

Fostering Cross-Cultural Understanding Through E-Learning: Russian-American Forum Case Study.

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Abstract—The importance of cross-cultural understanding is accelerated nowadays by globalization and joint efforts of different countries in the face of global challenges. Countries' educational systems display attempts to incorporate cross-cultural studies in their curricula across all stages of formal learning. Many higher education institutions offer special courses aimed at promoting cross-cultural studies. One of the tools used to facilitate the process is e-learning. The present article examines the case study of an internet-based collaboration between two higher education institutions – State University Higher School of Economics in Russia and Champlain College in the USA – in fostering cross-cultural understanding.

The project is based on the study of individualistic and collectivistic values within the framework of two corresponding courses studied at both institutions. The topicality of the study is determined by the growing importance of the cooperation of two countries on the international affairs arena, on the one hand, and the fundamental differences of the countries' underlying value system, on the other. In particular, a post-soviet Russia is generally viewed as a developing democracy representing the collectivistic end of the value spectrum, whereas the USA is considered as an extreme case of individualistic value system.

The comparison and contrast of the two systems conducted simultaneously by the representatives of both cultures (students of the two universities) within a specifically built internet forum comprises the base of the project. The case study covers the project's objectives, its background, the rationale behind its content choice, the design of the e-learning tool, the profile of the participants of the project, its implementation stages and its outcome.

The major findings of the case study deal with the process of building cross-cultural awareness, reinforcing students' analytical skills and providing them with a research incentive, fostering self-reflection, values projection from one culture onto the other, drawing the areas of their intersection, which, finally, result in cross-cultural understanding. The results of the study are assessed at quantitative and qualitative levels.

Index Terms—Cross-Cultural Understanding, Education, E-Learning, International Collaboration.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Cross Cultural Understanding

The phenomenon of globalization has led to an increasing importance of the global community members col-

laboration based on cross cultural understanding (CCU). The need for building new network of ties between countries and cultures was recognized on many levels and accelerated by the global challenges that can be dealt with only through joint efforts of different countries and regions of the world. Many scholarly studies are aimed at examining the mechanisms of CCU and the ways to foster it.

CCU is generally defined as the basic ability of individuals and communities to recognize, interpret and correctly react to people, incidences or situations that are open to misunderstanding due to cultural differences. [1] Such approach highlights an individual as an active subject capable of putting priory obtained knowledge into practice. However, this also implies a multi-layered structure of CCU that includes both active and passive components. To illustrate, CCU can be divided into such components as 'cross cultural knowledge', 'cross cultural awareness', 'cross cultural sensitivity', and 'cross cultural competence', given that one is built upon another. Thus, 'cross cultural knowledge' refers to a surface level familiarization with cultural characteristics, values, beliefs and behaviors. 'Cross cultural awareness', in its turn, is accompanied by changes within the learner's behavior and attitudes such as a greater flexibility and openness. 'Cross cultural sensitivity', as a natural by-product of awareness, refers to an ability to read into situations, contexts and behaviors that are culturally rooted and be able to react to them appropriately. Finally, 'cross cultural competence' is the ultimate stage of cross cultural understanding and signifies the actor's ability to work effectively across cultures. [1]

According to this structure, it is essential to acknowledge multiple goals while trying to foster CCU. The goals include 1) providing an access to information on cross-cultural peculiarities; 2) encouraging open-mindedness through discussing the information; 3) creating tools of interpreting and reacting to cross cultural contexts; 4) modeling the situations to implement cross cultural knowledge.

In order to attain those goals, countries' educational systems all over the world display attempts to incorporate cross-cultural studies in their curricula across all stages of formal learning. Many higher education institutions offer special courses aimed at promoting cross-cultural studies. One of the tools used to facilitate the process is e-learning. The present article examines the case study of an web-based collaboration between two higher education institutions – State University Higher School of Economics in

Russia and Champlain College in the USA – in fostering cross-cultural understanding.

B. *E-Learning*

Many educators around the globe acknowledge ‘the need for new empirically tested practices and scholarly sound methods for developing solutions for how best to use information and communication technologies to offer student hands-on learning of transnational and intercultural differences.’ [3]

E-Learning was chosen as the most suitable format for the project due to a range of advantages offered by web-based collaboration of two institutions from different countries. First of all, it is cost-effective and does not require any additional funding given that the platform for an on-line forum was already created by one of the institutions. Then, e-learning facilitates time-management as the world web can be accessed from any location at any time, not necessarily in class. That eliminates the need to alter the curriculum schedule to implement extra time for the project. Finally, an on-line representation of the material creates a unified learning environment, helps overcome differences in teaching and learning styles and bridge the gap between potentially unequal educational facilities in two institutions (equipment, technology and so on).

C. *Project Background and Objectives*

Russian-American on-line forum between the students of State University Higher School of Economics (SU HSE), Moscow, Russia, and Champlain College, Vermont, USA, dedicated to fostering cross-cultural understanding emerged out of educational needs of the two institutions.

The project was initiated by Champlain College and conducted within the framework of Global Modules. Global Modules is an e-learning tool of internationalizing the College curriculum and introducing the students to other nations’ mentality and lifestyle. Champlain students connect with students at various international universities for short, thematic, course-embedded, online discussions. This is an effective and low-cost way to internationalize the campus while using existing technology.

The tool was first designed in 2004 by Professor Gary Scudder, PhD, who managed through the years to establish the network of over 25 participating educational institutions all over the world, including those in the Middle East and Africa. The concept of Global Modules is based on interdisciplinary approach encouraging the discussion of the topics that fall within the framework of several academic disciplines. It also builds upon the idea of student-driven education meaning that the College curriculum is tailored to the needs of the students to be prepared to study abroad and acquire cross cultural knowledge. Finally, Global Modules determine the differential advantage of the College offering internationalization of the curriculum to serve the needs of the globally-minded youth.

SU-HSE was the first institution in Russia to join the network in 2009. For SU-HSE the project was gateway to integrate a web-based component into the course of American Studies reinforcing the process of developing cross cultural competences. Additional benefit for SU HSE students was an opportunity to practice the foreign language with the native speakers within the second lan-

guage acquisition disciplines and to get a hands-on experience in communicating with representatives from a target culture, thus, learning about the foreign country from its citizens.

In spite of the different needs of the institutions, the professors engaged in the project found an essential common ground which made this project possible. This common base for the two different cultures and two different institutions became the need for fostering cross-cultural understanding as one of the underlying requirements of the present-day globalized society.

The relations between the countries of origin of the institutions involved in the project also contributed to shaping the project’s objectives. Considering the history of Cold War and still having to deal with its heritage in the form of ignorance of the two sides about each other’s cultures and mentalities along with numerous misbeliefs and stereotypes in this field, in this case, it is of vital importance to establish as many channels of first-hand information and opinion exchange as possible on the level of higher education engaging the peers in a constructive dialogue.

II. WEB-BASED DISCUSSION FORUM

A. *Framework*

The project was conducted in the form of an on-line forum (within the framework of the Global Modules carried out by Champlain College). This is an asynchronous web-based discussion, contributions to which are limited to equal groups of enrolled students from each side, while the access to reading is open to the general public.

Global Modules comprise four weeks of an on-line discussion of a topic introduced with the help of a pre-selected reading that fits guidelines of both institutions curricula. The first week is dedicated to the general introductions and primary exchange of the mutual perceptions. The aim here is to determine the range of the background knowledge of the participants about the foreign country involved in the project. It is done in the form of free-writing, question-and- answer sessions, self-presentation. The second week offers a pre-selected reading on the subject and general questions to the participants on its content. The questions to the participants are targeted at reinforcing reading comprehension and identifying the main constituents of the reading – main idea, supporting details, facts, opinions, inferences and others. The third week is designed for the participants to share specific country-centered examples on the topic. In this case, as opposed to the previous stage, there is no ready-made material to build upon, thus research incentive and creativity become the cornerstones for the discussion. Finally, the fourth week is left for feedback and final comments. The participants are encouraged to share their views on the advantages and disadvantages of the project in order to tailor the following discussions to the needs of the particular groups of students.

B. *Participants and Content Choice*

The Russian-American discussion forum conducted in the fall of 2009 was based on the study of individualistic and collectivistic values within the framework of two corresponding courses studied at both institutions. American students were exposed to it within the class of ‘Concepts

of Self' for freshmen, while Russian students participated in it within the class of 'American Studies' for sophomores. The initial mismatch in the years of study can be explained by the pilot nature of the project and by the fact that the project was conducted in English, which is a foreign language for Russian students. However, the results of the forum proved that the mismatch was unnecessary and further on the classes are going to be equaled in the year of studies due to the sufficient mastery of English language by the non-native speakers.

The topicality of the forum subject - individualistic and collectivistic values - was determined by the growing importance of the cooperation of the two countries on the international affairs arena, on the one hand, and the fundamental differences of the countries' underlying value system, on the other. In particular, a post-soviet Russia is generally viewed as a developing democracy representing the collectivistic end of the value spectrum, whereas the USA is considered as an extreme case of individualistic value system.

The common reading which was presented to the students on both sides covers the main criteria for determining the individualistic and collectivistic ends of the value spectrum such as orientation on self or group, decision-making and knowledge transmission process, the issues of individual choice and personal responsibility, concepts of progress and competitiveness, perceptions of shame and guilt, expression of identity, property ownership, interaction style and expectations for adulthood.

The article was deliberately chosen to represent a traditional approach to the issue and it proved to encourage a heated debate on whether its main points are still valid. Although the students were asked to illustrate the article with their own examples supporting the author's statements, the participants of the forum opted to highlight their personal views opposite to those presented in the article. Thus, one of the main project goals was achieved, i.e. the participants got engaged into a constructive disagreement dialogue, which was carried out on several levels: the dialogue with the article's main points, the dialogue with the representatives of a different culture, the dialogue with the representatives of the same culture.

C. Supervision and Evaluation

The forum brought together 24 students in total (15 American and 9 Russian) under the guidance of two professors responsible for the disciplines within the framework of which the project was conducted (Initially the number of students was higher but it diminished due to the class drop-outs not connected to the project.).

Extending motivational theory of Douglas McGregor onto the field of education (Theory X and Theory Y of employee motivation), the instructors used several motivators for students to take part in the project. [2] First, the professors on both sides recognize that the students have an inner need to expand their horizons, explore other cultures and communicate with peers from other countries. This motivator, which corresponds to Theory Y, determined the participation of the majority of the students. However, along with pure thirst for knowledge and communication, the students are also motivated by academic success measured by grades. To include the motivator corresponding to Theory X, the instructors developed the system of supervision and evaluation as

part of the instructors' role to meet the needs of the students.

The supervision part was carried out in the form of monitoring the discussion the students had. The instructors acknowledged their presence in the forum and guided the debate to make it flow in the right direction. For instance, such comments from instructors as 'Britney raised an important point, what do you think about it?' were common. However, it was essential not to dominate the discussion so as not to discourage students from contributing and not to let instructors' entries influence the opinion of the students. Thus, the instructors' role was to highlight and clarify certain points in the discussion. For example, the abbreviation PC used by an American student might not be familiar to many Russian students, thus it was the instructor's responsibility to clarify that it stands for 'political correctness'.

Evaluation part of the project was outlined in the form of several rules. In case students opted for their participation to be evaluated in the form of a grade, they had to meet the following numerical and quality requirements. On the one hand, they had to contribute at least twice a week and at least one entry should be made as a response to another student's contribution. On the other hand, only those entries were evaluated that expressed some relevant idea and reinforced the debate. Irrelevant or meaningless entries were not evaluated, though not discouraged. Depending on the number and the quality of the contributions, the students got a grade which was incorporated into the final grade for the class.

III. MAIN FINDINGS

The major findings of the project deal with the process of fostering cross cultural understanding through engaging the students into cross cultural creative dialogue. The results of the study were assessed at quantitative and qualitative levels.

A. Quantative Assessment

Quantative assessment was carried out in the form of a questionnaire, which included 7 closed questions.

In the first 4 questions, 24 students were asked to rate on the scale of 0 to 10 (from 'no idea at all' to 'complete perfect picture') the knowledge of the foreign and the native country before and after the project. The results are presented in Table I.

The next two questions were aimed at rating the willingness to learn more about the foreign country after the project and to discuss any other foreign country. Finally, the last question dealt with the general impression from participation in the project. The results are presented in Table II.

The data from both tables reveal the following results:

1. American and Russian students differed greatly in the level of knowledge of the foreign country involved in the project. While American students' knowledge about Russia was significantly below average, in some cases even close to nothing, Russian students rated their knowledge about the USA above average. Thus, it indicates an educational significance of the project, which is also supported by the fact that after the project both sides admitted the increase in knowledge of the foreign country.

2. Both American and Russian students possessed a sufficient knowledge about their native country before the project. However, the majority of the students highlighted that the project helped to get more insights into their own country. It reveals that the process of building CCU also fosters a better understanding of a native culture.
3. The project provided the students with an incentive to continue the study of a foreign country, although the Russian students displayed a stronger motivation to do it. Both sides also got interested in learning more about another foreign country rather than those involved in the project. It shows the positive influence of culture studies on individuals, who get motivated to expand their cultural horizons.
4. Finally, the students on both sides, on the whole, displayed a positive attitude towards web-enhanced culture studies and the dialogue between two countries. This success provides for the further development of the project in future.

a. Qualitative Assessment

Qualitative assessment was conducted by means of matching the goals of fostering CCU (see introduction: components of CCU) to students perceptions expressed in the form of a free writing during the fourth week of the project (The students contributions are available at www.globalmodules.net). The students' responses are presented in the original grammar and punctuation.

As for the first component of CCU, which is cross cultural knowledge achieved through providing an access to information on cross-cultural peculiarities, it is reflected in the following comments of the participating students:

Joshua C. (US): *"I particularly enjoyed reading points of view from our Russian friends. Their unique insight into Russian culture and maybe their more worldly open-mindedness, assisted in showing me other sides that I might not necessarily consider."*

Alexandra M. (US): *"I really enjoyed reading about a culture I knew little-to-nothing about. It's very different to learn about something when the information comes from an independent source. I think learning about something in such an informal environment gives more personality to the information. I guess I was naive to consider the culture in America "the norm", and that everyone else's society is outside of that."*

The next component of CCU, which is cross cultural awareness fostered by encouraging open-mindedness through discussion, can be found in the following students' responses:

Britney T. (US): *"I have learned so very much in the last three weeks. I never realized how unique the United States is compared to other countries in the world. Perhaps the most eye opening is just how much history plays a role in the present."*

Katya A. (RUS): *"As for me I really enjoyed talking to our American friends, it was extremely exciting to learn how they perceive Russia and what their concerns are. You also added a lot to the way I perceive the US. And I figured that even though we live in different countries we all are open for communication, eager to talk and discuss a wide range of issues and willing to learn more and more."*

TABLE I.
RATING THE KNOWLEDGE OF FOREIGN AND NATIVE COUNTRIES.

Question	Number of Students	Grading Scale (0- no idea at all, 10 – complete perfect knowledge)										
		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
		1) knowledge of the foreign country before the project	US (15)	1	3	3	3	3	1	-	-	1
	RUS (9)	-	-	-	1	-	3	-	2	3	-	-
2) knowledge of the foreign country after the project	US (15)	-	1	-	3	2	5	2	1	1	-	-
	RUS (9)	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	1	5	-	-
3) knowledge of the native country before the project	US (15)	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	4	4	5	-
	RUS (9)	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	3	4	-
4) knowledge of the native country after the project	US (15)	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	2	4	7	-
	RUS (9)	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	2	5	-

TABLE II.
PROJECT IMPACT

Question	Number of Students	Multiple Choice Answers				
		not at all	no	may be	yes	for sure
1) willingness to learn more about the foreign country	US (15)	-	2	3	6	4
	RUS (9)	-	-	-	3	6
2) willingness to discuss any other foreign country	US (15)	-	-	7	4	4
	RUS (9)	-	-	-	2	7
3) general impression from the project		I hated it	I disliked it	so so	I liked it	I loved it
	US (15)	-	3	4	7	1
	RUS (9)	-	-	3	5	1

Christine J. (US): *"I believe this was a very good experience to participate in. I learned a lot about Russia that I did not know and I also got an idea of what foreigners think of the United States. I think that this activity is very good because hatred is most often because of dislikes or differences and in this activity we were able to either find out if our dislikes were true or not and able to find common ground on the fact that even though we live in completely different places we are all alike... people/students/teenagers."*

Cross cultural sensitivity achieved through creating tools of interpreting and reacting to cross cultural contexts as the third component of CCU can be tracked in the following students' contributions:

Dmitry S. (RUS): *"I think that on some issues our interests coincide, in some don't, but similar to our governments, we have got a wonderful opportunity to bridge the gap between us and overcome misunderstanding in different aspects."*

Emil G. (RUS): *"In my opinion, sometimes we faced cultural misunderstanding while discussing major issues of national identity that's why such projects are of vital importance because they can obviously help to overcome all pitfalls which will certainly arise while communicating with people from other countries."*

Finally, cross cultural competence evaluated as an ability of implementing cross cultural knowledge was best described in the following student's response:

Matthew K. (US): *"I have come to realize that we need to achieve a happy norm of individualism and collectivism because there are many good factors from both sides. This will make me much more conscious about the values of various situations I encounter in the future. I will be much more alert to everyone's tendencies. Whether they are individualistic or collectivistic I now know that there are aspects to be valued from each side. I have learned to give more thought to my surroundings and the society I live in. Most importantly, however, I have learned that I need to grow much more in a worldly sense. I need to become much more aware of other cultures in the world in order to realize the bigger picture and apply it to the culture I live in."*

Thus, the qualitative assessment indicates that the major goals of fostering CCU were achieved within the project enabling the students with cross cultural knowledge, awareness, sensitivity and competence.

B. Scalability and Sustainability

The fall of 2009 project was the first-time collaboration between SU HSE and Champlain College, which explains a relatively small number of participants on both sides. However, the success of the project has definitely set up a base for future collaboration of the two institutions.

The project is expected to grow in scale. In the spring of 2010, the number of web-forums will increase up to 8, engaging the total of over 200 students and 15 instructors. The numbers comprise the students and instructors engaged in various disciplines such as 'American Studies', 'Business Studies', 'Mass Media Studies' at SU HSE and 'Concepts of Self', 'Concepts of Community', 'Capitalism and Democracy' at Champlain College. Those bilateral on-line discussions in perspective can possibly turn into tri-lateral, involving other partner institutions from Global Modules network. It can also involve expanded use of

technology (such as video-conferencing) and other forms of networking (such as 1-1 partner interaction).

The project also appears to be sustainable due to making it a core component of the curricula of both institutions. Champlain has been running Global Modules for about 5 years now, making the project equal to 10% of the grade for certain classes. SU HSE is also planning to conduct it on regular basis within the concept of School of World Economy and International Affairs Mission of interdisciplinary approach to higher education including curriculum internationalization.

IV. CONCLUSION

The project showed that the dialogue with peers of an opposite culture proved to be constructive in terms of that the discussion gradually transformed into a cooperative learning, with the participants trying to acquire as much information from their counterparts as possible as well as providing as much in return. Some of the participants also felt the need for further research in order to make the picture more complete. The students' contributions revealed that they not only acquired cross-cultural competencies but also reached a certain level of cross-cultural understanding.

Another important outcome was self-reflection. In other words, the students were encouraged to reflect back on their own culture and, by the end of the project, acknowledged that they got deeper insights into not only a foreign culture but their own as well. As for the content, many students proved the traditional view on the issue wrong with their examples and came to the conclusion that the two opposite cultures have more similarities than differences.

All in all, the forum proved to be successful in fostering cross-cultural understanding between the students from two opposite cultures and served as a first step in building a closer partnership between two distant educational institutions.

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