

Using Cultural Metaphors in International, Virtual Student Collaborations

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Helping students reach higher levels of cultural self- and other-awareness is challenging and often requires special activities and exercises that go beyond regular classroom activities.

The current approach uses an online team building process as part of an international student collaboration to facilitate inter-cultural learning and understanding. In this context, cultural metaphors act in two ways: 1) as a starting point to introduce the two cultures, provide information about cultural differences in everyday life and 2) as a basis for subsequent exercises and discussions, for which the metaphors act as anecdotes and evidence to support learning about topics such as leadership, teamwork, and communication. In this section we will provide more detail about the online team building process and describe how we used metaphors to support the inter-cultural learning process. In addition, we provide direct quotes from student participants to highlight the utility of this approach.

Design of the International Collaboration

Students from two different universities located in Finland and the US were put in teams which included students from both countries. Team members within these intercultural teams interacted with each other exclusively via communication technology such as email, discussion posts, Voice over IP (VoIP), chat, or telephone. Within their respective classes, students participated in exercises targeted at becoming aware of specific cultural values and preferences. Within their own cultural sub-team, students discussed insights into and implications for cross-cultural similarities and differences from these exercises. After class, they sent their insights to their respective cultural counterparts across the Atlantic via a discussion platform.

During the week, teachers monitored the online student discussions and selected key exchanges to bring to class the following week. Specific exchanges were chosen for in-depth discussions in class if they demonstrated the discovery of a particularly important cultural insight or a lack of cultural discoveries that hindered the discussion between the students. We used these discussions to help the students move forward in their discovery process. In addition, an assessment of the students' current level of cultural learning allowed us to design subsequent class exercises so that they aligned with the students'

intercultural development process. Using a 'controlled confrontation' approach (Berry, Carbaugh, Innreiter-Moser, Nurmikari-Berry, & Oetsch, 2009), exercises targeted at challenging students' previous cultural assumptions created confusion and maybe even frustration about the lack of understanding. Based on this dissonance, students then engaged in an exchange with other students from the target culture to actively seek out information about the things they do not understand.

This pedagogical approach emphasizes the importance of direct experiences and subsequent reflection on cultural insights gained from specific exercises. The approach involves ongoing (i.e., never ending) discovery and development that is based on a 'reflection on reflection' process in which critical incidents during an international collaboration are discussed, with continuing reflection back while moving forward. During this process, students from different cultures become learner-teachers of each other rather than only receiving advice from the course instructor about the respective other culture. Ethnographic techniques such as observation and reflection are used systematically to help students uncover and explore taken-for-granted aspects of their own culture (i.e., values, norms, expectations, or preferences), and to communicate their discovery to their counterparts from the other culture. Acting as "experts" on their own culture, students of different cultural background help each other understand their own cultural frames of reference and ways of living. This approach benefits from an extensive analysis of different ways of living and communicating, which is based on more than a decade of (1) pedagogical exchanges between Finnish and American students (Berry, Carbaugh, & Nurmikari-Berry, 2004; 2006; 2009; Carbaugh & Berry, 2001; Carbaugh, Berry & Nurmikari-Berry, 2006; Köhler & Berry, 2008) and (2) turning local and exchange students into learner-teachers of each other in face-to-face courses in Finland and Austria (Auer-Rizzi & Berry, 2000; Berry, 2002; Berry & Innreiter-Moser, 2002; Berry, Innreiter-Moser, & Oetsch, 2009; Reber & Berry, 1999).

The Use of Cultural Metaphors

The cultural metaphors of American Football (Gannon, 2004) and Finnish Sauna (Berry, 2008) were integrated into the collaboration to support the ethnographic learning process of American and Finnish students. The metaphors fulfilled two main purposes during the international collaboration. First, they provided basic cultural insights for students with limited knowledge about the other culture and generated awareness of aspects of the students' own culture that had previously been taken for granted. Second, the content of the cultural metaphors formed a knowledge base for discussing business-relevant topics such as cultural differences in leadership, team processes, organizational structure and culture, and conflict management. More specifically, they functioned as real-life examples that provided deeper insights into the meaning of cultural differences. In the following section we will provide specific examples for how we employed the cultural metaphors to serve these two purposes.

Providing basic cultural insights and creating cultural awareness

Prior to introducing the metaphors, we asked the students to engage in two exercises to start the learning via experience process. These exercises help students assess their (limited) knowledge of the other culture and become aware of the stereotypes they hold of their own and the other culture. In the very *first exercise*, the *First Five Things* exercise, we asked the students in their respective classes to respond to the following tasks:

- List: the first five things that come to mind
- (1) *about your country,*
 - (2) *about people from your country, and*
 - (3) *the five most important values in your country.*

Students are then asked to complete the same task for the other culture. Students complete these lists in their respective classes first and discuss them within their cultural subgroup. They share similarities and differences in their lists to determine which of their answers reflect commonly held cultural values, beliefs, or stereotypes, and which reflect unique responses due to individual variation in previous experiences. This approach leaves space for diversity of opinions within each culture and opportunity to eventually become aware of taken-for-granted cultural frames of reference. In addition, this exercise makes explicit, to some extent, the stereotypes the students hold about the other culture.

In the *second exercise*, the *Tango Finlandia* exercise, we showed an American television program from CBS's *60 Minutes* called 'Tango Finlandia', which depicts a culturally tainted portrait of Finland through the cultural lens of the American reporter Morley Safer. The video can be accessed on YouTube (2011). Words used by Finns to describe themselves in 'Tango Finlandia' include *shy, silent, private, and brooding*. These misleading words overlap semantically with the words used by Finns when they use so-called 'proper English' to explain Finnish ways of communicating to others. Voice-over terms used by the American commentator include *clinically shy, terminal melancholy, depressed, mourning, brooding, and isolated*, as well as the following judgment: "The national mission seemed to not be noticed, grimly in touch with no one but themselves... a difficult time making even the most casual social contact" (Berry et al., 2004, p. 267).

Students were encouraged to actively discuss their interpretation of the video. The American students interpreted the voiceover by Safer to be factual. In contrast, the Finnish students were confused, as they understood that the Finnish speech was full of black humor which would mislead the American students while only providing very limited accurate information about Finnish culture.

We then ask the students to think about what this portrayal of Finnish culture by an American reporter tells them about American cultural values. Was 'Tango Finlandia' a window into Finland or a mirror reflecting America? This gives the students a chance to explore the impact of culture on their perceptions and interpretations of another culture. It also lends itself as a discussion base for the influence of media on our perceptions of

another culture. This exercise raised important questions about ‘false friends’/ ‘risk words’, namely words that are used by native and non-native English speakers in the same way but carry different cultural meanings across cultures. Therefore, there was awareness of the intercultural paradox on the Finnish side prior to reading the cultural metaphors.

After these two exercises, we introduced the cultural metaphors. Students discussed their insights from the metaphors in their cultural subgroups. They began with the cultural metaphor of their own culture and discussed how accurately they think the metaphor reflects their own culture. We also asked them to talk about whether they wanted to modify the metaphor. We then asked the students to discuss the cultural metaphor of the other culture. Their task was to generate three or four specific questions about ways of living and three to four specific questions about business life in the other culture based on the information communicated in the metaphor. The students then exchanged their insights with the remote team members via the discussion platform after class. In this way each American-Finnish team can engage in a discussion during which the students provide information as cultural “experts” from their own culture and receive information from their culturally different team members. The metaphors act as a basis for these discussions and provide a starting point that students can use to explore differences in their everyday life. In addition, the metaphors can provide an opportunity to integrate and extend the knowledge the students acquired in the first two exercises. The metaphors served more as windows than as mirrors, especially the Sauna metaphor as it explained the positive sides of Finnish silence to Americans, while helping Finns realize that they had to deal with ‘risk words’ when communicating with Americans in English.

Creating a knowledge base for discussing business-relevant topics

In addition to providing an opportunity for integration of previously acquired cultural knowledge, the metaphors also provide a basis for future discussions of cultural differences. For example, in one of the next classes, we asked the students to explore cultural differences related to leadership. In the *Preferred Leadership Styles* exercise, we provided the students with fourteen leadership skills and asked the students the following four questions:

*What are the **five** most important leadership skills that your team leader would need to use so that you can perform at your best?*

- 1) Please think of yourself as a team member of an international team;
- 2) Now, please think of yourself as the leader of a team made up of team members of your own culture.
- 3) Now, please think of yourself as the leader of a team made up of team members of the other culture.
- 4) Finally, please think of yourself as the leader of a multicultural team.

We then asked the students to assess how their responses might link back to their insights from previous exercises, including the First Five Things exercise, the ‘Tango Finlandia’ exercise, and the discussion of the cultural metaphors. In this case, the metaphors provided concrete examples of everyday life and business life in each culture that the students could draw upon to explain their leadership preferences.

In the *GLOBE* exercise, we provided the students with results from the *GLOBE* study (House et al., 2004). We picked two cultural value dimensions, *assertiveness* and *performance orientation*, and provided copies of the tables that summarize the standing of all included countries on these dimensions, both on the ‘as is’ and ‘as should be’ questions. We also provided the students with the question markers that were used to assess these two dimensions. We then asked the students to interpret the differences between Finland and the US, given their earlier insights about cultural differences from the metaphors and the *Preferred Leadership Styles* exercise. In this case, the metaphors helped the students to make sense of the cultural differences they were introduced to in the *GLOBE* study. The metaphors function as a backdrop against which to interpret complex numbers encoding quantitative differences between countries that might otherwise not hold a lot of meaning for the students.

This approach to using the metaphors raises new questions and insights when reflecting back and moving forward during the course. In addition, it helps students go beyond descriptions of cultural value dimension systems such as Hofstede’s (1980), Trompenaar’s (1994), or *GLOBE*’s (House et al., 2004) and deeper into communication with their remote team members about everyday ways of living and conducting business.

Student Learning

The following examples from the students’ final reflective essays illustrate how insights from the metaphors help the students to draw a bigger picture of cultural realities within and between their cultures.

American 1: “One other thing of interest for me and for the class was their Sauna metaphor. It was interesting as this metaphor was very elaborate in how it encompassed so many facets of their lives. Many Americans and other non-Europeans would not understand the big deal with this. The Finns have an unique perspective when it came to a Sauna. It can be much like their holy place—church, and while the Americans may have thought of it as somewhat sexual, the Finns took it very seriously. I was shocked to learn that little apartments were fixed with little Saunas as well, shows you how important they are. Regarding the metaphors, the Finns in certain groups had a little difficulty understanding our Football metaphor. Especially the fact that it is mostly used in hard business rather than everyday life unlike their Sauna metaphor, which seemed to be used for every scenario. They seemed to know a lot about the USA, not surprisingly usually from movies and news. So I was not understanding why they took the

Football metaphor so too heart. Their exposure to US movies and news gave them a breadth of knowledge into our culture that we did not have into theirs. Chalk this up to the difficulty in understanding cultural differences. A human condition, as many of us seem to over bear or over simplify things when we cannot immerse ourselves into the environment.”

American 2: “One major point similar to the lists I made about American culture and the Football metaphor is the emphasis on individualism. Even though football involves the whole team, individuals are praised for the work they do on the field. Another point is success. Losing teams are often forgotten and could possibly lose fans if they don't step up and win some games. Recognition is another one. When football players do something great or stand out they are often placed into the hall of fame or are brought up time and again for what they did in football. “

Finn 1: “In order to understand a new culture one has to understand one's own culture first and this course has shown many aspects of my own culture that I haven't noticed before here one's metaphor brings awareness of taken for granted in one's culture and contributes to communicating one's cultural ways more effectively to others. This probably happened on both sides. Also, reading the metaphors of the other side opened the door to questions and also confirmation of what had been learned previously during the course. [...] Something that is different in these two metaphors is how individuality is emphasized. Finnish Sauna is a social event like the American football, but in the Finnish sauna everybody is equal and it's essential that no one is above the others. This has a lot to do with the underlying values. Finns appreciate social equality where Americans seem to value individual effort and success. Also the American football event is more loud and cheerful while Finns usually calm down and try to relax in the sauna.”

Finn 2: “The American Football metaphor and the Finnish Sauna metaphor are two great metaphors to enhance our cultural understanding. These metaphors describe how our cultural behavior can be seen through important event or place. ... [The football] metaphor helped me to understand the American working life, [and] American colleagues gave us good examples of their working life how this metaphor can be seen there. I found out that Americans actually use this metaphor when explaining how things should be done.... , e.g. touchdown and huddle are widely used in American business world. ... it seemed like these metaphors were total opposites. American football metaphor emphasizes competing individuals, who huddle and work together to achieve victory, while Finnish Sauna metaphor emphasizes peace, privacy, nature and equality.”

Similarity and Difference Paradox

The exchange was full of 'risk words', which the Finns were more aware of because they could move back and forth between Finnish and English to discover where overlap ended when relying on words/phrases in the metaphors. The student comments were not limited to differences.

The things and values written on the first class turned out to be the basis of this course... later on I understood that the values are the underlying force that makes our behaviors so much different. It was interesting to see that despite all the differences there were some common goals also. It was just that we have different methods to achieve those goals.

The respect for the quality of life was something that we discussed about, because we saw it as a similar value although it was marked as a differentiating value. We concluded that in this case both Americans and Finns respect their quality of life, although it might be manifested in a different way.

While there was no desire on the Finnish side to transform into Americans, there was an awareness that Finns could benefit from 'importing' a bit of American culture into an American-Finnish team, e.g., giving up some of their autonomy expectations, which they had taken for granted, while adjusting to the more active verbalization in the American huddling tradition. American students also understood that movement towards the examples in the Finnish sauna metaphor, e.g., positive active silence and more autonomy, would be useful for the future.

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