

Innovative Business Projects as an Enabler to Enhance Intercultural and Management Skills of Students

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a study conducted among a sample of German and South African students participating in a virtual collaboration project in 2016. This blended learning international cooperation project (abbreviation: BLIC) involved students working for one semester in a virtual business setting in mixed teams across the two countries, thereby improving intercultural and management skills. Important goals of the project were the preparation of the students for the international workplace and the accumulation of intercultural experiences in an early stage during their studies. Lecturers from a German and a South African university supported the students during the whole project as coaches. The students had to coordinate a new international business expansion project within their team of German and South African members. The students also took part in an online-survey to analyse and evaluate the various students' perceptions of the BLIC project. Besides the presentation of the main results of the initial running of the BLIC study, several educational and practical implications are derived and limitations are discussed.

Introduction

Higher education faces substantial challenges and transformation, driven by both external developments and the millennial student constituency in our classrooms. In consequence, the role of teachers in higher education is also changing, with a new emphasis on becoming adept facilitators and orchestrators of pedagogical, autonomous, entertaining and innovative learning. This involves substantial re-design of courses and learning formats and in addition thereto the creation or adaptation of technology-enhanced platforms fostering interactivity and agency in the context of digital learning environments. The BLIC project focused on the integration of new technologies in the traditional curriculum in combination with the collection of international or intercultural working experiences during studying. Thus, students needed to be confronted with realistic cases and challenges during their education at university. Not every student can afford to study abroad. Therefore, new curricula concepts, such as that provided by the BLIC project, offer more students the

opportunity to get experience working with other cultures, to improve their foreign language, and to gain social and management skills by coordinating small marketing projects in mixed teams supported by professors at their universities. The BLIC project included traditional teaching and learning elements: Each student team had to learn relevant business methods such as market research to develop a business expansion project including a business plan to launch an innovative product on a foreign market. In addition to the above-mentioned aspects, the project also comprised virtual learning and collaboration sequences in which the students shared the collected data and set the next team milestone for the further development of the marketing concept for their project. Afterwards, the students from Germany and South Africa shared their workload and tasks. Thus, the activities differed between the local groups. The students used virtual learning tools, like Moodle, and social media tools, e.g. Skype or Facebook, for coordination and communication between themselves. The implementation of virtual learning settings has proven to be very effective for expanding knowledge in general [4]. In general and during the BLIC project, the students benefited from the adaptive and realistic learning environment [20]. At the end of the project, each student team had to write a comprehensive management report and present the developed concept in front of the other teams and lecturers at their local university.

In the contemporary business world, firms demand a wide range of work-related skills and a far-reaching knowledge base from the graduates when they apply for their first job. Therefore, student-specific and work-related tools, methods and skills must be provided at the university, for example using business simulation games and group-based business consultant projects. Traditional teaching methods are not sufficient to meet the needs of the students and their future employers. Digital technologies and innovative teaching and learning approaches offer new changes to train work-related skills in an interactive way, and across international boundaries. Furthermore, they fulfil the needs of ‘modern’ students. So-called ‘digital natives’ are familiar with the usage of social media and virtual collaboration technologies including Skype, Moodle and other applications [27]. In future, there will be a significant generational shift in the world of work [14]. The majority of the workforce will belong to the new wave of employees. For companies, this signifies the need to enhance their images and cooperate brands in order to remain attractive. According to a World Economic Forum study, digital natives are looking for *the opportunity to make a difference in society* (65%) and to *learn* (51%) as well as to seek *career advancements* (40%) [10].

The annually published Horizon Report of the New Media Consortium looks at current trends, challenges and advantages of new technologies in higher education in greater depth. Moreover, the report (2017) shows best practice approaches for appropriate use of these new methods and tools at different universities around the globe [2]. The paper emphasises that institutions should be more geared and structured in ways of promoting idea exchanges, identifying successful teaching and learning strategies for the modern world of business and rewarding teaching innovation. Furthermore, international business skills are necessary to boost workplace development and employability. Thus, universities have to deliver intensive, active learning experiences and skills-based training units using technology in meaningful ways [e.g. 7, 2, 19]. For the global market, graduates should fit into working in interdisciplinary and mixed teams. Online-based communities of practice, virtual multi-disciplinary student groups and virtual learning teams are effective approaches in this field [4]. Students, teachers and institutions can learn from another across institutions and beyond their local campus [2]. Online, mobile and blended learning concepts are used across the world, but access to such learning remains unequal [26]. Gaps exist that hamper college completion rates for student groups by socioeconomic status, race, gender or ethnicity.

Moreover, web access remains uneven in some countries or regions. Most institutions apply new technologies, including apps for learning or learning management systems (LMS), to enrich the traditional training environment on campus [18]. However, in many cases the technology-driven learning and teaching strategies of universities focus on ‘silo-solutions’. Therefore, training has extend beyond gaining separated technology skills towards generating a thorough understanding of digital environments, enabling interactive and adaptive learning to new contexts and co-creation of content with others [2]. Additionally, lecturers should select their favoured methods very carefully, because different learning outputs require different didactics [6]. For the purpose of supporting interaction on a relationship level, direct communication via the web might be the appropriate technology. Nevertheless, lifelong learning is the lifeblood of higher education and the organisations should prioritize and recognize the relevant trends for their students, faculty and staff [23]. *A great mixture of formal and informal learning with the right usage of new media and technology is the best solution to leverage the learning performance* [2].

Besides mobile learning, blended learning and collaborative learning are important methods for higher education [7, 19]. Distance education has grown continually during recent years, but the level of skepticism among faculty has remained very high [5]. Garrison and Vaughn (2007) suggest that blended learning is the right fusion of face-to-face and online learning experience [15]. From this perspective, it can be deduced that appropriately balanced blended learning combines online digital media with traditional classroom methods in order to enhance the learning experience for students [9]. This clearly necessitates the physical presence of both teacher and learners, with some elements of student control over location (where the experience will take place), time (when it is going to occur) and pace (the speed or rapidity at which such learning will be delivered and experienced). Online courses enable interdisciplinary knowledge sharing across the world and beyond the physical campus. In recent years, the majority of students have attended several online-courses during their studies [13]. Moreover, the number of virtual universities has increased and it had become very attractive to many students to study online. Students appreciate the direct information access, the opportunity to communicate and exchange with fellow students via the web, and the interactive elements of online-courses [2]. Unfortunately, the digital technology skills of lecturers are often limited [16, 19]. By increasing their digital skills and knowledge, teachers can better support the new generation of learners and the teaching and learning process can be shifted to a higher level [22]. The appropriate use of digital learning includes the availability of data about learners and their learning process and offers a new opportunity to optimize the teaching quality in higher education [17, 8]. *In summary, the wide ranges of new methods and technologies have established attractive options for forward-thinking lecturers to teach on a global scale, to work with students from different countries in a virtual classroom by collaborating online. The benefits of intercultural virtual classroom courses are evident for students as well as for teachers. Nevertheless, a professional skillset of pedagogical, cultural and technological competencies for lecturers are required and clear work guidelines for learning and teaching are needed* [2].

The Blended Learning Cooperation (BLIC) Project

Major trends associated with globalization such as technological innovations, demographic change and the emergence of a knowledge-driven society are accelerating the pace of change in the work environment. New technologies create new markets and jobs within a short time period and in chorus ruthlessly destroy existing businesses. Capabilities enabling professionals to benefit from a technology rich work environment and cultural

competences are a precondition for participating in the global business world. As important partners for industry, universities train, develop and qualify the managers of tomorrow. The BLIC project addresses the increasing need to integrate innovative learning approaches into curricula. At the Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University, this involves creating realistic international business settings in the classroom combined with online learning tools which offer students a variety of opportunities to enhance their intercultural and management competencies as well as skills in communicating on an international level. In order to offer and extend the benefits of blended learning concepts on a global level, the BLIC project was launched a few time ago, the first systematic assessment of this new teaching approach was conducted in 2016. The BLIC program consisted of a sample of 57 students from a German university (Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University / abbreviation: DHBW) and a partner university in South Africa (Cape Peninsula University of Technology / abbreviation: CPUT). The business bachelor students were selected and mixed in teams with German and South African students. Each team had a German and South African professor as coach and mentor. Moreover, the students were located at their home universities during the whole project. The mixed teams had to employ social media, different web-tools and the Moodle learning management system for project collaboration and communication. Before the project started, each team and lecturer took part in an introductory session to become familiar with the required and available tools and the BLIC project principles. Furthermore, the students needed to acquire different project management methods and had fixed milestones and deadlines for the project completion. At the end of the BLIC project, each student had to write a report about their marketing project and presented the results thereof. Besides these aspects, the BLIC project was intended to increase the international experiences of students and enhance their knowledge of working with foreign cultures in preparation for future business life. This paper concentrates on the results from the initial BLIC study in 2016. It is planned to repeat the survey annually to optimize this innovative project in the course of time.

Research Questions and Study Design

For the research project a quantitative method design was chosen. It comprised a quantitative online-survey via the Lime Survey tool. The sample included 10 mixed teams. A particular goal of this study was to gain better insights about students' perceptions and opinions concerning BLIC and their general attitudes towards new technologies and digitalization in the curriculum. Additionally, the effects of the participation in the BLIC project on the students' technical, methodological, personal, social and intercultural competences were analysed. With respect to the study design, the following research questions are addressed here:

- 1. How effective was the access to new technologies among the two students groups and which tools were frequently used for learning in general?*
- 2. What impact did the usage of digital media and new technologies have on teaching and learning within the BLIC project?*
- 3. Were there cultural differences regarding the usage of and attitude towards innovative technologies among the two students groups?*
- 4. Did the BLIC project increase the students' competencies, especially their personal and intercultural capabilities?*
- 5. What recommendations can be proposed with respect to the academic study as well as for the business world?*

Sample

For the study 57 bachelor students with an academic focus on management were chosen. A more expanded view on cultural differences was given by the two locations of the participating universities (Germany and South Africa). In autumn 2016, students completed the questionnaire via the online tool Lime Survey. The sample consisted of 42 German students (27 female and 15 male) as well as 15 students from South Africa (6 female and 9 male). The average age of the participants was 21 years (German students) and 25 years (South African students). The students from Germany were in their 3rd semester of business administration, whilst the group of South Africans also studied in the field of management, but differed in their academic years (from 2nd up to 4th semester).

Empirical Results

This section gives overview of the main results of the BLIC project with respect to the research questions. Within the scope of the questionnaire, the students were asked about the following topics: (1) Evaluation of their university; (2) General usage of digital media and technologies; (3) Evaluation of the project; and (4) Sociodemographic data. Besides open and closed answer formats, seven-point Likert scales were used. Items chosen for the survey design had to meet with statistic quality criteria [11]. The data were analysed using IBM-Software SPSS version 23.0. The results were calculated by descriptive analysis (mean, variance, standard deviation) and logistic regression.

According to the research questions students were asked which technologies or technical equipment they normally have access to and which devices they use or would like to use frequently for learning. 83,3% of the German students had access to their own PC or Laptop and 83,3% of them had a smartphone, whereas only 14,3% owned a tablet. In comparison, none of the South African students (N = 15) had access to a private PC or laptop, but 67% mentioned having an own smartphone and 13, 3% were tablet-owners. For lectures their personally owned or the university PC or laptop was the most preferred technical device for all students. The tablet usage was only seen by a minority of all students as a appropriate learning tool. However, 52,4% of German students and 60% of South African students used their mobile phone as a learning instrument on a regular base. Additionally, the survey gave further information about how often various technologies were used for studying. To answer this question a seven-point Likert scale with 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree” was utilized. In table 1 a summary of the core results of this question is shown.

Table 1: Usage of different technologies for studying

Please indicate how often you use the following technologies at the moment for studying/working as part of this lecture/class.	German students			South African students		
	N	Mean	Standard deviation	N	Mean	Standard deviation
1. Online libraries	42	3,7619	1,5743	15	5,1333	1,55233
2. Other scientific databases	42	3,2143	1,4062	15	4,0667	1,4376
3. Internet search engines (e.g. Google)	42	5,3333	1,4085	15	6,5333	0,7432
4. Social media: Facebook (e.g. own project group)	42	3,2619	1,9262	15	5,2000	0,7746
5. Community/conference technologies (e.g. Skype, Adobe Connect)	42	2,6190	1,5610	15	4,2667	1,9074
6. Learning portals (e.g. Moodle)	42	4,9048	1,6050	15	4,2667	1,9445

Whereas both groups were keen on internet search engines (e.g. Google) and learning portals - like Moodle - for studying and learning, the South African students were more active on social media platforms (e.g. LinkedIn) and they communicated more often via web-conference tools compared to the German students. Regarding the communication channels, the survey also contained a question about the preferred channels for communication with the BLIC lecturers. The students from both universities contacted the lecturers most frequent via email, followed by messages via the learning portal Moodle and traditional face-to-face meetings at the university. Contacting the teachers via Facebook or Skype as a conference tool was not very popular. These findings may surprise because commonly Facebook, Skype and Co. are the most preferred messengers for digital natives. *In the survey, the participants were whether they were satisfied with the IT-support provided from their own university and their teachers during the BLIC project.* Significant differences between the two nations were analysed in this area. Likewise to the aforementioned questions, the students were stated their level of satisfaction on a Likert scale from 1 (“very dissatisfied”) to 7 (“very satisfied”). According to the online-survey, the majority of the German participants were satisfied with the technological expertise of their teachers (mean = 4,3333), the reliability of modern techniques at their university (mean = 4,2619) as well as with their IT-support services (mean = 4,2857). The South African students, on the contrary, were more satisfied with the competence level of their lecturers when using technologies (mean = 4,9333) and liked the extent to which the lecturers include digital techniques in the project slightly more (mean = 5,000) in comparison to the German group (mean = 4,1429). The quality of the university IT-service was similar to the German results (mean = 4,3333). The logistic regression confirmed the assumption that the students’ satisfaction with their own competence level when using technologies correlates positive with an enhanced need for online communication during learning. In summary, all students liked the usage of learning platforms and, in the future, they wanted to work with them more frequently.

Regarding the first research question, German and South African students had a very positive attitude towards using digital media and new technologies in general and for learning. Concerning the second research question, a positive impact of these digital tools and technologies was detected in the study. The participants used the given tools as enablers and supporters for the project. The third research question focused on possible cultural differences regarding the usage of and attitude towards innovative technologies given among the two students groups. The empirical results showed some differences. The South African students appreciated some technologies more than their German counterparts. One possible explanation for this could be the lack of availability of these devices and technical equipment in South Africa because of financial limitations in the higher education sector. For example, current political problems and other differences hamper free or an affordable access to these technologies or to the educational sector in general.

Another objective of the empirical study was to evaluate the impact of project participation on the student’s competence level. Table 2 shows the evaluation of the usefulness of the BLIC project in general for both students groups. For the evaluation a Likert scale was utilized with different statements and a range from with 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”. The South African students all assessed the project as good and were

really satisfied with the participation. From the German students the project received a lesser rating but all evaluations were above the average of 3,5. *In conclusion, the BLIC project improved the learning performance of all students.*

Table 2: Perception of the usefulness of the BLIC project participation

Please indicate the degree to which the statements apply to you.	German students			South African students		
	N	Mean	Standard deviation	N	Mean	Standard deviation
1. I believe that this learning activity is very important for me.	42	4,3333	1,4925	15	6,0667	0,7988
2. Overall, the learning activity is excellent.	42	4,1190	1,2533	15	5,6000	1,1212
3. Overall, the content of the learning activity/ project is extremely interesting.	42	4,5476	1,3829	15	6,0000	0,7559
4. In general, I find the learning activity/ project documents very useful.	42	4,4048	1,1906	15	6,0000	1,0690
5. I feel that I will continue to profit from that which I have learnt after the project has ended.	42	4,5476	1,4348	15	6,1333	0,9155

In table 3 the perceived competence improvement via BLIC participation is displayed. For the evaluation a Likert scale was used with different statements and a ranking from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”.

Table 3: Perceived competence improvement through the BLIC project participation

Please indicate the degree to which the statements apply to you. (T0)	German students			South African students		
	N	Mean	Standard deviation	N	Mean	Standard deviation
1. I enjoy the work in this international project very much.	42	4,2143	1,4573	15	5,6667	1,0465
2. I would recommend participation in this project to other students at my university.	42	4,3095	1,4396	15	6,0667	1,0998
3. This project helps me to strengthen my technical competence (e.g. marketing knowledge).	42	4,3810	1,1677	15	6,0000	1,1339
4. This project helps me to strengthen my methodological competence (e.g. becoming familiar with analytical tools).	42	4,4524	1,1935	15	5,8667	0,9904
5. This project helps me to strengthen my personal competence (e.g. time management).	42	4,5476	1,3651	15	5,9333	0,8837
6. This project helps me to strengthen my social competence (e.g. capacity for teamwork).	42	4,8571	1,4910	15	6,0667	0,7988
7. This project helps me to strengthen my intercultural competence.	42	4,7619	1,5743	15	6,3333	0,7237

In general, the evaluation results of the South African students were of a higher level than the results of the German students. But all evaluations were above the average (3,5). These findings were confirmed in logistic regression. In terms of the experience with BLIC students from South Africa evaluated the project better and felt more motivated than German participants. The more students were satisfied with their own competence level when using technologies, the better they assessed the involvement of lecturers in the BLIC project and the more they could improve their competence through BLIC.

Therefore, the project helped all participants to strengthen their technical, methodological, personal, social and intercultural skills. Moreover, the students enjoyed the teamwork. Regarding these results, the BLIC project can be categorized as a successful concept that should be continued in the future. Thus, the fourth research questions were answered positively. The last research question explored the implications of this innovative blended learning concept for the academic and the business world. These aspects are discussed in the last part of the paper.

Discussion, Conclusions and Outlook

Current study results shed a positive light on global blended learning concepts such as BLIC and indicate room for further concept development and future research activities [e.g. 24, 9]. The coordination of virtual student projects with international partners is always challenging. It requires highly motivated students and lecturers to conduct the project successfully. Moreover, appropriate technical equipment and infrastructure must be present and systematic preparation and continuous support are crucial to make the project realistic. At the moment, not every country has a comparable digital infrastructure to match Germany or other European countries [26]. Thus, a systematic support by external stakeholder groups, e.g. cooperative firms, is helpful to conduct such kind of projects [12].

The study results are limited because only a small sample was used and only two countries participated. Nevertheless, current trends and the positive effects of this alternative concept were confirmed [e.g. 25, 7]. An ongoing evaluation of the BLIC project is essential for improving and developing the concept on long-term perspective. Due to current circumstances (e.g. the political situation in some foreign universities), the BLIC project always needs to offer certain flexibility with respect to its project management (structure). Additionally, the collaborating project partners should be stable as well as reliable. Enriching the BLIC project with new partners is an essential step towards the future use of BLIC. Moreover, the sample size should be increased and the study design extended (e.g. selective qualitative interviews with the participants to gain deeper BLIC insights). In summary, the BLIC project must be adapted to future requirements and needs of the different participants and partners.

Not only do students battle for the most attractive university places, but also the competition between the educational institutions for the best students has a strong effect on the academic and business world. By focusing on group-specific and international oriented study programs universities can differentiate themselves from competition. Global cooperation and attractive programs are essential to secure a high education standard in the future [1, 21]. *By following innovative trends and using new technologies in the curriculum, universities can strengthen their market position and recruit new students, teachers, cooperation partners and firms. Approaches like BLIC should also be used in the business world and integrated into trainee programs or in HRM development programs of enterprises.* The offer of international career options and the possibility to work aboard or in multicultural teams is highly attractive for many millennials. Moreover, firms should invest in new technologies and digital media for virtual collaboration and learning. Moreover, mobile devices and applications for learning offer attractive tools to increase the learning motivation in the workplace as recent studies have showed [2, 16].

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