The Non-Formal Academy Experience: An Exploratory Model to Develop Students' Competences for Working in International and Virtual Teams

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Abstract

This article describes the experience of developing, and piloting, a Non-Formal Academy, for developing student's competences to work in international and virtual teams, that took place under the scope of the European Project CATCH-IT. The experience involved the collaboration of educators and students from Portugal, Denmark and Poland, and consisted on the development and piloting of a stepwise approach to engage students in international and collaborative teamwork, with the purpose of making them acquainted with the demands of such working contexts, that are both timely and relevant in today's labour market. The motivation for the development of this research work stems from the both from research evidence, as well as from the empirical observation that, the current generations of Higher Education students will, to a great extent, be engaged in multicultural and internationalized working environments. Such contexts call for the development of specific competences, such as cultural intelligence for effective international collaboration, as well as the ability to work in technology mediated contexts, that often support the work on internationally distributed project teams. The teaching and learning model developed for the Non-Formal Academy involved a preliminary phase devoted to the organization of students into diversified groups, and the development of thematic project proposals related with the development of international careers and international business, in each of the partner countries. Afterwards the students were engaged in a stepwise learning model to support the development of their projects in four steps that aimed to expose them to international and collaborative working contexts in a progressive manner. The steps included: i) a step 1, consisting of fieldwork conducted in each of the partner countries; ii) a step 2, involving the collection of data and the interaction between the students and international experts, in each of the partner countries; iii) a step 3, involving work in virtual international teams, supported by computer mediated communication, and bringing together students from the three partner countries; and iv) a final step 4, where groups of students that were selected on a competitive basis building on the work developed in the previous phases, were engaged in a short exchange period across the partner countries, to finalize their projects in a face-to-face manner with their international colleagues. The experience allowed for the development of the Non-Formal Academy model, and enable a rich teaching and learning experience that exposed students to the demands of work in international teams and contexts. Students involved in the process perceived important benefits from the experience, and provided key feedback information to further improve the proposed model, in order to make it replicable in the future.

Keywords: *higher education, international competences, virtual teams, non-formal learning.*

1. Overview and Conceptual Background

In recent years we have observed a growing interest in the adoption of teaching and learning activities that involve cross-cultural interaction as well as the experimentation of virtual interactions between students. This interest is largely motivated by the acknowledgement of the increasing importance of global virtual teams in business and in labour contexts in general. Together with the growth in the significance of multicultural team in business contexts there is a shift from the importance of individual job performance towards the domain of team performance [1].Moreover, very often the work of such multicultural teams, and the coordination of geographically dispersed activities and projects, results in the need to support the interaction between team elements with technologies, i.e. trough virtual interactions. Therefore, the term virtual tam refers to the job, project or managerial circumstances where teams conduct significant amounts of interaction via technology or electronically supported

media rather than face-to-face [1] [2]. Virtual teams allow companies to bring together resources from disperse local contexts to complete a taks or a projects. The work in virtual teams often allows for cost reductions and increases in employee efficiency, while bringing down expenses associated with travel and expatriation and repatriation of human resources. Other benefits of virtual teams have also been acknowledged such as the ability to bring together diverse expertise and perspectives that allows for increased responsiveness and operational flexibility.

Despite the acknowledged benefits, there are diverse challenges associated with the effective setup, management and performance of virtual teams. For example, geographically separated team members can have weak mutual knowledge about of each other's contents and restrictions, therefore creating increasing coordination problems [3] [4]. Moreover the reliance on technology to support the interactions between the team elements can create limitations for informal spontaneous interactions something that can affect knowledge interpretation [5]. The difficulties in managing virtual teams are increased when they include collaborators from different national backgrounds, each of which has its own set of values, orientations, and priorities.

The growth in the importance of virtual and international teams in work contexts has attracted the attention of managers nad education professionals, bringing to the forefront the call for the renewal in the competences and skills of individuals, as well as for deep changes in the required learning paradigms and tools that are needed for the competitiveness and sustainability of modern economies. Learning has become a lifelong activity, that spans the contexts of private and public life and work. In order to meet these goals, traditional formal learning will need to be increasingly blended with other forms of education and informal learning.

In what concerns the demand for new competences that has been inscribed in the priorities an debates of public policies, educators and managers, digital competences have been advanced as key for personal development, active citizenship, employment and inclusion. The same holds for cultural competences, i.e. the ability to interact with individuals from different national and cultural backgrounds, and to take into account their perspectives in decision-making [6] [7]. Over the years we have observed the advancement of various definitions for the term competence, and often the persistence of some disagreement about the specific meaning of related terms such as "skills", "expertise", and "competency", that are often employed in the literature as synonyms. Overall, competences are defined as the combination of knowledge, attitudes, skills, values and behaviours that an individual needs to successfully accomplish a task or an activity. Competences can be acquired, learned, developed and achieved by experience, education and training and practice [8] The non-formal academy was focused on the development of competences that relevant for the internationalization of young professionals, i.e. the implementation of significant learning contexts for the development of several skills, that qualify young individuals to integrate international entrepreneurial and professional contexts. This proposal was thought as timely and relevant given the current generalized internationalized profile of economies, markets and societies, and consequently the international context of the employment opportunities that are offered to young graduates [9] [10].

2. Framework for competence development

The project team developed a stepwise learning methodology, involving a set of successive learning contexts aimed at engaging students in exercises requiring the development of competences considered to be relevant for working in international production settings. Notably, this methodology aimed to expose the students to a multicultural working context, by means of engaging them in the conduction of co-work with international counterparts both in face-to-face settings and through technology mediated communications. Specifically, the stepwise learning methodology aimed at exposing the participants to four types of working contexts (see figure 1).

At stage 1 of the methodology students engaged in group work within national teams in classroom context. The purpose was to involve participants in active and informal learning exercises in order to enable the acquisition of competences related to communication and teamwork. In stage 2 students were exposed to a working context where they had to conduct work interaction with other national participants, holding international experience, via technology (e.g. conducting a skype call or videoconference, e-mail, etc.). The purpose was to subject them to the use of tools that are common in supporting work in international and geographically disperse work settings.

At stage 3 students were exposed to work and interaction with participants in other international teams – including one team from Polish students, and one team of Danish students, working from their home countries - by means of technology mediated communication. The purpose of this stage was to add to the competences in communication, and teamwork developed in former phases, other competences related to the work in multicultural contexts, that are common in internationalized workplaces and

economies. Finally, at stage 4, a selected number of students got together in face-to-face work with the participants in each country and concluded the academy by engaging in on site co-work, building on the previous phases.
The methodology previewed the implementation of the four learning phases and contexts in parallel in the various partner countries (Portugal, Poland and Denmark so that in phases 3 and 4 the participants could engage in the international interactions and learning contexts.

3. The non-formal academy

Whereas the methodology was able to accommodate diverse types of projects or cases that can be developed following the four proposed context steps, two specific pilot projects were devised and validated in the three partnering countries as relevant working topics for contributing to the development of competencies for the international qualification of young people:
Project 1: Identifying key challenges, competences and attitudes for the internationalization of young professionals; and Project 2: Identifying key challenges, competences and attitudes for the international set-up or expansion of an enterprise/business.
After selecting one topic, each student group engaged in activities to pursuit the collection and discussion of information to address the topic in their selected project. This led to the production of reports for each topic that were shared across the groups. Moreover, this work was supported by a set of successive classroom sessions, at each stage, where specialists were invited to provide students with training on tools that could facilitate the work (e.g. team work, conduction of interviews with internationally experienced professionals, utilization of ICT tools to support communication of geographically dispersed teams, etc.) in order to develop the competences needed for each stage of the non-formal academy.

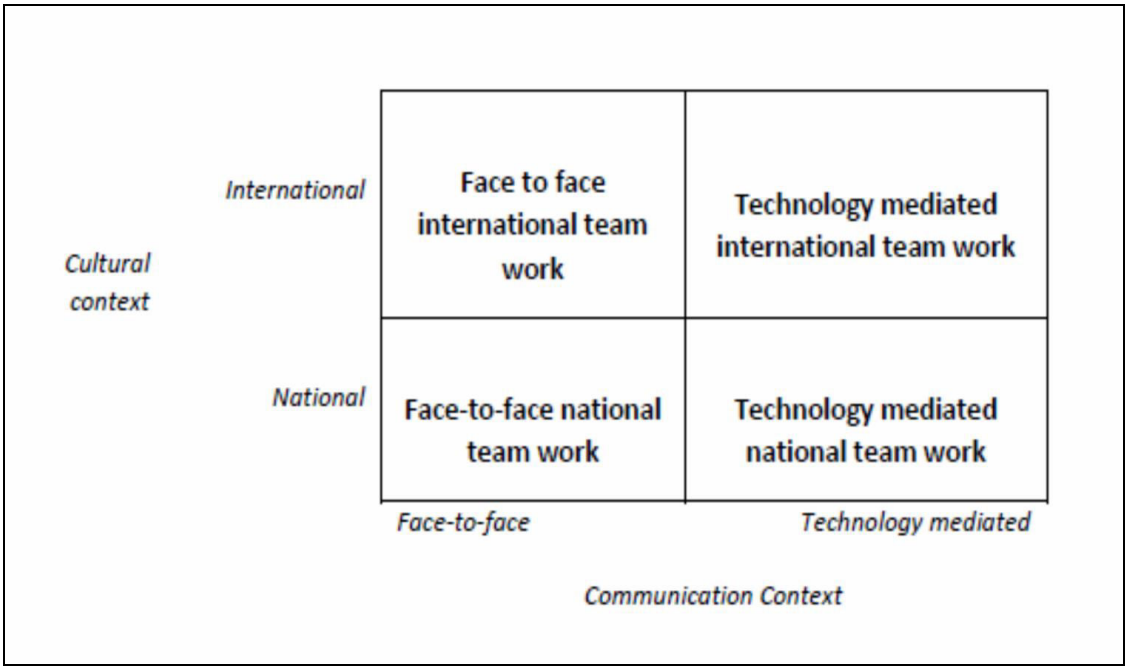

Fig. 1 Framework for competence development

The performance of students during phases 1 to 3 was assessed by the enrolled specialists and professors and was used as the criteria to rank student groups and select a group of participants that would travel to the partner countries, and conduct the final phase of the project (i.e. sharing and discussing the results) in loco with international counterparts.

4. Conclusions

This non-formal academy enabled the development and cross-country discussion of a methodology for the qualification of young people for international contexts. The engagement of participants in working scenarios where international contact and interaction is promoted supported the importance of experiential learning in the development of transversal competencies. The assessment of student

perceptions about the learning experience were positive. The research team focused on the lessons learned in order to enhance learning via virtual cross-cultural, distributed teams. The recommendations suggest that it is important to insert content and stimulate learning about intercultural communication at the start of the course, in order to increase the student's awareness about their cultural differences and achieve a better monitoring and judgement of their own ongoing collaboration with others. The experience suggests that in order to enable a collaboration process within a distributed team, with different national backgrounds it is important provide the participants with diverse world perspectives and initiate some activities to promote acquaintance with each other in order to build commitment. The experience also revealed that it is important to structure and pace the process of working the various transversal competences that are key for virtual international teams. The propose stepwise approach offered a common structure across the countries and the different project teams, that was perceived as positive and as contributing to creating a virtual shared project goals and timeline.

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