Friendship and Relationships in Virtual and Intercultural Learning Groups

Dr. Joanna Crossman
School of Management, University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia
Joanna.Crossman@unisa.edu.au

And

Dr Sarbari Bordia
School of Management, Marketing and International Business, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia
sarbari.bordia@anu.edu.au

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a qualitative research study about the perceptions of university students who collaborated in a virtual and international project to learn about intercultural communication. The findings indicate that participants capitalised on the opportunity the project presented to find friends and develop relationships and that the social interaction also characterised and influenced the learning experience itself and had implications for engagement. The paper concludes that the subjectivities of social interaction are powerfully embedded in learning and need to be explored further in higher education studies in order to inform practice.

Keywords:
Business education, e learning, interpersonal communication, learning via case studies, virtual team.
Friendship and relationships in virtual and intercultural learning groups

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a qualitative research study about the perceptions of university students who collaborated in a virtual and international project to learn about intercultural communication. The findings indicate that participants capitalised on the opportunity the project presented to find friends and develop relationships and that the social interaction also characterised and influenced the learning experience itself and had implications for engagement. The paper concludes that the subjectivities of social interaction are powerfully embedded in learning and need to be explored further in higher education studies in order to inform practice.

Keywords: Business education, e learning, interpersonal communication, learning via case studies, virtual team.

This paper presents the findings of a study about an intercultural online learning project involving students enrolled in an Australian university and another in the Netherlands. Australian participants were members of either an ‘international’ group that interacted virtually with the participants in the Netherlands or a ‘local’ group within the Australian university made up of culturally diverse domestic and international students (roughly 4-5 students in each group). Both groups collaborated on a case study on intercultural communication between an Australian franchisor and franchisees based in the Netherlands and Hong Kong. The project required students to interpret and apply intercultural communication research to the case study as well as reflect upon the intercultural communication within their groups. The case study was assessed individually and the online group work represented an opportunity to collaborate in developing insights to assist students in preparing for the individual assessment. All communication was in English since this was the common language amongst participants. A wiki site was constructed to facilitate the required communication for both ‘local’ and ‘international’ groups since as a “participatory social networking software” it enables groups to co-construct knowledge through editing text in online documents (Caverly and Ward 2008: 36). In addition, participants also used emails and MSN on their own volition to discuss the case study. The
primary finding from the qualitative data collected was that friendship and relationships within these culturally diverse groups played an important role in the student learning experience. The rationale for the project was multifaceted. First, research posits that positive early experiences of learning in intercultural groups assist in developing intercultural skills and increases students’ willingness to participate in intercultural groups in later years of education (Blasco 2009; Summers & Volet, 2008). Therefore, we chose to undertake this project in the first year core business communication course. Second, groups that are intercultural and geographically dispersed and work within the virtual framework (Kirkman, Rosen, Gibson, Tesluk, & McPherson 2002) have a key role both in contemporary organisations and in university learning. Given that it is cultural misunderstandings that give rise to failure of teams rather than technology (Cho & Lee 2008), the impact of culture (Chang 2006) is important in preparing business graduates. Indeed, this is one of the major goals of internationalisation (Volet & Ang 1998). Third, groups are well known to be more productive than individuals (Kerr and Murthy 2004) and research suggests that multicultural groups have distinct advantages in terms of performance (Boyacigiller & Adler 1991; Siddle 2009). This further supports the need for business schools to train pre-managers in intercultural communication (Summers & Volet 2008). Fourth, the project was designed to intensify student engagement through experiential learning, drawing not only on intercultural communication theories but also on the cultural perspectives, experiences, knowledge and backgrounds of the participating students themselves. The project utilised the “wisdom bank” strategy suggested by Chang (2006: 372) that acknowledges the cultural knowledge and experience of culturally diverse students in encouraging students to learn about cultures other than their own. In bringing personal knowledge and experiences to learning, Chang (2006) argues that the learning experience becomes internalised in ways that dig deep into individual conceptions of identity. Finally, despite two decades of on-going research into computer mediated communication, little is known about how online learning is experienced by students (Ellis, Ginns, & Piggot 2009; Ramsden, 2003). In this project, we sought to address this oversight. 

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES
Research on subjective and social aspects of learning in higher education has attracted substantial interest (e.g., Summers & Volet 2008; Volet & Ang 1998; Volet & Wosnitza 2004). Broadly, topics such as emotions (Cartney & Rouse 2006; Crossman 2007; Huyton 2009), spirituality (Crossman 2008; Tisdell 2001), friendships and relationships (Gareis 2000; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman 2008) represent some of the issues that are often implicit in learning and assessment. More specifically, internationalisation of business education, including large number of international students, culturally diverse educational context and internationalised curriculum have given rise to discussion about how some of these subjective, psychological and socio-cultural issues relate to the learning experiences students (Chang 2006; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia 2008; Zhou et al. 2008).

Earlier studies concerned with friendships and relationships experienced by students in culturally diverse contexts such as those by Bochner, McLeod and Lin (1977) in Hawaii and Furnham and Alibhai (1985) in the UK were largely concerned with establishing preferences for friendships based on the cultural heritage of participants. Furnham and Alibhai (1985) found that in one university in the UK, over fifty percent of international students had no British friends at all. Volet and Ang (1998: 5) argued over a decade ago that the minimal interaction between local and international students in Australian higher education was “disturbing” and this observation appears to remain an issue revisited in the literature (Summers and Volet, 2008, 357). More recently, Sawir et al. (2008: 148-149) suggested that loneliness and isolation described as a “relational deficit” amongst international students is not uncommon. Cho and Lee’s (2008) study of collaboration in virtual groups involving an American and two Singaporean universities using social network analysis also concluded that social factors were important influences in this learning process. Students who are separated from their friends and families and need to adjust to new educational process, university life can be a challenging time (Cartney & Rouse 2006).

Despite calls for educational processes that will facilitate social and educational objectives associated with internationalisation (Summers & Volet 2008; Volet & Ang 1998), there is very little work published that addresses friendship amongst culturally diverse students within their learning context.
Among questions that are yet to be answered is how do educational institution design learning activities that acknowledge and capitalise upon the cultural backgrounds of university students. Foldy, Rivard and Buckley (2009) suggest that individuals in culturally diverse groups need to feel safe about their own racial identity and perceive the educational institution to be a place where different perspectives are welcome. The authors also argue that downplaying cultural difference in learning can be perceived as diminishing cherished parts of individuals that are central to who they are. Without the fostering of appropriate “meta skills” in reflecting upon and modifying cultural assumptions (Foldy, Rivard, & Buckley 2009: 36), students may feel less than safe and anything but risk free compared to those who are members of homogenous groups. Therefore a crucial part of a good learning experience is for students to be part of a “friendly classrooms” that can foster friendship relationships among students (Sawir et al. 2008: 154-170). Summers and Volet, (2008) also highlight the value of linking assessment to learning about culture in culturally mixed groups – a feature incorporated into our own project.

The development of relationships and friendships in computer mediated groups has been explored in several research studies focusing largely on the organisational context (e.g., Bordia, 1997; Irmer, Chang, & Bordia, 2000; Kayworth & Leidner, 2001; Yoo & Alavi, 2001). It now seems clear that advances in technological sophistication have provided an appropriate environment where it is possible for strong interpersonal bonds to be formed (Kahai & Cooper, 2003) just as in face-to-face group settings (Whitty & Gavin, 2001). It can reasonably be assumed that some of this research would be relevant to online learning in business education. Wikis may provide a way to respond to the need for social interaction and inclusion amongst university students. Not only do they represent a departure from transmissive cultures of learning, they also encourage engaging, inclusive, socially interactive environments with which many students born on or after 1982 identify (i.e., net generation; Johnston, Duff, & Quinn 2009: 27-28). The collaborative learning features in wikis could not occur without an intensification of social interaction that could give rise to friendships and relationships (Workman 2008).

METHOD
The broad aim of this qualitative, interpretive and inductive research was to discover how students experienced an international online, experiential form of learning concerned with intercultural communication. It focussed upon the “lived experiences, behaviours, emotions and feelings” as well as the “social moments and cultural phenomena” involved (Strauss & Corbin 1998: 10) and probed the intentions, meaning and circumstances (Glesne & Peshkin 1992) of participants in responding to and experiencing the project.

Participants

Data was gathered via a purposive sampling plan based on the participants, events and purpose of the research (Johnson & Christensen 2000; Punch 2000). Students enrolled in an undergraduate business communication course in an Australian university who participated in an intercultural online learning project. While students from the university in the Netherlands also participated in the project, the data discussed in this paper were gathered from students enrolled in the Australian university only. A total of 27 students in Australia participated in the project, 11 of whom were international students (i.e., holding student visas in Australia) and came from countries such as Botswana, China, Korea, India, Malaysia and Singapore. The remainder were Australian students from varied cultural heritages.

Students interacted in two overarching online groups. The first was with students from the university in the Netherlands (n= 19) and the other between international and domestic students within the Australian university (n= 8). Students were told that participation was entirely voluntary and there would be no adverse outcome on their performance if they did not participate in the project. Those interested in hearing more about the project contacted the research assistant and were supplied with an information sheet in addition to a verbal explanation of the participant’s role and a letter of consent requiring signature. Participants were provided with ongoing information and support with regard to the research process, the intercultural case study project and the technological features of the wiki and the group membership structure. Since the researchers were also co-ordinators in the course in which the project was embedded and would have a role in student assessment, a research assistant collected the data and coordinated the project. The researchers did not receive the data until after the final grades for the course had been released as a further protection against any bias intruding on the
assessments. Participating students were made aware of this feature in the design of the research.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

As is common in research studies that employ a qualitative and interpretive approach, data were collected from both questionnaires and interviews since diverse ways of looking at the same phenomenon, added credibility and confidence to the research findings (Patton 2002). The open-ended repeat measure questionnaires were administered at the beginning, middle and end of the online collaborative project. Open-ended questionnaires were used because in keeping with an interpretive tradition, they were more likely to reflect participant views rather than being unduly influenced by the researcher (Foddy 1999). Anonymity was preserved by using a six digit participant generated code so that the research analyst could match data from the same participant at different points in time. The primary objective of questionnaires 1 and 2 was to ascertain what participants expected to gain from their involvement in the project, their rationale for participating and what they expected to achieve by the end of it (sample questions: “What do you expect to gain from the project?” and “Why do you have these expectations?”). Questionnaire 3 explored the online intercultural learning experience from the participant’s perspective and how the project influenced their understanding of intercultural communication (sample questions: “What are the things you found exciting about the project?”, “What are the things you found challenging about the project?”, and “How did the project enhance your understanding of intercultural communication?”).

The semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of the project in order to provide participants a further opportunity to express their thoughts regarding the process, structure, interpersonal interaction and general experiences in the project. Participants were also encouraged to state any issues that were important to them but were not covered in the interview questions. Some sample questions were: “Please give a brief account of how you think the members of the groups worked together to learn in preparation for the assessment?”, “Please give a brief account of how you think the members of the group interacted interpersonally?”, and “Please indicate how relevant
the project has been in terms of preparing you for the workplace”. Denaturalized transcription was used to capture the data from the interviews since it involved the full and faithful account of verbatim speech reflecting the substance of what was said in terms of the meaning but did not include references to involuntary vocalisations (Oliver, Serovich & Mason 2005). Some grammatical errors, although uncorrected in the transcription process were corrected when presented in the discussion section of this paper as they seemed to distract the reader from meaning.

The analytical process for all data was influenced by the constant comparative method associated with the tradition of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Data were initially open coded by comparing units of meaning (e.g., sentences, phrases or paragraphs) with others as new information was received. The process was one of continual refinement where categories were merged or dismantled as new categories were generated and different relationships discovered (Maykut & Morehouse 1994). Negative cases were pursued and where appropriate have been alluded to in the next section. In the initial stages of analysis, friendships/relationships/developing intimacy was quickly identified as a category along with poor engagement, technology, intercultural issues and time. Time was collapsed into the category concerned with poor engagement given that its implications were largely in that arena. With further analysis on a conceptual rather than descriptive level, it became apparent that the theme of friendships and relationships cut across and was embedded in all categories. Thus, the theory that emerged was that relationships and friendships characterised and influenced the learning experience for participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of data from questionnaires and interviews of local and international groups have been presented collectively since there was a high level of consistency in terms of the themes identified across all participants and data sources. To support the themes presented, quotations from the data have been presented in order to keep the concerns of the participants in tact (Strauss & Corbin 1994). We present the findings under three broad themes: Friendships and relationships as an integral part of learning, intercultural communication and poor engagement.
Friendships and Relationships as an Integral Part of Learning

Data from all sources suggested that making “new”, “more” or “different” friends was central to the participants. Therefore, learning was perceived as being socially constituted. References to an individual being friendly or not, often preceded accounts and rationales for pursuing greater interaction or withdrawal. One student commented, “I don’t really like one student, she was not really friendly at all. So I contacted one friendly person...”. Individuals perceived as unfriendly were expendable and could be easily abandoned for those who were perceived as “nice” or “friendly”, even in terms of the emoticons they used. Once positive relationships were formed, these relationships appeared to function as ‘anchor’ points in communicating about the case study rather than communication whereby all members relating at all times to all others. The literature suggests that intercultural friendships and relationships are more difficult to initiate than mono-cultural ones, at least in the initiation stages (Gareis 2000) and certainly much care and sensitivity in cultivating these relationships was evident. For example, one participant felt that she “always” had “to be friendly” so that people would feel “easy as much as possible”. Participants narrated their experiences in taking care in crafting email messages to avoid potential “misunderstandings”, “confusion” or appearing inadvertently “rude”. It has been argued that good interpersonal skills in virtual teams are at least as important as they are on a face to face basis (Kirkman et al. 2002) and participants in this study would appear to concur. Developing an appropriate genre for collaborative communication in learning and establishing levels of friendliness with those who are largely unknown was not always easy for participants. One participant discovered that she had annoyed group members by sending emails that were, “very friendly”, using greetings such as, “hey baby”, finding in the process that her emails were, “not really” written in a “work-oriented style”.

Face to face communication was viewed positively by participants as a “secure” means of communication that had implications for developing trust and intimacy in relationships. Internet however was perceived by some as “very scary”. One female participant commented, “[y]ou never know what happens. It might be different when you actually meet the person who you contact over the Internet”. In face to face situations, one participant declared he, “would be more friendly” and take
relationships, “to the next level” where it was not such an “insecure” environment in the way that computer mediated communication could be. Whilst, some were more cautious in terms of developing online relationships, others viewed the medium as liberating, describing themselves as “more talkative” and “more friendly”, where they felt “more free to talk”.

Consistent with other work, humour was associated in the data with social, cultural and emotional connectedness in the learning (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer 2000; Volet & Ang 1998). As a strategy, humour was used in cultivating a climate of informality in order to promote closer relationships and collaboration. One participant wrote, “I tried to use humour a lot….That’s...how we got to talk”. The remark, “She can joke” was clearly positive in the context of describing a student from the Netherlands and the relationship enjoyed between them. Humour was also used as a strategy for repairing relationships under some strain, “She was upset with me. I said, “you can slap me!” After that, she was happy to help me”.

**Intercultural Communication**

For most participants, their rationale for taking part in the project was linked to the need to make friends as a starting point for learning about cultures other than their own. Making “new friends from different countries” and “cultures” from “around the world” was high on the list of priorities. This was particularly the case with international students in Australia who felt that they lacked such opportunities in their homeland. Cultural relativism appeared to be submerged by the stereotyping of participants from other cultures. Dutch project participants were cast as, “strict”, “efficient”, “goal-orientated”, “very driven”, “strong willed”, who were “more interested in getting the job done...rather than making friends”. They were perceived as people who wanted “to finish everything on time”, approach things “step by step” and provide “instruction” on what needed to be done. Another participant commented, “They don’t really communicate personal backgrounds”. In other words students from the Netherlands were perceived largely as being goal rather than friendship focussed.

The interactions also gave rise to discussions on notions of politeness and rudeness. Whilst there were some remarks indicating that international students in Australia found Dutch students as being,
“fantastic” and “quite nice people”, there was some evidence of challenges for interpersonal communication. One Asian student in the Australian group remarked, “Asian culture people have to be polite to one another. We don’t get used to it (Western culture). Asian students have to learn about this. However, I strongly recommend, Asian students should keep our traditional culture, being polite”, indicating that perhaps the other participants may not have been as polite. In some cases, the perceived capacity of the Dutch participants for frankness was clearly framed as rudeness that shocked one participant. The student related her communication with the Dutch student as “She said, ‘If you don’t help me, you can leave the group’. I was taken aback a bit. She was very frank… My tutor told me today, ‘People in the Netherlands are more frank and straightforward. You should not be offended. That’s just culture”. Sometimes, painful accounts of personal experiences in forming relationships with Australian students were revisited in ways that explored concepts of identity, assimilation and racism and again, politeness and rudeness as one student recalled, “You need to be same or similar with Australian people. When I went to the high school, I tried to learn more about different things. Although they (Australian students) are rude, they didn’t mean that. Don’t be sensitive [she thought to herself]. Initially, I thought they don’t like Asian, but it is just a remark, let it go. They tend to think that Asian students can’t speak English. They made negative remarks. Just walk away [she thought to herself]. Otherwise you will be very angry”.

Part of the deepening of relationships involved an appreciation of diverse perspectives so that participants began to, “understand differences and learn to accept views people make in this project”. The data were rich with references to, “gaining a better understanding of the issues in the report through [other] perspectives”, and becoming aware of how “different opinions” helped with the “experience”. One participant commented, “…people looked at it with different perspectives and that is how this project assisted me”. Another found that “other people have curiosities…other students have different experiences, insights and opinions than I do”. Thus, the project seemed to facilitated introspection in a sense making process on intercultural communication.

Poor Engagement
Despite many positive references to high level of interaction between participants, it was clear that there were cases where individual participants did not engage with the project effectively. A persistent scenario would be where an individual initiated communication online, receiving no response which gave rise to feelings of “frustration”, “disappointment” and “confusion” about the apparent lack of commitment. One participant commented, “I don’t really understand. People wanted to do this project at the beginning, signing on.... After that, they didn’t want to participate”. Irritation and despondency grew when participants failed to fulfil perceived workload responsibilities or appeared to not interact sufficiently - a finding similar to that of Kirkman et al. (2002). Participants switched communication channels in the hope of eliciting a response. No response to a wiki posting would stimulate the sending of an email. However email had its own disadvantages in that in contrast with face to face interaction, email made it “…easy not to respond” and just “delete” the messages if it was “too hard to reply”.

Some participants stated the need for face to face communication: “If we see each other, people don’t want to be impolite...they will care about that person” and “I don’t feel [any] connection...[to] send e-mail. If I met one person even just once, I would have more sense of my responsibility ethically and relatively to that person. Although I am very busy, I would think about that”. One participant suggested that face to face communication would have made a “person more real” if online communication followed. In other words, when a person becomes “real” as opposed to merely virtual, expectations, obligations and commitments towards that person become more pressing. This resonates with other findings on social presence in the literature (Garrison et al. 2000). Participants adopted various strategies to elicit responses. One strategy was persistence. “I will just keep e-mail[ing] them, asking ‘what happen[ed]’?...once or twice per week, so that they will be aware that I am interested”. Another strategy was to send individual emails rather than sending a message to everyone, in the hope that the personalisation would prompt a response.

An influential factor in terms of engagement was that assessments for students in the Netherlands and in Australia were not scheduled at exactly the same time because of the way the respective organisations functioned. This meant there was only a short period of three weeks in the thirteen
weeks of the project when individuals in each university were completely engaged and focussed upon the project and thus communicating with others with similar levels of commitment. Thus, what represented a “crucial” time in preparing for assessment for one participant may not have been viewed as crucial for another and the consequent feelings of being “upset” or “frustrated” impacted on the learning relationships. Other studies have also alluded to the challenges involved in inter-university projects with respect to the alignment of organisational practices, policies and processes (Volet & Wosnitza 2004) but it is clear in this study that such alignment has a direct effect upon learning. Also, despite the interest in forming relationships and friendships, one participant felt that participants “didn’t have enough time to get to know each other” much beyond the superficialities of introductions until the very end of the project period when the assessment was imminent and participants were more fully engaged. Given finding that developing deeper cultural understandings are less likely when students have not had the time to develop their relationships (Volet & Ang 1998), this is not a surprising finding.

CONCLUSION

This paper responded to the call for academics to explore deeper understandings of the emotional and social nexus of computer mediated learning groups in addition to the academic task in hand (Cartney & Rouse 2006). It has been suggested, that the social and personal aspects of learning have been submerged in a climate where universities have cast themselves as an influential, commercialised service and export industry where students are viewed as “customers” or “enrolment units” rather than “human beings” (Sawir et al. 2008: 149). The finding that relationships become an integral part of the learning experience, illuminates how the subjectivities of humanity should be taken into account in planning learning. Educators and policy makers need to consider the time required to develop positive social relationships that facilitate learning.
REFERENCES


