

## **COLLABORATION ISSUES IN ETHNICALLY MIXED STUDENT TEAMS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In an international, western design study program hosted by local partner universities in China and India, curriculum planning, timetabling, language use, culture, assessment, and motivation posed challenges to handling issues in ethnically mixed student collaborative learning situations on managerial, teaching, and student levels.

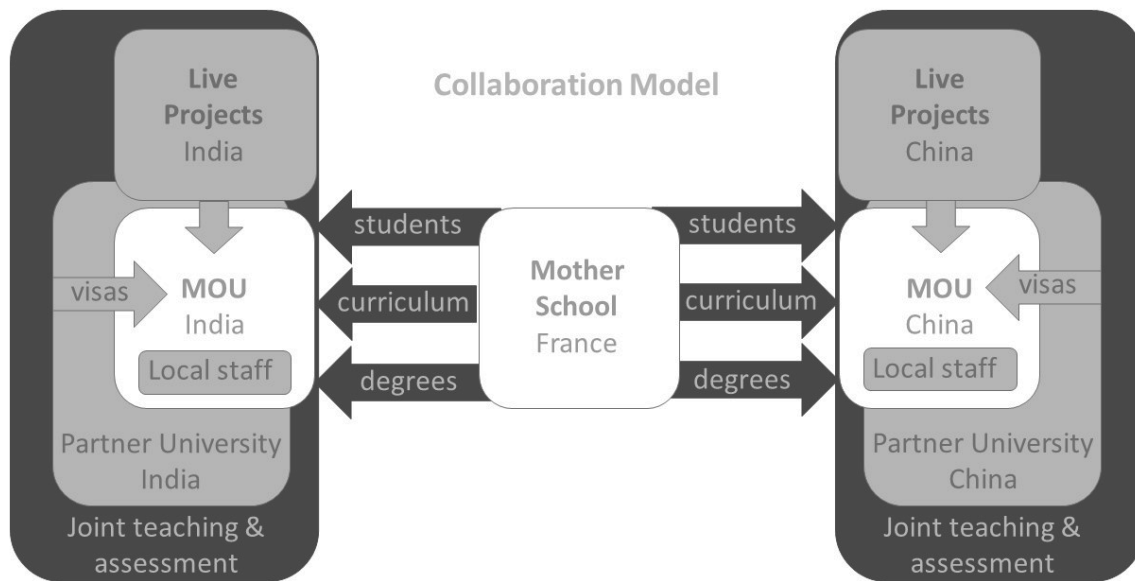
The paper is situated in the intellectual context of education, more specifically of international cooperation and collaboration in interdisciplinary learning, deriving information directly from the author's personal findings as dean of a French design study program permanently hosted by partner institutions in China and India from 2010 to 2014. Literature of comparable content was found to be *Enacting Diverse Learning Environments: Improving the Climate for Racial/ Ethnic Diversity in Higher Education*, by Hurtado, Sylvia, Jeffrey Milem, Alma Clayton-Pedersen, and Walter Allen, Washington, 1999.

The author suggests that partner-institution hosted, multidisciplinary transcultural Western graduate study programs must be fully formulated with variables within the course descriptor for collaboration with a host institution on one hand, but require autonomy within their host institution to function according to their accredited home specification to be of lasting and robust value to both their home institution and their host institution. Collaboration gains a stronger basis through individually curriculum-based assessment on both sides, the host institution's full legal backing for visa requirements, and a common long-term strategic vision by both partners, such as joint degree creation and teacher and student exchanges.

The author bases his findings on experiences within the framework of a partner-institution hosted, multidisciplinary, transcultural graduate study program of a French tertiary institution, operating in branches in India and China. The study program was based on a curriculum provided by the French mother institution, and delivered in English language to a body of students recruited mainly from France. The locations were university campuses in Bangalore, India and Shanghai, China, owned by partner universities which supplied space for teaching events, as well as staff and some of their own students for selected collaborative efforts. Students were enrolled both by the French mother institution and the Indian and Chinese partner institutions for administrative purposes, and received their master's degrees in transcultural design from the French mother institution after one academic year of attendance and another year of industry placements.

During these operations, the author had opportunity to observe and deal with issues arising from the ethnic diversity of backgrounds of students and staff. The issues affected the operations on student, teaching, and managerial/ administrative levels, and mostly satisfactory solutions to them could be found in most instances.

*Keywords: Partner institutions, China, India, curriculum planning, timetabling, language use, culture, assessment.*



1

Figure 1. Diagram of the MOU-based structure of operations of the French school

## 1 COLLABORATION ISSUES AT STUDENT LEVEL

Teaching events held at the two locations in India and China frequently necessitated the creation of student teams. The majority of students enrolled in the study programs was French, with a small percentage of Belgian, Mexican, Swiss, Moroccan, Indian, and Chinese students. In both Indian and Chinese locations, frequent attempts were made to bring together the program's enrolled students and the partner universities' students in suitable workshops, lectures, and longer projects, some of which were live international industry projects.

## 2 EXPECTATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN WESTERN STUDY EXPERIENCE

The author found that Asian students often expected western students to be superior to them in terms of prior knowledge and ability when first being introduced to them. This created a situation where student team leadership was usually automatically relegated to French majority students when collaborating with Chinese partner institution students, even in projects where local knowledge and language ability would clearly have been central to succeeding as a group. This issue was more prevalent in China than in India, and seemed to pivot on English language ability. Chinese students brought into projects whose English was of equal or superior quality to that of their French team partners would sometimes be successful in being awarded team leadership by their peers. In India, where English language ability of local students tended to be superior to that of the French students by default, team leadership issues would pivot on a perception of work ethic and attendance instead. In this regard, Indian students took much greater liberty than French or Chinese students did, and tended to feel uneasy with the tighter attendance requirements of the French program. The quality of their contributions to team projects tended to be profound enough though to help maintain their positions within them. The expectations of international students in western study experience therefore tended to create issues of unused leadership potential in China, and issues of perceived team abandonment and administrative chicanery in India (fig. 2, 3, 4 below: various situations at Indian branch).



*Figure 2, 3, 4. Student presentations at the Indian branch of the operations*

### **3 INTEGRATION INTO THE STUDENT BODY**

The author found that non-French students tended to isolate themselves from the main student body, either due to a lack of language ability, or different dynamics of working and socializing, or both. In the case of Chinese students, this may be attributable to a tendency to go through student life with the expectation of having only one best friend with whom life inside and outside university is largely shared, and an expectation of having to sit through teaching events entirely self-responsibly and without much chance of interaction with teaching staff or fellow students. As a consequence, calls for interaction are often not recognized, let alone seized, as precedents may be lacking. The author found that this can be changed by setting up team projects with a shared team mark subject to modification through peer assessment by team members, and by investing a particular effort in communicating these assessment modalities to the Chinese students beforehand. In India, the main factor disrupting team integration used to be the differing levels in the need for autonomy between French and Indian students. While French students could be intensely communal when working in teams, often to the point of artificiality, Indian students tended to remain cautiously self-efficient. Here, the issue was usually more easily resolved by expressly giving the French students the freedoms the Indian students assumed to have by nature (fig. 5, 6, 7: clustering of student populations in teams in Shanghai).



*Figure 5, 6, 7. Joint workshop situations at Chinese branch of the operations*

### **4 EFFECTIVE TIMETABLING**

The author observed that timetabling of teaching events intended for collaboration with the partner institutions often created issues between students. The French institution's teaching events were spaced tightly and followed and had to follow a rigid schedule synchronized between the French, Indian, and Chinese locations to ensure administrative efficiency (fig. 8: sample timetable – white spaces indicate variables for collaboration projects). For the most part, it would simply not get through to the intended student populations, as final validation was often hampered by absences of decision makers, or variables in the partner institutions' own timetabling. As a result, partner institution students would frequently be prevented from attending joint project events, as their own institution's planning tended to take precedence over joint event planning. This issue was eventually resolved by an agreement at head of schools level, wherein timetabling communication was made subject to mandatory, mutual updating, and advance notification of one entire semester.

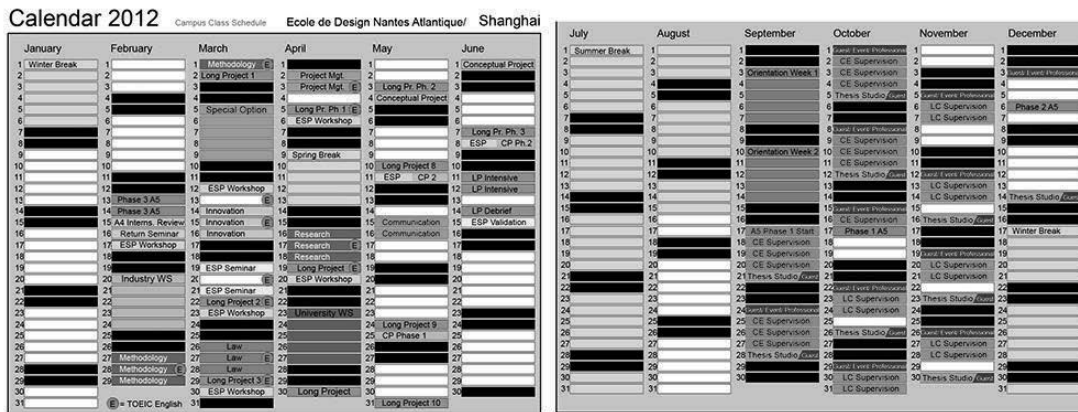


Figure 8. Typical timetable as used at the Chinese branch of the operations

## 5 SUFFICIENT LANGUAGE ABILITY

The author found collaborating Chinese students in particular to be often lacking in written and spoken English to a point where successful communication was difficult. This was usually despite assurances by the partner institution that students selected for participation in team projects had sufficient levels of English language ability, which resulted from an absence of suitable evaluation methods. Since collaborative efforts were treasured by both parties, and suitable students hard to find as it was, it was deemed inappropriate to demand the exclusive selection of students with certain IELTS or TOEFL scores. Instead, collaborative teaching events were co-taught by a member of the French teaching staff and a bilingual member of the Chinese institution's teaching staff, effectively resulting in dual language instruction English/ Chinese. These issues were not present in the Indian location.

## 6 ASSESSMENT ISSUES

The author recognized that failure bears a strong stigma in both China and India, and is not accepted with the same philosophical attitude as in western student populations. Especially in China, rather than spurring students on to avoid failure, the possibility of it appears to add to their insecurity and further reduce their self-confidence. The occurrence of failure almost inevitably elicited parental intervention, signalling an escalation of the issue. The author found that Chinese students tended to be entirely surprised by their low performance assessment when it occurred, as they saw a discrepancy between the diplomatic and gentle behaviour of Western teaching staff and their final results, prompting them to involve their parents. There is an expectation on their behalf of very direct and confrontational communication early-on when performance issues become known to a teaching staff member. If this does not occur, and is not followed up by directives, the issue may be missed by the student. The author resolved the issue by adhering to a phase gate model of project management with assessment and feedback, giving students early communication on their standing following three distinct, intermediary milestone presentations whose sequence was "Research Phase/ Concept Phase/ Resolution Phase" (see fig. 9 for illustration).

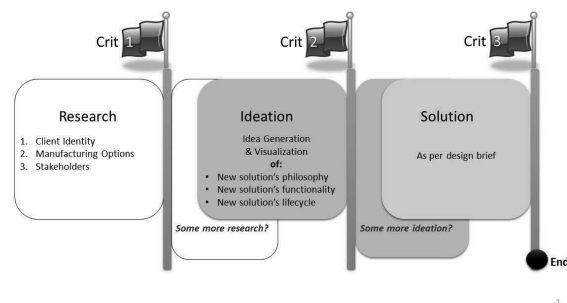


Figure 9. Standard phase gate model process adapted to requirements of a multidisciplinary design project

## **7 STUDENT MOTIVATION**

Students participating in joint projects with the author's French institution branches were sometimes pushed into collaborative study experiences by the partner institution, family, or tutors of their institution, and often lacked motivation to attend and contribute due to the initially often unassessed nature of many of these events; this issue was eventually resolved by integrating the assessment of the collaborative project into the partner institutions' regular assessments, creating a clear connection with the partner institution's curriculum, which ensured motivation of participating students. At a different level, students from the Chinese partner institution sometimes generally lacked motivation to attend higher education, having been pushed into it by family. Engaging that type of student was more difficult, but the author discovered that a certain degree of adoption of playful approaches to teaching events tended to convert the study experience into something more readily engaged in by that kind of student, while not reducing its value in the eyes of the others.

## **8 STUDENT TEAM BUILDING**

Student selection to participate in joint projects or workshops held by the French branches of the institution often seemed to occur based on criteria to do with relationships between the Chinese partner institution and parents of students. The students thereby selected frequently did not meet the profile requirements previously outlined to management, and could be from unrelated subject areas, have insufficient language skills, and may even have come from unknown institutions. That type of student was of course rarely appreciated as a team mate, and fairness issues regarding evaluation were usually quickly voiced by the other students when a team mark was to be applied to a project. The solution to this issue turned out to be simple enough though, as students who are put into teaching events as a favour to their influential parents by Chinese partner institution management often did not require genuine assessment. In that case, finding an additional and more suitable team member while allowing the original one to stay on usually solved the issue.

## **9 DIFFERENCES IN TEACHING STYLES**

The associative learning styles often still prevalent in Asian tertiary education tended to alienate western students as much as the abstractive learning styles favoured by the author's western teaching staff challenged the Chinese and some Indian students. An important issue the author recognized was the much elevated need for directives of Asian students when compared to their western fellow students. Being unaccustomed to an emphasis on activity and student contribution in western teaching practices made it hard for many of the Asian students to derive meaning from teaching events held by western teaching staff. This was further aggravated by a fundamental difference in the approach to team building the two student populations displayed: While western students relied on exhaustive and complete directives at the beginning of every team project and then embraced autonomy, Asian students tended to form teams more gradually, and expected receiving directives up until the end of the project, interweaving their own contributions with new directives as they saw fit. As a result, team projects led by Asian teaching staff often registered as erratic and authoritarian by western students, while Asian students often felt abandoned in team projects led by western teaching staff. The issue was overcome by western teaching staff adopting a suitable habit of continued reassurance to Asian students, and Asian teaching staff was encouraged to provide full, written project outlines at the start of projects to avoid ongoing, verbal directives to western students. Adopting playful teaching activities tended to make the implementation of the above much easier. Particularly lateral thinking exercises by Edward d Bono proved very successful in galvanizing multi ethnic groups in teaching events.

## **10 COLLABORATION ISSUES IN INTERDISCIPLINARY LEARNING**

The French program's setup as a master in transcultural design foresaw admittance of students from the areas of product, graphic, interaction, and graphic design, and it further foresaw these students maintaining their focus in their respective academic backgrounds while pursuing that master's degree. In an applied context, this meant mandatory, multi-disciplinary collaboration when team projects were conducted. With students coming from different countries and different prior institutions, this situation frequently highlighted compatibility issues stemming from the students' culture of origin, their interpretation of teamwork responsibilities, and the general approach to the subject matter at hand.

These issues manifested as follows:

- students would usually act in accordance with the values commonly attributed to team work by their respective cultures, and Western students were less likely to accept group marks than Asian students were. This trait in western students became even more manifest when teams consisted of members from diverse subject backgrounds. The author resolved this issue by introducing a peer review component with an individual, modifying effect on the team mark.
- Regarding interpretation of teamwork responsibilities, students would also act in accordance with the preconceived notions stemming from their respective cultural origins; Western students tended to adhere more strictly to their assigned team roles than Asian students did, and Asian students tended to relinquish roles to challengers easily. This issue could easily be resolved by creating job descriptions for team roles, which were introduced to Asian students as “game rules to be played by”.
- Subject matter was approached differently depending on the philosophies and value sets instilled by the institutions the students had previously come from; the author observed that Chinese students in particular tended to be much more conceptual, yet final result oriented than Western students. Western students tended to be more process oriented, while tending to finally present detailed, less conceptual, but more feasible outcomes. These different approaches frequently split teams, as neither side saw any commonalities with the other. The author attempted with good results to tackle the problem by making the students take Belbin Team Type tests before assembling teams.

## **11 CONCLUSION**

The author believes that collaboration issues in ethnically mixed student teams can be both created and resolved by curriculum planning, timetabling, language use, culture, assessment, and student motivation. The author’s findings suggest that sharing course descriptor content containing suitable variables to accommodate differences with the hosting institution is the most important step towards preventing student issues down the line, as it increases transparency and facilitates better coordination of teaching events between the two institutions, thereby responding to the issues of curriculum planning and timetabling. At student level, issues of language use, culture, assessment, and motivation can be addressed by the introduction of suitable methods and techniques; these are the use of bilingual teaching staff (language use), team building based on Belbin team type test results (culture), peer-assessment component for individual team members in team projects (assessment), and adoption of playful approaches to teaching events (motivation).

## **REFERENCES**

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