

Managing Intercultural and Practice-Oriented Student Projects: Evidence from Kenya, Germany, Ghana and the United States of America

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Abstract

“Building Bridges Across Continents” (BBAC) is an intercultural and student-centered project that seeks to promote international communication and helps students develop competencies in entrepreneurship, international trade and global cultural awareness. The project, which is in its fourth phase of implementation, connects students from the United States, Germany, Ghana and Kenya with the help of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) in order to work on a common research assignment for a period of ten calendar weeks. The main ICTs used in the project are Skype, Facebook, wiki, email and WhatsApp. This paper describes and analyzes the background, structure, and results of the project.

Keywords: Information Communication Technologies, Intercultural Communication, Student-Centered Learning, Global Cultural Awareness

1. Background

In a globally competitive marketplace, education plays an important role in opening opportunities in trade and entrepreneurship. While entrepreneurship creates a sustainable pathway to employment, unemployment rates in many countries and more specifically among developing economies are very high. The high unemployment rates are partly linked to the fact that students are graduating with insufficient practical skills in communication, media literacy, critical thinking, global cultural awareness and entrepreneurship. Although academic curricula are reviewed regularly, the review process in some countries tends to lag due to the lengthy approval process in universities with bureaucratic structures. Moreover, the review process does not always reflect the emerging and current challenges that graduates are facing during and after graduation. The unemployment rate is unlikely to fall without the adoption of a more practice-oriented education that empowers graduates to exploit the existing and emerging economic, social and technological opportunities in the virtually connected world.

Although governments have been put under pressure to create employment opportunities, little thought has been given to the potential that can be unlocked by small, innovative and incremental projects by individual universities working in a network with other universities within and across continents. Creative networking approaches which draw upon intellectual resources can create knowledge and experiences that shape and change people's attitudes towards entrepreneurship and technology in local as well as global contexts. Hence, training and exposure are required to reorient the mind-set of students toward entrepreneurship and technology. "Building Bridges Across Continents" (BBAC) is a practice-oriented project that uses learner-centred pedagogical methods to address the challenges of providing students with the needed skills for employment. The project thrives on the use of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) which empower students to take charge of their learning by interacting with their peers across nations and continents. Through this socio-cultural approach, learners acquire essential life and communication skills while increasing their cross-cultural awareness and gaining competencies for the global workforce (Chun 2015).



Figure 1 Project Logo

The project began four years ago when Bonn-Rhein-Sieg University of Applied Sciences in Germany and Cape Coast University in Ghana started to cooperate with each other. The initial collaboration involved different groups of students working on specific research projects. In addition, students held virtual meetings through Skype, conducted surveys and compiled reports. Over the last two years, two more universities, the University of Nairobi in Kenya and Coastal Carolina University in the United States of America, joined the project. In 2016, the total number of participating students reached forty-one. The project aims to expose students to the cultural differences between the participating countries and enhances the ability of students to engage in intercultural negotiations via digital communication.

2. Goals and Objectives

The overall goal of the project is to encourage international communication and to increase cross-cultural awareness among students and faculty members. In order to reach this goal, the project pursues several objectives. First, students who participate in the project will develop a familiarity with information communication technologies such as Facebook, Skype and wiki and enhance their intercultural management abilities. In addition, the project aims to provide opportunities for fruitful collaborative research and teaching among both students and faculty members in four different countries and four different institutions of higher learning. Finally, the project encourages the spread of student-centered teaching methodologies among the participating universities.

3. Project Structure

The project uses several methods to accomplish its objectives. The first step each year entails organizing a kick-off meeting between project team leaders in the participating universities. The meeting takes place either in a face to face setting or via Skype. During the first meeting, the team leaders agree on a manageable time schedule. This is the most challenging step as each institution has different academic schedules with country specific breaks and holidays that do not necessarily coincide. Therefore, the project is normally limited to a 9-10 week timeframe. Once the dates have been confirmed, specific responsibilities to implement the project are divided up amongst the countries. The next step involves the writing and updating of the student guidelines for the project in the current year. These guidelines provide a detailed description of the tasks and deadlines the students need to complete. These instructions are subsequently uploaded onto the project wiki. A wiki is a collaborative writing tool used as a website. The wiki is hosted and supported by the Bonn-Rhein-Sieg University of Applied Sciences. Team leaders hold online review meetings at least three times during the project to receive updates reports from each country and to address unforeseen challenges. The team leaders refresh their own familiarity with the project wiki. the project in the current

A project leader who is a faculty member in one of the participating universities selects the students in each country. Students are selected by their interest in intercultural communication, their knowledge of online information communication technologies and their availability throughout the project period. However, the project leaders in each country are at liberty to guide the student selection process such that chances of success are maximized. A list of participating students together with their relevant contact information is subsequently uploaded onto the wiki.

Once students are selected, the students are placed into one of the six international teams with two representatives from Ghana, Germany, Kenya and one from the US. For the student, the project begins with an orientation phase in their respective countries. A paper version of the guidelines is distributed and the project tasks with the seven steps (seen image below) are described. Each project leader provides some technical training for using the project wiki, which serves as a joint platform for all students. Students are encouraged to read the guidelines carefully and are reminded to observe all activity deadlines throughout the duration of the project.

Project Tasks

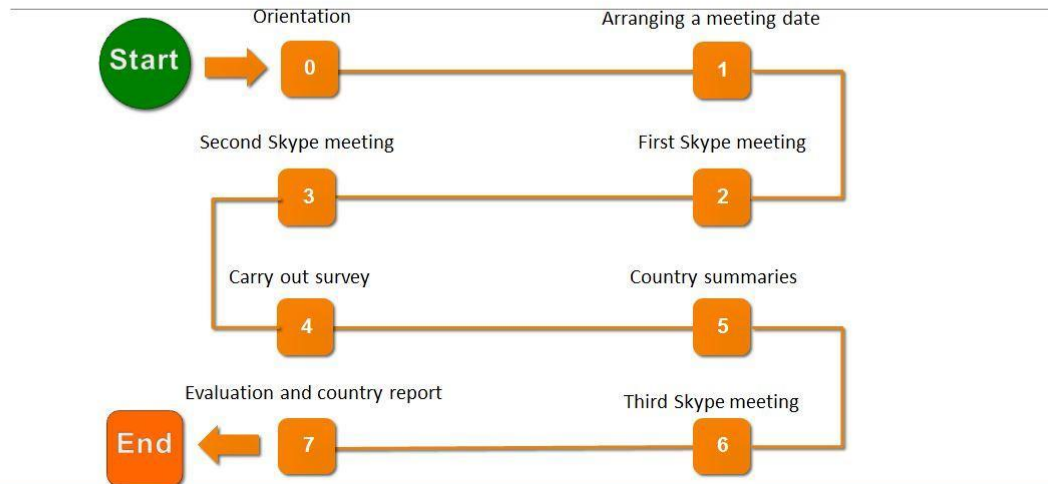


Figure 2 Project tasks

After being introduced to the project, the students reach out to their assigned team members in the various countries through email, and by uploading a short video clip on Facebook and WhatsApp. Within the group, students are asked to schedule Skype meetings which they are assigned to chair. Other students are asked to take minutes. The minutes of every meeting are uploaded into the wiki.

In order to encourage communication and collaboration, students work on a survey which attempts to measure the perceptions of the population in each country about a specific research question. In 2016, the research topic chosen was the general perception of Genetically Modified Organism (GMOs) in the respective countries. Students had little or no experience in the field and found the topic initially challenging, based on the feedback all students were very much interested in working on the topic. Students collected data and compiled reports that were shared with their team members. Clearly attitudes in Germany, the US, Ghana and Kenya varied. Issues of food scarcity were not part of the debate in Germany and the US, but students were able to discuss and reflect on different perspectives on attitudes and country specific notions on pro and contra arguments for using GMOs. Once the reports are ready, a consolidated survey report is prepared for each institution and funding agencies. In order to complete the project, the international teams have to complete seven tasks in 9-10 weeks.

A multiple number of digital communication tools are used for the specific tasks as each tool has its specific purpose and students learn what type of tool is most appropriate for the task involved. A multimodal approach to learning and communicating is thus introduced in the project and also providing a flexible learning environment (Khan 2007). Synchronous communication involves mainly the use of Skype for the three team meetings and asynchronous written work is mainly done through the wiki by uploading project reports and for working on their surveys. In the final week of the project, students participate in a project evaluation survey. Data from the student evaluations are analysed and changes are made based on the feedback for the next project. In addition, the data is used for research purposes.

Finally, a student report is generated to inform interested stakeholders of the universities about the final outcomes and the content created by the students in the project. This final report allows team leaders to assess the quality of the students' work, but also offers an opportunity to share the collaborative work the students accomplished.

4. Project Outcomes

The project has demonstrated that intercultural awareness and global competencies can be developed through the creative use of information communication technologies across different continents. Irrespective of the diverse and differing backgrounds of the students, we have established that they are able to share experiences, communicate with each other across continents and work together to conduct shared research. Through their participation in the project, students are exposed to different versions of English and different cultural values with regards to time and task management styles. Results from the project demonstrate that Skype is currently among many students the preferred online tool for communicating across continents. Wiki and WhatsApp were highly used by students to communicate with each other. Telephone calls were the least favorite choice of communication across continents. This might perhaps be due to the high costs involved and the difficulty in arranging group calls via traditional telephones. Overall, the project demonstrates that low-cost, stable online-based communication tools are effective in managing international projects. Furthermore, Skype calls supported by video provide excellent opportunities for student and faculty members from different continents to interact with each other without the need to pay for expensive plane tickets. Hence, building rapport and establishing ties as seen as a major challenge (Louhiala-Salminen, L. & Kankaaranta, A. (2011) in global business, can be accomplished by students and faculty members in this project.

5. Students' Experiences

Participating students in all countries reported in the final assessment that the project helped them increase their cultural and global awareness and their ability to communicate and interact with English speakers in different countries. Students came to realize that working and negotiating styles in different countries affected project outcomes. Students also gained a better understanding of why ethical questions about genetically modified organisms (GMO) are perceived differently in different continents. The majority of participating students were between 19 and 23 years old. The project provided an opportunity for the majority of the students to engage in online discussions with international students and learn about the use of wikis. Although students were able to use a wiki, few students were actively involved in correcting their group member's posting on the wiki. This suggests that either the majority of the students uploaded error free work or they lacked confidence in correcting their peers' work. More than 90% of the students expressed high satisfaction with their own level of participation in the project. While willingness to meet project deadlines was high among students, this did not automatically translate to an equally high success rate in meeting deadlines.

Internet facilities and connectivity varied from one country to another with erratic connectivity reported most frequently in Ghana. Despite differences in time zones, particularly in three continents, the students were able to negotiate meeting times that were agreeable to all. The students scheduled their own meetings, drafted their

agenda for such meetings; wrote minutes, made short videos and uploaded them online. They prepared collaborative questionnaires and administered them and analysed data with no assistance from the project leaders. This implies that the students acquired important intercultural negotiating skills and increased their competencies in using information communication tools like Skype, Facebook and wiki. Throughout the project, students honed their research skills as well as their project management skills. For the African countries the biggest technical challenge was not having technical equipment (i.e. headsets) and the slow internet connection. A close analysis of the student comments reveals that all students became consciously aware of difference in communication styles among the participating cultures. This result also coincides with the research studies on intercultural communication that reveal difference in low and high context cultures. According to Hall, high context cultures (i.e. African culture) convey messages with an implied context that is not directly spoken. On the other hand, low context cultures such as Germany and the USA tend to be more direct in their communication (1975). There is also a level of difference within high or low level cultures. The German language is very direct and little is left for the imagination once a message is transmitted. A simple "nein" in German has a direct message for the receiver that something has been declined by simply saying "no". Whereas English native speakers in general, may send a different message to decline something wrapped in indirect message "I am afraid, we will have to talk about it as it seems difficult". There are, of course also differences within the English variations spoken in the World. Both messages are the same, one with an implication and one without. The direct message may be misunderstood as unfriendly or inappropriate if not aware of the cultural differences in the way messages are communicated in low and high context cultures, especially when speakers are not using their own native language to communicate. A low-context listener may perceive the indirect message from a high context sender as a possibly "yes, with some irritations that may arise". These types of cultural differences were noticed by the students and discussed during their reflection sessions in class.

6. Implications of the Project

The project has connected more than 180 students since its inception in the year 2013. The first project connected forty students from Germany and Ghana. In the second phase, seventy students took part in the project. In 2016, Kenya and the USA joined the project and expanded the range of diverse cultural backgrounds. The project has increased cultural awareness and global communication abilities and making graduates become successful future global citizens. As seen in previous collaboration projects, Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) can assist in establishing pedagogical fruitful communication across different continents provided that the autonomous learning is presented in manageable chunks or tasks so that students are able to complete the various tasks successfully. (Brautlacht et al 2017) Students developed international contacts that if nurtured can serve as focal points for information access about entrepreneurial opportunities. Furthermore, there is potential for students who are networked to look beyond the current project and using global insights develop business ventures that transcend national boundaries. (Rauhut 2013) A second implication of the project is adoption of better practice-oriented pedagogy in teaching and by extension faculty members in their respective universities. In recent years online collaboration projects have mainly focused on intertercultural competencies (Chun 2015). However, digital competencies that are directly linked to specific tasks related to language and communication

strategies need to be included into higher education curricula. This also includes a more differentiated approach on teaching English as a lingua franca and digital literacy (Brautlacht et al 2017). This is likely to improve delivery of various curricula and prepare the graduates for employment.

8. Future Plans

In 2017, the project will continue with all four universities. Coastal Carolina University has established a new course for their participating project students, thus dedicating class time and support during the project. In the future, plans are underway to improve access to internet facilities for students in Ghana and Kenya. Based on the feedback from the evaluations, the students would prefer access to facilities on campus and the use of head-sets and internet set boxes for better connectivity. In addition, the project leaders have committed to publishing a handbook for teaching competency-based courses in Africa by also sharing their experiences in these collaborative teaching projects for faculty interested in collaborating with African universities. Finally, there are plans to encourage other universities to start-up similar projects by offering support in setting-up these exchanges.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We acknowledge contributions and assistance from Prof, Dr. Jürgen Bode, Vice President for International Affairs and Diversity (Bonn-Rhein-Sieg University of Applied Sciences); Prof. Dr. Rosemond Boohene, Dean of the Centre for International Education (University of Cape Coast) and Prof. Dr. Justus Munyoki (University of Nairobi). We also acknowledge the support by the Project Assistants, Osman Feseni (Ghana) and Lena Spiekers (Germany) and Lioba Visser (Germany).