10 The Global Virtual Teams Project: learning to manage team dynamics in virtual exchange

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Abstract

Our paper positions telecollaboration in the business context, in which culturally, geographically, temporally, and functionally dispersed teams – so-called Global Virtual Teams (GVTs) – are increasingly being used to engage an organisation's creative and problem-solving capabilities. In this virtual workplace, team members must complete tasks efficiently, despite language and cultural difference, geographical distance, technological complexity, and variance in organisational goals. We propose that virtual exchange projects can provide students with valuable pre-workplace experience of the demands placed on GVTs and the skills needed to operate successfully in a GVT environment. The GVTs Project outlined in our paper was set up for this purpose, and is run across five business schools by management and ESP teachers. We identify themes that have emerged through project observation and student reports, and exemplify how students manage the challenges of working in a GVT with a case study in which a project participant analyses her team's dynamics[3].

Keywords: Global Virtual Teams, global factories, interdisciplinary virtual exchange, management and communication skills.

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1. Introduction

The modern manager needs to work with greater creativity and flexibility in today's diverse and digitally enhanced work environment. Rapid technological progress and access to new markets have driven multinational corporations to create more complex, fluid, and interdependent company structures, which Buckley (2009) conceptualises as *global factories*. Within these firms there is a major focus on offshoring and outsourcing certain activities, and building competencies within the organisation and with external partners in key areas. These developments have given rise to the implementation of GVTs, defined by Daim et al. (2012) as "culturally diverse, geographically dispersed, electronically communicating workgroups" (p. 199). It is these teams that are being used to engage an organisation's creative, knowledge-sharing, and problem-solving capabilities across borders.

GVT-work is reputedly challenging, and research draws attention to the skills needed to collaborate on delivering project outputs despite language barriers and cultural diversity, geographical distance, technological complexity, and different organisational goals (Gilson et al., 2015). However, there are just a handful of reported examples of pedagogy aimed at preparing business students for these work scenarios (including Osland et al., 2004, and Taras et al., 2013), indicating a lack of such skills training in tertiary education. In this paper, we describe a learning environment which we have designed to help students acquire the experience and develop the skill sets needed to become drivers of best GVT practice. We outline the project experience of one team, highlighting themes that are recurrent in our project observations and drawing parallels with the literature on GVTs from the fields of business and management.

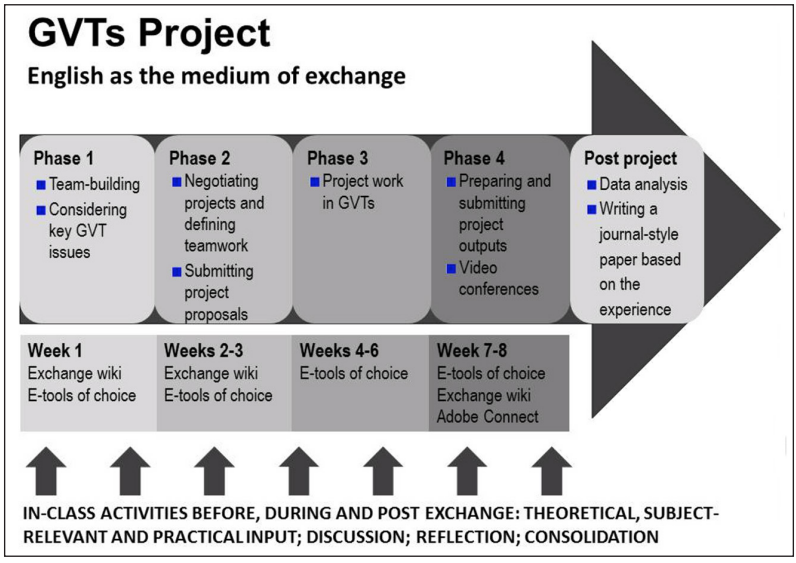
2. The project

The GVTs Project was initiated five years ago and combines insights from business studies of GVTs with research into telecollaboration to provide students with an insider experience of working in a GVT. The 2017 iteration had 142 participants

from the Business and Economics faculties of Dublin City University in Ireland, Masaryk Institute of Advanced Studies in Prague, Masaryk University in Brno in the Czech Republic, the University of Paderborn in Germany, and Tampere University of Applied Sciences in Finland. The project is embedded in a blended learning course, with classroom sessions at participating institutions dedicated to subject input, familiarising participants with aspects of working in GVTs through study and discussion of literature in the field, project-relevant language skills development and reflection on the learning experience.

In order to simulate real-life GVTs, participants are organised into teams with four to five members that are diverse not only in terms of national and institutional culture, but also by gender, language proficiency, academic maturity, age, and work experience. Also in keeping with GVTs, deadlines are purposefully tight. Teams have just eight weeks to conduct team-building and then negotiate, research, and present a project in which they compare a product, service, or business procedure across at least two different cultures (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Project phases



3. Individual team analysis

During the project, students archive communications in all media channels they use and keep a diary of the project from their insider perspective, logging any critical incidents. After the project, they analyse the data they collected quantitatively. This involves temporal analysis of the quantity, distribution, and frequency of communication over time in the different media. The temporal analysis is mapped on to the type of communication, e.g. whether transactional or interpersonal, whether it is about content, administrative issues, socialising, or conflict-management. Students then analyse this data qualitatively in relation to the literature on GVTs, identifying and comparing their own experience with research from the field. Each of these analyses represents an insider case study of a student GVT. Although students touch on a range of themes, the four most frequently occurring are

- leadership,
- impact of mediated communication,
- trust, and
- commitment/motivation.

The following case study of one of the project teams has been chosen to exemplify how these themes manifest themselves in team dynamics.

4. Case study: results and discussion

The team described here was diverse in terms of national and institutional affiliations (German, Irish, and French, whereby the French student was doing an Erasmus semester in Brno), age (ranging from 19-26), gender, academic maturity (from 3rd semester bachelor to 3rd semester master's degree), and English language skills (from B2 learner to native speaker). The analysis

foregrounds the impact of communication behaviours, trust, and commitment on the emergence of a leader.

4.1. Emergent leadership

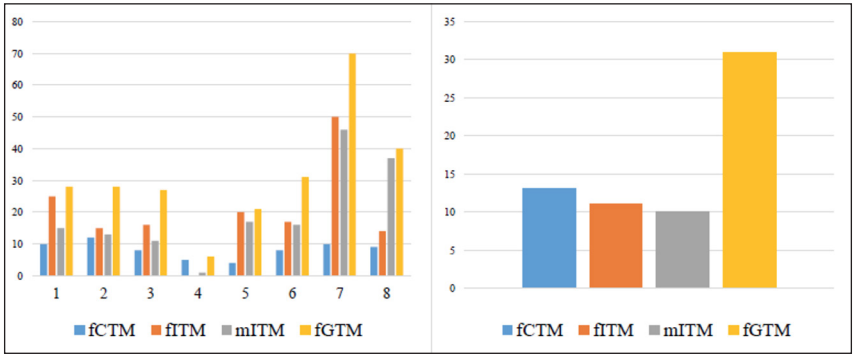
According to Gibson and Cohen (2003) it is not common practice for companies to assign leadership to a GVT member. Instead, leaders tend to emerge due to behaviours such as proactivity, commitment, expertise, or managerial skills. Furthermore, literature on GVTs (e.g. Panteli & Tucker, 2009) shows that more than one leader may emerge during the lifetime of a GVT, depending on the competences required for different project phases. By analysing the trajectory of the GVT in question, tipping points can be identified, which Boyatzis (2008) defines as moments when a group leader emerges due to certain behaviours. As team members became more aware of each other's competences, one student became the team manager, while others were perceived to be leaders in other areas of expertise, for example as report editor or presentation moderator. Notably, due to the temporary nature of GVTs and the limited knowledge that team members have of one another, leadership qualities are perceived through online communication of those qualities. Leaders therefore often emerge due to their communication behaviours.

4.2. Impact of mediated communication

Strong 'telepresence' is often a sign of an emergent GVT leader, and is expressed through the quantity and the quality of communication, in interaction initiation and speed of response (Zigurs, 2003). The German team participant was the most proactive, prolific, reliable, and responsive communicator. Her telepresence was firstly demonstrated as the creator of the WhatsApp group and initiator of most conversations. Not only did she write the most communications, but her average message length was also the longest (Figure 2).

In team video conferences, although attendance was good overall, only she attended all conferences from start to finish, demonstrating reliability and commitment to the project, and thereby inspiring trust in other team members.

Figure 2. **Left**: number of WhatsApp messages per WhatsApp member per week. **Right**: average number of words per message per member (f=female; m=male; TM=team member; C, I, G=Czech, Irish, German)[4]



4.3. Trust

Tyran, Tyran, and Shepherd (2003) found what McAllister (1995) refers to as 'role performance trust' to have a strong impact on leadership development. Role performance trust develops when members demonstrate competencies needed to accomplish a task. The German team member's communication skills led to her becoming the team manager. This may have been compounded by the fact that she was the oldest member of the group, close to completing her master's degree and had excellent English skills. However, different team members also inspired trust in their ability to perform roles competently, leading to a distribution of leadership. Irrespective of leadership, however, the team members inspired trust in each other through their overall online visibility and engagement throughout the project.

4.4. Motivation and commitment

Asymmetries in motivation and commitment are problematic in telecollaboration and real-life GVTs alike. Team members frequently work on parallel projects,

4. Figure 2 is reproduced here by kind permission of Katharina Sander.

and tend to prioritise face-to-face projects due to their visibility. This brings us back to the concept of telepresence and its impact not only on emergent leadership, but on team dynamics as a whole. In our experience, teams who met regularly in video conferences seemed to be more satisfied with their teams, irrespective of measurable project success, as was true of the case study GVT. This shores up our belief that video conferencing, and video conferencing skills development, should ideally be a mandatory part of the project, even if participants find scheduling difficult.

5. Conclusion

Research into GVTs has highlighted that for all the benefits that GVTs can bring to organisations, there are massive challenges in dealing with people across cultural and technological distance and organisations (Ferrazzi, 2014). Multinational organisations are discovering that to realise the benefits of GVTs, participants need more specific skills training. Telecollaboration projects can play an important preparatory role here, but research is needed to pinpoint those skills.

The student who contributed her team analysis for our case study summarised her experience as follows:

> "It gave us the possibility to gain deep insights on how to leverage the advantages of multifaceted abilities that exist within a randomly-formed team… how to cope with problems that arise from cultural differences, varying language skills and global dispersion… The project helped me to evaluate my own communication and leadership skills and I learned that I must reveal my train of thought more extensively for the other team members to be able to follow my ideas more easily".

These are important insights, both for the student and for us. Her insider analysis helps us to understand the impact on team dynamics of the four themes

we identified – leadership, online communication, trust, and commitment/motivation. This is a line of research that is worth pursuing more systematically in future iterations of the GVTs Project. By analysing the interplay of these themes across a number of team constellations, we might be able to determine more precisely which skills are needed to deal with the challenges of virtual, international teamwork and how to foster them in the design of our project.

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