Work in Progress - Managing cross-cultural differences in an Open Ended Group Project course

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Abstract – This paper includes a description of a trial version of using international student collaboration in an OEGP type course, the difficulties experienced, and suggestions for how to deal with them in preparing for a full-scale version of the course.

Index Terms – Cultural differences, Group projects, International collaboration, OEGP.

INTRODUCTION

An Open Ended Group Project (OEGP) is in many aspects a suitable education set-up for international collaboration [1]. This belief was given a reality check in a joint venture between Uppsala University, Sweden and Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, Indiana, USA in 2004, when a group of students from Rose-Hulman was introduced as a collaborating team almost half-way through the semester long “IT in Society” course at Uppsala [2].

Some of the difficulties encountered, e.g. not really knowing the persons one work with, especially the subtle and not-so-subtle cultural differences, are presented and potential remedies for them. Our goal is that students will gain a deep (not surface level) understanding of their own and others' belief and values and how these are manifested in behavior is extremely important.

THE IT IN SOCIETY COURSE

The IT in Society course has been run at Uppsala University since 1998, mainly for 4th year students in the IT engineering education programme. An important goal of this course is to prepare students for their role as IT professionals in terms of personal development. Some of the characteristics of this are an ability to communicate with peers, other experts as well as users, and to have an understanding of group dynamics in projects including a repertoire of how to deal with situations that might arise.

I. Collaboration Partner

Collaboration with real users has been a part of this course from its inception and the last three years this collaboration has been with a local hospital. To help to improve the situation in a hospital seems natural to the students as they see themselves as taking part in an activity that benefits society. The need for IT is obvious and pressing, but the value of introducing IT in a particular context is usually far from clear. Likewise, dealing with a sector which has expertise in an area other than IT has been very useful for the students since it gives them experts to talk to who are not IT specialists and who have their own set of procedures and their own jargon. These aspects have allowed students to prepare for real life situations where IT is a tool rather than a pre-requisite.

II. Project size and scope

Experience with working in a project including real users is part of the aim of this course. The students are required to work in teams of between five and seven in order to meet the “working in a project part”, since experience shows this is a big enough group to require proper project management in order to function, and yet not big enough to become unwieldy. There have been problems with users really being real, e.g. they have suddenly “disappeared” for different reasons. The problem of ‘disappearing’ resources has been addressed by developing a project that is large enough to require several subprojects and thus create several contact surfaces and a possibility to contact real users through several channels.

The need for project management is obvious, thus avoiding the problem of using a method that is too powerful for the task at hand which might lead to lack of student motivation to learn and/or use the method.

III. Providing an overview for participants

Working with a real environment such as the hospital does increase the motivation in the student cohort, but it is nevertheless important to provide a clear goal and a distinct summing up at the end so that students have a sense of the OEGP coming to a close for them at least. This aspect is no less vital in connection with the collaboration partner.

ADDING INTERNATIONAL GROUPS

The setting for the IT in Society course as describe above is assumed to provide a stable ground to expand into an international arena. To introduce an international group half-way through the course turned in many ways out to be too difficult. In preparing for the coming course we will address

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the following issues in order to prepare the students for a fruitful experience.

I. Learning about Collaborators

Whether the collaborators are Swedes or Americans, there are going to be differences in the assumptions one makes about communication, managing conflict, etc. On the surface, we see many similarities between Swedish and American culture; however, speaking the same language and dressing similarly does not imply using the same communicative rules or operating with the same values. Examples of cultural differences between Americans and Swedes that potentially might create dissonance/misunderstanding are:

- silence v. talk. E.g., Americans use "small talk" to develop relationships; Swedes think small talk is superficial and therefore distrust it. Swedes think that if you don't have something to say, you should just not say anything. Whereas Americans see talk as a way of being connected with others and when silence goes on too long, struggle to find something to talk about. Neither is right nor wrong, simply different culture-based attitudes toward a common activity. However, if you believe that silence is withdrawing and/or being rude or not caring (Americans think this) and your communicative partner thinks that your continued talk is superficial and false (Swedes and Japanese), then the situation can spiral out of control, leading to distrust.

- beliefs about "equality" of persons. Americans believe that all persons are created equal; this means that each person has the duty, responsibility, and ability to manage their present and future. Swedes believe that all people are equal, too. However, it has a different meaning for them and leads to a different set of behaviors, since their interpretation is "I am better than no one and no one is better than me." Two implications of this are:

  Implication 1: Americans sometimes engage in talk that looks to Swedes like "self-promotion," and have a good reason for it: there will be no automatic assumption of a person's value and the belief is that if we're to "get ahead," one has to promote oneself. *Any* kind of talk where one tries to make oneself look better than others would be frowned upon by Swedes, and this kind of talk can be very subtle. Talk that positions one person as more knowledgeable than another is also a problem and needs to be carefully presented in a way that maintains the integrity of another person. In the course last fall one of the Rose-Hulman students gave "advice" to the Swedish students during an interview. The interviewer guessed, though with no evidence, that the Swedes bristled at this, because it implied that the advice-giver saw him/herself as superior in knowledge.

  Implication 2: Swedish professors give less direction and advice to students. They believe that students should ask questions and think through a direction on their own, discover on their own. Thus when looking back at the first trial, the lack of direction might be interpreted as a sign of great respect for the ability of students, while the students themselves wished for more direction.

II. Structuring the Project

Both Swedish and American students wished for more guidance on how to proceed with the project. While it was okay not to know what goal the client wanted to achieve or the product students would come up with to achieve it, having a process to draw upon for the project itself would have been helpful. The student groups may have learned different project management skills/processes, so they need to negotiate what process they will use and agree on one.

III. Structuring Communication

Early in the project, students need to have a discussion in which they agree on and commit to some communication norms. For example, if Judy sends Sven an email, Sven should reply asap, even if it is only to say "I have received your mail and will get back to you within X period of time." No response at all is a problem and will cause resentment. There are many practical guides for managing cross-locational and cross-functional teams; students should not be expected to come up with rules and ideas on their own. What the groups need is some set of prescriptions or guidelines to use as a straw man, deciding which norms they can all agree on for a particular project. An early videoconference supported by agenda and someone who makes sure everyone gets to know each other but also stays focused on tasks could be useful in getting the project started.

CONCLUSIONS

The experiences from the pilot version and discussions like the one in this paper have resulted in a plan for a stricter control of the next instance of the course, which will include the American students from the start. The spirit and ideas behind OEGP will however be kept in the new version of the course.

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REFERENCES
