't understand is minor thing. If we contact our counterpart synchronously, this problem will diminish, but it seems difficult to communicate synchronously because of time-zone difference and personal schedule.

What strategies were used to establish an effective e-consulting relationship? How was it different from a face-to-face consulting relationship?
Nearly all consultants recommended using a more prescriptive consulting style as a strategy to establish a more effective e-consulting relationship. In a prescriptive consulting relationship, the client perceives that something is "not quite right" and calls in the consultant to diagnose the situation and to prescribe a solution to the problem. It is then the responsibility of the client to implement the solution. On the other hand, a collaborative consulting relationship is based upon a dynamic process between client and consultant. This process involves a series of decisions, reached by consensus, concerning the expectations in terms of results and roles performed during the consultant relationship. Such a relationship requires high involvement on the part of the client and may push the consultant to the edge of his/her knowledge and skill.

In the interviews, all consultants agreed that a major difference between serious face-to-face consulting and e-consulting was the lack of nonverbal information and contextual cues, even when they were able to interact via teleconferencing. This was perceived of as an obstacle to communication for establishing reciprocal understanding. As Karen, one of the remote

consultants, explained, "There was no connection about us. We knew a little thing about us. My problem is not being at a distance, my problem is I am not familiar with them. I was very careful in not offending them [her counterparts in the U.S.] in any way."

How were the consultants' contributions taken by the students in the United States? Was the consultants' professional advice taken into consideration? Did the consultants feel ownership of the product and processes of instructional design?

The remote consultants were not consistent on the perceived value of their contributions to the project by their counterparts in the United States. One of the consultants, Briana, commented, "I had some impact on the final product because from the beginning I feel that I had ownership on the product in terms of instructional design. I wasn't much knowledgeable about the subject matter but I tried to read a lot about it and tried to understand how I could help the team members [in the U.S.]." She was undoubtedly heard and her expertise and contributions were valued. On the other hand, Karen felt that the professional advice she gave to the students working in the U.S. was not highly respected. She explained, "Our team was not highly motivated. They always said that we have other commitments like we work full time. We had no chances to communicate with each other." On a different note, Sonia described her perspective on the consultants' contributions by saying colorfully, "For example when you cook, the food becomes more delicious with spice. We [the consultants] were like spices. They [students in the U.S.] would have prepared the food without us but we were like a spice and with spice the food became more delicious."

Discussion

Offering students opportunities for intercultural collaboration has the potential to educate leaders in the field of instructional technology and to foster understanding for global citizenship. This study aims to add valuable information to the design of international collaborative instructional experiences that allow for exchange of expertise independently of geographical borders and time differences. The ultimate goal of the study is to better understand the process of consulting in instructional design when the consulting spans geographical, linguistic and cultural boundaries.

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