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Internationalising education – Cross-country co-teaching among European higher education institutions

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Abstract

Many lecturers preach teamwork, but they do not practice it by sharing responsibility for classes. Particularly in a transnational context, inputs from lecturers and learners from various countries might be beneficial for students' learning. This paper asks the question: How can higher education institutions (HEI) set up cross-country and cross-HEI co-teaching to facilitate the transfer of host and home country knowledge? The authors provide insights into a transnational co-teaching project that partly relies on virtual distance learning across countries. This real-life project supports small and medium sized enterprises in their international endeavours with the support of lecturers and student teams from the respective host countries as well as their home countries. The authors discuss advantages and disadvantages of cross-country and cross–HEI co-teaching in comparison to traditional teaching methods. Furthermore, the authors elaborate on the impact of virtual distance learning in comparison to in-class teaching at a single physical location. Due to the international nature of the project, it mainly relies on distance learning that can be very effective when implemented correctly. The paper provides lessons learned from the project that might be beneficial for lecturers with and without international components in their teaching.

Keywords: *Internationalisation; co-teaching; virtual teams; distance learning.*

1. Introduction

While many lecturers emphasise the importance of teamwork for their students, the actual teaching in higher education institutions (HEI) still depends mainly on the knowledge and efforts of a single lecturer responsible for the respective module. It therefore seems that lecturers do not practice what they preach.

Co-teaching is widely known as a method that facilitates the learning of groups with diverse abilities or special needs (Austin, 2001; Murawski & Lee Swanson, 2001). However, its application at the higher education level is less intensively studied (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2008). Wenzlaff et al. (2002, p. 14) define co-teaching as "two or more individuals who come together in a collaborative relationship for the purpose of shared work […] for the outcome of achieving what none could have done alone." Therefore, co-teaching appears to be particularly useful in cases where the lecturers have a diverse competence base.

Modules related to the internationalisation of businesses seem to be an interesting field for the application of co-teaching in a HEI context. These modules address the tasks and difficulties that occur when an organisation operates in a home and a host country. Knowledge of both countries is required and it therefore seems desirable to gain first-hand knowledge from partners of the host and the home country. Involving a larger set of individuals from both countries allows all participants to learn from one another (Tajino & Tajino, 2000). This paper therefore asks the question: *How can higher education institutions (HEI) set up cross-country and cross-HEI co-teaching to facilitate the transfer of host and home country knowledge?*

The paper contributes to education methodology in the following way: We first illustrate a practical implementation of co-teaching in a transnational HEI context that requires virtual distance learning. This can be used as a template for further projects. Second, we compare the advantages of co-teaching and traditional teaching models and share some lessons learned. Third, we elaborate on the necessity of a shared single physical location for teaching and the experiences with virtual distance learning across countries and cultures.

2. Theoretical Foundations

Unlike most applications of co-teaching and team-learning, its use in a transnational setting is subject to distance-related challenges. Participants are usually not in one single location, but spread between the home and host country. Therefore, costly travels or forms of distance learning are necessary. Some popular definitions of co-teaching (e.g. Bacharach et al., 2008, p. 9) explicitly emphasise the notion of a 'single/shared physical space' to ensure its success.

The literature on distance learning, "the separation of teacher and learner in space and/or time" (Sherry, 1995, p. 338) is not conclusive in this regard. Unlike the literature on co-

teaching, some reviews conclude that most studies suggest that distance learning compares favourably with instruction at a shared physical space (e.g. Phipps & Merisotis, 1999). A meta-analysis by Bernard et al. (2004) suggests that the results vary substantially, depending on various context factors, such as synchronous versus asynchronous teaching, with distance learning being more successful in an asynchronous teaching context. Moreover, the use of computer technology seems to be supportive for the success of distance learning. The literatures on co-teaching and distance learning therefore do not provide univocal suggestions on the necessity of a shared physical space and both forms of education might be worth exploring in this context.

Commonly reported challenges of distance learning within transnational virtual teams are communication problems and missing trust (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998). Communication problems that mostly relate to multilingual backgrounds can be solved with an adequate media infrastructure, the motivation to rely on various forms of media and 'redundant' communication (Tenzer & Pudelko, 2016). Redundant communication refers to the replication of the same information, but with different media. This repeated information is redundant in a monocultural context, but helpful in a cross-cultural context to ensure that at least one information transfer is successful.

'Swift trust' is very common in virtual teams. It is a form of trust that is initially created and only later verified and potentially adjusted by individuals. Unlike other forms of trust, it is an affective 'leap of faith' (Möllering, 2001) and not based on positive previous experiences. Within a virtual team, swift trust can be created by ensuring early communication and a positive tone, which substantially influence the team's performance (Gilson, Maynard, Young, Vartiainen, & Hakonen, 2015).

3. Transnational Co-teaching Project

Our transnational co-teaching efforts are part of the project "INTENSE – INTernational ENtrepreneurship Skills Europe", supported as a strategic partnership under Erasmus+. Five partner universities (from Belgium, Croatia, Finland, Germany and the Netherlands) created a teaching team that redesigned their international management curricula. The output of the project includes comprehensive teaching materials that are complemented by a range of case studies, as well as a teaching manual with teaching scripts for lecturers. The project further includes the implementation of student consultancy projects that provide direct support to small and medium sized enterprises (SME) that seek to internationalise.

Initially, students are taught the basics of international management (e.g. market entry modes, strategies of internationalisation, cross-cultural differences) and project management in a regular single lecturer teaching environment at their respective home country. All HEI

involved in the project deploy the same teaching materials and scripts. Once the basics are known, lecturers make use of co-teaching to implement the real-life consultancy projects.

3.1. The Structure of Co-teaching in Student Consultancy Projects

The students work together in teams of five to seven students and each team collaborates with one local SME. The lecturers organised the collaboration with the SME beforehand. This includes the acquisition of potential partners and matching student teams and companies in home and host countries.

The projects start simultaneously in five countries, involve 25 student teams, 25 SME (5 per country) and require cooperation between student teams. Figure 1 illustrates how the transnational component is implemented in the projects using a simplified example of three teams.

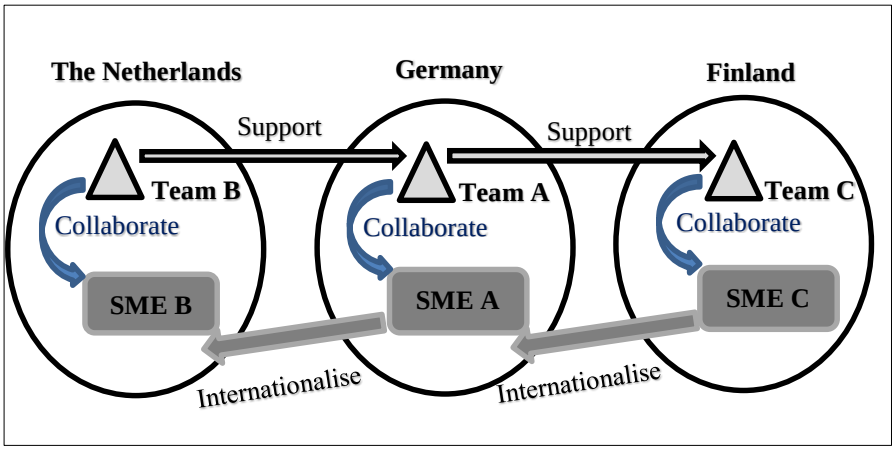

Figure 1. Transnational Student Consultancy. Source: Lehmann, Saulich and Wohlgemuth (2018)

Team A in Germany collaborates with the German SME A. SME A wants to internationalise to the Netherlands. Team A receives support from the Dutch student team B, e.g. relevant knowledge on the Dutch market. At the same time, team A provides specific information on the German market to team C. Team C is based in Finland and collaborates with the Finish SME C that seeks to internationalise to Germany (Lehmann et al., 2018).

The consultancy projects are supplemented by a course that follows a blended learning approach, meaning that some lectures take place as regular in-class lectures, while others were e-learning and individual counselling sessions. The course includes research skills, project management skills, behavioural skills, business etiquette and international management components. Course contents reflect students' needs and provide specific information just in time when students need them.

The involvement of lecturers and students from home and host countries ensures that students acquire the necessary market and task related knowledge that a single home country lecturer could not fully supply on its own. Moreover, this team learning provides students with a practical hands-on experience about the problems in intercultural and virtual communication and with insides on the real-life business problems of the firms they work with.

3.2. Regular Single Lecturer Teaching and Co-teaching

The INTENSE project offers the opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching in a regular single lecturer way and co-teaching since both methods are deployed in the project. The basics of international management and project management are taught in a regular way and only the consultancy project involves co-teaching and team-learning.

The reasons for this divide are various. Co-teaching requires a lot of additional effort (Vesikivi et al., forthcoming) and is not as efficient as single teaching (Austin, 2001). Therefore, it should only be implemented in cases where the added value is worth it and cannot be achieved otherwise (Wenzlaff et al., 2002). There is no need to rely on co-teaching for well-known theoretical concepts of internationalisation and project management. However, it is very valuable to add host/ home country collaboration if the content of the lecture is not standardised and ambiguous ad-hoc information is needed during the project.

As suggested by previous literature (e.g. Austin, 2001; Minett-Smith & Davis, forthcoming), we also agree that teachers should establish and maintain specific areas of expertise, although this is sometimes not fully implemented in practice. We tried to emphasise that the home country teacher should generally be in charge and the host country lecturers and students offer support. It is important to avoid ambiguity of who is in charge and what should be prioritised.

While students and lecturers later confirmed that multiple lecturers and team learning benefitted their learning, it created some frustration along the way and required additional effort. This is mainly due to differences in the organisation of HEI and differences in cross-cultural work behaviour. To provide examples: The workload expectations and the adherence to deadlines differed substantially and created a lot of misunderstandings between the teams. This was partly caused by varying academic calendars and course requirements across HEI. Resolving those situations early on and discussing the progress of both teams and the quality of their work regularly is crucial to avoid misunderstandings.

3.3. Virtual Team Collaborations and Teaching in a Single Physical Location

Team communication relies mainly on virtual distance media to reduce costs. The involved HEI could not afford regular team meetings across countries. However, the funding of the EU Erasmus+ programme allowed for one international student week in which 2-3 students (of 5-7 students) per project team could participate to exchange information face to face. The

week was scheduled in the middle of the projects. Therefore, it allowed to compare (1) the cooperation of the teams in a phase without any face to face contact (2) with direct contact in a physical space and (3) with virtual cooperation after an initial contact.

The first virtual work phase was characterised by a lot of misunderstandings and frustration. Particularly the cross-cultural differences complicate virtual communication. Students were free to choose the communication media. Various channels, such as e-mails, text messenger services, video-conferencing, phones, file sharing services etc. were used. As the literature (Tenzer & Pudelko, 2016) suggests, not all communication media were well perceived and the reliance on redundant information on various media helped the progress and the understanding. No specific medium is superior in all cases, but the diversity creates additional value.

The second work phase, the international student week in one single location, improved relations between most teams. While weak forms of trust were present in the initial communication, the direct evaluation of someone's ability, integrity and benevolence (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998) led to a replacement of the initial swift trust by stronger forms of trust and distrust in the relationships. Most teams judged the others teams favourably in direct contact, which improved the collaboration in the third work phase, the virtual collaboration after the meeting. However, one team appeared less trustworthy than in virtual communication. This resulted in the opposite effect. Our experiences support previous work on 'swift trust' (Gilson et al., 2015) and the 'leap of faith' (Möllering, 2001) in virtual communication.

The synchronisation of progress in all countries also created organisational problems for co-teaching. During the distance work phases students and lecturers were still involved in additional modules at the home institutions that are not synchronised among the countries. The schedules were quite different (holidays, exam periods, etc.), therefore the time and effort invested into the programmes varied at different stages in every country, which created some slack for students in other countries that waited for input. These synchronisation problems do not exist in a single physical space teaching situation as all participants already arranged their schedules accordingly and reserved the appropriate amount of time. Our experiences support previous literature on distance learning that argues that virtual teams are more effective for asynchronous teaching than synchronous teaching (Bernard et al., 2004).

Overall, our experiences show that a combination of distance learning and face to face contact is beneficial. Distance learning helps to decrease costs significantly and is required by the nature of the project. However, at least one short face to face meeting creates a more realistic picture of your partnering team to justify the initial swift trust. In most cases it supports the efficiency of future work and communication. If a physical contact is not possible, a reliance on multiple communication media might be supportive to avoid miscommunication and build

at least weak swift trust. Lecturers and students need to take into account that virtual communication and building up trust in a virtual environment requires a high level of commitment and effort from all participants.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Our paper adds to the practical dimension of teamwork and co-teaching in various ways. First, we illustrate a practical application of co-teaching and team-learning in a transnational setting. Lecturers in the field of international management or other international contexts might use our approach as a template to implement similar collaborations in their curricula. Next to the benefits that relate to co-teaching, the project also provides an interesting avenue to experience cross-cultural differences hands-on.

Second, we emphasise that co-teaching also involves a lot of organisational efforts and recommend its application only in cases were the additional co-teacher or expert can provide added value and the learning outcome cannot be achieved otherwise.

Third, lecturers from all fields might learn from our experiences with virtual collaboration and be motivated to apply electronic communication media. Many scholars regard a single physical location as necessary (e.g. Bacharach et al., 2008, p. 9). Our project does not confirm this, as virtual distance learning was in our case also effective. However, a combination of virtual cooperation and a face to face meeting is desirable.

Our findings and conclusions are currently based on two runs of the student consultancy projects. Further research on the impact of this teaching approach on students' innovative, team work, international, project management, and problem solving competences using the INCODE barometer is currently under way and might provide additional insights.

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