

# Diverse Learners in Online Collaboration

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## Abstract

The current article reports collaborative online projects implemented between two European higher education institutions in the spring of 2015 and 2016. The data consist of teachers' observations and students' reports, feedback, and their self, peer and group evaluations. The article discusses how diverse learners coming from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds are able to collaborate in online learning projects and what skills this kind of learning requires and develops. Cultural diversity in the article refers not only to national or ethnic cultures, but also to institutional, learning, communication and work cultures that play an important role in international co-operation.

**Keywords:** *diverse learners, collaborative learning, intercultural communication, online projects, team working skills*

## Tiivistelmä

Vuosittain raportoidaan lukuisista opetuskokeiluista, joissa opiskelijaryhmät eri maista toteuttavat yhteisiä oppimisprojekteja verkossa. Tämä artikkeli käsittelee kahden eurooppalaisen korkeakoulun, Université Jean Monnet'n ja Karelia-ammattikorkeakoulun opettajien ja opiskelijoiden yhteistyötä vuosina 2015–2016. Oppimisprojekteihin osallistuneet 166 opiskelijaa olivat lähtöisin erilaisista kielellisistä ja kulttuurisista taustoista. Kulttuurilla tässä artikkelissa ei viitata ainoastaan kansallis-etnisiin ryhmiin vaan myös oppilaitos-, oppimis-, viestintä- ja työskentelykulttuureihin. Artikkelin tarkastelee sitä, miten monikulttuuriset ryhmät toimivat verkon yli tapahtuvissa oppimisprojekteissa ja millaisia valmiuksia työskentely vaatii ja kehittää. Aineisto koostuu opettajien havainnoista, opiskelijoiden raporteista, palautteista ja itse-, vertais- ja ryhmäarvioinneista.

**Avainsanat:** *erilaiset oppijat, yhteistöiminnallinen oppiminen, kulttuurienvälisen viestintä, verkossa toteutettavat projektit, tiimityötaidot*

## Background

Cooperation between Université Jean Monnet (UJM for short) and Karelia University of Applied Sciences started in 2012 when they took part in an Erasmus Lifelong Learning Programme with four other higher education institutions. After the successful implementation of three intensive programmes in France, Austria and Finland, the partners wanted to continue their collaboration. Because no external funding was then available, two of the teachers decided to create a joint online assignment for their students as part of their regular curricular courses.

The collaborative projects were implemented in spring 2015 and 2016. The project task was to collect and share information on business and communication cultures in Finland, France and one non-EU country. The students prepared a 15-minute presentation for an existing company in one of the countries on the cultural aspects of the other two. In the presentations, the groups assumed the role of intercultural consultants. The overall objective was to increase students' awareness of the cultural dimensions that play an important role in international business management and communication. In the meantime, the online projects were to provide a learning environment where students could develop their transferable soft skills while interacting in English in cross-cultural teams and carrying out tasks together using digital tools.

For the first experiment, five multicultural groups were created, each consisting

of 10-12 students in three smaller teams. In 2016, 10 groups were made out of four to six Karelia students and three to five UJM students. The groups were made as diverse as possible in terms of nationality, language, gender and intercultural experiences. It was assumed that diversity would challenge the students' cooperation and communication, but also help them avoid groupthink. Moreover, heterogeneous groups were thought to be more creative because members would bring in different perspectives, opinions, ideas and information (Phillips 2014).

## Diverse Backgrounds of Students

The two universities, UJM and Karelia UAS, attract degree students from their respective regions, but also from abroad. Being close to the Finnish-Russian border, Karelia UAS receives many Russian-speaking students. During the past years, a significant number of Vietnamese students have pursued English-mediated BBA studies. The UJM student body contains both local and international students from French-speaking countries, Turkey and China. In addition to degree students, both universities take part in student mobility programmes and integrate a number of international exchange students into their regular courses. In 2015, 58 students taking part in the online projects represented 14 national and language groups. In spring 2016, similar projects were carried out by 108 students from 16 different ethnic and language backgrounds. As a consequence, the national, ethnic and linguistic diversity of students was considerable in both experiments.

Far too often cultural diversity in edu-

cation is seen only as the ethnic mix of students. This viewpoint is far too narrow because cultural phenomena are multi-layered and complex. In addition to the national and ethnic diversity, the learners in our experiments enacted various educational and institutional cultures. Such cultural differences or similarities were not only manifested in academic conventions, calendars and course requirements, but also in the type of learning that was valued and expected. Many Finnish and French students in our experiment considered project-based learning and group work commonplace, while some non-European students commented that they had never been involved in online group assignments in their previous studies. Moreover, based on our previous experience as teachers of diverse groups, we assumed that the expected self-directivity and self-efficacy may be overwhelming to those individuals who were more used to structured activities and teacher-directed approaches. Taking all this into account, self-management, self-reflection and collaborative learning skills were not to be taken for granted. In our experiments, students were asked to reflect on themselves and their group work before, during and after the assignment. Their self-reflection was more thorough and peer feedback more constructive in 2016 than in the experiment the previous year. As teachers, we learned how to better support the development of students' transferable soft skills.

### **Managing Diversity in Online Teams**

**I**n the projects, diversity showed itself in a variety of communication styles and management preferences. As all students were between 18–24 years, the

question was not about bridging age gaps. Gender, however, became an important factor when some groups had to choose a leader. Male and female participants seemed to have slightly different preferences regarding the appropriate leadership or management styles. In 2015, the groups were not asked to nominate a leader or determine clear team roles. In 2016, the instructions were more specific in this regard. Each group had to appoint at least a group representative who was in charge of informing the teachers about their progress. Sometimes the same person had been given multiple roles, while some groups wanted all to be “equal” and “not put anyone above the others”. Before the projects started, the students had to complete Belbin's team role inventory. Although scientifically controversial, this self-evaluation tool enabled them to discover their personal strengths and weaknesses regarding teamwork. The tool was used to divide action-oriented, people-oriented or thinking-oriented individuals more equally into teams. It also appeared that reflection on team roles helped many students understand the value of group diversity or “discover the team's hidden potential”.

*Language did not seem to hinder interaction or task performance.*

Although English was the common language used in the online projects, it was not the first language of any of the participants and English was spoken in a variety of ways and accents. Students' language skills varied and yet, language did not seem to hinder interaction or task performance. Often students belonging to the same language group helped their peers by translating and interpreting. However,

some miscommunication was reported to happen because of different communication preferences. In fact, every group had members from indirect, high-context and more explicit and direct, low-context cultures. In their self-reflection, students described situations where they had unwillingly offended others by being too direct or not been heard or understood when they had expressed themselves too softly or vaguely. The projects served their purpose when students became aware of the potential pitfalls in intercultural communication. We were pleased to note that some students had been able to go beyond the mere recognition of problems into resolving misunderstandings.

### **Preconditions for and Outcomes of Online Collaboration**

The two experiments clearly showed that online collaboration requires structuration and careful planning. Firstly, teachers must agree on common objectives for the assignment and provide their students with the basic theoretical input enabling them to carry out the task. There has to be a clear task brief, explicit timeframe and concrete outputs. The projects have to be signposted by milestones when groups report back about their progress.

Although teachers and assignment instructions must provide structure, they should also leave space for students to choose the approach, tools, and organisation of their project work. To ensure real teamwork, the assignment must be designed so that negotiating and joint decision making become a necessity. In 2015, the projects succeeded better in that respect. It was probably a consequence of what the groups were expected to deliv-

er at the end. In 2015 the project presentations were live-streamed in an online seminar, while in 2016 the project outcomes were presented in a video format. The event in 2015 was synchronic, which caused a lot of excitement, but also feelings of togetherness. Moreover, there was a smaller number of students and less conflicts with academic calendars in 2015 than a year later. Although the projects were launched earlier in spring 2016, a two-week holiday of UJM students and Karelia's one-week break slowed down or stagnated the process. When there was no reply from the distance team, students became frustrated or irritated. The teachers also had to reschedule some milestones to allocate more time for students' collaboration before submitting their reports. Because of time management issues, only half of the groups were actually able to produce their video collaboratively. The other half produced two separate videos, one by Karelia students and the other by UJM members of their group. It also appeared that in some cases the students had not made joint decisions on the contents of their video presentation.

There are skills and attitudes that the students should already have at the outset of international online assignments. As quite often English is the only language that can be used to communicate with all team members, every student must have a sufficient command and willingness to use it. To be able to put forward their perspectives and voice their opinions effectively in project meetings, the students' English skills in our experiment should have been at least B1.2 on the CEFR scale. If students with advanced language skills had exerted their power in decision making and had not allowed or encouraged the participation of less confident speak-

ers, it could have been at the expense of the team process. Having said that, Berg (2012) found out that the differences in language skills can be less conspicuous in virtual teams where written rather than spoken language is used. We also concluded that language was not a major obstacle for online collaboration. On the contrary, the online projects seemed to contribute positively to the development of language competence.

*The students in our experiments were able to develop their digital skills and learned to choose appropriate tools for different purposes.*

In the context of online projects, students must also be able to make good use of digital tools and resources to produce the required outputs, such as videos, reports and audio recordings. It was, therefore, essential to ensure that groups had a balanced mix of technical skills. Although the groups divided tasks mostly according to the students' existing skills, some students also reported to have learned new skills from their peers. As they had to use various devices and media to communicate and organise their distance teamwork, the students in our experiments were able to develop their digital skills and learned to choose appropriate tools for different purposes.

One of the important learning goals of the assignment was to improve students' team-working and communication skills and prepare them for situations where they need to reconcile different opinions and resolve potential conflicts. Virtual teams and especially virtual student teams have been claimed to be very pragmatic

and more task than relationship focused. Task-oriented teams try to minimize effort and often ignore conflicts and disagreements that do not directly affect the task accomplishment (cf. e.g. Dubé and Robey 2009; Fransen et al. 2011 and Munkvold and Zigurs 2007). After the groups had been organized and projects kicked-off, collaboration looked rather smooth and effective. However, the final evaluations and informal feedback revealed that there were suppressed negative feelings and conflicts. Some groups reported that the tasks had not been distributed evenly or that some members had been either too passive or too dominant. However, the problems were mostly ignored until the task was accomplished. In 2016, the teachers provided more consultation during the process, which seemed to yield better results. Some groups were able to discuss and reconcile their differences already during the process. On the other hand, there were a few occasions in both years, when a student asked to change groups or requested the teacher to come and solve a problem in the group. There were also students who were not very committed to their team and did not communicate enough with the others. Yet, even the less cohesive groups had task-committed individuals who made sure that the assignment was completed on time.

## Conclusion

If we focus solely on the content of students' presentations, we could conclude that only a few project groups managed to deepen their theoretical knowledge on cultural dimensions in international business. During the second year, students concentrated more on the format than the content of their presentations. However, the learning objectives re-

garding the development of transferable soft skills were better met in the latter experiment.

While working in diverse groups, students had to use various means of communication and even several languages to get their message across. If they were willing and motivated to contribute, they were able to develop their skills through practice with others. In their groups, students were confronted with different perspectives and expectations and had to reconcile their differences through communication. In order to achieve the common goal, they had to make decisions collaboratively. When working with peers from different backgrounds and sharing perceptions and visions, students had a chance to develop their intercultural and interpersonal communication skills. During the process they also became more aware of their communication styles and preferences. We also found evidence showing that students' autonomy and team working skills developed when they organised their group, coordinated tasks and followed up on their team work on and off site.

It is true that student diversity and group heterogeneity create challenges and increase the complexity of online projects. Yet, according to our experiments, the complex tasks, multifaceted processes and wicked problems enable students to develop the soft and transferable skills that are necessary for the world of work in the digital era.

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