

A German-American Alliance: Simulated Real-Life Cross-Cultural Business Communication Exercise Involving German and American Classrooms

Susan L. Luck
Pfeiffer University, Charlotte

Stephanie Swartz
University of Applied Sciences Mainz, Germany

While it is one thing to read about communication and work styles in other countries, experiencing it while also having to meet expected requirements of your own culture is something different altogether. We took two very similar classes, both comprised of working adults in Germany and in the US, and joined the students into a project with a purposely vague deliverable. We wanted them to move beyond a textbook understanding of working interculturally, to experience working with people from another country and to present points via technology with presenters who were delivering information simultaneously from both sides of the Atlantic.

INTRODUCTION

Although many global MBA programs teach intercultural communication, what happens when the method for teaching that concept becomes mostly experiential? To answer that question, we took two very similar classes, both comprised of working adults, in Germany and one in the US, and joined the students into a project that spread over several weeks and that had a purposely vague deliverable. To initiate this project, we gave them a case study of a real-life merger between an American and a German corporation to create a new corporation. We then broke them into groups of four, with each group assigned to create proposed points to be included in new HR policies that governed both countries' employees. These points were to be presented for discussion at a live international videoconference at the end of the month. Both culminated in a final paper where students analyzed issues that arose during the course of their interactions, with both sets of students applying cultural theories such as Hofstede and Hall and proposed strategies for successful business interactions involving Americans and Germans.

PURPOSE

Our purpose was simple: while it is one thing to read about communication and work styles in other countries, experiencing it and working within it while also having to meet expected requirements of your own culture is something different altogether. We wanted them to be able to move beyond a textbook understanding of working interculturally, to have experienced working with people from another country. Furthermore, we wanted students to have first-hand experience of working both internationally and almost entirely via electronic communication. Students were expected to be able to present points via

technology with presenters who were delivering information simultaneously for discussion at a videoconference from both sides of the Atlantic. While the students may have inferred that the policy points were the main goal of the assignment, our main goal was to have them learn to communicate with people from another country.

ANALYSIS

An analysis on cultural differences affecting business communication styles was done in the German classroom after the project had finished. Students were to experience the differences and incongruities first hand and then search for answers with the help of Gert Hofstede, Edward Hall and Richard D. Lewis. While Germans and Americans are both low context, monochronic, direct cultures which prefer to convince through facts and stick closely to an agenda (Hall, 1990), cultural dimensions which set them apart and cause irritation include the Germans' high uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1991). With the help of Hofstede and Lewis (2006), students learned that Germans are task-oriented and need longer to make decisions while Americans focus on results and become impatient with long, drawn-out discussions.

Furthermore, the students learned that initial get-to-know-you questions that the Germans, who had read that Americans value small talk, asked were considered too personal and almost offensive by the Americans. Distinct differences arose as to what medium to communicate in; where communicating for work via social media was acceptable to one county it was not for another. Americans learned that much of their unconscious use of idioms and casual phrasing—including emails without salutations—were considered unprofessional and rude by the Germans. They worked through translation and language barriers as well as barriers they created for themselves via perceived tone.

Finally, during the final videoconference students interacted in true discussion over cultural differences and how to solve them. They learned to overcome time differences while presenting in tandem with partners across the Atlantic and learned to accommodate with and adjust for the limitations that the technology brought to the videoconference.

METHOD

Participants

The American group was comprised of part-time Masters of Business Administration students taking a degree-earning Business Communication course held by Susan Luck, professor of Business Communication. The German counterparts were part-time undergraduate students of Media Management taking part in a mandatory Business English and Communication course held by Stephanie Swartz, professor of Business English. Although age as well as family status varied between both courses considerably, all students were balancing work with studies and thus were under time constraints similar to real-life project management pressures. It should also be mentioned that the German students had to satisfy an English language level prerequisite of upper-intermediate in order to maintain their admissions so that the level of English knowledge was high.

The Americans came to realize how Anglo-centric they had perceived the business world and how Americans could be perceived as crass, rude, and arrogant. Since only one student in the American class could speak German, the students also realized how limited they were by not being able to speak German while their German counterparts could speak English. They also realized how much they relied on the one German speaker in their class to help them communicate. These realizations led to much discussion in the American classroom as to the global weakness Americans have in terms of communication and how as a society Americans should intensify demands that children and adults be able to speak another language.

Task

Using the real-life merger between the American Reebok and the German Adidas companies, students were divided into groups of four, each comprised of two Americans and two Germans. We listed categories for seven types of HR policies: dress code, employee monitoring, dating of other employees,

email and social media policy, team-building and corporate identity. Students were assigned to the teams, and they exchanged a list of who was in what team as well as their email addresses. They were told to make initial contact with each other, decide on what (digital) method to use to continue communication, distribute tasks, share information, and prepare a five-minute presentation of proposed policy points for the rest of the “company” (the other students) to be discussed at the video conference. The students were given one month in which to complete this assignment. Apart from regular enquiries into their progress during class, the students were left entirely on their own to set deadlines, fulfill tasks and prepare an agenda for the final conference.

Method

Our method was simple: we each distributed one page of instructions that were purposely broad and open to interpretation. Then, as students had made the initial contact with their international counterparts, we asked questions within the classroom setting as to what was happening but also how the students were reacting to what was happening and why. We purposely remained in the background, giving just as much guidance as necessary to keep the project moving but allowing for the students to make their experiences and solve issues themselves.

Assessment

The German students were expected to keep a logbook in which their benchmarks and progress were to be documented. All email correspondence or chat threads were to be included as well as personal comments concerning issues or questions that arose. This was to serve as a basis for the final paper handed in at the end of the project. In the final paper students were to analyze their experience, using cultural theory to explain differences in communication styles between the Germans and the Americans. Finally, the project itself was subject of the paper, and students were asked to give feedback and constructive criticism, making suggestions how this project could be improved in the future. They were also asked to evaluate the project and determine what value the project had for their academic and professional development.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

While the German students were considerably more concerned with their language skills, both groups developed their verbal and written business communication skills. Whereas the German students learned that in an international negotiation small mistakes can be overcome and thus gained in confidence, the American students realized that they needed to limit the use of idioms or humor which could be misunderstood or hinder communication. The students also spent considerable time discussing what each country saw as appropriate for “business casual” and how standard legal requirements, such as random drug testing, taken for granted in America seemed to shock the German students.

Both groups profited from written and spoken communication with “real” Germans and Americans in a simulated business situation. Both gained practical experience in intercultural communication and through positive and negative reactions from both ends, learned important lessons in international negotiations. At the same time, both groups learned to dispose of certain clichés while stepping outside their cultural parameters.

Furthermore, the project demanded certain skills paramount to professional life such as time management, benchmarking, conflict management, project management skills as well as the effective use of digital media in a global format. Many of the students from both groups felt that they had gained invaluable experiences from the project, which would help them later in their professional careers. Once the project had completed, with a very successful videoconference, student feedback from both sides of the Atlantic was that they felt this was one of the best projects of their entire academic careers.

The initiators of the project learned important lessons on the application of technology in the classroom and the importance of good technical support, which other aspects to possibly add to the scope

of the assignment, and how experiential assignments as applied to intercultural communication can enhance student learning outcomes.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In today's global world, the likelihood of our graduates having to work in multicultural teams is almost certain. If the understanding of culture is extended beyond that of national cultures, then it is paramount that our future professionals develop skills with which they can operate successfully in diverse working environments. Language is only one of many hoops to be jumped through. Digital media is intended to make communication easier; however, technical glitches, delayed responses or different approaches towards the use of social media can complicate matters more.

One of the greatest challenges for teachers of Business Communications is making business diversity come alive in the classroom. Discussing language style and potential issues when communicating across cultures is valuable but the question remains whether any of those dos and don'ts are actually applicable once students leave the classroom and face their business partners across the bargaining table.

With this project American and German students learned firsthand how global business communication functions, where the pitfalls may lie and how to overcome cultural barriers while developing intercultural competencies imperative in a global business environment. Through a comprehensive applied project, students acquired skills beneficial for professional life far more effectively than through textbook learning.

FUTURE PROJECTS

While the German and American students experienced cultural differences, they are still both very linear-active cultures (Lewis, 2006). In other words, while their communication patterns may vary, they still share very similar core values such as importance of time. It would be interesting to add an additional classroom of students from another part of the world such as Asia or the Middle East, which Lewis (2006) describes as reactive or multi-active cultural types respectively. With greater emphasis on personal relationships and the polychronic treatment of time as found in countries like China or the United Arab Emirates (Hall, 1990), students could possibly face greater challenges in terms of communication during the project. Firsthand experience in dealing with these cultures is indispensable in light of the importance these countries play in global business.

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