EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN CYBERSPACE: USING INTERNET TO CONNECT STUDENTS FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES IN A COURSE ON CROSS-CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

In this paper we will present a pilot project where three universities on different continents (Africa, America and Europe) collaborated to offer a joint course on cross-cultural Psychology. Both students and teachers were evenly distributed between the universities and all interaction took place through a distance education platform. The course was structured to facilitate interaction between students from the different continents in a virtual international classroom and thereby to add an experiential dimension to the theoretical contents of the course. To tentatively evaluate if a course of this kind could affect students attitudes a test on ethnocentrism was distributed before and after the course. Students evaluations of the different tools that were used are presented along with their evaluations of the course as a whole and their suggestions for future courses.

Of the different learning tools that were used, the Discussion tool was most appreciated. Group projects, were students from different countries had to coordinate their efforts to solve problems, collect data and present joint solutions, was the most difficult to manage. Different time zones and difficulties in establishing efficient intra group communication seem to have been the main obstacles. No general effect on ethnocentric values was found, but a higher degree of involvement in the course was related to decreased ethnocentrism, as measured by us. We conclude that modern distance education platforms have a great potential in connecting students and teachers in different parts of the world to enhance learning and intercultural understanding, but that the cultural differences also present a challenge for the teachers to plan and arrange such a course in a way that takes these cultural differences into account along with the different societal and economical conditions in the countries that are represented.

Keywords - Distance education, globalization, innovation, technology

1 INTRODUCTION

Distance education has a long history and several evaluations have found that learning results in higher education can be at least as good as with traditional courses.[1,2,3] It has also been estimated that a great proportion of the doubled demand of higher education expected between 2000 and 2020 will consist of courses distributed in distance mode.[4] It seems however that the utilization of this technology to connect staff and students at different universities, especially in different parts of the world, has only begun. Using distance education technology for such a purpose seems to have many potential advantages. Some of the most obvious ones may be:

• combining complementary expertise in different universities and parts of the world to enable courses of a higher quality than any of the universities could accomplish on its own
• inclusion of guest teachers that may not have the time to travel long distances to give lectures or participate in seminars
• incorporation of global perspectives in a more genuine way than could be offered by staff in a single location and
• enabling cross-cultural student groups to cooperate and to learn about the meaning of culture through experience within the course framework

To harvest such possible fruits, the participating universities need to overcome some of the special challenges associated with joint global educational projects. To plan, pedagogically design and distribute such a course in an efficient and well coordinated way may be difficult enough within the faculty of a single university, especially when teachers are located in different departments of the same university. But when they are located in different universities in different countries, these challenges naturally become a lot more difficult. In addition, other challenges add to the complexity, such as management of different time zones, semester periods, different grading systems, different teacher and student roles, different traditions and values concerning learning goals and different pedagogical philosophies, some of which may be related to cultural differences.

There is probably much to gain in terms of competitive advantages for universities that manage to cope successfully with these challenges. Globalization sharpens competition also between universities and it has been estimated that only around 100 universities in the world will thrive, while the thousands that remain will have a hard time to survive unless they adapt to changing demands and environmental conditions [4]. The ability of universities across the globe to jointly develop and offer successful and high-quality distance education courses could well be one of the most important survival factors in the global higher education market.

In addition to the general advantages related to quality and flexibility, a special potential can easily be seen for courses that have intercultural understanding and skills as a dedicated part of their contents. A learning environment that combines theoretical studies with experience and cross-cultural interaction may be superior to traditional teaching to convey the deeper meaning and implications of culture. In many disciplines such as Business, Management, International Relations, Communication and Psychology, understanding of culture and the mastering of intercultural skills are becoming an essential part of the required student competence profile after a completed education.

In this paper we will present a pilot project where three universities on different continents collaborated to offer a joint course on cross-cultural Psychology. Both students and teachers were evenly distributed between the universities and all interaction took place through distance education platform. Which were the challenges we had to deal with? Which factors could be identified as important for success or failure? What did we learn from this and what do we think others can learn from the experience we made?

2 THE COURSE

Between January-May 2009, we, three colleagues from three different universities in Sweden (Växjö), Uganda (Makerere) and the United States (Minnesota-Duluth) taught an online course in Cross-cultural Psychology for students from those three universities. We used Blackboard as the platform of instruction and interaction. The course included readings, lectures, exercises, discussions, projects and exams. Extensive use was especially made of the discussion forum in Blackboard where students did not only post, but also responded to each other’s posts. In addition, intercultural groups, with student participants from each of the universities, collaborated through the platform to analyze cross-cultural scenarios and to perform field studies with data collection from each of the three countries.

The contents of the course was divided in three modules: In the first module we explored the field of cross-cultural psychology and its tools. We included introductory topics as globalization, culture, identity and methodological issues related to cross-cultural Psychology. In the second module we explored how basic psychological factors such as cognition, personality, emotion, self, family and group interactions occur in different cultural contexts. In the third module there was an applied focus, examining workplace issues and health psychology in different cultural contexts. The students completed a test on ethnocentrism before and after the course to tentatively evaluate if changes in ethnocentrism could be related to taking the course. At the end of the course the students discussed what they had learned and also provided feedback on the course content and delivery.

A general pedagogical idea of the course was to create an international class room via the distance education platform. Many of the discussions and the assignments encouraged students to make comparisons between the different countries represented by them and to relate that to the theoretical contents of the course. In addition groups of around six students were formed with around two
participants from each university. In the group projects the students made a joint report to respond to each of the specific group assignments/projects, always with an intercultural focus. To work together in these projects a virtual group “room”/folder was created for each group with unique access for its members. Once the group had arrived at a common solution inside their rooms, they published it for all to see.

There were 17 discussion topics in the course and the students wrote a total of 1054 posts in these. This corresponded to around 25% of all the time students spent while they were logged into the course. In addition there was a group project/assignment for each module. For each contribution in these discussions and group projects the students earned points which in addition to the scores from the online exam on each module added up to their total score upon which the grade was based.

Due to restricted broadband access for many of the students, lectures were only presented as Word or PowerPoint presentations, i.e. filmed lectures were not used.

The course was planned for 36 students (12 from each university). Of the 28 students that participated actively in the course, approximately 50% had no previous experience of Blackboard or similar distance education platforms.

3 RESULTS

30 students were logged into the course at least once during the course period and 28 participated actively throughout the course. The active students completed, on the average, 75 sessions each that each lasted for 24 minutes. 20 of these students finally passed the course. As we graded the exams, individual assignments, discussions and group projects, we could determine how much of the content the students learned. This presentation of the course outcome will however focus on student ratings and comments. In the first subsection below a student discussion on what they had learned is summarized. In the next section the anonymous course evaluation, including both student ratings and comments, is presented. Finally, in the last section the results of the ethnocentrism test, with scores from the beginning and the end of the course, are presented.

3.1 Analysis of students final discussion on major learning outcomes

The theme of this final discussion was “What did I learn?” with the following instruction: What was you most important and new thought from this course on cross-cultural Psychology? Why is it important to you? How can it be applied in cross-cultural settings? After having made your choice and published it, read and compare what others have emphasized as most important to them. Make at least one comment to what someone else have published.

In analyzing the 41 posts (not counting personal thanks and well wishes), it was noticed that ALL students mentioned noticing, understanding and respecting cultural differences as an outcome. Despite serious difficulties with coordinating schedules across three time zones and school calendars, all students reported enjoying interacting with each other and hearing about different aspects of the three cultures.

3.2 Course evaluation survey

The students had a choice to complete an anonymous course evaluation at the end of the course. Twenty-one students (6 from Makerere, 10 from Minnesota, 5 from Växjö) completed the evaluation. We first asked about the students’ experience with online delivery platforms such as Webvista/Blackboard or Moodle. Eleven students had used these online platforms before, but for 10 students it was the first time they were using this platform.

The remaining questions asked the students to provide ratings from 1-5 (5=excellent/very much, 3=neutral 1=very poor/almost nothing) on certain aspects of the course. We have included some example quotes as they were written from the students’ responses.

**Question 1.** When asked to evaluate if they learned anything new, 71% gave positive ratings (4 or 5) with a mean of 4.0.

*This is the first all online course I have taken and it was very interesting getting to know how people were educated in other far off countries.*
I learned that communication across seas and only by online means is very difficult. Since it was my first time to attend classes with such technology. It is a great lesson to understand how our world developed and how it is possible to bring the world together. I learned a lot about cultural diversity. My attitude towards other cultures has changed from negative to positive. The diversity in culture and the way things are done across different places was a new experience to me.

**Question 2.** To the question “What was your opinion of the course as a whole?” 57% had a positive rating, with a mean of 3.6. They liked the content but would have preferred more structure in the course. This class was so unstructured. It was hard to follow deadlines with different time zones and such. I think that maybe a little more individualism in assignments would improve the course load. I think this was a great course but communicating with the other students in my group was often a difficult task. Overall I loved the course though. Material great, course work tough to organize Great. Some unpolished parts, such as the hard to get schedule and how most things were scattered around the platform. Else ways, just great! The content was good. The organization of the class and communication with students needs some work. Also, grades and modules should be posted in a timely manner. It was a good course but it was hard to communicate with group members, and I had troubles with assignments of the same module being due a few days before the other ones, was very confusing to me. Very interesting material and method of teaching, what a unique experience. Very unorganized though It really has much value and content compared to the other electives. It exposed me to a whole new experience that helped me with my other online course unit. Only that there was a lot of work to do. More coordination is needed among the three universities but this being the first time it was really excellent

**Question 3.** We asked the students about their opinion on the discussions in each module. Discussion involved individuals posting their thoughts and responding to others’ postings. 76% rated this activity positively (mean=4.0) The module discussions were very interesting and made me use a great deal of thought. I thought they were very good topics These were certainly sufficient topics, but more intriguing ones may have made the course more interesting. This was probably my favourite part of the course, along with the readings It was very excellent. The readings and discussions were very good. I kept all for reference as I was not able to read and digest all. I will read them again and again. It was good, it helped give you an inside to others countries and how much different their lives are then mine

**Question 4.** Group projects seemed to give the students the most trouble. Only 21% rated this activity positively (mean=3.0). The main problem was coordinatig across time zones, cultures and personalities as exemplified by the following comments:
The projects were hard because of the whole coordinating thing, the topics however where interesting.

Cooperation was okay, however, I feel that a couple of us took on the bulk of the projects.

I really like the idea of the group projects but found them hard to complete often times due to the different time zones group members were in.

Interesting but complicated. Wouldn’t change it, though. It is worth it.

I wound up doing the lion’s share of the work in my group, so it wasn’t as of good an experience as I was hoping for -- it was frustrating waiting for other people to do their share of the work

This was the challenge for me as we are from different time zone. I suggest to form groups from similar time zones of course with different cultural sets.

Different time zones and motivation of students make it very difficult to work on group projects.

Emphasis of teamwork encouragement in the groups made me realise how adorable this course is

The assignments were good, it was hard to get group members involved, but when we were able to connect with everyone they went very well really hard to work on group projects it was a challenge

Good idea, if a group had a set time to meet it would have been easier but that is tough to accomplish.

Getting to discuss with the group was a bit hard for some just did not want to discuss so the work was left to practically 1-2 people.

Thought the projects were good, but very difficult to complete because of communication problems

My group members were really cooperative. I appreciate and it earned us good grades

**Question 5.** For the readings in the course, the mean rating was 3.75. 60% had positive views. Students reported findings the readings relevant and interesting, but some felt that they were too much.

Readings were relevant to the topics learned. The readings were interested but sometimes a little long and hard to understand.

Great research articles. I have done some research on some of the topics so very interesting.

There were both easy to understand texts and texts with more depth.

One of the readings seemed a bit repetitive -- I would have like to have had more reading assigned out of the Hofstede book

The readings are excellent.

Readings were good; I feel that some of them could have been shortened

The readings were so detailed and big making it hard to exhaust all and understand at the same time.

The content was relevant though it was a lot honestly

**Question 6.** On lecture notes, the mean rating was 3.74. 65% rated the lecture notes positively. Most students found the lecture notes useful to facilitate understanding, while some thought they were difficult or increased the burden too much in combination with the readings.

The lecture notes were very helpful and i learned a good deal from them. The notes were very relevant
Because they were more simplified compared to the readings
I mostly worked with the readings, because the amount was ok didn't need lecture notes.
They were too many to read through all with the limited time too but have good content
The content was ok though some to me were not easily understandable
Very thorough and contributed to my knowledge of each subject.
The lectures are very excellent. Especially the first lecture, about globalization. Unfortunately I saw it after I did the exam.

**Question 7.** On individual assignments, the mean was 3.8, with 60% positive ratings.
I prefer when we got reading material and a topic to discuss like the globalization team.
Individual assignments were great and substantially contributed to what I learned.
The individual assignments were put together very well. I thought they were easier to complete than the group projects because you didn’t need to wait for feedback from group members, which takes time.
Issue of commenting on my work aroused my esteem
I sometimes could not understand and so had to think a way out or consult a friend for the Internet was not 24-7 for me.
The feedback and comments from the teachers was really good and fast. They also listened to our problems and considered our requests.thanks
They gave freedom to answer in the perspective I thought beat they were not limited I could air out my views
It was very encouraging for the teachers to interact with us

**Question 8.** When we asked the students about their overall impression of the atmosphere of the course, and the interaction with other students, the rating was 3.4, and only 50% had a positive rating of 4 or 5. There were serious complaints about how hard it was to coordinate with other students. Here cultural differences seemed to play a role as some students complained that they did not have communication in a timely manner with some of their peers.
Again I really liked the idea and wish it was easier to communicate with them. I found that asking just simple question took days or even weeks.
Great atmosphere. Hard to find everything, though. One could use a virtual map, perhaps.
I really liked the general discussion area -- I got a lot more out of this interaction and reading other people’s thoughts than I got out of the group assignments
So terrific in the way that these people could co-operate as if we were meeting face to face.
Very hard to connect with students in group, but discussion boards were good
Tough to get/keep everyone involved
I really enjoyed meeting the students though we did not really interact that much.
Because in my opinion my group was good and it helped me learn to work with other people outside
Not so good but with time I think it will be improved

**Question 9. Examination.** When we asked the students what they thought about contents, relevance and level of the examination, the mean rating was 3.7 with 65% rating it positively.
Found the examinations very strange and sort of unnecessary. 
It seems to me like the examinations are more about helping us assimilate what this course is all about and I like that.
Examinations were good, the questions were picked well
Relevant to the material!
The exams were so astonishing as they could open your your minds in order to answer them but all in all they were good.
The exams were really tough

**Question 10.** When asked if the course provided with an adequate knowledge of cross-cultural psychology, the mean rating was 4.1, with 75% responding with a positive rating.

**Question 11.** When asked if they had learned to work and interact with individuals from other cultures, there was a rating of 4.2 with again 75% responding positively.

**Question 12.** A rating of 4.0 (75% positive) indicated that the students would recommend this course to other students.

### 3.3 Summary of student ratings

A graphical summary of how the students rated the different learning tools of the course quantitatively (fig. 1) reveals that most frustration was experienced in relation to the group projects and interaction with other students. The five learning tools that were evaluated were Discussions, Group projects, Readings, Lecture notes, Individual assignments and Examination. The low proportion of positive ratings (4 or 5) for the group project tool emphasizes the differences in student appreciation even more than the mean ratings in fig 1: While the group project had only 21% of positive ratings, this proportion was for the other learning tools between 60-76%, highest for the Discussion tool.

![Student ratings of learning tools](image-url)

**Fig 1.** Summary of student ratings (mean values) of the different learning tools in the course. For each item the lowest rating was 1, the highest 5. The number of respondents was 21.
3.4 Student recommendations for future courses

**Question 12.** We asked the students to tell us what topics they would like to see explored. There was a very sophisticated list and a lot of variety indicating to us that this is an area that is of interest to the students who are becoming aware of the globalization issues.

- Different psychological phenomenona and how they manifest in different cultures, or more specifically subcultures.
- Teenagers, suicides, teen pregnancy, addiction etc.
- War and conflicts
  - I found the topics on hand to be very informational and educational and enjoyed them as they were.
- The research aspect and getting validated research done on related topics.
- I liked when we got to answer to some stereotypes of our countries. That might be interesting to elaborate...
- More discussion amongst the whole class so that we get a deeper understanding of each other’s cultures and daily lives
  - Global system Terrorism and Religion. Geo-Politics from a Cross Cultural Psychology perspective.
  - About the gender differences in the negotiation processes-political ideas of the youth basing on the party systems across the world. -How different cultures cope up with the cultural shock.
  - Reasons as to why some countries are extremely collectivistic while others are completely individualistic
  - I think the topics covered were sufficient
  - Language barriers between businesses!
  - Sex, human resource management, psychometrics, life,
  - Go more in depth on how this will affect students in the work place
  - Gender and Human Resource management
  - How different cultures carry out business, it helps when people go to different countries for business
  - Practical illustration of different cultures thanks
  - 1.conflict resolution across cultures 2.Business3.exchange programs

**Question 13.** For the open-ended question about what can we do to improve the course, the students provided many thoughtful suggestions on how to teach such an international course in virtual space:

Considering that the course was aimed a for people with different backgrounds (educational areas) it was good. The only thing would be the difficulty that we students have to coordinate.

- Increase the contact between students and teachers and between the teachers* Increase the contact between students* More time for the assignments* An equal group of people who all wants to study the course
  - I didn’t really like taking the mark down in grades when an assignment was submitted by another group member when I felt that I could’ve done a better job. This was a matter of either taking charge and coming off extremely rude, or taking a back seat and letting someone else take credit for the project submissions but receiving a grade that isn’t one I’d have expected to get. I think with individual submissions this problem could be eliminated.
  - Make so sort of instant message system to communicate with group members so projects can be completed on time and with good understanding.
Leave out the group projects and focus more on the discussion part. You can read more opinions and thoughts this way and it's not so difficult to organize. Doing group work with someone from another country barely felt like that, I was only on a computer with someone who knows English and we couldn’t organize anything together as a group. I liked the discussions much more. Maybe do individual projects or more exam material in the future.

The thing that was the greatest flaw was how hard it was to find the right material, keep track of deadlines and know where what was supposed to be posted. Some directions might be useful. There was a calendar one could modify, why didn’t you use that, for example; the platform was rather chaotic, but only minor changes would be needed to fix that... A place where all the deadlines (and links to the assignments) are visible would be gold.

I think offering a class like this is an outstanding idea, and I’m glad I was a part of it. If I were to offer suggestions for improvement, I would first of all cut down on the group project assignments -- maybe have one group assignment for the whole semester.

When we’re trying to get to know each other across countries and cultures, I believe it should be a positive experience. In this class, waiting and waiting on group members to get their parts of the assignment done was frustrating. I want to get to know these people on a more intimate basis and don’t want my first experience with them to be a frustrating one. (Maybe that’s just my American ‘let’s get this done’ attitude, but when teachers set deadlines, I feel that work should be done on time). Sometimes I felt more like a teacher than a student with my group. I enjoyed the readings and learned from them. I also enjoyed watching the movie Babel and discussing it with my classmates. I think the amount of surveying that we did in this class was maybe a bit too much.

I think more class discussions and less surveying would be a good idea. I hope you keep offering this class, because I think it’s a great experience for students. I know that as you tweak the course, it will keep getting better and better. Thanks so much for taking on this endeavour. Classes like this will help people across the world connect and understand each other better.

This was very nice and encouraging. The only challenge was the time zone to do the group project.

Modules should be posted on the date that is listed for the start of the module. Grades should be posted in a timely fashion, the students have to meet deadlines, I would hope that our grades could be posted quicker - especially the last module.

The content itself was good; the group projects were difficult especially with the translations. Maybe instead of three group projects there could be a semester group project, only one.

The course should provide short courses on how to use the black board because most of the people do not know how

Make connecting with group members easier, that was my only trouble

I recommend that more time be given, a classroom for the students doing it, be a little less tough on the exam, explain the detailed notes and also encourage email interaction.

It was very difficult to complete group projects, so post everything right away so students have time to finish them. Also have more actual deadlines so group members have to finish by a certain time. It was also difficult to contact the instructors with questions because responses sometimes took a while.

You should give deadlines for each assignment; enough time should be given to the students.

All in all, what you were able to achieve was terrific being the first time, but more coordination is needed so that every one can be on the same page through out the course.

### 3.5 What did the students learn?

We asked the students to summarize what they think they learned from this course. Their answers in their own words reflected a growing awareness of other cultures and communities as seen in the random samples below:

Cross-cultural psychology across cultural lines. Every person in every world part has its own cultural programming. And as one that always keep an open mind, I see myself as a cultural
sojourner, and even within the same cultures, there exist differences and similarities. But I survive and I think we all will, as we continue to recognize these differences and similarities and create ways to live with them, respecting everyone in his/her own way...blessing the fact that arise that there is always room for improvement, a meeting point to have a sigh of relief. This course to me is a continues one because I enjoy thinking across international lines and this course has made me more like a singular entity with a plural existence.

The most important and new thought I had from this course was Hofstede’s five dimensions of culture – power distance, collectivism versus individualization, uncertainty avoidance, short-term versus long-term orientation, and masculinity versus femininity. I like the way it was broken down into understandable parts. I had never thought of culture in that way, so I found it very interesting. It was important to me to learn this because it helps me better understand the world and the many different types of cultures in the world. I often work with people from different cultures in my job, and I think it’s really important to have an understanding of other people’s cultures. As was written in one of the papers, the new Golden Rule is “Do unto others as they would do unto themselves.” I think so many of the problems in this world are a result of misunderstandings in communication, and the more we can understand others and communicate more effectively with them, the more peaceful and joyful the world will be.

For me the most important part was when the participants gave their reason for taking the course and their question on cross culture. It reflected their concern and how they actually think. Two statements were for me specially interesting and enlightening. One person from the university of Minnesota said that the USA was like a big brother and took it upon them to take care of other & "smaller"; countries. It was interesting because I could see then that there are people in the USA that genuinely believe this, of course what the government does is a whole different matter. The second statement was from a Swedish student who had come across some cultural differences when studying in the police academy. I too didn’t know that for Muslim men to touch another woman is disrespectful, I could relate to this situation knowing how easily misunderstandings can occur when you don’t know the other persons ways. It was good to learn from other peoples experience, and especially enlightening to see how others think and of course their culture.

I appreciate really doing cross-cultural psychology because it has changed my attitude towards certain cultures. I really had a negative attitude towards some tribes, races but now I get to understand about different cultures and how to work, learn and cope with them. Though we were getting negative responses from other students, I encourage many to do it and even students doing industrial fine art admired this course. So I just wish it goes on and some other part should come in and we participate because I love this course. Thanks.

I think that the most beneficial thing about this class was being able to work with others from very diverse backgrounds. Our location in the US, and personally, growing up in a very small town (about 3000 people), I never really had the opportunity to work with others who are from a different culture. As a matter of fact, other than my travel experiences, I never have worked on a school project even with anyone other than someone similar to my background. I thought this was really cool though, our group was able to work together successfully, even with the challenges of different language and time zones, etc., and it made it a really positive experience. I’m doing some volunteer work this summer in Tanzania and I feel that this class has MORE than helped me in my understanding of other cultures, as well as made me more comfortable in knowing that I’m going to a place that doesn’t seem so culturally distant as it had before talking with our group members. The skills we obtained in this class in regard to overcoming the language barriers are definitely going to help me in this work, and I feel that people from all cultures could take a lesson from this in learning to be more patient and understanding in their endeavours to communicate with those of different backgrounds.

I actually learnt a lot from this new course. My most important and new thought from cross cultural psychology is that we should learn to live in harmony with different cultures and the interaction has been the best and most splendid experience I have ever seen. This course has been so important to me for it has built my esteem with different cultures and has also shown me that we can cooperate with different cultures. It can be applied in a cross-cultural setting through actually cooperating with the different cultures and also understanding these cultures. Am glad to have been part of this course for I have grown in the cross-cultural integration.

This has been a very interesting course for me. It is the first online course I have taken and was very interested in the way that it worked. What I learned most was the thoughts that people from
other countries had about us here in America and how they felt about each other. I learned a good deal about the education system of both Uganda and Sweden, and how they both differ from the U.S. I found it to be very difficult to get in contact with group members sometimes because of the different times zones we were all in. Sometimes I was able to speak with individuals but rarely did we all come together as one. I think this course is very important and I would recommend it to anyone who wants to learn first hand about other cultures and their norms. This course is the next best thing to travelling; I hope that at some point in my life I make it to both Uganda and Sweden but for now this will do the job.

Cross-cultural psychology is a class that taught me a lot about the cultures of others, but more importantly it taught me about myself. Before this class, I was stubborn in my own ways. I thought that here in America, our culture was the best and that all others were second-class. I have learned to open up to other people’s suggestions and really take what they have to say into consideration. By working together with different cultures, I do believe that it would be possible to solve some of the world’s problems. It is a GIVE and take relationship, and I think that giving is the most important aspect there. I feel that by providing input and knowledge into a pool of thoughts can be an effective way of problem solving. I believe that by understanding other cultures, it helps us live our own.

3.6 Ethnocentric attitudes before and after the course

A scale of 21 items, intended to measure ethnocentrism, was constructed and given as the first and the last assignment on the course. The purpose was two-fold: to develop and test a new instrument on ethnocentrism and in addition to tentatively see if the course would have any measurable effect on the degree of ethnocentrism. The questions were based on our general understanding of the ethnocentrism concept and the following sample items may serve to exemplify the kind of statements we used: “I prefer parties with a cultural mix rather than the ones where all come from my own culture”, “I would prefer to work in a company where the managers have a similar cultural background as myself” and “I think that the quality of products made in my country in general are better than those from most other countries”

A five-point Likert scale was used and the students were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed to each statement. The resulting scores were reversed for some of the statements so that a higher score always indicated a higher degree of ethnocentrism. After removing three items with poor inter-item correlations, the remaining 18-item scale had a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.78 when it was first distributed (31 respondents) and 0.82 (18 respondents) at follow-up.

A paired t-test based on the 15 students that passed the course and in addition responded both at baseline and follow-up revealed no statistically significant difference in ethnocentrism between the two test occasions. Calculations were also made where the change in score (follow-up score subtracted by baseline score) for each student was related to their activity on the course (as measured either through posted messages, number of sessions or total time logged in), estimated through Spearman correlation. All correlations were in the expected direction (-.39 to -.53), but only in one case borderline significant (number of posted messages, -.53, P=0.051). When the three activity measures were transformed into z-scores and then combined into a more general activity index, the correlation grew to -0.56 (P=0.04). It was also investigated if the change in ethnocentrism score for each student was related to the grade on the course. This correlation was a non-significant -.29.

4 DISCUSSION

The main idea of this course was to add an intercultural experiential dimension to a course in cross-cultural Psychology by connecting students from different cultures through an Internet based educational platform. Two learning tools especially aimed at creating such an interaction, discussions and group projects, were used. Of these, the discussion tool seemed to have worked very well, both in terms of student evaluations and the amount of discussion that took place. Most of the discussions were constructed so that each student had to post an original view or ask a question on a given topic to the other students and in addition to make at least one comment to someone else’s post. This encouraged the students to interact and compare views in a lively fashion throughout the course.
The group projects on the other hand were difficult to manage for the students. The main obstacle seems to have been getting the group organized and to make each member contribute in time. To facilitate this, a discussion folder with unique access for each group and a real-time interaction chat room were used. The number of posts published in the virtual group discussion rooms varied from 12 to 122 between the groups. In retrospect it was obvious that groups who used this forum for intra group communication, rather than trying to communicate internally through the chat room by other means (such as e-mail), were more successful. Thus, a learning experience for us as teachers was to introduce this tool better from the beginning and avoid the confusion of having two parallel tools for intra group communication. A general problem with using the chat room was setting up meetings in real time with different time zones. Especially the Uganda students in addition had problems with access to individual computers, Internet connection capacity, frequent electricity failures and less know-how on how to use distance education platforms, both among students and technical support staff. For all of these reasons, we now feel more sceptical about the usefulness of the real-time chat tool for intra group communication in a course of this kind.

Another learning outcome, both among teachers and students, was the implications of cultural differences also for the experience of different features of the course itself. Different expectations and interpretations in relation to structure, punctuality and commitments, which probably to a great extent are rooted in different cultural values, could probably be utilized better to create inter-cultural awareness, especially in relation to ethnocentrism, which also was one important topic in the course contents. An example of such an issue to reflect upon, for both teachers and students, could be how structured a course like this should be and how seriously we should take deadlines and time limits, given the different cultural backgrounds represented by the course participants. As can be seen in the evaluations, quite a few students expressed concerns and frustration about this. (In reality, from different student groups we received requests to, on the one hand, be more flexible and adapt more to circumstances, and on the other, to be more strict and to stick to original structure and deadlines).

4.1 Did the course make the students less ethnocentric?

From the evaluations can be seen that the students in general experienced the content as interesting, relevant and useful. They provided very thoughtful discussion posts (on the average around 35 postings per student) and their evaluations of what they learned indicated that the course provided a good experience and helped students broaden their horizons. But did it really affect their values and make them more open-minded and less ethnocentric?

The ethnocentrism test was an effort to tentatively address this question. For the group as a whole, no general decrease of ethnocentrism was however found, at least not as measured by this test. On the other hand, there was quite a substantial correlation between degree of student involvement in the course and decrease of ethnocentrism. The lack of a control group and the risk that the students through the course better could adapt their responses in a socially desirable direction would have made any causal interpretations hazardous if a general course effect had been found. The absence of a general decrease in ethnocentrism seems to make it less likely that a social desirability effect specifically could explain the correlations. It could also be argued that if gained knowledge biased test performance at the follow-up in a socially desirable direction, this would have shown more in the correlation with the grades on the course than with course involvement, which was not the case. Taken together, the results indicate that ethnocentrism cannot easily be affected through a course of this kind, at least not unless the student is intensely involved in interaction with other students, and in addition that this dimension may be more important for a change in attitudes than the kind of knowledge that is measured in the exams.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This experience has strengthened our belief that courses based on this concept has a great potential in connecting students and teachers in different parts of the world to produce an enriching learning experience for all involved. At the same time, a course project of this kind, inter-cultural both in contents and form, introduces challenges that need to be anticipated and overcome in a flexible way to take cultural differences into account in order to be fully successful. Especially if culture is a theme of the course, such a course could also possibly make course participants less ethnocentric and more open minded to people from other cultures than their own.
References


