Collaborative Student-Empowered Cross-Border Projects

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Abstract

This paper compares two cross-border projects at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, Finland, and Stenden University, the Netherlands. The aspects compared and discussed are student commitment and learning; course and project management, and instructor practices and collaboration. The objectives of both projects were learning competences for international project work, online collaboration, improving project work and research skills and improving cross-cultural and communication competence. The projects were implemented within courses of international communication and Business English, and the pedagogical methods were inquiry- and problem-based learning. The projects were led by student managers. The pedagogical objectives were to learn new ways of learning and to shift class room management practices and create a business environment for students to conduct a research. The data for the comparison is collected in student diaries, questionnaires on learning, reflection discussions and self- and peer assessment. Also, classroom observation was used. In both the projects quantitative research was the main activity managed by student project managers who worked closely with the instructors who administered the course. The findings show that pre-planning alleviates obstacles of learning, motivation and cross-cultural barriers. Yet learning results are dependent on individuals and their commitment. Guidance and support play a significant role. The project manager approach and leader roles varied from the first year to the next. The instructors changed their practices intentionally to enhance opportunities for learning. To conclude, it is obvious that projects may be multiplied to certain extent. Commitment, input and outcome are dependent on each participants' background and attitude. Preparation and pre-course information are beneficial, familiarity of used learning practices and cultures alleviate obstacles of learning. Furthermore, familiarity with technology and an open mind toward new ways of collaborative learning enhance commitment and hence learning.

Keywords: student empowerment, learning diaries, project learning, collaboration.

1. Introduction

This paper compares two cross-border projects at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences (HH), Finland, and Stenden University (Stenden), the Netherlands. The projects were English@Work in 2015 and B.E. Future in 2016. Experiences of student commitment and learning; project management and collaboration are compared. The objectives were to learn project work, online collaboration, research, cross-culture and communication. The pedagogical methods were inquiry learning (IL) and problem-based learning (PBL) and the objectives to implement new ways of learning and student empowerment.

HH and Stenden resemble each other in size and approach to learning. Stenden applies PBL in Seven Steps: Students first delineate the problem by formulating a description of the case study. Secondly, students formulate concrete targets to analyse and (re)structure them (Step 3). Next task objectives are defined individually (Step 4), and in self-study additional information is searched and the findings are reflected within the group (Step 5). After having done this, students synthesise and merge all concepts (Step 6). In order complete the cycle students give feedback to each other, evaluate the entire process and draw up points for improvement for the next assignment (Step7). HH's approach IL requires that learning takes place in a social setting where problems are solved through study, discussion, testing and sharing. Learners are creators of knowledge and social interaction is vital to learning. Knowledge is created through creation of solutions via social collaboration and problem solving. The six steps of inquiry learning are creating a problem, creating goals and content for a

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project/study/implementation plan, agreeing on work practices and theories, constructing knowledge together, reflecting and sharing the knowledge.

Learning diaries were used because reflection is part of learning. Students use the target language for meaningful content which encourages to communication and gives self-confidence. Students are social agents, and diary and portfolio work encourage them to decision making. Reflection makes learning visible and helps students orient towards their goals as they document their actions and become aware of learning. It is vital that students notice their learning and focus on making efforts towards the right direction. This enables them to proceed and progress, enhances autonomy yet it requires engagement, reflection and appropriate use of language. (Kohonen 2009).

2. Student commitment and learning

In 2015, the students were involved on different levels and those who involved higher-order skills benefitted from the project. The students had varied goals and differences appeared in motivation. For many credits were the utmost goal. Most felt they learnt communication and language, and some also leadership and research skills. The students without previous experience of project work were the least motivated but developed their language skills. In project 2, the learning diary work started in workshops and was followed-up in team meetings. After comparing the learning diaries from both countries, it was obvious that students from the two universities had different learning objectives due to the different ways of assessing them. Stenden would assess them on virtual meeting skills and HH would mark them on the overall performance. This fact led students to produce different learning diaries which reflect on different learning objectives. The Dutch students focused on communication skills, particularly on meeting skills. On the other hand, Finnish students focused on project skills and written communication. The diaries show change in commitment and attitude to learning as the notes change from lists to reflections and summaries of learnt issues.

Dutch students had personal interviews to illustrate what they had written in their diaries, which proved an important tool for the assessor to understand the reasons why a student would write certain learning objectives and the resulting outcomes. Many students wrote that they had learnt nothing from the project, however when being asked what were their learning objectives, they admitted having formulated none. Therefore, they had a very unrealistic idea of what they were supposed to pay attention to, and subsequently adapt in their personal development. The HH students developed understanding of Business English and communication, learnt language for specific purposes; improved writing skills, and enhanced competence for interviews, meetings, and project work. Other competences achieved were intercultural and communicative competence, ITC for virtual meetings; marketing, advertising and other industry-related competence, and research and project work. Reaching of goals were not mentioned in all the diaries. Surprisingly, most learning took place in student meetings, at company visits and interviews, and on guest lectures. Overall, the greatest learning points were increased positivity towards the future and work life.

3. Project management

Course management was shifted to students. In 2015 the student project managers created the plans, and then involved the project participants, and in 2016 all the participants created the plan. This process was lengthy and might have decreased commitment. In project 1, the project managers' goals were to developed leadership, project management, and communication skills. They were in daily contact and several online-meetings took place. The work approached was holistic. The project 2 mangers were independent and motivated by their roles. They wished to learn project management, internationalization, English and research. They met their objectives despite that the process and results suffered of the large teams.

Communication was smooth but pressured towards the end. More organized meetings with the instructors might have helped them perform better as they were challenged to motivate their teams. The project manager–instructor communication was efficient yet more meetings might have enhanced organization and decision making. Project 2 was experienced as good learning experience, giving insights into leadership. The managers in project 2 learnt more and more to seek advice from the instructors and to apply different strategies to manage the teams.

Project managers influence the performance of their teams and their involvement was different in the two projects. The project manager diaries express commitment and passion, even personal feelings during project 1, whereas in project 2 the not many personal goals were reflected. The instructors empowered the students and allowed them create and manage the projects. This created ownership and high-level commitment. This was a shift in course management, and an attempt let the students to take charge because responsibility and ownership tent to yield greater commitment and higher

achievements. However, the instructors might have failed to notice need coaching. The instructors intended to make amends and increase coaching but this was left to the initiative of the managers.

4. Instructor practices

The first project was created of a desire to offer students an international experience that would help them develop meeting and presentation skills. Additionally, the instructors wished to trial co-teaching internationally, to experiment with project-based teaching and applied research. Communication challenges were experiences and in many occasions communication was 1-to-1 and there were communication gaps and mixed messages. The instructors felt that the project objectives were met and that much valuable information was gained. This was the first time that such cooperation took place and the instructors were pleased with the overall results.

The instructors were proactive and changed some practices from project 1 to project 2. Pre-planning, project manager selection and an online meeting of all parties were completed in early stages. The project managers proceeded with the project plan and instructor consultations. Continuous coaching was needed in both projects, more in project 1.

The instructors were motivated to do a repeat study, and offer an opportunity for internationalization and to further enhance the strategic partnership between the two universities. They wished to seek new ways of collaboration involving companies, students and universities. It was obvious after the first project that something had to be done regarding different methodology and assessment of students. Therefore, instructors decided to adopt a learning diary to monitor engagement and performance of students throughout the project. The idea was to gather data to see students' perspective on learning objectives and outcomes, since in project 1 many students said they had learned intercultural skills, virtual meeting skills, management skills and communication skills, without being able to pinpoint how they achieved such and improvement and the methodology to achieve them.

5. Conclusions

Commitment at different levels results in success at different levels as well, both from instructors and managers. It could be said that one of the most prominent recommendations is that instructors are equally committed to the guidelines of the project and how managers and teams should be supported. The instructors might have failed to observe all the needs of project 2 as the project managers needed support.

Preparing and monitoring the virtual exchange on both sides is essential, and commitment from all participants is key to perform effectively and successfully across borders and university systems. The time that instructors devote should be facilitated by both institutions, otherwise the high risk of failure and discontent could easily jeopardise the success of projects of this nature. Also, differences in learning styles, teaching methods, and cultures may result in a struggle.

More detailed instructions should be known by all parties in advance to avoid miscommunication. Perhaps a communication plan should be outlined. It is of the essence that the stream of communication among all parties flows smoothly since failure to do so leads to miscommunication and frustration end therefore to discontent.

After considering the learning outcomes and feedback it is recommended that a general outline of the project and its tasks be given for the students at the beginning of the semester. Thus, the individual learners might better understand the scope of the project and the input required of successful participation. Furthermore, instructors might create a model for their roles with a division of tasks and responsibilities.

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