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7. GLOBAL VIRTUAL TEAMS (GVT) FOR BUSINESS STUDENTS

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Abstract

THE PURPOSE OF this article is to demonstrate that technology can enhance learning, increase students' cultural awareness and equip them with essential 21st century skills. It is also to create the awareness of alternative method for teaching. Implementing Telecollaboration in teaching also offers opportunities for universities to support their internationalization strategies by 'globalising their curriculum' and engaging learners in dialogue with peers in distant parts of the world.

The use of technology in modern education is spreading wide. Technology can facilitate learning, improve students' performance and prepare them for 21st century workplace. Creating, using, and managing appropriate technologies and resources presents several opportunities for teaching. This paper demonstrate that Global Virtual Teams (GVT) presents a formidable front in modern teaching methods for International Business students. GVTs is an international online collaboration project, Global Virtual Team's (GVT) between TAMK Tampere University of Applied Sciences, Paderborn University, Masaryk University in Brno, Dublin City University Business School and Czech Technical University in Prague. The article highlights the design of the online course (GVTs) for International Business Students, challenges and opportunities for using this method in teaching other courses.

GVTs is a borrowed concept from Telecollaboration, which is used in teaching languages and intercultural communicative

competence. Telecollaboration explores collaborative work with students from geographically distant locations using synchronous and asynchronous communication. Virtual Exchange (VE), also known as Telecollaboration, eTandem, just to mention a few, are all alternative terminologies, which are becoming part of Finnish education delivery. (Abruquah, E., Dósá I. 2018)

Virtual Exchanges as used in business aim to bring co-workers and business partners located in geographically distant locations together by means of modern technology to accomplish specific tasks. (Brown 2016) Global Virtual Teams (GVTs) is undoubtedly, one of the current cost-effective and time-saving ways of organizing temporal teams for collaborative work among employees or co-workers sitting in geographically distant locations that transcend cultural and national boundaries.

GVTs project in teaching business students was introduced to me by a colleague from Paderborn University, Rachel Linder, whom I met at a Unicollaboration conference in April 2016 in Dublin. The project was first implemented in teaching Academic communication for second year International Business students in the autumn 2016 in TAMK, in collaboration with the partners mentioned above. The primary objective was to prepare business students for 21st century work life. The preparation package includes making students aware of cultural differences in the globalised world and some applications of modern communication technologies used in globalised companies and Institution. Students produce a research report, which conforms to the norms of academic writing and referencing style, as described in TAMK's report guide for thesis writing.

Description of the project.

Global Virtual Teams Project was initially between students of Business and Economics at universities in Paderborn, Brno and Tampere. However, the partners have since increased to include five universities. The project design pays attention to the collaborative aspects, where cultural encounters and interactions translate into goal-orientated cross-cultural business communication. The entire project is divided into different phases, which students build their teams to accomplish the main task. The teams prepare a report comparing a product, service or aspect of business (e.g. managerial styles, business innovations etc.) across at least two different cultures.

The project prepares business students in becoming familiar with language specific in Business and Academic world and prepare themselves for working with people from different cultures across different time zones. Problems, difficulties and frustrations are bound to happen at different phases. Research in GVTs concept continues and elements of successful VTs dominate research to find good practices and ways to reduce or eliminate challenges and frustrations. In their research, Hind and Baily (2013) discuss conflicts in VTs arising from several cultural issues, while Järvenpää and Leidner (1999) focus on communication and trust in VTs.

In an attempt to resolve some of these conflicts and to achieve success in implementing GVTs for business students, Lindner (2016) has developed a model, which presents systematic online pedagogical approach to successful GVTs projects. The model focuses on discussing special features of project design (see figure 1) and shows how various activities in the phases translates into goal-orientated cross-cultural business communication.



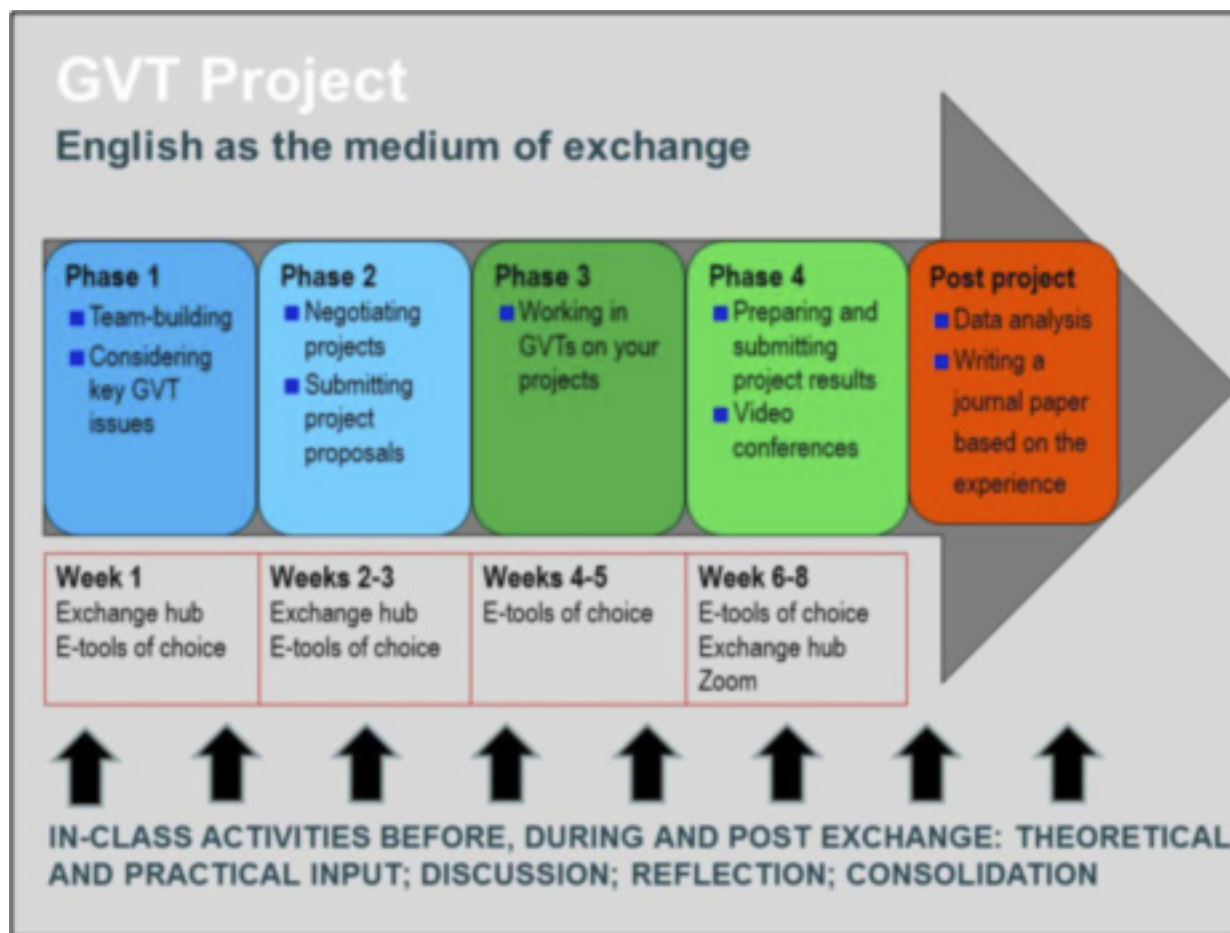


Figure 1. GVTs project design (Lindner 2016)

Thirty-two teams made of one hundred and sixty students participate in the GVTs project annually since autumn 2016. A team constellation comprises of, at least, one member from each partner universities. A good team is made up of 5 members on the average. The teams go through the various phases as described in figure 1, to complete the project.

The number of phases designed for a particular GVTs project depends on the length of the project and the intended outcome.

Each phase has designated exercises to be completed. The exercises are designed to eliminate or reduce some of the major issues and frustrations, which are likely to evoke a feeling of dropping out (Ayoko, Konrad and Boyle, 2012). The first phase ensures

good team building exercises to help students understand their roles in the team and to make sense of the GVTs concept. Clear understanding of what GVTs is, paves the way for further team development. Phase 2 goes a bit deeper into negotiating appropriate and realistic project based on the project theme. Students then submit their topic proposal to the teacher in charge for feedback, suggestions and comment in a video conference, using ZOOM video communication. (ZOOM 2018)

Phase 3 is designated to team research and developing the content for their project. Here, team members work on their individual parts of the project while attending group VC meetings amidst using other asynchronous communication media to facilitate their learning and to keep members up-to-date on their activities. Phase 4 prepares students for delivering the final product of their research. A final VC allows student to present their project to the teacher in-charge. Evaluation is based on the individual presentation skills, language use and relevant of the content presented. After the final VC the team then prepares to submit the final report. As part of the report, students give recommendations for improving GVTs and recommendation for companies.

In conclusion, GVTs projects have received negative as well as positive feedback from the students. It is obvious that GVT is a very new concept to most of the students and it was equally challenging to all. Most of the negativity forms at the beginning of the project, where frustration sets in to reduce the motivation of some individuals. Almost all the teams agree that a number of things have to be established from the onset to ensure success of the project. The goals of the GVTs project must be clear and understood by all. Roles and responsibilities of team members should be clear

to all. Setting goals and milestones facilitate the functionality of teams and smooth running of the project. It brings to the team members a sense of belonging and that every contribution counts.

Communication problems is one of the challenges that confronts GVTs. Geographical distances coupled with time differences and different schedules complicate the situation. Building a team involves good communication among members. Most students adhere to ZOOM and WhatsApp media for both synchronous and asynchronous communications. The taxonomy of students' experience of the GVTs all point to the direction of setting clear goals for the team, selecting the appropriate communication channels and platforms, defining roles to increase participation and commitment and clear task distribution.

GVTs project provides a new way of teaching Business students. It challenges students to explore beyond their comfort zones, present them with new opportunities, teach them new skills, which are essential in the 21st century workplace. The project requires, at least two willing and reliable partners, who are committed to engage in a complex and yet simple pedagogical journey to transform their traditional classrooms into a digital environment. (Abruquah & Dósá 2018 in Koivunen, M. & Korvenpää, U. (edits), 67). GVTs require students from business or economics institutions, of course, but this approach is not limited to only business students, the concept can be applied to multi-disciplinary groups. The experience is rewarding to both teachers and students. Students experience an alternative way of learning in the digital age, while teachers, among other things, embrace the new trend in higher education. In addition to improving their research in business, collaboration and communication skills, and raising their inter-

cultural communication skills, students also develop several complex skills of problem solving, conflict resolution and several 21st century skills.

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