

CASE STUDIES AND BEST PRACTICES IN GERMANY

Erasmus+ KA2 project: “REACT - Creation of a Collaborative Environment in e-classrooms”

Intellectual Output 2 “Creation of a set of innovative activities, tools and educational collaborative methods adapted to a virtual classroom curriculum”

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Intercultural Classes – Online Learning

INTRODUCTION

Intercultural classes are an educational strategy that provide the students from different cultures with a real time learning and communication experience. Where they virtually brainstorm with their multi-cultural classmates, create ideas, discover new cultures and together prepare presentations. With the help of the intercultural classes, the students get the exposure and the understanding of the cross-cultural complexity through the social learning engagement with the international students. The classes help them to develop cultural awareness, resolve social perceptions of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination through intergroup contact. The reflection on complex cases in collaboration with others' comments, replies and feedback enhances the mindful observation, analysis and understanding toward cultivating intercultural competence.

OVERVIEW

The intercultural classes took place online and they were offered to the students studying Bachelor's in International Management in GBS German Business School in Tunisia, University San Luis de Potosi in Mexico, and University Areandina in Colombia together with the Hochschule der Wirtschaft für Management (HdWM). The total participants in the virtual classrooms from the respective universities were 25 to 45 approx. In the first session, the professors from both countries got an opportunity to communicate their knowledge input related to the learning material to the students. The inputs were proffered via Teams (Online) and the tasks were communicated in detail to all the students. The students from both the universities were provided one-two weeks of sufficient time depending on the task. The tasks were provided in mixed composition of nationality and gender. After the completion of the tasks, students were required to present their research and the results of the task in a group. The students' feedback and reactions were mostly positive, as a result, the students proposed to do the intercultural classes again.

APPROACH

The intercultural classes took place for 2 weeks with Mexico and Colombia and 1 day in Tunisia for the duration of 3 hours, respectively. The language of instruction was English to all the students. Further the process took place in the following 3 steps: -

Step1- Preparation

The focus of the classes was to make the students understand different national cultures as well as business cultures. For this reason, the first activity was given to the students to prepare

a power point presentation with the content answering the question “How is the business culture in their home country?”. This preparation was done between one or two weeks before the general meeting. Every culture did their own culture profile. The duration of the presentation was decided to be 30 minutes. The presentation contained element of national culture and business culture. Every student in the group has to do a part of the presentation. After the preparation, the students and professors from Mexico and Columbia and the students and professors from Germany respectively joined virtually for the presentations.

Step 2- Implementation

It was taken into account by the teachers that all the students were equipped with the necessary tools for the online lectures. The links were received by the students with the considerate prior time to be on the same platform. For e.g. Zoomlink, Username and Passwords were provided to the students in Mexico. The major challenge related to the time difference was taken into account. For e.g the session held for German students at 3pm CET was 8 am CDT for the Mexican students. During the online presentations, the required participants were the students from Mexico, Columbia, and Tuinisia and the professors from the respective countries in interaction with the German Students and their professors.

Step 3 – Action

The session started with a 10 minutes presentation of the respective organization’s teachers regarding the topic and goal of the intercultural class to be achieved.

The input was given by the professor about the cultural model and related learning material on how to analyse different cultures. Furthermore, the task for the students was explained and the multicultural teams were formed for preparing the common presentations.

The teams worked together on the presentation using this culture model to identify the problems, difficulties, strength and smooth “easy to work” aspects in the business cultures. The freedom of the task’s interpretation was given and the method Do It Yourself was granted. The time of one-two weeks was given to the multicultural teams for their common work. After this time, the multicultural teams presented their analyses. Feedback about their performance was given by both professors. A final time for reflection based on their common experiences were given in discussed in the plenun.

RESULTS

The main objective behind the intercultural classes was to experienced the complexcity of working virtually and with multicultural teams. Time aspects like the big time difference between the two countries, caused students either to get up very early for the Mexican team or going to sleep later from the German students challenged them a lot. Communication and the differente levels of English knowledge and pronuntiation were probably the biggest challenge.

Furthermore, an interesting finding was the curiosity of the students for the different cultures. The students mentioned that they spent maximum time in knowing and sharing the knowledge of their own cultures rather than just working on the presentations. Here, the collaboration indicated the efforts made by the students to put their foot in their group members' shoes and understand the alternative methods of solving the same problem. This helped them to widen their perspective and increase the emotional awareness for their personal growth and explore different stories, narratives, metaphors and meanings related to interculturality.

At the very beginning the students faced problems to identify the concepts of culture, business cultures and international cultures and what to write about it. Therefore, the input from the professors gave them the guidelines for the implementation of the related practical assignment.

When the students were asked to provide feedback, most of the students gave the feedback that the intercultural program was very short. They expressed their enjoyment, and they were highly satisfied with the experience in participating in such event. They recommended to conduct such a program once per semester so other students could participate as well. As a result, HdWM would be conducting the intercultural classes for 2 weeks this year again for the third time in a row. Based on the Tunisian students' positive experience, HdWM will organise a travel in October to Tunisia to continue working in developing intercultural competences face to face.

CONCLUSIONS

The students learnt to come out of their comfort zone and communicate with colleagues in front of them from another nationality. The intercultural classes helped them to push their limits and collaborate effectively with another foreigner in a team.

After the completion of the intercultural classes, the students developed the skill of understanding variations and perceptions of typical communication practices. Moreover, the taxonomies of context, space, time, and other contextual factors. In summary, it was a very positive experience for the students and contributed to the internationalization activities of the universities.