

6 ‘FORE - UEK Telecollaboration 2017’ – virtual exchange in business studies

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Abstract

The report describes the FORE - UEK Telecollaboration 2017 project conducted between November 25th 2017 and January 3rd 2018 between over 60 students from FORE School of Management, India (hereafter FORE), and 70 students from Cracow University of Economics, Poland, and Erasmus students (hereafter UEK). The main goal of the project was to enhance the understanding of managerial problems in modern business. Apart from learning outcomes in the area of management and business communication, the aim of the project was to create learning environment facilitating the understanding of the problems of cross-cultural communication, as well as development of attitudes of cooperation and sensitivity to cultural differences. The report contains detailed information about organizational matters related to the project, such as: initial arrangements, choice of tasks, scheduling, tools, description of participants, learning outcomes, and evaluation of the project from the perspective of teachers and students and the conclusions for further cooperation.

Keywords: telecollaboration, business studies, cross-cultural communication.

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1. Introduction

Telecollaboration is an engagement of students in online cross-cultural interactions with foreign partners in order to gain mutual educational benefits. The method is broadly used in language learning, but in recent years the idea has evolved in different areas of education as well (O’Dowd, 2018). Virtual exchange is a unique opportunity to let students from different countries and cultures to work together on common problems, which in case of a presented project are business and management. The value of telecollaboration is particularly visible in cooperation between students coming from very distant countries, such as India and Poland, when online collaboration is the simplest way to create a safe environment in which participants can experience cultural differences and can try to cope with them themselves. It requires cross-cultural communication, managing cross-cultural teams, and, in the field of business studies, multidimensional reflection on managerial issues.

2. Project organization

2.1. Objectives

The main goal of the FORE - UEK Telecollaboration 2017 project was to enhance the understanding of managerial problems in modern international business and to develop attitudes of cooperation and sensitivity to cultural differences. Moreover, for Polish students, the goal was to practice English. In general, similarly to other projects, our long-term goal was to prepare students to work in multinational communities (Abruquah, Dosa, & Duda, 2016).

2.2. Participants

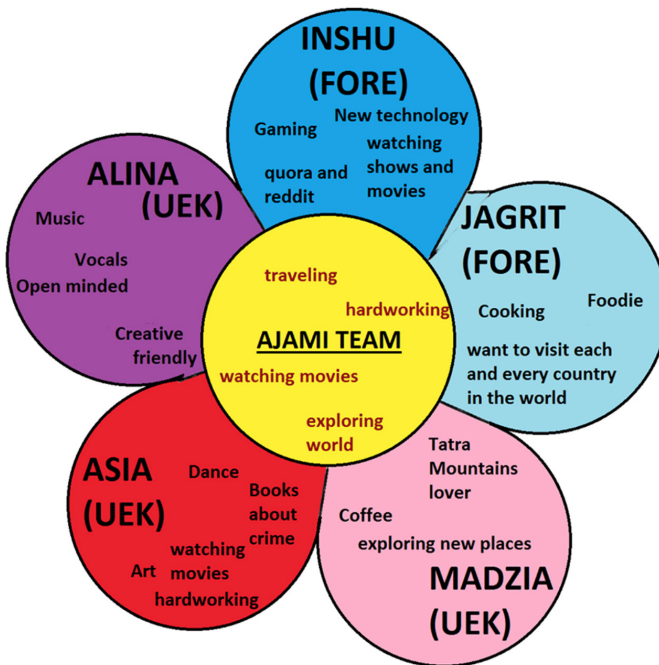
The participants were both undergraduates and postgraduates. In the case of the Polish students, their language levels ranged from A1 to C1. Seventy students of UEK and 64 students of FORE were divided into 24 multicultural teams of five to seven members.

For some students, the participation was mandatory (as a part of the course activity), for some others it was a voluntary project for which they could gain additional points for their final grades.

2.3. Tasks

Task design is important as it initiates cooperation, marks the presence of teachers, and determines group processes (Kurek, 2015). Our telecollaboration was divided into two parts: team building, and a team project on a chosen managerial topic. In the first part, teams were asked to design a team flower illustrating similarities between members (middle part of a flower) and including specific information about each team member in a separate petal (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Example of a team flower (Source: FORE-UEK Telecollaboration 2017, students' work)



During the second part of the telecollaboration, students were asked to discuss and present a poster regarding one of the following topics:

- Global business – a challenge for modern managers. Indian and Polish perspective.
- How to make business in Poland and in India.
- How to be a good manager. Indian and Polish perspective.
- Conflict management – ways of reacting to disagreement. The case of Poland and India.
- ‘Getting lost in translation’ – different communication styles. The case of India and Poland
- Similarities and differences between Polish and Indian tradition.

According to original arrangements, the telecollaboration was supposed to begin on November 25th 2017 and last three weeks: the first part was planned for one week, and the second for two weeks. However, because of an initial delay (due to huge interest among FORE students, official approval by FORE Programme Board was required), exam sessions at FORE, Christmas being celebrated at UEK, and New Year celebrations, the deadline for final submission of the projects was prolonged, and in total the cooperation lasted for seven weeks.

2.4. Tools

The main tool used in the telecollaboration was the Padlet.com platform. It served as a communication tool between teachers and students and it was used for the presentation of team results. Assuming that even the simplest tools, such as email, are enough to design learning activities enabling cooperation between students from different locations (Harris, 1999), students were free to choose tools for their team work at their convenience. According to the survey

conducted after the project, 65% of the respondents declared that their team organized a teleconference for all team members, and over 80% of respondents admitted that their team created a group in one of the communicators (e.g. Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp).

3. Results

In the case of virtual exchange in business studies, two types of results are expected: one related to deepening understanding of managerial problems, and another to the development of communication skills.

Interculturality of the exchange determines a dual approach to managerial issues, based on different values and assumptions embedded in the culture. Students learned how the same problem, such as team leading, entrepreneurship, and global management, may be approached in two different cultures. Such a reflection broadens the understanding of these issues.

Additionally, virtual exchange is also a source of reflection on communication patterns and cross-cultural differences in communication. Given that the role of teachers was limited and teams were self-organizing, it was an opportunity to manage an international team. Eventually, 22 teams managed to accomplish both tasks.

Students' evaluations of the project were positive. Below, some of their opinions on benefits and challenges are presented:

“The most inspiring was collaborating over such long distance and breaking barriers”.

“Thanks to this cooperation, we could meet a new culture, broaden our horizons, and most importantly, gain new great friends. Our chat was not limited only to the task. We sent pictures from our countries and from our universities. We wanted to learn about ourselves as much as possible”.

“The most challenging was to connect in the same time. Everyone have own responsibilities, and it was not always possible to contact at the same time”.

“The most difficult step was the first step. As soon as we started the group chat, a thread of understanding was established between us”.

The general observation is that students were more focused on cross-cultural communication than on business issues. Whereas for some students the telecollaboration project was great fun and they kept exchanging pictures and news after it had been finished, for others it was a source of great frustration, as they faced problems with organizing team work. The most common constraints were: time difference, time perception and other cultural differences, age difference, and unequal contribution to the group work.

4. Conclusions

Nowadays, when business and management students must be ready to work in international environments, virtual exchange is a wonderful experience enabling students to identify their strengths and areas of competences that should be improved. Telecollaboration in business studies not only facilitates the discussion on particular managerial problems, but also helps to develop skills such as team management, team communication, presentation, and team problem solving.

The main achieved outcome is deeper understanding of cross-cultural communication. Moreover, according to the results of the survey, the majority of respondents were very glad with their team work results and new experience. Overall evaluation of the project and the benefits for students and teachers lead to a conclusion that the project was worth the effort.

As for the organization of virtual exchange, future projects should last longer than the initially planned three weeks. Especially the first phase of team building must be extended. Moreover, given that some teams had problems with self-

organization, the activities should be more structured (e.g. plan of the first meeting, tools).

Our project also brings insights into the role of a teacher in telecollaboration. Even though we decided to limit our interventions, we kept modeling behaviors by posting our opinions, commenting students' work, and taking part in the discussion. However, according to our observations, some students require more interference from a teacher.

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