GLOBAL TEAMWORK
TO PROMOTE CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING AND COMMUNICATION

Sharon L. Beaudry
Oregon Institute of Technology
sharon.beaudry@oit.edu

Eva Toth Szalvai
ESCI-UPF, Barcelona
Eva.szalvai@prof.esci.epf.edu

ABSTRACT

Cultural dimensions theory provides a framework for cross-cultural understanding and communication. Geert Hofstede's work in this area offers a foundational appreciation of how a society's culture can shape values and behaviors encountered in an international business setting. This paper presents an experiential learning project, based on Kolb's model, designed to introduce cultural dimensions theory, as well as engage students in a first-hand international experience. This model places students in the position of exploring cultural differences by being a member of an international working team so they experience the challenges of working remotely. Students encounter what it is like to work in a global team and face both cultural differences and communication difficulties. This experiential learning design creates an environment that challenges students to apply and test the theory, discover practical applications and reflect on their own culture to bring greater meaning and learning to cultural dimensions theory.

Keyword: Cultural dimensions, Kolb's Experiential Learning model, remote teamwork, international business.

INTRODUCTION

In today's business environment, as the world becomes more globally interconnected, it is very commonplace to be employed by organizations that have an international business component. Understanding cultural customs and business norms is critical to working together effectively to meet business objectives. Moreover, it is essential to gain experience in meeting the challenges of global communication when working on a global platform. However, simulating this experience in the classroom can be difficult to replicate. This paper presents an applied experiential learning assignment to promote cultural understanding. This model assigns students to a multi-cultural global team that works remotely on a project focused on cultural differences.

The goal of the project is to have the team produce a deliverable and explore cultural theory while experiencing the challenges, first hand, of being on a multi-cultural international team project. The following paper will present the background, assignment designs, and student impact.

BACKGROUND

Dutch social psychologist, Hofstede, developed cultural dimensions theory in 1980 following his global study on employees of IBM and expanded groups (2001). This model defined four initial dimensions of national culture which was expanded in later years to six, which includes Power Distance, Individualism, Uncertainty Avoidance, Masculinity, Long Term Orientation, and Indulgence. Hofstede's presents the idea that individuals are influenced by their national culture, which promotes common values in these six areas (Hofstede, 2001). Understanding how these values influence the workplace provides the basis areas of international management.

Applying cultural dimensions theory has become more significant as communication has improved and global trade has advanced (Friedman, 2005). Understanding cultural diversity within a business context has become a valuable tool for effective interactions with global partners. Gaining an awareness of one's own cultural identity, as well as developing an appreciation for cultural dimensions of international colleagues, can advance understanding in the business environment. The business community should recognize that a singular westernized approach can threaten the unique cultural expression and build barriers to effective international interactions (Mason, 2007; Nisbett, 2003).

Advancing student's appreciation for the dimensions of culture in an international setting is a challenging task in the undergraduate environment (Hansen & Williams, 2003). Common approaches focus on traditional methods of study with few opportunities for students to explore first-hand the differences on a global stage. However, in recent years, there have been some pedagogical approaches to the instruction of cultural dimensions theory for a variety of disciplines. Parrish (2010), adapted cultural dimension learning framework to understand how cultural differences can impact teaching and learning. Kniep Blanton and Barbuto,

(2005) developed an experiential approach for undergraduates involving in class role modeling the various dimensions within the class in a sales team exercise. In 2013, Jain created an intercultural sensitivity training project which utilized cross-cultural movies and focused discussions groups to develop increased sensitivities to other cultures.

Expanding the focus of cultural dimensions beyond the classroom walls has been the next step. During a two-year cross-cultural experience, Cronjé explored commonalities of communication among professors and students using cultural dimensions theory throughout the remote delivery of a masters-level computer course (2010). Wagner advanced the topic by using an evolving collaborative film software that allowed students from five countries to collectivity make movies in international student teams (2015).

The following work seeks to advance this topic of a cross cultural experience at the undergraduate level through the use of international team assignments for business students to explore and test theory and their own cultural beliefs as it can be applied to a practical business setting.

THE PARTNERSHIP

The development of this project came from a partnership of two business professors. Having previously worked together at the same institution, they were each at new institutions literally around the world from one another. One was working at the business program at Oregon Institute of Technology (Oregon Tech), a public polytechnic institution in Oregon in the United States of America. The other was at ESCI-UPF, an international business school supported by the Catalan government and the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, located in Barcelona, Spain. Starting in 2015, the two teamed up to develop this undergraduate project in the ESCI-UPF course called, *Doing Business in America* and Oregon Tech's Human Resource Management course.

For the purposes of this assignment, this partnership could be replicated among any institutions that have cultural differences. While international differences have a more significant impact on student learning, even remote teams within the United States could offer students a worthwhile experience both in terms of remote teamwork and cultural differences.

ASSIGNMENT DESIGN

This assignment focuses on cultural dimensions theory founded by Hofstede (2005). Students worked on assignments within teams consisting of individuals from both their own class, as well as a class from another global location. Students explored and tested the cultural dimensions theory and navigated communication challenges while working remotely. They produced a series of assignments, both individually and as in a team, that reflected on the experience and applied the theory in practical terms.

This experiential learning approach was designed based on Kolb's Experiential Learning Model cycle depicted in *Figure 1* (1974). This theory allows learning of an abstract concept to be applied in a range of situations. The student experiences a new situation, which is then followed by reflection of any inconsistencies between the experience and prior knowledge. This then gives rise to new ideas and modification of concepts. Finally, the learner tests and applies these new concepts in an active way (Kolb, 1974).

FIGURE 1
**KOLB'S EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING MODEL (KOLB, 1974)**
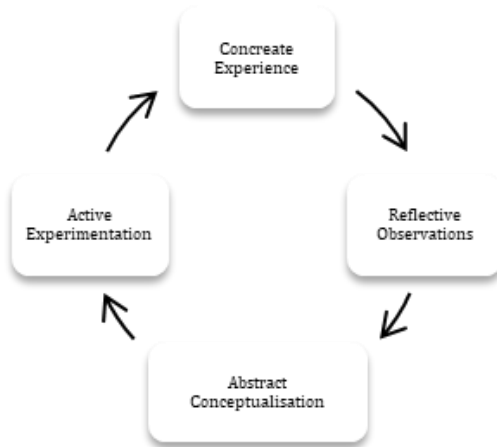
The learning objectives for the project composed three main goals: 1. Understand and apply cultural dimensions theory to a global project. 2. Analyze and evaluate cultural differences and communication challenges while working on a project in a remote global team.   3. Create deliverables that reflect on personal experience and apply cultural dimensions theory for business

professionals.

In this assignment, students assumed the role of a global human resource management training and development team that must prepare educational training materials for employees who will be doing business in Spain, the United States and one other country (of the team's choice). It is the team's job to prepare their employees for doing business in these countries, therefore they need to include anything relevant to conducting business. This includes both the cultural dimensions theory, as well as practical cultural norms and protocol in business like contract negotiations or entertainment. The final training project deliverable, which could be in the form of a brochure, presentation, or video, must be based on cross-cultural research and interviews with team colleagues. All stages of the project took place over about eight weeks. *Figure 2* presents the detailed timeline for the project.

Students worked in teams established by the professors based on class size. Team size varied from four to as many as seven, based on enrollment. All communications within teams were conducted in English. Throughout the project, students were given complete autonomy over how best to communicate with each other. Students used a variety of tools such as Facebook group,

FIGURE 2
PROJECT TIMELINE
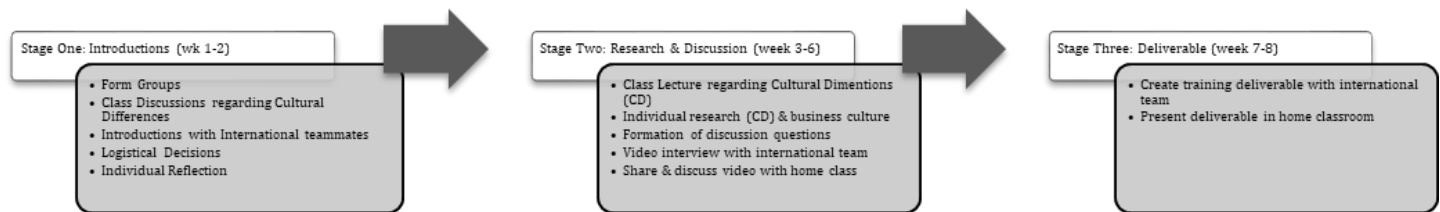
e-mail, Skype, and texting.

STAGE ONE: INTRODUCTIONS

Stage one of the project provided initial experience learning cycle as they were introduced to the project and their teams. Once students received some initial instruction and guidance, they engaged in a low level experience. This was then reflected on both individually and as a class, to prepare for the second, and more significant second stage of engagement with their international team. This first stage allowed students to observe and reflect upon cultural biases and adjust prior knowledge before embarking on main portion of the assignment.

Prior to the introductions, professors had an introductory class discussion regarding cultural differences to bring awareness to challenges they might face. These discussions focused on potential cultural biases, cultural self awareness, communication challenges (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010). For example, the American class discussed how Americans can be perceived as very direct and even brash by those from other cultures. Additionally, students were reminded that everyone has speaking accents which may be difficult for others to initially understand. For some students, this was a completely new perspective of their own culture and voice since they had little, to no previous international exchanges.

Once introductory concepts were discussed, students then were required to engage with their international teams through extended introductions. Students were asked to share information about themselves so their teammates would begin to feel comfortable with each other. Most of these initial exchanges were through e-mail. During these initial communications, students were also asked to discuss various modes of communication and come to a consensus as a group. They had to contend with time zone differences so they could find a time that worked for everyone. Lastly, as a group, they had to decide on the third country that they would focus upon for the assignment.

Following the initial introductions, a brief individual written summary of the experience and further class discussion took place regarding first impressions. Students often reflect upon differences in the use of the English language. For example, the Spain students were generally very formal when writing, while the American students were more informal. Issues of cultural phrasing or colloquialisms arose during these initial exchanges. Students also noted that there are often time delays in getting responses, which began to illuminate the time-zone differences.

This initial introductory stage established a framework for the assignment. These first experiences allowed students to reflect on previously held beliefs about their own culture and begin to conceptualize the challenges of working in a diverse cultural team. Not only did students developing an awareness of the logistical challenges to global teamwork, but they began to be introduced and experience cultural differences within their international teams. This also gave them an opportunity to explore and reflect upon any biases and uncover new perspectives before moving onto the next stage (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010).

STAGE TWO: RESEARCH & DISCUSSION

The second stage of the project provides students with a more in-depth round in the experiential learn cycle in order to build upon the previous initial introduction phase of the project (Kolb, 1974). This stage provides students with more in-depth theory and

an ability to test both new knowledge and assumptions with their international team.

This stage introduced students to cultural dimension theory (Hofstede, 2001). With their home class, the theory was explored as it specifically applies to United States, Spain, and their other selected country. This research was based on Hofstede's work, as well as other credible research. Students were asked to apply the theory to practical applications for business professionals working in a global setting. For example, if negotiating a contract in a global setting, how would cultural differences apply? Also, what are the expectations in terms of dining or other business interactions?

Students then prepare a list of interview and discussion questions with their home team based on their cultural dimensions research. This step allowed students to discuss, reflect and apply the theories as it applied to their own culture as well as their international team. They utilized both their prior introduction phase experience and the cultural dimensions research to form questions and prepare for a face-to-face video interview and discussion with their international team.

With these questions, they arranged meetings with their international team to interview each other and discuss their findings. These meetings were conducted through a video chat modality such as Skype and were recorded. The main purpose of this interaction was not only to share their findings but also to test the practical applications of the research with each other. For example, Hofstede's theory states American's are more focused on the individual success rather than on the team – was this actually the experience of the American students? Students found that while some theories were correct, others were not found to have practical implications.

One significant issue for the students during this stage of the project was the logistical communication challenges. Students quickly learned that it took substantial pre-planning when working within an international team. Completing this project last minute did not work. Students often assumed that the other portion of the team would be required to stay up late to make an international meeting. Teams that were effective at preplanning the meetings were successful. Those teams that were last-minute planners or were inflexible with their schedules had major trials completing this stage.

Following these team meetings, videos were shared in home classes along with reflections of the interaction and the testing of the theory in this experiential environment. Most significantly, not only did students learn about the other culture but most became far more aware of their own culture, as well as the cultural bias that they had (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010). For example, one group of students from Oregon realized that their main exposure to people who spoke Spanish was from Mexico when they incorrectly imposed those same impressions on their teammates from Spain. These reflections allowed for rich discussion in the class regarding cultural and communication differences, biases and self-awareness.

STAGE THREE: DELIVERABLE

The final stage of the project required teams to develop a deliverable based on their research, experiences, reflections, applications and testing (Kolb, 1974). This last stage provided students with an opportunity to draw upon all elements of the experiential learning model to produce a practical application base not only on theory but their own experience.

This stage required teams to develop materials for employees who need guidance on international assignments or working within global teams. Specifically, their goal was to create a practical business training application. In other words, since Spain is high in the area of Uncertain Avoidance, what does this mean in practical terms? Student teams developed presentations, brochures, and videos.

During this last stage of the project, ongoing encouragement of working within the international team was needed. While students enjoyed the interaction and discussion during stage two of the project, the challenge of producing a deliverable within that team was difficult. Students were often found completing this portion was easier to accomplish with their home teams due to timing and remote communication challenges. Successful teams often used remote platforms like Google docs to complete this stage. Regardless, each student was able to utilize not only the theory but also their own experience to produce the assignment.

ASSESSMENT

To determine the effectiveness of this project in terms of the learning objectives, a student survey was administered following the projects conducted in 2015 and 2016. The following will discuss survey design, student ratings, and instructor observations, along with lessons learned and general conclusions.

The student survey was designed to focus on two specific areas related to the project: exposure to cultural differences and communication challenges while working in a global team. A series of Likert scale questions queried students regarding aspects of the learning objectives. Also, a group of open text questions was designed to illicit reactions to various aspects of the project. Between the two classes in 2015 and 2016, 45 students completed the survey, 18 from Spain and 27 from the United States.

CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

This first section will focus on the cultural issues experienced by students. The survey contained a series of questions, as seen in *Table 1*, related to the theme of cultural understanding based on a five-point Likert scale.

TABLE 1
CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

	Strongly Disagree or Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree or Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
This project exposed me to cultural differences	4%	9%	87%	3.93	.71
By working within an international team, it aided my learning of cultural dimensions theories in practice.	6%	18%	76%	3.80	.96
I became more aware of my own cultural through this project.	9%	24%	67%	3.78	.90
I became more aware of other cultures through this project.	9%	9%	82%	4.07	.93
I was able to apply my learning of cultural dimensions throughout this project.	9%	13%	78%	3.87	.89

n=45

Overall, students reported having a significant exposure to cultural differences through this experiential learning model. A majority of students gained an understanding of the cultural dimensions theory and reported greater awareness of testing the theory in practice while working in an international team. While a majority of students reported that they became more aware of their own culture, it was less than those students reporting a greater awareness of other cultures.

As a percentage, more students from the class in Spain reporting gaining an understanding of cultural differences than the American students.   This was likely due to the prior cultural awareness difference between the two groups of students. While the students from Spain had previous international experiences and actively sought to study international business, the students from Oregon were generally from rural environments and had limited exposure to cultural exchanges. Therefore, the Spanish students appeared to have greater awareness and appreciation for the international exchange.

Of those students that reported little or no benefits to the project, they were observed by instructors to have a last-minute approach to planning for assignment activities. This led them to experience frustration when interacting with their international teammates. Since they had a hard time understanding the need to plan ahead, they never were able to reflect on the experience beyond the logistical issues.

In an open-ended question, students were asked if they experienced any culture clashes during the project. About half reported no culture clashes, while others noted language barriers, differences in the formality of communication, and general difficulties aligning expectations of the team members. There were a few groups that reported having more challenges with their home country team than with their international teammates.

The assessment of the deliverables from these two classes was also compared to one class in the United States that did not have this experience. Both groups demonstrated a similar understanding of Hofstede's cultural dimension theory, however, those that worked in the international team environment, had a much more in-depth understanding of the of the practical applications of the theory in a business context.

COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

The students were also surveyed regarding their communication challenges while working within a remote team. As seen in *Table 2*, overwhelmingly students reported these challenges. The level of English language formality was noted. Specifically, the American students reported that they became more aware of their accent and use of slang which was not always understood by their international counterparts. The majority of Spanish students were able to fluently speak several languages and their use of English was more formal.   Comments from both groups included difficulty in understanding accents and meanings of phrases.   Extra effort was required from both groups to explain meanings in a conversation.

TABLE 2
COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

	Strongly Disagree or Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree or Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
This project exposed me to communication challenges	2%	11%	87%	4.31	.85

n=45

The other significant challenge was the ability to plan for the international delay and time zone differences. Students reported receiving written communication irregularly or delayed. Of the 45 students completing the survey, 44 reported challenges

with communication. Both groups of students reported gaining perspective of the effort and time it takes to plan out an international assignment. As the stages of the assignment progressed, more students understood the need for significant pre-planning within international teams to meet deadlines.

The two main modes of communication were e-mail and video sessions. Some teams set up shared Google documents or Facebook groups. Students reported differences in communication based on modality. Generally, students appreciated the face-to-face video session to clarify communication between the groups. Written communication, within various modalities, was often reported as difficult since it required more effort to clarify meaning.

LESSONS LEARNED

Utilization of Kolb's experiential learning model (1974) allowed students to move beyond the theory of Hofstede's cultural dimension. This assignment allowed students to progress through three stages of experience, reflection, application and testing to develop a greater appreciation for how culture plays a role in the global business environment. Students experienced aspects of the cultural dimensions theory first hand and were able to ask questions of international teammates regarding, for example, how "uncertain avoidance" is compared in two countries with very different values (Hofstede, 2001). Most significantly, students were able to challenge and reflect upon their own cultural bias and gained greater perspective of skills needed to effectively work in an international team (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010).

Both students and instructors learned several other lessons from this experiential learning model. While students reported an increase of appreciation of other cultures, it was the communication challenges that made a more significant mark with students. Overall, students came to value the significant amount of time and planning that was required when working within an international team. Additionally, students gained a greater understanding and perspective of their own culture's dimensions (Hofstede, 2001). This was particularly seen with those students that had less previous exposure to international interactions.

There were several lessons learned by the instructors as well. Similar to the students, the instructors also faced remote communication and logistical challenges. The project was fit within two classes that had slightly different foundational focuses. Additional efforts needed to be made to design the deliverables to meet the themes of both classes. The classes were also on different schedules and timelines, therefore efforts needed to be made to make the project fit within both classes. The first couple of weeks required flexibility to determine the timeline and the makeup of student teams. Lastly, the instructors primarily communicated through e-mail. Both agreed that while this form of communication was somewhat effective, they would have benefited with periodic video meetings to discuss challenges and successes "face-to-face."

CONCLUSIONS

Providing an enriching international experience for students can be challenging, however, the development of a remote team assignment can provide participants a first-hand encounter. This assignment was designed, based on Kolb's experiential learning model, to create an active learning experience for students to explore, reflect, apply and test cultural differences and communication challenges in business. Specifically, the exercise applies Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions to a simulated international workplace environment.

Participants reported increased knowledge of the theory, as well its practical application in a business setting. The majority of students also reported gaining a greater understanding their own culture and how it is perceived by international partners. Lastly, the students learned the need for increased communication and additional planning when working remotely. Based on results of the survey and assessment of assignments, the effectiveness of the project appears to demonstrate a useful learning tool to promote cultural sensitivity and international communication.

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