

Friendship and relationships in virtual and intercultural learning: Internationalising the business curriculum

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Graduates need to be prepared for working in global organisations that increasingly rely on virtual, culturally diverse teams. This paper reports on a qualitative research study concerned with the perceptions of university business students who collaborated on a virtual and international project to learn about intercultural communication. The findings indicated that participants capitalised on the opportunity the project presented to find friends and to negotiate and deepen relationships. In addition, the analysis revealed that social interaction also characterised and influenced the learning experience itself and had implications for engagement. The paper concludes that the subjectivities of social interaction are powerfully embedded in the learning process and may play a part

in engagement. Second, the project was perceived as a valuable way of preparing students for workplaces where developing intercultural communication skills and online, culturally diverse team relationships are required.

Keywords: *Internationalisation, friendships and relationships, higher education, business education, social nexus, virtual communication*

Contextualising the project

Evidence suggests that studies in intercultural communication have gained greater focus given the ethical, economic and demographic implications of globalisation (Eblen, Mills & Britton 2004: 28). It is within this broad context that this paper is presented since it shares the findings of a research study about an intercultural, online learning project involving students enrolled in an Australian university.

The rationale for the project was multi-faceted. First, Australian students were enrolled in a first year business communication course and the decision to incorporate the project at that time responded to evidence that positive and early experiences of learning in culturally mixed groups would influence student willingness to engage in culturally mixed university group work later in their academic careers (Summers & Volet 2008: 368). Second, virtual groups working on shared goals across cultures, space, time and organisations (Kirkman et al. 2002: 67–77) have a key role in the successful performance of contemporary organisations as well as in university learning. The findings of a number of studies that multicultural groups have the potential to perform better than homogenous ones further supports the value of universities developing students with the skills and understandings to work in this way (Summers & Volet 2008: 358). Given that social and cultural conflicts often give rise to project

failure rather than technology in online contexts, reflection upon the apparent impact of these influences is important in preparing business graduates (Chang 2006: 372, Cho & Lee 2008: 548).

Preparing graduates for culturally diverse workplaces is one of the major goals of internationalisation (Eblen, Mills & Britton 2004: 28, Volet & Ang 1998: 5) and it is of interest to note that recent cycle two reports from the Australian Universities Quality Agency suggest that the issue of social and cultural inclusivity in some universities between domestic and international students is a matter attracting some attention (AUQA 2010), though Jiang (2008: 351) has suggested that the social and cultural rationales for internationalisation seem to have taken a back seat to political and economic drivers.

Designing the teaching and learning necessary to accommodate the needs for the internationalisation of business, where managers are increasingly leading culturally and geographically diverse virtual groups, is not a simple task (Blasco 2009: 174, Sidle 2009: 19). The process is not made easier by the apparent paucity of empirical research studies that examine the influence of intercultural and social factors in computer-mediated collaboration (Cho & Lee 2008: 549) and the limited studies exploring ways that computer technology can be used within intercultural communication pedagogy (Eblen, Mills & Britton 2004: 28).

A wiki site was constructed where participants in both 'local' (physically located in Australia) and 'international' (physically located in either Australia or the Netherlands) groups could communicate. As a 'participatory social networking software', wiki enabled groups to co-construct knowledge by editing text in online documents (Caverly & Ward 2008: 36). Our study aimed to discover more about how online learning is experienced from the perspective of students, a topic that has reportedly been neglected despite two decades of ongoing research into computer mediated communication and

learning in universities (Ellis, Ginns & Piggot 2009: 303). Ramsden (2003) too, has also more generally expressed concern that student perspectives have been subjugated in educational literature.

Finally, another rationale for the project was to intensify student engagement by taking an experiential approach to the learning and encouraging students to consider the implications of intercultural communication theory for the case study and also their own cultural perspectives, experiences, knowledge and backgrounds in ways that legitimised those things they already 'knew'. In this respect, the project resembled some of the characteristics of Chang's 'wisdom bank', a concept that respectfully acknowledged personal cultural heritage and experiences amongst students in ways that encouraged active learning and motivated students to learn about cultures other than their own (Chang 2006: 372). However, Chang's assumption that the inherent cultural diversity of classrooms in contemporary universities makes any efforts to engineer learning about cultural diversity redundant, would seem to be somewhat optimistic. As Volet and Ang (1998: 20–21) have indicated, intercultural learning between local and international students requires 'careful planning and monitoring' and would not occur spontaneously in the classroom, but rather need to be embedded as part of a focused approach to internationalisation in higher education at the institutional level.

In bringing personal knowledge, experiences and perspectives to the learning, Chang argues that the experience becomes internalised in ways that dig deep into individual conceptions of identity (Chang 2006: 375–376). These personal and social forms of engaged learning thus provide an authentic and meaningful climate where relationships and friendship are not simply a positive but unplanned outcome. They are, in fact, an inherent part of the learning experience and a rationale for engaging in it from the student's perspective.

Intercultural learning and student relationships

Research concerned with subjective and social aspects of learning in higher education appears to have attracted greater attention within the last decade (Montgomery & McDowell 2009: 455, Summers & Volet 2008, Volet & Ang 1998, Volet & Wosnitza 2004). Researchers are exploring the ways in which emotions (Cartney & Rouse 2006, Crossman 2007, Huyton 2009, McQueen & Webber 2009: 244), spirituality (Crossman 2008, Tisdell 2001) and friendships and relationships (Gareis 2000, Zhou et al. 2008: 63) play a part in learning and assessment. More specifically, the expansion of international education has also given rise to discussion about how some of these subjective, psychological and socio-cultural issues relate to the learning experiences of international students in culturally diverse university contexts (see Chang 2006, Sawir et al. 2008, Zhou et al. 2008: 63). Earlier studies such as those by Bochner, McLeod and Lin (1977) in Hawaii and Furnham and Alibhai (1985) in the UK were concerned with exploring how cultural profiles influenced choices about friendships and relationships. More recently, the Cho and Lee (2008) study, concerned with collaboration in virtual groups involving an American and two Singaporean universities using social network analysis, also concluded that social factors were important elements in the learning process.

In addition, there is evidence to suggest that despite the best intentions of those involved in the intensification of internationalisation in our universities, loneliness and isolation are too often the hallmarks of a 'relational deficit' experienced by international students (Sawir et al. 2008: 148–149). These findings may be connected to Australian research conducted over the last decade that reports a 'disturbing' lack of meaningful interaction between local and international university students (e.g. Summers & Volet 2008: 357, Volet & Ang 1998: 5). Similarly, in the UK it would seem that studies from the mid-eighties have indicated that

few international students could lay claim to enjoying friendships with their British peers (Furnham & Alibhai 1985). Such a state of affairs, particularly in the first year of university, presents a particular challenge for international students experiencing cultural transition and separation from their families while at the same time seeking to establish supportive relationships as well as a sense of their own identity (Cartney & Rouse 2006: 84). The need for research to guide universities in decision-making about social as well as educational objectives associated with internationalisation and multicultural groups has clearly been identified (Summers & Volet 2008: 357, Volet & Ang 1998: 6).

If indeed cultural and social diversity give rise to conflict (Foldy, Rivard & Buckley 2009: 28) and ‘militate against integration’ (Cartney & Rouse 2006: 79) in ways that could lead to feelings of isolation, then planning for learning in culturally diverse classrooms represents something of a challenge. Although the need to develop close personal relationships amongst students apparently varies from culture to culture, the creation of ‘friendly classrooms’ would seem to be an obvious starting point for nurturing friendship and meaningful personal relationships (Sawir et al. 2008: 154–170).

The university classroom needs to be a place where varied perspectives are welcome and where personal, racial identity not only holds no risk but is also not downplayed as a cherished and central part of who individuals are (Foldy, Rivard & Buckley 2009: 26–36). Without the fostering of appropriate meta-skills, reflection and the challenging of existing cultural assumptions, many students may well feel anything but secure compared with those who are members of homogenous groups (Foldy, Rivard & Buckley 2009: 36). In addition, the literature suggests the value of linking assessment to learning about culture by capitalising on student diversity (Summers & Volet 2008: 358) and this advice was indeed incorporated into our own project.

Within an organisational context, a number of studies have considered the development of relationships and friendships in computer-mediated, group contexts (e.g. Irmer, Chang & Bordia 2000, Kayworth & Leidner 2001: 7, Stefanone & Gay 2008, Yoo & Alavi 2001: 371). It now seems clear that strong interpersonal relationships can develop in computer-mediated environments as they are in face-to-face settings (Kahai & Cooper 2003: 263, Whitty & Gavin 2001: 623), and the same assumptions might be made with regard to online learning contexts in university business and management programs.

Wikis may provide one way to respond to the need for social interaction and inclusion among university students. Generation Y students born after about 1980 are apparently well-disposed to identify with this form of technology that represents a departure from transmissive learning contexts and has the potential to be conducive to engaging, inclusive and collaborative environments that involve social interaction (Johnston, Duff & Quinn 2009: 27–28, Workman 2008: 23). However, despite the undoubted potential for enhancing internationalisation via online learning, few studies appear to have explored the area in any depth. Noted exceptions include Volet and Wosnitza's (2004) work involving German and Australian students and Gareis' (2000) qualitative case study research focusing on cultural and linguistic variations in how individuals interpret friendship among German international students studying in the USA. Unfortunately, Gareis' (2000) literature review on intercultural student friendships largely relies on sources published between the 1950s and 1980s and may as a result fail to capture the changing landscape of university life, especially in business programs. More generally, the intensification of globalisation since that period will almost certainly have altered how much exposure university students from varied cultures have to one another, how they interact and the understandings individuals bring to those intercultural relationships.

Methodology

The broad aim of this rich, qualitative, interpretive research study was to discover how students as participants experienced an online, experiential form of learning concerned with intercultural communication. Grounded theory, first conceived in the 1967 seminal text, *The discovery of grounded theory* by Glaser and Strauss and now arguably the ‘most commonly used qualitative research method’ (Morse 2008: 13), was selected as an appropriate method to achieve the research aim. Grounded theory was chosen since it enables the researcher to probe the intentions and responses of participants in relation to the circumstances presented by the online, intercultural project and explore the meanings they brings to that experience (Glesne & Peshkin 1992). In other words, grounded theory has the capacity to explore the ‘behaviours, emotions and feelings’ of participants, as well as the ‘social moments and cultural phenomena’ (Strauss & Corbin 1998: 10). A constructionist perspective on grounded theory was adopted in this study. Simply put, constructionist grounded theorists posit that concepts and theories are constructed by participants and researchers rather than emerging from the data that is construed as some sort of objective truth waiting to be discovered (Cassell et al. 2009: 516, Charmaz 2008b: 401).

As is common in grounded theory, purposive sampling was chosen because the setting, the participants, events and purposes of the research were aligned with the key areas of interest in the study (Johnson & Christensen 2000, Punch 2000). Specifically, we as researchers were interested in the perceptions of students enrolled in an undergraduate, business communication course in an Australian university. Students who participated were organised into study groups as part of an intercultural online learning project that involved collaborating on the analysis of a case study. Although the case study was a required assessment for all students on the course, participating

in the online, collaborative learning project and the research study was entirely voluntary.

While students from a university in the Netherlands also participated in the online project, the data discussed in this paper were gathered from students enrolled in the Australian university only. A total of 27 students in Australia participated in the project. Participating students were divided into two study groups. Group 1, referred to in this paper as the 'international group' (n=19), collaborated online with students from the Netherlands. Group 2, referred to in this paper as the 'local' group (n=8), comprised culturally diverse individuals who were either Australian citizens or international students from Botswana, China, Korea, India, Malaysia and Singapore. The rationale for splitting the two groups was that some 'local' students expressed an interest in the project too late to be included in the 'international' group but nevertheless saw the value of intercultural collaboration among culturally diverse students in the university. They also had the additional opportunity to arrange face-to-face interaction if they wished.

Both the 'local' and the 'international' groups collaborated on the case study about intercultural communication between an Australian franchisor and two franchisees based in the Netherlands and Hong Kong respectively. The case study required students to interpret and critically apply intercultural communication research to the practical context of the case study, but they were also encouraged to draw upon their own cultural and heritage experience in discussing the case study online with other students. Participants were provided with ongoing information and support by a research assistant with regard to the research process, the intercultural case study project and the technological features of the wiki.

The ethical management of the research was approved by the appropriate university committee. Students were alerted to the fact that participation was entirely voluntary and that if they decided

not to be involved in the research study there would be no negative implications in terms of their course grades. Since the researchers were also co-ordinators in the course in which the project was embedded and would have a role in student assessment, a research assistant collected the data and coordinated the research study. The researchers did not receive the data until after the final grades for the course had been released as a further protection against any bias intruding on the assessment process. Participating students were made aware of this feature in the design of the research.

Data were collected from questionnaires and interviews. Open-ended, longitudinal questionnaires were administered at three points; the beginning, middle and end of the online, collaborative project. Open-ended questionnaires were used because in keeping with an interpretive tradition, they were more likely to reflect participant views rather than being unduly influenced by the researcher (Foddy 1999). Anonymity was preserved by using a six-digit, participant-generated code. The primary objective of questionnaires 1 and 2 was to ascertain what participants expected to gain from their involvement in the project, their rationale for participating and what they expected to achieve by the end of it. Questionnaire 3 explored the online intercultural learning experience from the participant's perspective and how the project influenced their understanding of intercultural communication.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of the project in order to provide participants a further opportunity to express their thoughts about the project that had not otherwise been captured in the survey questions. Some sample questions are detailed below. The question asking about how the group interacted was not initially included but, consistent with theoretical sampling in grounded theory (Suddaby 2006), was added when analysis of initial data suggested that interpersonal relationships were an important aspect of the experience.

- Please describe your experience of the project.
- Please give a brief account of how you think the members of the groups worked together to learn in preparation for the assessment.
- Please give a brief account of how you think the members of the group interacted interpersonally.
- What do you believe challenged communication in the groups and what worked well?
- Please indicate how relevant the project has been in terms of preparing you for the workplace.
- Please suggest any ways in which you feel the project could be improved.

Constant comparative analysis, as a grounded theory technique, was used to analyse the data and occurred simultaneously with data collection. Data were initially open coded by comparing *units of meaning* (expressed or couched in sentences, phrases or paragraphs, for example) as new information was received. The process was one of continual refinement where categories were merged or dismantled as new categories (or themes) were generated and different relationships discovered (Maykut & Morehouse 1994). As this process continued, core categories were identified that seemed to resonate deeply with the data in defining ways. These core categories form the basis of subheadings in the discussion of findings section that follows and give rise to the theory that social relationships are powerfully embedded in virtual and intercultural collaborative projects in management learning.

Discussion of findings

Analysis of data collected from both the questionnaires and interviews as well as from the 'local' and 'international' participant groups has been presented collectively given a high level of consistency in the findings across these data sources. In vivo data have been used to

illustrate findings in order to keep the concerns of the participants to the fore and attract greater confidence in the findings themselves (Strauss & Corbin 1994).

In summary, participants perceived the need to create a friendly atmosphere that would facilitate learning. Doing so was not always easy, as responses indicated that attaining a level and manner of friendliness that was culturally appropriate appeared to be largely a matter of trial and error. Most participants stated their rationale for joining the project was to get more experience with intercultural communication. However, limited experience of intercultural communication may have given rise to a tendency to stereotype in some cases. Participants also expressed frustration when others did not seem to be participating in a committed fashion and developed strategies for stimulating engagement among team members. Thus, the key findings of the study were that participating students capitalised upon the opportunity the project presented to find friends and to negotiate and deepen relationships. Also, the analysis revealed that social interaction also characterised the learning experience itself and had implications for engagement.

Friendships and relationships are an important aspect of learning

Data analysed from both local and international groups suggested that making 'new', 'more' or 'different' friends and 'getting to know each other' was central to rationales for participation in the project. In other words, learning was perceived as being socially constituted.

Fledgling learning relationships and friendships, however, were not entirely perceived as authentic experiences. For example, when one student commented, 'She is very nice, like friends', there is the implication that being *like* a friend is not quite the same thing as *actually* being a friend. Given the contexts in which associations and distinctions were made, friendship appeared to be viewed as a state of arrival and *friendliness* and being *friendly* as pleasant, indicative of

friendship and indeed simulating friendship but not quite friendship itself.

Certainly, if participants did not make deep friendships, *friendliness* was nevertheless important and determined decision-making about how people would proceed in their social networks online. References to an individual being friendly or not, often preceded accounts and rationales for pursuing some relationships and withdrawing from others. One participant commented, 'I didn't really like X; she was not really friendly at all. So I contacted one friendly person ...'. Thus, individuals were considered expendable and could be easily abandoned for others who were perceived as 'nice' or 'friendly' team members even in terms of the emoticons they used.

Friendliness was also a way of operating with those who were yet unknown, to overcome initial uncertainties in emerging relationships and cultivate a climate where individuals could feel comfortable. The literature suggests that intercultural friendships and relationships are more difficult to initiate than mono-cultural ones (Gareis 2000: 72) and certainly much care and sensitivity in cultivating these relationships was evident. For example, one participant felt that she 'always' had 'to be friendly' so that people would feel 'easy as much as possible'. Such care was also evident in crafting email messages to avoid potential 'misunderstandings', 'confusion' or appearing inadvertently 'rude'. It has been argued that good interpersonal skills in virtual teams are at least as important as they are on a face-to-face basis (Kirkman et al. 2002: 69, 74) and analysis of data in this study would appear to be supportive.

Developing an appropriate genre for collaborative communication in learning and establishing levels of friendliness with those who are largely unknown was not always easy for participants. One participant, for example, discovered that she had annoyed group members by sending emails that were 'very friendly', using greetings such as 'hey baby' and finding that her 'more open communication'

and non 'work-oriented style' seemed to give rise rather more to irritability than intimacy amongst project members. Gauging how friendly to be was difficult in other ways, as one participant in the local project implied, '... when I organised the meeting with X on Friday initially, I wanted to tell her to meet each other at my home. But I was embarrassed because I didn't know how she would react to me'. This particular description can be understood better when informed by research findings that an invitation to a student's home will be associated with varied assumptions about the implications for developing intimacy, depending on the culture of those extending or receiving such invitations (Gareis 2000: 71).

Formality in communication was associated with the need 'to get something done' and being task-orientated and informality with developing friendship and 'soft' skills. Distinctions between formality and informality were evident in decision-making about whether to conduct the communication using a university or a personal email address, for example, or gauging whether it was appropriate to use MSN, considered a more intimate way of communicating. Noting that one of the participants from the Netherlands did not give her an MSN address, one participant commented, 'I never pushed it, she only communicate[d] with me through e-mail. I never push[ed] it, as long as she communicate[d] with me'. Relationships conducted online in the project that subsequently led to face-to-face meetings involved some adjustments being made to initial impressions. Someone who seemed 'organised' and 'goal-directed' online appeared more dependent face-to-face. Thus interpersonal relationships required constant re-adjustment as switching channels of communication allowed for additional perspectives of an individual's identity to come to the fore.

Consistent with other research findings, humour was associated in the data with social, cultural and emotional connectedness in the learning (Garrison, Anderson & Archer 2000: 100, Volet & Ang 1998: 10). As

a strategy, humour was used in cultivating a climate of informality in order to promote closer relationships and collaboration. One participant wrote, 'I tried to use humour a lot ...That's ... how we got to talk'. The remark, 'She can joke', was clearly positive in the context of describing a student from the Netherlands and the relationship enjoyed between them. Humour was also adopted as a strategy for repairing relationships under some strain, for example, 'She was upset with me. I said, "[Y]ou can slap me!". After that, she was happy to help me'.

Clearly, finding ways to become more experienced intercultural communicators and developing friendships in the process was attractive to many, and may suggest that not all participant needs were met in this regard, as international students in Australia. Certainly, one international student, alluding to her face-to-face tutorials in Australia, commented somewhat wistfully, 'I didn't know other people, I would love to' and another reflected that she communicated largely with Asian international students rather than 'Australians'.

Although 'local' groups had an opportunity to meet face to face whereas 'international' groups did not, few local participants appeared to take advantage of the fact. This finding is particularly curious given that face-to-face communication was viewed positively by participants as a 'secure' means of communication that had implications for developing trust and intimacy, whereas Internet was perceived by some as 'very scary'. One female participant commented, '[y]ou never know what happens. It might be different when you actually meet the person who you contact over the Internet'. In face-to-face situations, one participant declared he 'would be more friendly' and take relationships 'to the next level', because he felt more secure than when he interacted with others using the Internet.

However, while some were more cautious in terms of developing online relationships, others viewed the medium as liberating,

describing themselves as ‘more talkative’ and ‘more friendly’, where they felt ‘more free to talk’. Correspondingly, face-to-face meetings did not result in automatic trust, as is made clear in the statement, ‘she didn’t realise that I don’t want to tell everything that I have done to her. She expected to write everything at the meeting ... but she can’t do that’. In other words, trust building was also associated with a fair trade of information and effort.

Intercultural communication

‘Meeting’, ‘making’, ‘interacting’, ‘studying with’ ‘new friends from different countries’ and ‘cultures’ ‘around the world’ in order to know more about those cultures was a common rationale. This desire was particularly important for some international students in cases where few opportunities existed in their homeland to interact with people from cultures other than their own. The taken-for-grantedness of multicultural Australia and other countries, where there is at least the *potential* for forming interpersonal and intercultural relationships may mean that academics overlook the unfamiliarity of culturally diverse learning groups for some individuals.

In the process of identifying the influence of culture on communication, there was a tendency for stereotyping to occur. According to Eblen, Mills and Britton (2004: 29), the literature suggests that stereotyping may be more common in computer-mediated communication than in face-to-face situations because these kinds of messages are shorter and provide less interpersonal information, resulting in the importance of any information received becoming inflated. Dutch project participants were cast as ‘strict’, ‘efficient’, ‘organised’, ‘goal-orientated’, ‘very driven’, ‘strong willed’, ‘hard workers’ who were ‘more interested in getting the job done ... than making friends’. They were perceived as people who wanted ‘to finish everything on time’, approach things ‘step by step’ and provide ‘instruction’ on tasks.

Participants commented that their peers in the Netherlands did not 'communicate personal backgrounds'. One student in Australia noted, 'We didn't really talk about personal thing[s]. [We] talked about the project'. These observations and others like them appeared to indicate a participant perception that students from the Netherlands tended to be *goal-focused* rather than *friendship-focused*. A study by Eblen, Mills and Britton (2004: 43), concerned with online intercultural learning between students in the US and New Zealand, suggested that personal relationships tended to be developed following communication about the task in hand. It is possible that the students in our study, many of whom were international Asian students in Australia, would have expected the development of personal relationships to precede discussions about the task, given the emphasis upon relationship building in that region.

Participants also conceptualised behaviour in terms of politeness and rudeness. Despite some references to students from the Netherlands being 'more polite', 'positive', 'fantastic' and 'quite nice people', for example, tensions clearly arose from intercultural and interpersonal communication. One Asian student in the Australian group remarked that in:

'Asian culture' people have 'to be polite' to one another. We don't get used to it [Western culture]. Asian students have to learn about this. However, I strongly recommend, Asian students should keep our traditional culture, being polite.

One participant struggled with assumptions about frankness and rudeness, and sought help from a tutor in order to make sense of the experience. Despite efforts to explore ethnocentric assumptions, the participant remained somewhat affronted:

She said, 'If you don't help me, you can leave the group'. I was taken aback a bit. She was very frank ... My tutor told me today, 'People in The Netherlands are more frank and straightforward. You should not be offended. That's just culture'.

Thus, as Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001) argued, while effective management of cultural conflict can promote growth within individuals and in their relationships with others, mismanaged expectations can lead to biased intergroup perceptions, emotional frustrations and ethnocentrism where the ways in which an in-group do things is considered superior and the ways in which an out-group conduct their affairs is considered backward.

Participation on the project also gave rise to other painful and sensitive memories in forming intercultural relationships that involved feelings about identity, assimilation, intense and repressed emotions, racism, and again, politeness and rudeness:

You need to be same or similar with Australian people. When I went to the high school, I tried to learn more about different things. Although they [Australian students] are rude, they didn't mean that. Don't be sensitive [she thought to herself]. Initially, I thought, 'they don't like Asians' ... it is just a remark, let it go. They tend to think that Asian students can't speak English. They made negative remarks. Just walk away [she thought to herself]. Otherwise, you will be very angry'.

There was a clear indication in the data that students learned to value the varied perspectives that intercultural communication in teams could offer in the learning experience. Participants frequently expressed appreciation in learning to 'understand differences and ... to accept [other] views people [held] in this project' or 'gaining a better understanding of the issues in the report through [other] perspectives', and becoming aware of how 'different opinions' helped with the 'experience'. One participant commented, 'people looked at it with different perspectives and that is how this project has assisted me'. Another found that 'other people have curiosities ... other students have different experiences, insights and opinions than I do'. Thus, these learning relationships facilitated a *looking out and looking inwards* in a meaning-making process of constructing

understandings about intercultural communication and the interpersonal implications.

Issues concerned with engagement

The data yielded many positive references to the high level of support participants received from both peers and academic staff. However, in pursuing negative cases, some evidence revealed incidences of poor engagement in the project that had consequences for developing relationships, friendships and, indeed, ultimately learning.

A persistent scenario would be where an individual initiated communication online and received no response, which gave rise to feelings of 'frustration', 'disappointment' and 'confusion' about apparent lack of commitment. One participant commented, 'I don't really understand. People wanted to do this project at the beginning, signing on ... After that, they didn't want to participate'. Despondency and irritation intensified when individuals failed to meet workload expectations or where there were mismatches in the degree of social interaction sought—a finding discussed elsewhere in the literature (see Kirkman et al. 2002: 73). Eblen, Mills and Britton (2004) have also indicated that, when students delay in responding to emails, in an online intercultural project the result is discouragement and setbacks in motivation that placed the project at risk.

Participants on the project adopted various strategies to encourage engagement among other team members and the formation of relationships. Such strategies included persistence, personalisation, threats and switching communication channels. Personalisation would be achieved by sending individual emails to group members and a threat might come, for example, in the form of seeking changes in group membership (in other words, expulsion of a group member). Threats of this nature could prove effective. One participant responded by apologising and adding, 'I am enjoying this and I am back'. Finally, participants switched communication channels from

the wiki to email, for example, although participants noted that email made it 'easy not to respond', since individuals could simply delete messages if they were 'too hard to reply'.

Participants conjectured that some individuals at least 'didn't care' about ignoring emails because only face to face made the relationship 'real' and therefore email-based relationships would not attract the same level of commitment. Illustrative data included:

If we see each other, people don't want to be impolite ... they will care about that person.

I don't feel [any] connection ... [to] send email. If I met one person even just once, I would have more sense of my responsibility ethically and relatively to that person. Although I am very busy, I would think about that.

Thus, when a person becomes 'real' as opposed to merely virtual (and by extension, hypothetical), expectations, obligations and commitments inherent in those relationships become more pressing. Research indicating that it is vital for individuals to project themselves as 'real people' and to establish a social presence online (see Garrison, Anderson & Archer 2000: 89) would appear to be consistent with this analysis.

Some participants felt they 'didn't have enough time to get to know each other' much beyond the superficialities of introductions until the very end of the project, when assessment was imminent and they began to give it greater attention among competing assessment responsibilities. Given studies finding that developing deeper cultural understandings are less likely when students have not had a chance to develop their relationships (Volet & Ang 1998: 10), and that students working in culturally mixed groups need longer periods of time to overcome initial social challenges and develop positive feelings about the interaction and learning (Summers & Volet 2008: 359), encouraging engagement and interaction from the beginning of a project like this is crucial.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the importance of the potential for friendship in attracting students to intercultural learning projects. Although *friendliness* was more often perceived as an adequate substitute for friendship itself, expressing friendliness in appropriate ways interculturally presented something of a challenge and was influenced by whether a participant was perceived as more task/goal-focused or relationship-focused. On occasions, such cultural orientations could give rise to some level of conflict when perceived breaches of 'polite' behaviour occurred based on ethnocentric evaluations. Some participants attempted to manage the poor engagement of team members by adopting particular strategies, including threats. Online communication may have compounded both engagement in the learning as well as the development of friendships in that a party may be perceived as less 'real', more virtual and thus, ultimately, hypothetical. The successful establishment of both friendship and student engagement was also clearly associated with the time spent on the task, as well as the duration of the project.

The findings of the study, therefore, appear to support the literature suggesting that academics need to attend to emotional and social factors involved in learning as well as to the learning tasks *per se* (Cartney & Rouse 2006: 80–85). That students appear to view some kinds of learning as a means to forge friendships and broaden their social networks suggests that designing these kinds of activities has potential for deepening academic, social and cultural engagement. Providing students with the opportunity to reflect upon the way that culture may impact upon intercultural communication and online group relationships while working on tasks, may also prove to be useful in preparing graduates for working in globalised, culturally diverse workforce contexts. However, while the project design might aspire to preparing graduates to this end, we have no evidence to support such a claim. Further studies involving employed graduates

and employers, for example, could well explore the implications of projects like this one in terms of their perceived impact upon employability and performance in culturally diverse workforces.

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