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## A SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS PROJECT IN A COLLABORATIVE AND VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

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**ABSTRACT:** *The university setting is the appropriate place to develop global and virtual abilities. Some disciplines include the multicultural dimension in their programs but the intercultural contact is often missing. Working with an international team, practicing negotiation strategies and using effective decision-making processes are examples of important elements that all professionals should master. These intercultural skills are better learned through first-hand experience (Kolb, 1984). For this reason, an intercultural and academic initiative has taken place between Universidad Nacional (UNA) in Costa Rica and FH Münster of Applied Sciences in Germany. The partnered project focuses on the elaboration of a collaborative project among students from different backgrounds (Costa Ricans and Germans; mainly) to obtain a final negotiated outcome in the elaboration of a sustainable business plan. Participants are 28 university students of an English Integrated course with emphasis on Business English from Universidad Nacional (UNA) in Costa Rica and 17 students from the Administration major taking a Business English class from FH Munster. This research aims two main goals: firstly, to include specific intercultural objectives in university courses and secondly; to give university students the opportunity to work with students from another university in a different part of the world and build intercultural teams.*

**KEYWORDS:** intercultural competence, business plan, sustainable project, collaborative groups

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### INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, individuals need to interact with people from different religious, economic, linguistic, social and geographic backgrounds for building a better cultural understanding that will benefit their personal and professional life (Trompenaars; 2011:2-3). The international work communities are currently demanding professionals with cross-cultural skills which go beyond the traditional knowledge-based learning (McNab, 2012). There is the need of exposure to a vast quantity of information but also to establish interpersonal interactions with individuals of other cultures to develop competencies necessary to fulfill successful intercultural interactions. These competencies have been summarized under the term: intercultural competence.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Intercultural competence is defined as "a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts." (Bennett, J. M. 2008). Indeed, the fact of working in multicultural virtual teams is a challenging task that required the development of intercultural competence for better understanding of working styles and obtain efficient and harmonious outcomes.

Virtual teams are essential when the members of the group are located in different parts of the world. This kind of teams are defined as teams that "work across boundaries of time and space by utilizing modern computer-driven technologies... that enable geographically dispersed members to coordinate their individual efforts and inputs" (Ebrahim M. 2011:1). This modern working style is a need because of the globalized nature of the business world in the 21st century. Entrepreneurs and business people have to learn how to deal with this type of technological communication. These type of teams are more and more often part of our current personal and professional lives. Companies, universities and offices that are spread all over the world and need to coordinate and work together on projects for mutual benefit but who cannot necessarily meet in person all the time because of the distance (Boix Mansilla; 2013:2). For these reasons, the careers in Business Administration need to engage in these types of collaborative projects so their students are exposed to this environment; having this exposure the students will be prepared to successfully work in multicultural and virtual teams in the real world. These skills are part of what recently has been called: "global competence" and it has emerged, as "the capacity and disposition to understand and act on issues of global significance" (Asia Society, 2011). It consists of four competencies:

1. Investigate the world beyond their immediate environment, framing significant problems and conducting well-crafted and age-appropriate research.
2. Recognize perspectives, others' and their own, articulating and explaining such perspectives thoughtfully and respectfully.
3. Communicate ideas effectively with diverse audiences, bridging geographic, linguistic, ideological, and cultural barriers.
4. Take action to improve conditions, viewing themselves as players in the world and participating reflectively (Nevadomski, Stacy: 2014)

Working in virtual teams have its benefits and its drawbacks. Among the documented benefits that this type of work offers are: reducing relocation time and costs, reduced travel costs, greater degree of freedom to individuals involved with the development project, respond quickly to changing business environments, sharing knowledge, experiences, most effective in making decisions, cultivating and managing creativity (Ebrahim;2011:1-2). However, this virtual experience also has its inconveniences: lack of physical interaction, everything to be reinforced in a much more structured, formal process, cultural and functional diversity in virtual teams lead to differences in the members or team members need special training and encouragement. Whatever the pros and cons are in each distinctive group; virtual teams are and will be a way for communicating when distance is an issue. This paper approaches the mechanisms to reduce the geographical gap and guide the participants to create a business plan based on sustainable tourism in which all the members of the groups from both universities can agree to put their ideas into a single project.

### **Intercultural Competence Objectives:**

The main objectives of this joint venture are that the students get involved in a sustainable project and become aware of their own culture, aware of cultural differences, able to communicate effectively and appropriately in different cultural environments, able to differentiate between national culture, professional culture and organizational culture, open to the possibilities of rational adaptation in order to achieve better deals, contribute to organizational learning and being able to recognize similarities and differences in working styles among people of different cultures.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The students from both universities interact through the virtual classroom platform from Universidad Nacional (UNA) educational system. The students from CALA; FH Munster provided their email addresses and UNA created their user names and passwords; in this way, they had access to this platform to access the content, chat rooms, forums and videos that were shared in this platform for this project. The students also set meetings using skype, WhatsApp, Facebook and messenger to organize their work and final document and presentations.

### **Description of Subjects**

Students from both universities: Universidad Nacional (28) and FH Munster (17) are regular students from a Business English course. The students enroll in the former university are students from the Computer Engineering major and the students from the latest university are part of the Business Administration program; both bachelor degree programs. Their ages go from 18 to 25 years old and their English level is pre-intermediate for the UNA students and high intermediate for CALA students.

### **Stages of the Business plan project**

To better evaluate the development of global competence, measurement tools are used before and after the project. These are the descriptions of the phases:

#### **1. Warm-up :**

1.1 Students from UNA and MUENSTER brainstorm on the board ideas they have about each country and city respectively to get an idea about the type of individuals they will be working with; their geographical circumstances, language, political system, favorite type of music, sports, religion, famous persons etc

1.2 After this, students from both universities watch a video about CR and Germany to get familiar with the lifestyle and social structure of potential business partners and tourists.

1.3 Students write in the UNA virtual platform a personalized paragraph introducing themselves: name, age, career, likes, dislikes; general description about Costa Rica and Germany.

1.4 Students form teams including members from UNA and FH Muenster. Each team has to develop a sustainable business plan for the Manzanillo-Gandoca Natural Reserve Area or the Bribri-Talamanca indigenous region. The main condition of their final product is that each group provides innovative and meaningful ideas for enhancing a sustainable tourist project respecting the sustainable tourism principles from the World Tourism Organization (WTO) which include: “leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs

can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential eco-logical processes, biological diversity and life support systems”(DESA;7).

### **Research**

2.1 Each professor introduces the topic: what is sustainable tourism? and how it can help preserve the environment and the national culture at the same time creating jobs for the local community as well as the business potential it represents for the business and tourism.

2.2 Students give specific examples of their own experiences at home. The professors post the photo in the virtual classroom of their group's brainstorming and compare both charts.

2.3 Students do research about similar projects in their target country and how the project was developed and share their findings in class / the virtual classroom.

### **Business plan**

3.1 Team members identify target markets and potential customers in their target country who could be interested in buying the tourist package they offer to them. Methods of advertising (brochures, media ads, videos, newspaper ads, partnerships with travel agencies, music etc.) are discussed based on the target group's interests and needs; for example: executives, senior citizens, adolescents, backpackers, families etc. Once their target group is chosen they are in charge of:

- Deciding the tourism product they will use to attract this target group to Costa Rica and to the Gandoca Manzanillo National Wildlife Reserve or Bribri Indigenous community
- Discussing the design of their Social Marketing campaign
- Preparing presentations which include background information about their travel agency (history, offices, number of employees etc.), a description of their tourism product, their social marketing campaign, estimated costs and a summary of the benefits of their campaign and why it should be implemented.
- After brainstorming questions, each team designs their own business idea that they would like to carry forward, they present a draft to the respective professor and post the final version in the virtual classroom.

### **Marketing strategy**

The students exchange ideas between the team members to shape their business plan. Here, they have to use the chat rooms in the virtual classroom and/or facebook, whatsapp, instagram etc for each group. For general guidelines, students can use information from: <http://www.wikihow.com/Develop-a-Tourism-Business>. Students proceed to prepare a social marketing campaign for Gandoca or Bribri region.

### **Team building**

In this stage, the students continue with virtual and intercultural collaboration by sharing their team findings on sustainable tourism in Costa Rica and the focus is to their personalized project; they give each other feedback in the virtual platform. They also self-reflect on their experiences and on how their cultural background may have influenced their working style.

### **Conceptualization**

Here, the students make sense of what happened and interpret the events and understanding the relationships between them. Professors provide the students in Münster and UNA with the

theoretical background of different working and communication styles across cultures for effective intercultural and virtual interaction.

### **Experimentation**

2.4 Professors visit each other in their respective countries for team teaching. During this stage of the learning cycle, the students work on how they are going to put what they have learnt into practice. For learning to be useful, students need to place it in a context; something that is relevant to them. In this phase of the group work, students apply the strategies they have discussed to make collaboration more effective in real life situations.

7.3 At the end of the semester, a video conference is organized. Students meet through skype for the last time and exchange their perspective about the whole experience.

### **Business project presentations**

Keeping sustainable tourism principles in mind, the students developed projects which created ideas about sharing cultural and agricultural knowledge with locals to encourage responsible rural tourism through home stays; opening hostels, building an animal refuge, organizing bike tours, teaching cooking and English classes or retreat campaigns for business people under stress: Here, you can find the videos of the students final projects online:

1. CAMPING <https://youtu.be/3rPWyWLp-l0>
2. Monkey Travel: Souvenir Market and Organic Farming , Manzanillo  
<https://youtu.be/opfVg7EPgmo>
3. Puerto Viejo Tours  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Jn7WU9pZcY&feature=youtu.be>
4. Iriria Experience – the spirit of Bribri  
<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1qr7eOLxu2moU4IXVNHX1bqULX83VltUdS3rAtam98oA/edit>
5. GANDOCA VOICES  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3CzEtfT6oY&feature=em-share\\_video\\_user&app=desktop](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3CzEtfT6oY&feature=em-share_video_user&app=desktop)
6. A PERFECT PLACE TO VISIT <https://quik.gopro.com/v/gAowRJdPwW/>
7. Viva La Vida. No link because students did not upload it online
8. YAMIPA Hostel in Gandoca  
[https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B3IT\\_W7J9KAIdXJmcVJIQXp1SUK/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B3IT_W7J9KAIdXJmcVJIQXp1SUK/view)
9. HOPE SLOTH  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byWfXzlyc6A>

### **Project Reports**

- 9.1 Each team submits a written business report and a video or power point presentation
- 9.2 The project finishes with a self-reflection of students and the project leaders. Learning outcomes are evaluated.
- 9.3 In this self-reflection stage, students answer 4 yes/no questions and write a 1-page self-reflection paper (not marked but required) about their team working experience.

### **Outcomes of the final project from the students' perspective**

Students from UNA were asked 5 yes/no questions in a survey about their team experience. In general, the students showed to be very proud of their work (question 1: 21 out of 28); most of

them were also satisfied (question 2: 25 out of 28) with the final outcome; all of them (question 3: 28/28) felt they had improved their team working skills and 23 out of the 28 students (question 4) wrote that they would like to participate in a similar project..

These students also portrayed on paper their impressions and opinions about this team experience. These are some samples of the students' responses:

Question 1: What was your first reaction when you heard about the project?

Student 1: "Well this was my first experience working with a group of different country so for me it was exciting and scary because I had fear with the communication."

Student 2: "I was very surprised and excited to work with Germans. I thought it was an opportunity to learn about a new culture and maybe a little of the language.

Student 3: "When I heard about the Project, the first thing I thought was this will be a waste of time, because I was focused in other things, and It was not my priority. But, on the way I changed my thoughts, and actually started to be interested in this project".

Student 4: "When the project was assigned my first thought was that the project was going to be difficult. I worried for my team, they could be lazy, and the difference of hours between the countries. I had luck and my team worked very well, everyone was very responsible, and always we coordinated the schedules without any trouble".

Question 2: During this project you worked with different tools: whatsapp, facebook, skype, etc. which tools were new to you in the working context? what do you see as being the advantages and disadvantage of each one in terms of working on an international project?

Student 1: "None of them were new for me I have already used them. The advantages are that they are easy to use and the facility that are available at any time, but the disadvantages that maybe somebody cant connect at one time and maybe the internet is a factor."

Student 2: "Skype was an application that I had never used before. I think the application we used most as a group when doing the project was WhatsApp. The advantages of using WhatsApp in the project was that each team member could contribute ideas at any time, it is a good application for remote work teams".

Student 3: 'It was the first time I used Facebook for work in a project because I always used it for fun and socialize. In a world that is always connected, it is an advantage to work by internet, because we shared ideas in any moment in the Whatsapp's group, but one disadvantage is that you don't always have good internet connection so the communication is bad".

Question 3: Do you think the project has changed the Costa Ricans' perspective of Germans?

Student 1: "Working with Germans changed my mind about them. I thought they were very serious and did not talk too much, but after working with them changed the way I think, I know they are nice people".

Student 2: "My expectations of the German students were responsible, serious people and very punctual. And my expectations were correct:.

Question 3: How do you think this experience will add to your ability to work in international?

Student 1: "I think I learned to communicate better with international people. Be more understanding and patient with group members."

Question 4: What did you learn about the project?



Student 1: “When we were doing this Project, I learned that Costa Rica has a lot of potential in tourism, the problem is that many people think Costa Rica has only touristic places in San Jose, Cartago; Alajuela and Heredia. So, this Project has a objective, that is to open Costa Ricans and foreign eyes, giving them new places where to go on a vacation”

Student 2: “I learned with this project a lot. Despite living in the same country that Limon is a culture very different of mine, so with this research I studied much better this place, of course I also learned about the german’s culture and now I know more about business”.

Question 5: Could you please explain if and how you adapted your working style during the project? In what ways did you behave / communicate differently in comparison to when you work in a team with only German/Costa Rican students?

Student 1: “During this project I had to change the way on how I communicate because I had to talk to strangers so I needed to be more polite compared when I work with someone that I know, also I had to be more organized with the information because the Germans seemed to be more organized than us so I had to be a little bit more careful in that aspect”.

Question 6: Is there anything that you would do differently if taking part in an international project in the future? What advice would you give to students working on an international project similar to this one?

Student 1: “I would have liked to have more meetings to discuss the topics of the project. So my advice to other students working in something like that is to prepare a very good schedule for meetings and organize the topics that you will discuss in it”

## CONCLUSION

Team working is a complex but very rewarding experience. There are many variables to take into account when multicultural teams work together: gender, age, cultural and social background, language among others. It becomes more difficult when the participants belong to very different cultural backgrounds and they are placed in the opposite part of the world where the only mean of communication is through a cell phone or a computer.

Despite the fact, this was the first time both group of students had a team virtual experience they were able to fulfill all the tasks and carry out a final product which they were all very proud of. During this journey, the main difficulties mentioned by the students were: time difference, communication styles regarding setting up dates, times for meetings, ways to correct information or ways to express agreement or disagreement. Fortunately, there were more positive insights at the end of the project such as perseverance, need of negotiation, need to adapt to other people’s ideas, formats to present reports, time differences. In summary, there are moments of joy and moments of tension but overall they all learned to work with people at the other side of the world who had a very different perspective of what team working means and different expectations regarding educational organization. The final outcomes are the result of a long process of preparation and dialogue which indeed enriched their academic, professional and personal life.

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