

REFLECTIONS ON USING CROSS-CULTURAL VIRTUAL TEAMS IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

In Spring 2018, the authors conducted a cross-cultural virtual team experiential exercise with undergraduate students at RIT Rochester, RIT Croatia, and Oakland University. The project was a unique collaboration of tenured, tenure-track, instructor, and adjunct faculty teaching at multiple campuses and online. In this chapter, the six faculty members offer individual reflections about the joys and challenges of facilitating this project, including advice for faculty considering a similar project.

Introduction

Global virtual teams are important and increasingly ubiquitous in business, and the ability to work effectively on virtual and international teams is an important topic in business management education. At the same time, as faculty, we are constantly seeking ways to foster interaction and collaboration among global campuses, both with students and faculty. These two factors converged into an opportunity during the Spring 2018 semester, when six faculty members and 322 students embarked on a team-based, cross-cultural virtual project as part of introductory Organizational Behavior (OB) classes at RIT (Rochester, New York), RIT Croatia (Zagreb, Croatia), and Oakland University (Rochester Hills, Michigan).

After a short introduction of the faculty members and classes, we will provide a brief overview of the project itself, its results, and the lessons we learned about the project. We then offer the unique individual perspectives from all six faculty members and some concluding thoughts. Through this approach, we hope to offer some insight into the exhilarating but sometimes messy world of transnational education at RIT and beyond.

Participating Faculty

Dr. Mike Palanski is an associate professor in the Management Department of the Saunders

College of Business (SCB). During 2017-2018, he was one of three SCB faculty holding the university-sponsored Miller Chair in International Education, which allowed him to provide resources to the project and time to help facilitate it. Mike had collaborated on several similar projects in the past, most recently with Dr. Maja Vidović in Spring 2017 when both faculty members were teaching introductory OB classes at RIT Rochester and RIT Croatia, respectively. Although he did not teach any of the classes in the current project, he served as de facto project manager for the overall project.

Dr. Maja Vidović is a lecturer in International Business at RIT Croatia in Zagreb and a part-time online instructor in International Human Resource Management at the Pennsylvania State University. Maja's several years of teaching at Penn State afforded her a unique perspective on American students. In Spring 2018, Maja taught three sections of OB in Zagreb (114 students), as well as an additional 27 students in an online section of the same class. Maja served a unique role in the project as the only Croatian faculty member, as the only faculty member teaching both in-person and online classes, and as the faculty member with the greatest number of students.

Dr. Michelle Hammond is an assistant professor in Management at Oakland University in Michigan. Prior to Oakland University, Michelle spent nearly ten years as a faculty member at the University of Limerick (Ireland), which afforded her unique insights into transnational education. She and Mike have collaborated closely for many years on both research and teaching, and they conducted a similar project when Michelle was at Limerick. In this project, Michelle taught 77 in-person students in two sections at Oakland University.

Dr. Joy Olabisi is an associate professor in the Management Department of SCB. Joy's teaching and research focus on cross-cultural management and collaborative networks. She grew up in both Nigeria and the United States, and her personal and professional experiences have provided a valuable perspective on collaboration dynamics and challenges. She had collaborated with both Mike and Michelle on prior projects. In this project, Joy taught 39 in-person students in a section in Rochester.

Dr. Jenna Lenhardt is an adjunct faculty member in SCB. Jenna had worked as a recruitment specialist and adjunct professor in management and leadership at SCB until just before the start of this project, at which time she left to pursue a similar position at Virginia Commonwealth University. As an online learner herself (she completed her Ph.D. online from Capella University), she offered virtual collaboration expertise to the project. She taught one online section of 25 students.

Mr. Michael Scrivens an adjunct faculty member in SCB. Over the course of more than a decade, he has taught a wide variety of courses for the college, including Organizational Behavior. He had conducted a smaller, in-class version of the current project several times before. In this project, Michael taught 38 in-person students in a section in Rochester.

Background of the Project

In the fall of 2017, Mike and Maja discussed repeating and expanding the project from the prior spring, and to collect data to assess its efficacy. Michelle soon joined the project, followed shortly by Jenna. All four hoped that additional faculty and students from the University of Limerick might be able to join as well, but this hope did not come to fruition. Mike approached Joy and Michael about joining and promised to provide direction and support in order to minimize the administrative burden on them.

The team of six faculty met several times (virtually, of course) in fall of 2017 in order to plan the project in its entirety. Planning included discussion of project scope (team-based project with individual reflection components), timeline (activities lasted for about three months, with the heart of the project lasting about five weeks), and research components (several surveys and short reflections) designed to address two fundamental questions. First, could this type of project demonstrably increase students' efficacy about working in virtual teams, efficacy about working in a cross-cultural context, and overall enthusiasm for this type of project? This question is important because efficacy is an important and well-established antecedent to continued growth and ultimately performance within a given area. Second, do learning environment (on-campus vs. on-line) and country of instruction, respectively, have an effect on such efficacy and enthusiasm? We asked this question because we often find an assumed equivalence between on-campus and online learning, as well as across RIT's global campuses. However, this assumption is often subject to verification of any sort. The faculty team also obtained Institutional Review Board approval from all universities.

The Project and Its Results

A total of 322 students were placed in 93 teams, with each team consisting of 3-4 students. The target team composition was three members (one from each campus); however, due to an unequal number of students across campuses and sections, the actual breakdown varied. The project consisted of two main phases and multiple deliverables, and the entire project was worth 30% of the overall class grade for all students.

In Phase 1 (10 days), each team was instructed to create a team contract. This assignment was intended to provide an initial "get to know you" experience by fostering required team interaction and to help students think through the overall project and create guidelines for how the team would function. We provided suggested guidelines for effective team contracts, but did not specify its exact form nor the type and amount of interaction needed to create it. In Phase 2 (4 weeks), each team was responsible for identifying a television show, watching it, and analyzing it as a team according to theories and concepts from the class. Each team was then required to complete a paper with an assigned structure. Teams were required to submit a partial paper draft at the halfway point (about two weeks into

Phase 2). This draft required teams to have already selected a show, written an introduction and problem statement, and identified three OB concepts/ theories with which they would analyze the show. Teams had the option to submit a more complete draft for feedback, if they so chose. The final paper, worth 15% of the class grade, was due at the end of Phase 2.

In addition to the team deliverables in Phase 2, each student was required to complete a structured self-reflection paper at the end of each of the 4 weeks of Phase 2 (worth a combined 10% of the final class grade). These short papers were designed to reinforce learning through reflection about the team dynamics (e.g., working virtually across time zones and working cross-culturally), as well as to provide students a way to earn points that was independent of other team members.

Results from the research portion of the project showed some interesting results. First, results showed an increase in self-efficacy about working on virtual teams for on-campus (but not online) students. Second, we found a marginal increase in cross-cultural efficacy among students. Third, we noticed a general increase in enthusiasm about the project. Finally, we found that Croatian-based students tended to have higher overall levels of efficacy and enthusiasm than U.S.-based students. These findings showed that our approach to a virtual cross-cultural learning experience has a demonstrable impact on study efficacy and enthusiasm, but that we also have room for improvement with respect to how we go about facilitating the project. For instance, in future iterations we plan to require more student interaction with a specific focus on cultural learning. Complete study findings and a more detailed description of the project (including project materials) may be obtained from the lead author.

Common Faculty Reflections

Across the faculty team, there were a variety of themes that motivated and inspired the collaboration on this global virtual team project. This section will outline and reflect the individual and shared vision of each faculty in the group. There are a variety of personal and professional motivations that drove collaborative engagement for the faculty involved. Identifying these motivations and connecting with fellow faculty who share a common vision and mission is a key first step for a successful project. A common theme for the faculty engaged with this project was a shared passion for continued integration of globalization concepts and experiences into the management classroom setting.

Globalization in Education Matters, Particularly in Management Education

An increasingly globalized business environment requires a commitment to the integration of cultural competency in coursework that is aimed at teaching successful management skills. Each professor saw a need to do this project at this time, based on calls in both

professional and academic literature, as well as through personal experience both learning and teaching internationally.

Maja Vidović. “Being a professor for an International Business program, offered in Europe at one of the global campuses of a US-based college, and working with students that come from literally all parts of the world, I highly *value global diversity and connectivity*. Education today focuses on *hands-on experience* and developing students’ skills, rather than merely providing knowledge. There is much talk about critical thinking, and the exact skills the students should develop. Yet, in order to provide such a learning experience for students, professors as well need to “think outside of the box” when it comes to a teaching approach.”

Michelle Hammond. “I have personally experienced the benefits of working cross-culturally. I studied abroad when I was in college and worked in Europe for nearly a decade, both of which were such valuable developmental experiences for me. Many students do not take advantage of the study-abroad program at my university because they are working full-time or for other reasons. Given the importance of developing a global mindset and being able to collaborate virtually, I thought this was an ideal project to *give students exposure to both without having to leave home*. To be honest, I didn’t know very much about Croatia prior to starting the project, so I enjoyed learning more about the culture and working with an awesome faculty member!”

Michael Scrivens. “I was interested in the design of this course because international companies find it challenging going global. One of these challenges is communications. Based on my experience as a professor teaching management and marketing courses, *communication is an important aspect in going global*. Cultural and social differences vary from country to country. I thought it was important to be part of a course with one of its focuses on international teams.”

Jenna Lenhardt. “Coming from a culturally diverse family and having studied abroad in my undergraduate career, I understand *the importance of global engagement* and awareness as a leader. This project offered me an opportunity to combine my passion for global education, online learning, and building teamwork and leadership competency skill sets.”

Teach by Doing: Application is Key to Learning in Management

All faculty members value global education integration in the classroom that is focused on being applied and hands-on.

As faculty with practical and professional experience, there was a shared commitment to ensuring application and hands-on experience as the project was developed. One of the most rewarding aspects of the project was to see “aha!” moments with students as they connected learning from the project to other aspects of the class, and to learn about students utilizing the project as a key experience during interviews for internships.

Michelle Hammond. “I was also attracted to this project as it ran through most of the semester and I could see how it could *draw a number of topics from the course (OB) in a very hands-on way*. I thought the project could help to tie seemingly disconnected ideas together within the context of one integrated and experience-based project. Rather than my own examples of the various theories and constructs, *students themselves could share their lived experiences*, successes, ideas, and frustrations. In addition to some benefits of cross-cultural exposure, experience collaborating virtually, and being able to tie course material within one project, other benefits emerged throughout the project for the students and me personally. I got feedback that one student did successfully bring the experience into a summer internship interview. I learned a lot myself during this project. I really enjoyed the experience overall. I found the benefit for the students to be the most rewarding aspect.”

Joy Olabisi. “What has been especially rewarding is seeing how much students underestimated what they would get out of this project. Many students had experienced working in numerous teams and seemed to approach this project with a similar mindset as their prior team occurrences. Hearing students navigate through the cultural and virtual challenges was a process I was glad they experienced. Some of my students also mentioned that they *highlighted this very project experience in work or leadership positions* that they were interviewing for during the duration of the project. They seemed to appreciate the cultural exposure that the project provided.”

Michael Scrivens. “I found that many of my students *pushed back on working in international teams*. There were a few reasons; time differences, expectations on the deliverables, and the virtual aspect of the team when many students felt more comfortable with face-to-face. Communicating by email proved harder for some students and building timely communication expectations was a main area of stress for many teams. I expressed the importance of learning how to communicate with team members from another country, or for that matter, another part of our country. Several teams still were not completely comfortable with this working environment.”

When the Faculty Become the Students

The need for applied projects that mimic real-world problems is essential to building needed skill sets for future leaders. As life-long learners, the faculty also continued to learn effective teamwork skills through this project along with our students. The lived experiences of our virtual international faculty team mimicked the experience of our student teams. Through our own collaborative challenges, we were simultaneously going through a similar experience that was valuable when supporting the student challenges throughout the project.

Mike Palanski. “This project was a terrific example of experiential learning for the students. In retrospect, however, I realize we missed a big opportunity to enhance the experiential

learning component. As Jenna notes “the struggles, benefits and learning outcomes our students experienced in this class were similar to our instructor experience.” Our collaboration as *faculty mirrored the challenges and triumphs that the students faced in the same project*. It would have been risky, but I wish we would have “pulled back the curtain” and given the students more insight about how we as the faculty team functioned. I think it would have been instructive and perhaps encouraging to show students that we, too, struggled at times.”

Michelle Hammond. “We experienced a lot of the *same challenges as the students – time zones, technological issues, communication, etc.* My biggest lesson was to make sure we were all on the same page as faculty members and to be very specific in our communications of expectations of the project and handling student questions. I thought the project would have a bigger impact in building the students cross-cultural competence. Mid-way through the project we were discussing culture and I asked the students what they have learned about Croatia. Very few students had even bothered to ask any questions or learn anything about those they were working with in Croatia. It made me realize that we really *needed to make the cross-cultural piece more prominent.*”

Use Your Network - Collaboration Magnifies Success

This project was a perfect example of how faculty can maximize their faculty network to improve their teaching and research opportunities. The benefit to students was complemented by the benefits to the faculty and the field of management education. As faculty, we are tasked with a variety of teaching, service and research expectations. This project allowed the faculty to engage with other faculty with common values in these professional areas. Thus, a side benefit of the project was to show students how developing and leveraging a personal network of colleagues is important in one’s career, and how overlapping goals can coalesce into a shared project.

Mike Palanski. “My initial interest in the project originated from a number of sources. First, I was involved in similar projects several times in the past, including projects with Michelle, Maja, and Joy. Those projects usually involved just 2-3 faculty members and their classes, and I was intrigued to see if this type of project could work on a much larger scope. Second, as a co-holder of the Miller Chair for International Education, I wanted to conduct a cross-cultural project in order to encourage others to do similar things. We have a vibrant network of global campuses at RIT, but the student-level collaboration among campuses is an underutilized opportunity. I wanted to show a way that faculty in any discipline could partner with one another to provide a meaningful experience for their students and do so with limited resources. Finally, and perhaps somewhat selfishly, I wanted to do a project with my friends. This is one of the best parts of being an academic. Where else can you work on a creative project with good friends, while producing knowledge that will help others,

and while potentially changing the course of students' careers (or maybe even lives!)?”

Michelle Hammond. “I would like to say that I crafted this project in line with the *strategic goals of the university*. Truth be told, it was much more emergent. Our Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning hosts a university-wide teaching expo and I was able to present this project there. It was very well received and through the process of sharing this project with others in my university, I realized the extent of the alignment with our strategic mission in areas around enhancing global awareness, utilizing experiential learning activities, and advancing diversity. It was rewarding to feel I was contributing to the broader university's mission.”

Joy Olabisi. “One of my *research interests is virtual collaboration* so the opportunity to explore students collaborating across institutions globally, as well as across different learning modes (“traditional” vs. online), was too good to pass up. Furthermore, the sheer size of the study, which featured over 300 students and over 90 student teams, would enable us to observe trends as well as gain a better understanding of how to facilitate virtual, cross-cultural teamwork. I was excited to be part of a project that would provide my students with this unique experience – to equip them with necessary skills to collaborate virtually AND across cultures.”

Teaching Is an Art: Sharing the Learning Space Allows for Reflective Teaching

The faculty team on this project are committed and interested in the art of teaching and have a desire for continual improvement in their teaching philosophies. As different teaching styles came together, faculty learned, grew and became stronger instructors through the collaboration, mimicking what they hoped students would also experience. Faculty learned from each other during this project and also learned a great deal from the students. A key lesson we learned was that in order to effectively engage in a more challenging topics, like cultural competence, the realities of virtual teamwork, or expectations and work style differences, there must be an active choice built into the course by the instructors.

Mike Palanski. “Because I was not actually teaching any of the classes, all of my interaction with students was second-hand through my colleagues. This dynamic was something I never really got used to, and I am not sure I would participate again without teaching some of the students involved. Because I had no students, I found the process of collaborating with my colleagues to be the most rewarding aspect (so far). Except for a project that Michelle, Joy, and I had worked on several years ago, I believe it was the first time that this particular group had worked together, or even met each other. For example, Maja and Jenna are both outstanding teachers. As the two online instructors on this project, it was gratifying seeing them collaborate on other aspects of the course beyond this project. I learned a lot by seeing how their *two different approaches are both effective paths to educating*. The other

gratifying aspect for me is seeing the *scholarship and research part of the project develop*. As of this writing, we have a (nearly) complete manuscript that will hopefully land in an international conference and in a respected journal.”

Michelle Hammond. “I was attracted to the idea of collaborating with others in my teaching role. I have worked with Mike previously on a similar project and *I enjoyed being able to share ideas, get feedback on student concerns, and collaborate on grading as well*. The idea of working with new people was also exciting. As a faculty member, I really enjoy the collaborative aspects of research and was excited about the idea of bringing more collaborative aspects into my role as an instructor as well.”

Jenna Lenhardt. “We were a motley crew with different teaching perspectives and methodologies. I found in *sharing these different points of view we all came out better instructors* and our students were given an opportunity that gives them critical skills to be successful in the global economy of today. In many ways, the struggles, benefits and learning outcomes our students experienced in this class were similar to our instructor experience.”

Build Structure for Success: “Think Big” is Not Necessarily Always the Best Strategy

One common theme learned throughout the term was that structure, communication, expectation building, and follow-up is critical to faculty team success for this project. The more people added to the project, the more the project grew in complexity and opportunity. When building sustainable projects, it is critical to start small to work out challenges and then grow. There are also limits to how large to grow without adding undue stress to all faculty involved.

Maja Vidović. “The pilot collaboration project was kicked-off in Spring 2017, with only Mike’s students based in RIT Rochester, and my students from RIT Croatia participating. Even though the number of students in the project was quite impressive (98 students on Mike’s end, and 124 students on my end), and balancing 49 teams was at times hard to grasp, the entire collaboration was highly rewarding. At the end of the semester, after many virtual meetings, even more email messages, and lots of coordination between Mike and me, all included stakeholders were happy. The students reported that this was a unique and amazing experience, we loved the opportunity of providing something different to our students and were excited with their feedback that the journey was valuable for them in terms of building their skills in many areas. The second delivery of the collaboration project in Spring 2018 included another university, even more students, but significantly more professors as well.

Reflecting back to compare both experiences, the collaboration with *only two professors included was naturally smoother and quicker*. It was very easy for the two of us to agree on

the approach we should take as professors, and be consistent. Any issues we encountered were swiftly resolved, and *all decision-making processes were much easier and simpler*. Having said all that, I'd also like to point out that for the Spring 2019 semester, we're again running the project at the same "think big" scope of three campuses, several instructors and few hundred students. I guess that the ease of within-project communication seems to win over any hustle of having many decision-makers on a team."

Michelle Hammond. "The project was definitely more work than the usual team or in-class project. *Coordinating with several other faculty members took time and at times presented difficulties*. I got some feedback from students to the effect of "our professors are telling us different things." That was frustrating as after very regular virtual meetings ourselves I thought we were all on the same page. I did share with the *students how we were, in effect, struggling with the same things they were.*"

Mike Palanski. "Structure matters. Because of the significantly higher number of students in Croatia (all taught by Maja), we needed to include multiple sections of the class in Rochester (taught by Joy, Michael, and Jenna, respectively) in order to provide some semblance of balance in terms of students. In retrospect, I believe this project was *almost too big in terms of number of faculty involved*. I look forward to repeating the project when all faculty members have experience, and we have a better *developed set of procedures in place.*"

Jenna Lenhardt. "The biggest take-away for me was that these types of international partnerships are paramount when developing courses and experiences that maximize our combined intellectual power. The project was better because of each of our input and we *were better professionals after having struggled and learning with each other*. Just as we teach our students, we are better together than we are individually and so the ability to work on a team will both make you stronger as an individual, yet also positively impact the strength of your organization. We grade differently, we each weigh the importance of citations differently, we each have a different perspective on what "hand holding" is and how comfortable we are in allowing groups to "fail". *Coming to consensus on these types of things was both challenging as well as fruitful for our combined success as a team.*"

Faculty Calibration is Essential for Success

In management, we know that larger teams have higher likelihoods of missing a critical communication piece, and processing or sharing information differently with others. Larger teams can have an advantage to stretching limits, challenging the status quo and completing deliverables at a faster pace. As we teach our students, communication is key, and building expectations and follow-up are also critical in moving a complex project forward. One of the lessons that we learned –or, more specifically, had drilled into us – is that you cannot over-communicate or over-manage a virtual project. Little hiccups in face-

to-face communication become coughing fits in virtual communication.

Mike Palanski. “As much as I loved working with my colleagues, it was *much easier to work with just one other partner in past projects*. Having six faculty partners leads to significant process loss, despite the individual levels of competence and enthusiasm. I felt this dynamic most acutely when potential problems arose. Many of the course documents and deliverables were communicated through individual course Learning Management System shells. Any change needed to be pushed out to multiple courses, and the potential for error was greater.”

Maja Vidović. “As opposed to managing a collaboration project with only two professors included, the logistics of collaborating with so many different sections, professors, and campuses were much more challenging. For example, waiting for the feedback from all six professors would sometimes stretch to the point of being nerve-wracking. The *chances for miscommunication and misunderstanding were much higher* as well, as it was more challenging to keep track of having all the professors in the loop. This is where having Mike as our *project manager was of immense importance*. On the other hand, collaborating with more people brought the *diversity in opinions and approaches*, which typically led to *better solutions*. As a result, not only was the project better structured and delivered, but it helped me re-question my overall approach to teaching, and I believe it made me an even better professor in the end. Equally important, having more professors included meant alleviating *a part of the strain of having to personally do all the work*. Much of the preparation, communication with students, and grading was done much easier when the work was divided among more people. Yet, the challenge of coordinating release dates, feedback and remaining consistent in our responses to student teams was definitely more intense.”

Joy Olabisi. “In addition to the rewards, there were some challenges. Based on the number of students at each geographical location, student teams were not geographically dispersed equally. For instance, many of the (non-virtual course) teams of four members had two members from the Croatia campus. Some of my students expressed that this partially collocated subset of the team seemed to suggest that project decisions and process outcomes appeared to favor these subgroups. Another challenge was managing the *calibration that occurred among the professors*. We did our best to plan for and anticipate challenges and questions that would arise and held numerous meetings before and during the project; however, there seemed to be quite a few circumstances where students on the same team would receive different responses to their inquiries from their respective professors, thus causing some confusion. As professors, we worked to address any miscommunications as quickly as possible, but we could not always avoid these occurrences.”

Being Direct is Essential: Build a Trusting Relationship and Expectation of Feedback

To expand on the point raised in the previous section, we learned many lessons. To be more accurate, we personally experienced lessons that we already knew about from academic literature and/or through facilitating other student projects. It was a bit shocking to find ourselves making “rookie mistakes”, but the benefit of doing so was a greater sense of humility and appreciation for the students’ experience in the project.

Mike Palanski. “As the project lead, I should have been clearer with respect to expectations and communication. I know from the research about virtual teams – including some of my own research – that one should *err on the side of over-communicating*. There were instances when it seemed that everyone was on the same page, only to find out later that different faculty members were indeed presenting a somewhat different picture to their respective classes. Such a situation is easily handled with two faculty members but is significantly more complex with multiple faculty members. We should have had *clearly defined procedures for handling student questions with a unified voice*. From a logistics side of things, when working with different learning management systems (LMS), it is *critical to plan how the submission of team deliverables will be handled*. This point cannot be emphasized enough in the success of a virtual project when considerations such as FERPA, sharing of student information across institution lines and working within the legal lines of each participating institution’s code of conduct.”

Jenna Lenhardt. “Finding time between my full-time administrative position, life, moving, and teaching, and then add five different partner schedules, and two different time zones, this project challenged my ultra-organized professional self. Just like our students, *we as a team needed to identify roles, responsibilities, and our own individual and team strengths* in order to accomplish this amazing task. There is a need for both shared understanding of course outcomes as well as the critical logistics that make a team and project work effectively with hundreds of participants. If we could do it, we could help our students be successful and *make the most of their time in a class that taught about diversity, leadership, teamwork, and communication*.”

Relationships Matter and Trust is Key

Embarking on a new initiative, particularly one that includes a wide variety of potential challenges such as time zones, different institutions, and a variety of teaching styles, it is essential to choose faculty with whom you enjoy working with as you move through the inevitable complexities of the project. This type of project is, after all, a voluntary aspect of the job.

Maja Vidović. “When I initially met Mike, *we immediately clicked* regarding our approach to students and teaching. The excitement of finding a kindred spirit was an awesome push

towards collaborating to build a daring student learning experience. With hindsight, *this connection proved to be the critical component of a successful student collaboration project.*”

Mike Palanski. “I had worked with each of the faculty members before on different projects and could vouch for their *individual level of competence and trustworthiness*. I would not recommend doing a project of this magnitude with a stranger. Better to start by working on a more modest project before trying to tackle a larger one. More than anything, I felt a *sense of responsibility towards my colleagues* on this project. I was the only tenured faculty member, and I was the person who sort of talked everyone else into it. Joy and I had done similar projects before, so I wasn’t terribly worried about her. Still, I knew that she was investing time and energy at a time (right after the tenure packet is submitted) when most faculty just want to take a deep breath. Michelle – fresh off a decade in Ireland – was back home in the USA at a new university. I knew this project would be of somewhat high profile at her new university, and I wanted it to go well for her sake. Maja had the twin challenges of carrying the highest student workload and solely representing the “other” culture in our cross-cultural project. Moreover, given RIT’s imbalanced faculty workload structure at our global campuses, I knew that Maja needed to be very selective with respect to discretionary work such as this project. I wanted this project to be a good investment of time and energy for her. My greatest sense of felt responsibility was for the adjunct professors on the project. Jenna was a freshly-minted Ph.D. striving to forge her own path while building a career and reputation at her new university, and while trying to maintain a working relationship as an adjunct professor at her former university, RIT. A poor experience for her students could adversely impact her continued relationship with RIT. Likewise, Michael – despite having a long relationship as an adjunct professor with RIT – was also at risk if the project did not work out well.”

Parting Advice from the Field

In summary, as new projects emerge, it is good to start small with another faculty member who you feel confident will match your interest, passion, and provide thoughtful feedback. Depending on the course learning outcomes, the content covered, and the different complexity factors as it relates to campus location, faculty comfort with each other, the size of the faculty group is an essential factor to consider when embarking on international co-teaching projects. There were common themes shared across the faculty team from where to start, how to set up good systems for success, and then how to make the most of the experience for you and your students. The faculty team each experienced the project slightly differently and had some final pieces of advice for future big thinking collaborators who like to push the envelope.

Mike Palanski. “I offer *three pieces of advice* for faculty who are considering a similar project. First, go slow and go small to start, and ramp up from there. Do a small, low-stakes

project in one semester, and then do something more complex. Second, make sure you *know and like your colleagues*. You are going to be spending a significant amount of time together and working through problems. Finally, have *fun and embrace the experience*. The beautiful thing about cross-cultural virtual team projects is that you as a faculty member are working through the same issues as your students. You are learning and growing together, which can make for a very enriching experience.”

Maja Vidović. “My two biggest lessons learned is that students are very hungry for novelties in their studies and creative professors are also very hungry for novelties in their teaching. *Students thrive from learning through personal experience* and are typically able and willing to tackle even the most complex challenges we can prepare for them, especially if they recognize the connection between an exercise and the workplace expectations. As a faculty, we had the pressure of collaborating on an actual project opening up so many topics, and *providing many “aha” moments that help us grow as teachers.*”

Michelle Hammond. “*Start early.* Spend some time speaking with your future collaborators at least 2-3 months before the semester begins when you want to run the project. Another suggestion is to think through all the details of the project. Imagine yourself as a student from each location going through the project. What will they need to know and what questions might they have? I also suggest *being aware of differences across universities that might matter.* These might include the grading structure (it can be very different cross-culturally), online course management systems (can faculty/students be added?), and timing of breaks/holidays. I would recommend ensuring students have equal access to submission and feedback and they don’t have to rely on only one team member from a specific institution. Finally, and most importantly, *do it! You’re not likely to regret it.*”

Joy Olabisi. “One suggestion that I would make is to *implement a video conferencing requirement* of some sort of the student teams. Students were encouraged to interact via virtual conference at the beginning of the project. However, since this was not a requirement, I do not recall if any of the students in my class reported that they had done so. Moreover, by the end of the project, several students informed me that they wished they had done so. Also, we did not require students to *use peer evaluations*. I believe that instituting some type of peer evaluation would be helpful in reducing many of the “slacker”-related complains and would improve within-team communication.

Generally speaking, students (especially at the undergraduate level) will still view “strongly suggest” as optional, especially in a team setting. I would suggest clearly indicating what students are expected to do. Second, I intended to use 15 minutes of a class session for any of the students (representing 39 teams) to briefly share some of their more poignant (good or bad) experiences as well as some effective strategies to address challenges they’ve faced. This turned into a much longer session that many students later noted was especially helpful for *navigating through their own team challenges*. Therefore, if possible, I would

recommend setting aside some time around halfway through the duration of the team project, to *allow the class to “talk through it.”* It might be slightly messy, but the experiential growth attained makes it worth it!”

Jenna Lenhardt. “My advice for future faculty who challenge themselves to create the best classroom is to set up bi-weekly faculty meetings, set deliverables, and deadlines, and *be kind to yourself and others. It will not be perfect the first time around,* yet that is all part of the continual improvement process. Set reminders for you and your team *to laugh and remember that you are doing this because it is critical to model for your students what you want them to learn how to do as global citizens.* Teach your students how to fail by showing them how you are humble enough to learn from their struggle and improve the project the next time around. Be a leader that they can model and always look to the next time and keep notes on what you would change and why.

Finally, I suggest being *data driven and use technology to your advantage.* Surveys, even if you are not using this for future research, will help you gauge interest, engagement, and learning throughout the project to continually improve based on data in the future. Use technology as a tool to engage your instructor team in productive ways. **You** may need to learn new technology to be your best instructor self. *Take this opportunity to be a life-long learner* and be confident and courageous enough to take a leap into the unknown. You and your students will be all the better for it.”

Michael Scrivens. “I would advise professors to make sure their students understand the importance of international teams. If I did this again, and I hope to do so in the future, I would spend more time educating my students by having them *conduct some research and write a paper on this subject.* I would also include some role playing where I would have one team member from RIT-US, working with another from Oxford-UK, working with another from Croatia, and another from China. This would help students learn how to communicate with international team members.”

Conclusion

We conclude this chapter by presenting some observations from Organizational Behavior research that can hopefully guide and motivate other scholars seeking to engage in transnational educational experiences. Our increasingly interconnected world has led to an enhanced focus on understanding effective virtual and international collaborations within the area of management education (Alavi, Yoo & Vogel, 1997; Alstete & Beutell, 2004; Duus & Cooray, 2014; Ramanau, 2016; Schwartzman, 2006; Wang & Haggerty, 2011). Consequently, management education research has reinforced the significance of hands-on experiences (Erez et al., 2013) as educational institutions are becoming more committed to ensuring that students are adequately prepared to engage and thrive in a working environment that demands cross-cultural and virtual capabilities (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2012;

Baldwin & Trespalacios, 2017; Chen, Donahue & Klimoski, 2004; Goodman & Bray, 2015; Hardin, Fuller & Davison, 2007).

Our project explored two main contexts: virtual teams and cross-cultural interactions. In investigating how scholars can facilitate student learning within cross-cultural virtual teams, we identify some key insights based on our experiences. First, we observe from the organizational behavior literature that virtual teams can be immensely successful when there is a collective acceptance, or alignment, of electronic collaboration technology (Bjorn & Ngwenyama, 2009; 2010). While access to technology and tool familiarity is less of an issue in today's society, technology use in virtual teams still poses a challenge. In fact, we observed that some of the team challenges associated with collaboration tool use actually stemmed from lack of agreement on which tools to use as some participants were more adamant about using certain tools that they preferred and were more socially accustomed. Scholars suggest addressing technology alignment as a continuous iterative process, identifying an optimal collaboration approach and modifying technology use as the project progresses. Research also highlights virtual collaboration as requiring effective interdependence of task processes (Malhotra & Majchrzak, 2004). Geographic separation can make it more challenging to develop trust as well as implement effective strategies to reinforce accountability in working across locations and time zones. Thus, it is important for participants to develop a shared understanding and shared ownership of the task to enable effective communication and coordination. Additionally, scholars propose establishing "swift trust" (Crisp & Jarvenpaa, 2013) in the early stages of ad hoc virtual collaborations, such as in educational contexts.

In addition to exploring virtual team interaction and collaboration technology use, we also investigated students experiences related to cross-cultural interactions. Prior research has observed that working in cross-cultural virtual teams can help students develop problem solving and creative thinking skills (Duus & Cooray, 2014) and that the impact of such educational experiences can be long-lasting (Erez et al., 2013; Ramsey & Lorenz, 2016). Thus, we were motivated to study and assess the effectiveness of our project and identify important lessons for future studies. Nikolic et al. (2017) have acknowledged the importance of appropriate training and support for both participants and facilitators. Notably, they highlighted the need to be attentive to project design details and to clarify the collaborative processes that participants will engage in. This aligns with our observations from this project. The faculty collaboration on this project, which was in itself a virtual cross-cultural collaboration, provided valuable perspective to us as we each facilitated our respective classroom projects. Experts have observed that "one way to focus on intercultural learning is to have programmatic elements that present frameworks for construing subjective cultural differences and provide opportunities for exploring those differences" (Nikolic et al., 2017). For example, in the next iteration of this project that we will be executing, we are reinforcing the cross-cultural "component" of the project by asking

teams to address the problem from the perspective of multiple cultural regions.

In conclusion, we cannot overstate the fact that OB research tells us that both virtual and cross-cultural communications need to have an almost exaggerated simplicity and clarity in order to be effective. We also suggest that in developing collaborative student projects, it is worth considering the extent to which your field depends or could benefit from some combination of a cross-cultural perspective and/or virtual collaboration. Our overarching point, and indeed our warm encouragement, is that in the right situation – the right colleagues, at the right time, with the right project – a cross-cultural virtual student collaboration can provide a unique learning experience for both faculty and students.

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