Pedagogical engineering in intercultural teams: critical success factors

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Based on actual cases, this paper asserts the factors necessary for successful development and implementation of educational programmes in intercultural teams. The findings, based on the authors’ several years of experience in the field, suggest that international course development is a resource-intensive activity that must take into consideration the cultural differences and core competencies of the institutions involved if the course development is to be successful.

Background

Since its inception, the Groupe ESC Poitiers Graduate School of Management in Poitiers, France has pursued international development of its graduate educational programme. As with similar graduate programmes in management throughout Europe today, the programme started with the simple exchange of professors and students. These exchanges promoted and developed the managerial skills (flexibility, openness, etc.) required of graduates. As the international programme developed, it was clear that simply exchanging professors and students would no longer suffice.

In recent years a policy of common-course double-diploma development has been followed. Courses are jointly developed and taught with partner institutions. Students who successfully finish the programme receive the school’s degree as well as the degree from the partner institution concerned.

This emphasis on common-course development and teaching in the last few years has resulted in the following projects:
- the International MBA: a full-time MBA programme jointly developed with Nene College and University of Leicester;
- IBISCUS: a European course in information systems development jointly developed between the Groupe and institutions from the UK, Italy, The Netherlands, Denmark and Spain;
- the MSc in International Management, jointly developed with the Université de Sherbrooke in Canada; and, most recently,
- Avenirs Atlantique, a joint programme between the Groupe and institutions from Canada (French and English speaking), Spain, Sweden and Germany.

This article briefly reviews the elements that have been critical for the success of these projects. Specifically, attention is placed on criteria necessary for successful joint pedagogical engineering in intercultural teams. The pedagogical engineering process is divided into three critical phases:

1. The decision and planning phase: activities that must occur before actual engineering can get underway. These usually involve individuals of equal standing in the institutions involved. In addition, the individuals involved at this stage should have the power to make decisions concerning resource utilisation.

2. The course development phase: this phase is concerned with the actual course development process. Teams from the institutions involved will be responsible for creation of the course. As the team will be multicultural, many of the critical success factors will be related to the management of diversity in heterogeneous teams.

3. The implementation and follow-up phase: once the engineering has been completed, the team will be responsible for the successful implementation of their project as well as any future modifications.

The decision and planning phase

All development efforts start with an explicit agreement stating each institution’s desire to collaborate in joint course development. Although this stage may seem rather clear, there are essential criteria that must be considered in order to guarantee success in later stages.

A partnership based on competencies

A good international partnership should not be based on the sharing of assets that could be obtained by either institutions in the short run. Thus, all partnerships are based on synergistic possibilities in competencies and not on physical complementarities.

The academic environment

Time should be spent explaining and understanding the academic system in each country. What is the role of education? How do students enter into the system? Is there a work placement? What technology is used in the education process? All these, and more, are questions that are fundamental to understanding the educational process and environment. A detailed analysis will reveal any possible constraints that will need to be taken into consideration during the development phase.
Similar stakeholder interests
Each party should have similar stakeholder interests in the successful joint development and implementation of the programme. In some projects, it may be the case that one party has an interest in partial success. A good example is for programmes that do not offer double or joint degrees. Each institution is only interested in the success of their component of the programme. Once pedagogical development is complete for the course sequence that interests these partners, their participation wanes. If all parties see the end as the full course development and implementation, all parties have a stake in the entire programme and not only subcomponents, which, concerning success, may or may not be seen as being mutually exclusive.

A note of caution should be made here about the relationship between those negotiating the programme development and those doing the work. In organisations where decisions are made in a strict hierarchical structure, the individuals doing the actual development may not have the same interest in success as those that put the project into place. To avoid this, it is highly recommended that the individuals that will be developing the course be involved with the initial "negotiating" stage as early as possible.

Organised planning
A well designed planning of activities should be put into place and agreed by all. As international institutions often operate under different academic calendars, it is quite important for each partner to indicate the periods of "down-time". Numerous techniques exist for project management. Our experience suggests that a simple Gantt chart with meeting dates, deadlines, individual responsibilities and other useful information can be quite effective. Needless to say, as the teams will often be apart, individual time managers should be chosen for each institution to guarantee that time constraints are adhered to.

A global vision
One role of the leadership of the institution is to reinforce the importance of international sharing of know-how. Organisations involved with international course development should reward and promote international awareness. As previously mentioned, the Groupe ESC Poitiers has arrived at a phase in its development where it is ready and able to develop common courses with its partners. The preparatory phase for the school was long and was supported by the direction in hiring, salary and other decisions. Today the school has faculty and students from around the globe.

As a result of this global vision, the professors are more willing to share their know-how in teaching. This willingness to share a priori enables the faculty to develop quickly an environment of trust and confidence with existing and future partners in educational development.

Choice of actors
Finally, the team members for the later engineering phases must be assigned. Factors such as appreciation for interdisciplinary teaching, understanding of different cultures, flexibility, strong communication skills, and openness to change should be essential when selecting participants. Individuals chosen from the engineering process should also be those that will be responsible for the teaching and successful implementation of the programme.

The course development phase
Once the "macro" objectives have been fixed, the engineering teams can start course development. Useful information that was obtained during the initial decision and planning phase should be transmitted and discussed with all development team members. In addition to this sharing of information, there are several factors essential to success.

Confirm goals
The initial meeting should be spent restating the goals as seen by each institution. Although this too may seem a repetitive step, it is important that each partner expresses themselves openly and without constraints. It is impossible to spend too much time at this stage. Our experience suggests that there are often numerous surprises concerning how the initial goals are interpreted. As with all intercultural communication, problems occur when there is either misperception, misinterpretation or miseducation (Adler, 1991). To avoid this, all development team members should be free to ask questions and ask for confirmation at any point. One possible tool to enhance this phase is the use of the consensus card technique (Kelly, 1994). In this method, individuals express their ideas around a table. Through a designated supervisor, any member can stop the presentation and ask for clarification. Each participant signals, using a three-sided sign, their agreement (go), their potential cause for concern (caution) or their disagreement (stop). If a "stop" sign is present, the supervisor animates a debate between the parties until an agreement is reached. The goal is to go around the table,
allowing all to express themselves, and finish with only “go” or “caution” signs showing. Although this method is quite effective it can be quite time consuming if groups are large. In addition to the above, each institution can be asked to express their goals in their native language. This avoids any possible problems that occur when partners work in a given language that is not totally mastered.

Finally, although later steps in development can be done using “virtual” development tools[1], it is strongly suggested that this phase be done in person at an agreed upon location. Electronic asynchronous or synchronous communication has its advantages for geographically dispersed team development processes; however, the importance of understanding the cultural nuances as well as using non-verbal and non-written communication is essential in building initial team spirit. If only electronic means of communication are available, plan on spending an initial period of time exchanging information concerning the general activities of each development team member. This period of “small-talk” has been shown to be extremely important.

Semantics
As with all international communication, there are often problems concerning the words that are used in communication. Clearly, before any development efforts can get underway, the interested parties should take time to express their definitions of words crucial to the development process (e.g. credit, course, objective, aim, etc.). Exercises in semantics have existed for quite some time and can be quite useful in this arena. This point again underscores the difficulties that must be overcome if cross-cultural communication is to be effective.

Focus on equifinality of learning objectives
Teaching is something that is done differently in all countries. The role of the teacher, the relationship between teacher and student, and the overall objective of education can be quite different as others (e.g. Hofstede) have previously pointed out. Joint development is the time to exchange different ideas and learn from one another. However, the existence of different methods should not interfere with development. Partners should focus on agreement of the outcome and not on the “means”. Together, the development team should clearly state what students enrolled in the programme should be able to do once they have successfully completed the programme. Once all have agreed upon these objectives, the team can concentrate on managing the outcomes taking into account the cultural diversity rather than managing the diversity itself.

“Imagineer”
With an intercultural development team, you have the opportunity to compare as well as create new teaching methods. Not only do new teaching methods add to the richness and uniqueness of the final outcome, jointly developed new methods also add to the sense of ownership and pride that each teacher/developer has in the programme. Pushing teachers to do something they do not want to do, or in a way that is unfamiliar to them, will lead to failure. As a result of an increased sense of ownership, the probability of successful implementation is greatly enhanced.

Although there exist many techniques for joint development, the Groupe’s experience suggests that brainstorming and idea consolidation techniques work the best. As this is not the subject of the current presentation, the reader is invited to consult the numerous resources available or directly contact the Groupe for further details.

Go slow and have a good time
Intercultural teamwork requires an investment in time and events that encourage each member to understand and appreciate one another. Successful implementation requires that mutual respect exists among the teachers if this respect is to be expected among the students. The teachers will be examples for their students.

The development process should not be rushed. For example, the international MBA took over one year to develop jointly. A great amount of time was spent in creating the team spirit. The old rule “work hard, play hard” is clearly applicable. Allowing team members to meet and exchange ideas in a relaxed atmosphere should be encouraged. In our experience with UK partners, more informal learned sharing a pint of beer in a local pub than could ever be learned sitting around a table in a classroom. Remember this is not wasted time. This initial investment will be rewarded later.

One final note, our experience suggests that sometimes individuals accept to get involved in course development for the opportunity to participate in an international activity. The chance to travel to and experience the lifestyles of another country is often an important motivational factor for new participants. The group leaders should recognise and manage this.

Minimise constraints
In order to liberate creativity in the team, it is essential to minimise the constraints of the final outcome. Institutions have specific constraints concerning course hours, times,
class size, etc. Time should be spent to sort out which of these constraints can be removed. For example, in the MBA development, the only constraint put on the team was the total number of hours. Course starting and ending times, hours per week, the number of teachers per class and other factors, usually considered to be fixed, were determined by the development team.

Any constraint that exists should be communicated to the development team so that they can be taken into consideration.

When possible, start from scratch
In some development programmes, teacher/developers may feel that time can be saved by simply adapting existing materials or courses to the new course. When possible, this should be avoided. These courses were developed for a different audience, with different teachers, etc. The initial cost of using an existing course may be low, but later costs in student dissatisfaction, unbalance objectives and priorities and overall breakdown of the new programme can be quite large.

Take a step back
In order to achieve cultural synergy it is often necessary to take a step back from the proceedings. If you find your self thinking or expressing ideas like, “These people must be crazy” or “that would not work back home”, it is time to stop and take a step back. Even the best intercultural team members fall into the trap.

To get a better outlook on the proceedings, try to reframe what is being done or what has been said by looking at things from the perspective of team members from other countries. If the team finds itself slipping into ethnocentric behaviour, take a moment and do some simple cultural awareness exercises. For example, have each member state how he or she feels the other members see him or her. This can be quite interesting as well as funny. Remember, intercultural development is not easy. Take time to evaluate how things are going and “recharge the batteries” if things start going downhill.

Be prepared for political manoeuvring
Developing international educational projects is a strategic and sometimes expensive decision. Understandably, there is a high degree of risk. Individual “actors” in the partner institutions are more than happy to take credit when the project is a success. However, during the political positioning process, sometimes partners will distance themselves in order to be seen as taking a less risky position should the project fail. Someone who is a great partner in development meetings may suddenly take a different position when his or her superiors enter the room. Clearly, this “internal positioning” depends upon the degree of autonomy, risk-taking behaviour, and power distance in each culture.

Start with positive working assumptions
All actors should enter the meeting with some common assumptions in mind. These assumptions are also clearly identified by Adler (1991) as being:
- heterogeneity: we are not all the same;
- difference: they are not like me;
- equifinality: our way is not the only way;
- cultural contingency: our way is one possible way.

Institutional team leaders should work on developing these assumptions before any cross cultural work begins.

The implementation and follow-up phase
Validation
Validation can be done both internally, among the participating institutions, as well as externally. Clearly the means by which validation will be done is dependent upon the means available to the partner institution and the preferences towards one form or another (e.g. some cultures find it difficult to accept external validation).

In the M.Sc. administered jointly between the Groupe and Université de Sherbrooke, each course leader (in France and Canada) validates the other’s courses. The course leader visits the partner institution, attends courses and later briefs the faculty on how he or she perceives the course from their own cultural perspective. In some instances, satisfying the requests for changes that come from this “external” source are welcomed more easily than changes that come from within the same institution.

It is sometimes the case that in international teams parties fail to reach agreement resulting in a validation deadlock. It is well known that intercultural teams are most efficient when there is a need for different ideas and cultural divergence. However, when decisions must be made, there is often a need for an external validation to help in convergence.

External validation can often be through peer review. For example, this can take the form of a “board of study” composed of individuals directly involved with students after finishing the course sequence. For a business course, companies, alumni and other organisations (e.g. business associations, institutions of accreditation, etc.) can get involved.
The external validation also allows for a benchmarking of the programme. Finally a written document that details the outcomes of the validation as well as the objectives of any changes to be made should be approved by all members of the teaching team.

Reorientation
Environments change. As environments change so should the material being taught and the way in which it is taught. The pedagogical team should be concerned with the identification of changes as well as the implementation of any pedagogical modifications resulting from these changes.

Perception of changes in the environment is clearly a function of culture. In addition, changes take place at different speeds around the world. Good communication between the institutions (e.g. e-mail) permits the team to sense environmental changes more quickly. In addition, the team members can share their different points of view as to how the changes should be addresses in the programme. Again, focus should be placed on harmonising the objectives and not the manner in which these objectives are obtained.

Revitalise the spirit
Once the engineering phase is complete and the initial student intake is progressing through the course sequence, teachers have a tendency to slip back into their habitual ways of working. This is even more common where the course developed by the team is the only intercultural course offered and taught by the teachers. As time progresses, the teachers see that more time is spent preparing a course that is not “conventional”.

To avoid the above situation, regular meetings should be held between the partner institutions. Close contact can also be maintained using e-mail. Teachers should see the initial development as the start of a long-lasting relationship. Encourage inter-institutional research, faculty team teaching and other activities that promote the continued success of the course as well as the partnership.

Some final remarks
The participation in intercultural pedagogical engineering and successful implementation results in an increased awareness and understanding of the institutions involved. The time and resources spent in engineering can be quite heavy. However, this should be seen as essential to the development of the core competencies of the institution. It is not uncommon that successful implementation of one core is quickly followed by several more.

International strategies are seen as being more and more important for companies in the current business environment. Development of international courses using international teams permits academic institutions to put into practice what is so often taught in the classroom. Moreover, careful investment in international pedagogical development can result in a “competitive advantage” that can be sustainable in the long-run.

Note
1. The Groupe recently experimented with the use of Internet-based communication for the Avenir Atlantique programme development. Using e-mail combined with and ftp and WEB server, a modified Delphi technique was used to solve problems concerning course content and teaching methodologies. Additional tools such as electronic brainstorming can also be used. The advantage of these tools is that parties are separated and their comments are anonymous.

References