Teaching Innovation and Staff Development Grant 2010

Intercultural learning and collaboration in global student teams

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Two of the key graduate attributes at the University of Melbourne are to help students become attuned to cultural diversity and to become active global citizens. A crucial aspect of this goal is for students to understand the impact of cultural differences and to acquire critical skills and tools to manage these cultural differences in their future workplace.

The course “Cross-cultural Management” explores the theory and practice of firms and its representatives (individuals, teams or groups) when they face business environments that are part of the globalization process. Students learn about managing customs and practices across the world, cross-cultural communication, and the development of culturally and internationally sophisticated employees, teams and managers. The focus of the course lies on developing future employees who have a global mindset and know their role in achieving success by executing the international strategies of the firm and being aware of the cross-cultural differences.

Helping students reach higher levels of cultural self- and other-awareness is challenging and often requires special activities and exercises that go beyond regular traditional classroom activities. Teachers need to pull students out of the comfort zone of their familiar living and working context to help them experience the impact of cultural differences in the workplace.

In the current project students at Uni Melbourne will participate in an international student collaboration with students in Finland, Austria, and the USA. This collaboration will give the students an opportunity to work in real internationally distributed teams with team members from different cultural backgrounds, grounded in their own cultural work context. This is becoming more and more the reality of today’s work in organizations and we need to prepare students to become successful global team members.

The collaboration consists of two parts. Students from the different countries will participate in an online business simulation called RealGame™. As a global virtual team, they will be steering a manufacturing company during two simulation sessions. After each session, the teams are provided with an in-depth analysis of their performance (e.g., sales figures, information about production, financial trends, and negotiation successes) based on which they will reflect about their business competence and virtual team skills. Furthermore, the instructors and team members will provide feedback on virtual team member skills.
In addition, the Australian and Finnish students will participate in a separate email exchange that engages the students in in-class exercises targeted at making them aware of their cultural norms and at challenging their cultural assumptions. In this exchange students teach each other about their own cultural background. Given that only the Finnish and Australian students will participate in this reflective exchange, we will have the opportunity to contrast their business simulation experiences with the experiences of the students from the other participating universities who are only playing in the business simulation. We want to examine whether engaging students in in-depth cross-cultural reflections will help them to perform more successfully as an international team member.

From this international collaboration I hope to learn about the successful integration of practical experiences and experiential exercises into the curriculum of Cross-cultural Management. The more specific goal is to design a successful international collaboration with foreign universities which can create long-term partnerships for teaching, development of successful, practice-oriented teaching methods, internationalization of our curriculum, and successful international networking for students and teachers.