THE NON-FORMAL ACADEMY EXPERIENCE: AN EXPLORATORY MODEL TO DEVELOP STUDENTS’ COMPETENCES FOR WORKING IN INTERNATIONAL AND VIRTUAL TEAMS


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Abstract

This article describes the experience of developing, and piloting, a Non-Formal Academy, for developing student’s competences to work in international and virtual teams, that took place under the scope of the European Project CATCH-IT. The experience involved the collaboration of educators and students from Portugal, Denmark and Poland, and consisted on the development and piloting of a stepwise approach to engage students in international and collaborative teamwork, with the purpose of making them acquainted with the demands of such working contexts, that are both timely and relevant in today’s labor market. The motivation for the development of this research work stems from the research accounts, as well as the empirical observation that, the current generations of Higher Education students, to a great extent, be engaged in multicultural and internationalized working environments. This calls for the development of specific competences, such as cultural intelligence for effective international collaboration, as well as the ability to work in technology mediated contexts, that often support the work on internationally distributed project teams. The teaching and learning model developed for the Non-Formal Academy involved, a preliminary phase devoted to the organization of students into diversified groups, and the development of thematic project proposals related with the development of international careers and international business, in each of the partner countries. Afterwards the students were engaged in a stepwise learning model to support the development of their projects in four steps that aimed to expose them to international and collaborative working contexts in a progressive manner. The steps included: i) a step 1, consisting of group fieldwork conducted in each of the partner countries; ii) a step 2, involving the collection of data and the interaction between the students and international experts, in each of the partner countries; iii) a step 3, involving work in virtual international teams, supported by computer mediated communication, and bringing together students from the three partner countries; and iv) a final step 4, where groups of students selected in a competitive manner from the work developed in the previous phases, were engaged in a small cross-exchange period across the partner countries, to finalize their projects in a face-to-face manner with their colleagues from three participating countries. The experience allowed for the development of the Non-Formal Academy model, and enables a rich teaching and learning experience that exposed students to the demands of work in international teams and contexts. Students involved in the process perceived important benefits from the experience, and provided key feedback information to further improve the proposed model, in order to make it replicable in the future.

Keywords: higher education, international competences, virtual teams, non-formal learning.

1 INTRODUCTION

The development of competences connected to cross-cultural interaction and the adoption of teaching and learning activities that involve experimentation of virtual interactions between students is a growing concern in formal and non-formal learning contexts. This awareness is largely driven by the increasing importance of global virtual work contexts. Together with the growth in the significance of multicultural team in business contexts there is a shift from the importance of individual job performance towards the domain of team performance [1]. Furthermore, very often in the context of multicultural teams and geographically dispersed activities and projects fallouts in the use of technologies to mediate the interaction between team elements. Therefore, the term virtual team refers to the job, project or managerial circumstances where teams conduct significant amounts of interaction via technology or electronically supported media rather than face-to-face [1] [2]. Virtual teams allow companies to bring together resources from disperse local contexts to complete a task or a project. Some benefits of virtual teams have also been acknowledged such as the ability to bring together diverse expertise and
perspectives that allows for increased responsiveness and operational flexibility, allowing allows for cost reductions and increases in employee efficiency.

However, the literature mentions several challenges associated with the management and performance of virtual teams. For example, geographically separated team members may create increasing coordination problems [3] [4] due to weak mutual knowledge between the several elements of the team. Furthermore, the mediation of technology may create obstacles to natural interactions that may create several misinterpretations [5]. The management of virtual teams may be more difficult if the teams include elements form different countries, with their own set of values, orientations, and priorities.

The growth in the importance of virtual and international teams in work contexts has attracted the attention not only of managers from firms but also education representatives, taking to the head the discussion about different competences to be developed for the competitiveness and sustainability of modern economies. Additionally, learning has become a lifelong activity, that spans the contexts of private and public life and work. In order to meet these renewed goals, traditional formal learning will need to be increasingly blended with other forms of education, new learning paradigms and tools and also informal learning.

In what concerns the development of new competences that has been inscribed in the priorities on debates of public policies, educators and managers, digital competences have been advanced as key for personal development, active citizenship, employment and inclusion. The same holds for cultural competences, i.e. the ability to interact with individuals from different national and cultural backgrounds, and to consider their perspectives in decision-making [6] [7]. Over the years, in the literature we may find various definitions for competence with some discussion about a consensual meaning for the term competences, "skills", "expertise", and "competency". These terms are often used as the same. Overall, competences are defined as the combination of knowledge, attitudes, skills, values and behaviours that an individual need to successfully accomplish a task or an activity. Competences may be acquired, learned, developed and achieved by experience, education and training and practice [8] The non-formal academy was focused on the development of competences that are relevant for the internationalization of young professionals. The rationale was the implementation of significant learning contexts for the development of several skills needed to be suitable for young individuals to integrate international working contexts. This proposal was thought as timely and relevant given the current generalized internationalized profile of economies, markets and societies, and consequently the international context of the employment opportunities that are offered to young graduates and the opportunities raised by a globalized labour market [9] [10].

2 COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT SETTING

In this project was developed a stepwise learning methodology, involving a set of successive learning contexts aimed at engaging students in learning contexts requiring the development of competences considered to be relevant for working in international settings. Remarkably, the aim of the methodology is to expose the students to a multicultural working context, by means of engaging them in the conduction of co-work with international counterparts both in face-to-face settings and through technology mediated interactions. Specifically, this developed learning methodology aimed at exposing the participants to four types of working contexts (see figure 1).

At stage 1 of the methodology students engaged in team work within national teams in classroom context. The purpose was to develop active and informal learning exercises in order to enable the acquisition of competences related to communication and teamwork. In stage 2 students were asked to conduct work interaction with other national participants, holding international experience, mediated by technology (e.g. conducting a skype call or videoconference, e-mail, etc.). The purpose was to be aware and to use tools that are common in supporting work in international and geographically disperse work settings.

At stage 3 students were exposed to work and interaction with participants in other international teams – including one team from Polish students, and one team of Danish students, working from their home countries - by means of technology mediated communication. The purpose of this stage was to add to the competences in communication, and teamwork developed in former phases, other competences related to the work in multicultural contexts, also common in internationalized workplaces and economies. Finally, at stage 4, a selected number of students got together in face-to-face meeting with the participants in other partner countries and concluded the academy by engaging in on site co-work, building on the previous phases.
The methodology previewed the implementation of the four learning phases and contexts happening simultaneously in the various partner countries (Portugal, Poland and Denmark). The aim was to match the participants in phases 3 and 4 in similar activities and to engage them in the international interactions and learning contexts.

3 THE NON-FORMAL ACADEMY: METHODOLOGY

Whereas the methodology was able to accommodate diverse types of projects or cases that may be developed following the four proposed context steps, two specific pilot projects were simulated and validated in the three partner institutions considered as relevant working topics for contributing to the development of competencies for the international qualification of young people:

Project 1: Identifying key challenges, competences and attitudes for the internationalization of young professionals; and Project 2: Identifying key challenges, competences and attitudes for the international set-up or expansion of an enterprise/business.

After selecting one topic, each student group engaged in activities to pursue the collection and discussion of information to address the topic in their selected project. This led to the production of reports for each topic that were shared across the groups. Moreover, this work was supported by a set of successive classroom sessions, at each stage, where specialists were invited to provide students with training on tools that could facilitate the work (e.g. team work, conduction of interviews with internationally experienced professionals, utilization of ICT tools to support communication of geographically dispersed teams, etc.) in order to develop the competences needed for each stage of the non-formal academy.

The performance of students during phases 1 to 3 was assessed by the enrolled specialists and professors and was used as the criteria to rank student groups and select a group of participants that would travel to the partner countries, and conduct the final phase of the project (i.e. sharing and discussing the results) in loco with international counterparts.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This non-formal academy enabled the development and international discussion of a methodology for the acquisitions of competences for young people meant to international work contexts. The engagement of participants in working scenarios where international interaction is promoted supported the importance of experiential learning in the development of transversal competencies. The assessment of all student perceptions about the learning experience were positive.
The main objective of this assessment was to learn about the lessons to be taken in order to improve learning via virtual cross-cultural and distributed teams. The recommendations suggest that it is important to insert content and stimulate learning about intercultural communication at the start of the course, in order to increase the student’s awareness about their cultural differences and achieve a better monitoring and judgement of their own ongoing collaboration with others. The experience suggests that backgrounds it is important provide the participants with diverse world perspectives and initiate some activities to promote acquaintance with each other in order to build commitment in order to enable a collaboration process within a distributed team, with different national. The experience also revealed that it is important to structure and bound the learning process and the various transversal competences that are key for virtual international teams. The propose stepwise approach offered a common structure across the countries and the different project teams, that was perceived as positive and as contributing to create a virtual shared project goals and timeline. The parallel development of the projects facilitated the international interaction of students, mediated by technology, but mainly the final work meeting face-to-face at the end.

REFERENCES


