Leadership and Global Competencies in a Virtual Context[1]

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ABSTRACT

With globalization, digital technology is acting as a catalyzing medium that opens up increasing opportunities for all with access to multimedia information and communication technologies. Such technology also offers potential to increase access to education, and to intercultural experience that develops global competencies and supports students to get ready to become "global citizens". McLuhan has coined the term 'global village' and highlighted the ways in which the medium and the message act in a synergic way.

With the significant role played by communication technologies in education and training, it is now critical to improve the training of the trainers to include intercultural perspectives and to develop interculturally aware and sensitive practices in teaching. What are the key global competencies and how do we develop our intercultural competencies for today's 'global village'?

Kadir Has University undertook a challenging project with the initiative of College of Staten Island-CUNY became the international partner of a distant learning course through video conference in 2004 and since then this exemplary e-leadership is going on. Discussing critical success factors about learning at a distance and the drawbacks and benefits of distance learning are the main objectives of this paper.

Key words: Cross-cultural Learning, Global Competencies and Leadership.

I.   INTRODUCTION

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communication technologies. Such technology also offers potential to increase access to education, and to intercultural experience that develops global competencies and supports students to get ready to become "global citizens". In the 1960s McLuhan has coined the term 'global village' and highlighted the ways in which the medium and the message act synergistically. Indeed "the global embrace" predicted by McLuhan has abolished the linear conception of time and space for Internet has transformed our way of communicating along with our way of thinking and learning.

With the significant role played by communication technologies in education and training, it is now critical to improve the training of the trainers to include intercultural perspectives and to develop interculturally aware and sensitive practices in teaching. Lately, surviving in complex and virtual world depends largely on affirmative attitudes towards diverse cultures and uncertainty along with cross-cultural adaptation and flexibility rather than control. Application of educational technology serves as a bridge to introduce new perspectives and cultural issues.

What are the key global competencies that are necessary for cross-cultural learning and how do we develop our intercultural competence based on experiential learning for today's 'global village'? Can experiencing "other culture" by being exposed to various perspectives through formation of work teams or pairs with diverse backgrounds in a virtual classroom develop such awareness are the major research questions (Kolb, 1993).

Kadir Has University (KHU) undertook a challenging project with the initiative of College of Staten Island (CSI/CUNY) and became the international partner of a distant learning course through video conference in 2004. Then, CSI and KHU were connected with two other partners in China and South Africa using internet based videoconferencing. Shanghai Television University and University of Port Elizabeth had been the other two partners. Nowadays, American College of Thessalonica from Greece has joined our discussion board of our joint virtual learning project. The conceptual model behind this project is called the Global Experience Through Technology Project (GETT) initiated by CSI with the goal of harnessing internet technology to bring university students of different cultures together in a virtual classroom»(Lewenthal, 2005; p. 184)

This paper summarizes the lessons learned from the use of technology and multi-perspectives in teaching and the consequent reflections and empathy observed during this innovative class of international students in two years. Discussing critical success factors about distance learning and the challenges involved in an internet-based learning are the main objectives of this paper.

In cross-cultural learning, technology has the potential to dissolve cultural barriers and taboos. The rising awareness of the need to develop intercultural communication, global competencies and perspectives may be explained by the trends below:

- A technology push and an economic imperative that reduces spatial and temporal separation,
- A demand for peace and global justice,
- A demographic trend of diversity and
- Ethical concerns and issues.

These factors will bring collaborative usage of new educational technologies to enhance the development of the next generation of leaders. If such a cross-cultural experience enhances moving from one set of values to another through a process of cultural transition that enables better interaction with others in the 'global village', then one may state that it is essential to develop intercultural competence or at least some of the global competencies (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004).

II.   THE GOAL OF A VIRTUAL CLASS PROJECT

Digital technology is acting as a catalyst, accelerating change and opening up ever increasing opportunities for those with access to multimedia information and communication technologies. Central to such systemic development is the preparation of tomorrow's leaders of educational technology, such that they may adopt multi-level and intercultural perspectives on the complex educational systems within which they work (Davis, 2002). In particular, I will focus on a transatlantic project that is working to establish cross-institutional, and cross-cultural communities using strategies that utilize digital technology in blending f online collaborative work with limited face-to-face interaction of students, faculty and technical staff. Consideration of this project may help us to illustrate our emerging understandings, and will provide the basis for presentation of directions for further research

There is growing awareness of the need to develop intercultural communication and global perspectives. Martin and Nakayama (2000) identify six motivating factors to improve intercultural communication such as:

- A *technology push* that directly links an increasing diversity of people and cultures, by minimizing the effects of spatial and temporal separation,
- An *economic imperative* as trade and commerce become increasingly global in scale and yet must continue to meet local needs and concerns.
- The *personal motivation* that comes with our inquisitive and exploratory nature as human beings developing self-awareness.
- An *imperative of peace* and its maintenance in the long term.
- A *demographic imperative,* as our societies become increasingly diverse.
- *Ethical imperatives* that arise from challenging ethical issues that arise with variations in norms and perceptions.

McLuhan had coined the term 'global village' and highlighted the ways in which the medium and the message act synergistically. With the increasingly complex part played by communication technologies in education and training, we believe that it is now critical to improve the education of educators and the training of the trainers to include intercultural perspectives or global competencies and to actively develop interculturally aware and sensitive practices in facilitating/ teaching. (Niki & Mi Ok Cho; 2005)

The use of computer mediated communication and other digital technologies in bringing together new communities of learners can also provide an experience that is akin to immersion in an unfamiliar, culturally strange environment. Distance education today includes strategies to encourage formation of collaborative study groups and learning communities. Students commonly find this way of learning very

stimulating and engaging by the end of the course and it is not unusual to find that some students wish to continue their virtual community beyond the end of the class schedule.(Niki, 2002).

Theoreticians mainly drawing on Hofstede's (1980) work on cultural differences identify the other cultures (of developing countries) as being characterized by high collectivism, high power distance and femininity, low uncertainty avoidance, and associative/contextual thinking. By and large, Turkey is found to be mostly: a country with a high power distance, a high uncertainty avoidance and with a low long-term orientation, a high social identity based collectivism. However, one can argue that there are wide variations among different regions and subcultures in Turkey.

These are seen as the polar opposites of cultures in developed countries against which management and leadership theories operate. Moreover, certain values typical of developing countries runs counter to the Western managerial norms. A few examples of the main conceptual elements derived from the non-Western norms are like:

- a fatalistic approach to life. Hence strategic goal setting, planning and budgeting are not valued and if carried out are hesitant and vague;
- a past time orientation. Hence planning is an extension of the past, decisions are based on precedent. Low premium on initiative; hands-off policy is often preferred;
- a 'being' orientation in place of looking good or appearing as anticipated. Hence decisions are often regarded as not being rational since they are mostly based on emotions and feelings;
- high power distance and strong authority relationships. Thus, there is often low risk taking, status rather than performance is crucial in giving feedback or setting incentives and rewards (Javidan, 2006).

Similar to the above theoretical grounds, in our study on global competencies among employees in Istanbul (2001), our findings show, our development trend in global competencies are in the right direction; however the pace of change will accelerate if generally accepted top priority competencies are put into practice at work. There are relative development needs particularly in leadership, team building as well as facilitating and coaching others to succeed. The power distance between management and other employees, controlling micro-management, and traditional "know-it-all" or "zero-sum game" understanding disable leadership and teamwork competencies and limit leadership styles to "telling and selling" that is directing and supporting rather than coaching and delegating styles of situational leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969). Thus, motivating expectation that all employees can be developed, may add value and make a difference is not enhanced.

However, when strategic leadership and leading roles (e.g., coaching, facilitating, mentoring and delegating) are practiced rather than tactical micro-management, a trustful organizational climate, participatory and collaborative understanding can easily flourish. On the whole, inventions and innovations are no longer made by occupation into new territories, it is accomplished by viewing and grasping the world from an entirely different perspective and organizing accordingly. The choice is

either to become enterprises where global competencies are enhanced or to fall into a competency gap and "the where global competencies are enhanced and digital capabilities are enabled or to try to catch up a long gone band wagon. Not falling into the digital gap and becoming only copy-cats may be attained by becoming a learning organization and a self-learning person both starts by facing a mirror to assess and appraise from within through self-reflexivity. The question to be posed is do we want to look good in form and tangibles or to be good in essence and intangibles? Do we prefer acting as if we are adapting to the changing demands or have we paved the way for transforming ourselves and our organizations for the imperatives of the near future? Are we prepared for knowledge economy with due respect to the global competencies? Are we getting close to the new high-skilled employee profile demanded by this internetizing evolution or digital revolution? These research questions addressed in that prior research have also shed light to my inquiry of this paper.

Our discussion thus far has identified a need to incorporate intercultural perspectives in education, and to model good practice in the preparation of futureleaders/ faculty in educational technology. It has also identified a broad challenge for educators today. How do we develop our intercultural competencies for today's 'global village'. In a research by Yamazaki and Kayes (2004), the main cross-cultural learning competency clusters are found to be positively related to Kolb's corresponding dimensions of experiential learning theory such as interpersonal, information, analytical and action learning skill sets.

My assumption is that one may use cultural differences to enhance learning, because the shock of a different culture or perspective often stimulates cognitive and emotional dissonance, which in turn brings us to a better understanding of others and ourselves. When managed appropriately, the individual can be enabled to reflect on personal behavior and perceptions that had become routine and thus invisible from an early age. (Niki & Mi Ok Cho; 2005). Discussing critical success factors about learning at a distance and summarizing lessons learned from the use of technology that enhances information sharing and learning some of the global competencies that are at the crux of cross-cultural competence. are the main objectives of this paper.

'The need to create attitudes that go beyond tolerance toward embracing difference and living constructively and compassionately in a multicultural world is critical to the survival of humankind and the planet. We cannot act fast enough to encourage the ' of the necessary skills by those motivated to live in the dynamic of inbetweenness.' (Pusch, M.;2005)

III.   EXPERIENCE OF THE TWO AND A HALF YEARS

The virtual classroom as a distance education/ learning project has been a challenging experience since the participating students were coming from diverse backgrounds; however, they had one thing in common. They were all more familiar with the new media than the lecturers like me since they are all used to chatting, SMS and MMS messages, e-mailing or using other messengers to express themselves and to interact with each other. Hence, the video conferencing along with chatting, e-

mailing and virtual blackboard as techniques also revealed different pedagogical goals such as:

- Allowing students to interact with each other as much as possible to the extent of letting them chat even during the presentations and lectures to make them become active learners,
- Encouraging them ask questions and comment upon lectures as well as all relevant issues so that instead of posing questions the answers of which are already known and conveying the students a coherent body of knowledge, we made them organize the information discussed in class.
- Supporting students to sort out their own conflicts and disagreements between and among themselves through a series of weekly and monthly assignments, some of which as part of a semester term paper or project, in an interactive set-up (they were working in pairs e.g., US and Turkish students were preparing their monthly assignments together) so that they can develop their own perspective or question their frames
- Acting more as a facilitator ,a moderator or as a coach rather than teaching them or leading them in a telling or selling style in the conventional way so that the students may work as a team or create their own leaders and through their personal or digital network (e.g., virtual discussion board, chat sessions etc.) they can also get peer support.
- Motivating the students for further research based on key words and research questions and giving them latitude for using their personal experience within the context of the course which is globalization and culture will enhance their creativity and make them challenge their own limits.

Expectations of CSI/CUNY and KHU Students along with their feedbacks:

   I myself am an immigrant so I feel this course has a lot of meaning for me, I can really relish in this globalize world within which I live and have a true comparison to the other side, seeing as how I lived in the USSR until I was seven.[2]

- I grew up in Lagos Nigeria, moved to the United State in June 2002. My educational background is in Computer Science/programming/Networking. But right now I am a senior at CSI majoring in International Studies. I speak five international languages which includes Arabic, French, Hindi/Urdu and Yoruba.
- I was born in Staten Island and am an 18 year old freshman at the College of Staten Island. I am undecided as far as my major, but am interested in either Education or Psychology.

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[2] To protect the privacy of students, I am only giving basic information stated by some of them without their names.

- Everyone calls me Ali, and I'm a freshman in the CUNY Honors college . I have absolutely no idea what my major will be, but I do intend to declare a minor in French. I have two dogs, two sisters, and am addicted to caffeine, nicotine, and fantasy novels.
- I am 18 years old and a freshman in the CUNY Honors College , I am interested in studying psychology and learning about other cultures. I was born on Staten island and have lived here my whole life.
- I am eighteen years old and a freshman at the CUNY Honors College. I plan to major in either English or History. Outside of school, I dance at a local dance studio. I have only been outside of the country once, when I went to Scotland to visit family.
- I was born on Staten Island and lived here for the most part of my life, however I had lived in Costa Rica for a couple years when I was younger. I'm a music major and that's pretty much all I do.
- I'm a senior and a Political Science major. I was born in New York but my parents are from Guatemala. I'm excited about getting your points and views concerning issues facing Turkey, the US and the world.

"It was such a pleasure being surrounded by intelligent people who are willing to have a free flow of ideas and opinions on any range of topics. It was particularly interesting that half of those people were miles away yet expressed similar viewpoints as ours. It seemed as if we were seeing the workings of globalization firsthand. This experience helped highlight a point that I have learned from years of working with international students: cultural differences don't make much of a difference if you're just willing to listen to each other." (Lewenthal; 2005, 188).

"The virtual classroom project is the best educational experience I've had so far. Though my partner and I did not have an ideal working relationship, it was still beneficial. My (Turkish) partner and I had interesting conversations regarding the US actions in Iraq, music, literature, globalization, etc. Through our chat sessions, the differences between my partner and I lessened. Our conflict was not based on cultural differences; rather, it was similar to the types of conflicts I experience with classmates here when we work together as a group."(Ibid.)

NEVIN, ANNA & EWA: We are all Erasmus students from Poland. We came to KHU since we wanted to live abroad and learn another culture. We look forward to both this course and our one semester experience in Istanbul. (As outgoing students from preparing to study abroad, they were culturally prepared and familiar; one of them even was able speak and understand Turkish.)

BERRAK & HAKAN: We are a little worried about the language & technology, still we are excited about the course and meeting with foreign students.

"In fact we have learned too many things. It was an amazing lecture but, because of the speaker phones we couldn't hear the presentations very well, if we could it would be much better" (Ibid.)

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Let me summarize now the lessons I draw from the virtual class room experience for four semesters and benefits as well as drawbacks as reflections. First, pessimism ought to give way to positive thinking and faculty need to be more involved in shaping virtual distance education program and web-based learning process along with the technical experts as was the case in KHU and CSI collaboration. Further, distance learning systems based on videoconferencing can be complementary to conventional face-to-face lectures rather than replacing classroom education. Likewise, distance learning is not going to be a cheap replacement for campuses for the foreseeable future. Third, we as faculty need to go beyond defense mechanisms against this technological innovation and regard it as an opportunity not a threat with pedagogical objectives in the back of their minds. Fourth, such educational innovations need to develop based on needs assessments of faculty and students to be able fulfill real needs.

- The learning experience must have a clear purpose with tightly focused outcomes and objectives.
- The learning environment makes appropriate use of a variety of media; for instance using films, documentaries, and newspapers on internet etc. supports research . However, selection of media may also depend on nature of content, learning goals, access to technology, and the local learning environment.
- The learner/ student is actively engaged and the faculty also is a learner/student particularly of the digital process and real-life experiences.
- Problem-based as well as knowledge-based learning is emphasized since the first highlights analysis, synthesis, and evaluation while the latter involves recall, comprehension and application.
- Learning experiences should support interaction, cooperation and teamwork.
- The practice of distance learning contributes to the larger social mission of education and training in a democratic society.

On the whole, changing our educational models and conventional methods empowers students/learners and encourages critical thinking and active experiential learning derived from how each student creates meaning from his or her experiences. In a nutshell: Fosters meaning-making, discourse ; Provides for interactive learning at multiple levels; Is learner-centered and focuses on problem-solving; Encourages active participation and learning ; and allows group collaboration and cooperative learning .The degree of student and faculty satisfaction in online virtual courses depends, however, to a large extent, on how well the courses are planned and taught. The quality of the course and course instruction are more important than computer technical skills. After all, if the educational goal is accomplished and the student is satisfied with the experience, the institution, the faculty and the student benefit.

Online education is a growing trend and many universities are offering some type of distance education or an example of a virtual classroom. This is a paradigm shift in the mode of teaching and learning, if not of the institutions as a whole. There are no

boundaries anymore. Students have the freedom to experiment and develop unique ideas while conforming to the parameters and system developed by the class through collaborative dialogue.

Even though there are many advantages with online learning as summarized above, there are also disadvantages. Not having face-to-face contact with classmates or the instructor can lead to feelings of isolation or lack of connectiveness. Thus, our in-between model of virtual classroom experience that incorporates human touch and personal interaction and conventional methods with new ones combines best of both worlds particularly within the framework of enhancing global competencies. These competencies comprise of cross-cultural competency clusters such as building relations, valuing other cultures, listening and observation, coping with ambiguity and adaptability and flexibility at least helps students attain major interpersonal and adaptive and information gathering skills.

Student enthusiasm in an intercultural virtual class project depends on the extent to which students are able to build a shared learning culture that facilitates the discussion of alternative views and multiple perspectives from a 360 angle. The prerequisite to create such a climate is faculty's own development of a shared teaching and information culture. Future research as to how students' experiential distributed learning experience might have an affirmative indirect impact on work experience in a distributed workplace as well.

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