

Computer–Mediated Communication:

Issues and Approaches in Education

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Chapter 10

How Similar or Different Are We?

A Perception of Diversity in Global Virtual Teams

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ABSTRACT

Global virtual teams are becoming vastly popular amongst public and private organizations. This prevalent way of organizing can be used for students to gain experience in working with various cultures using technology. GlobCom is a global communication project that provides students with this opportunity but also presents them with challenges such as cultural barriers. This chapter explores students' perceptions of diversity in their global virtual teams. It provides insight as to how students overcome issues of cultural differences by working in an online environment.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual teams are becoming almost a fixture of organizations throughout the United States, Europe, and beyond, as a response to globalization. Organizations need to have a wider international reach and be present 24/7. By having individu-

als working together, but from different parts of the world, they can meet their international 24-hour needs.

The field of public relations (PR) is no stranger to this new way of doing business. Many PR firms are expanding globally. For example, as of 2010, Hill & Knowlton has 79 offices in 43 countries; Porter Novelli has 90 offices in 60 countries; Weber Shandwick has 121 offices

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in 76 countries. Similarly, more multinational organizations need to communicate globally by having communication specialists in various geographical locations. These specialists are there to grasp the economic, political and cultural intricacies of their part of the world as PR practices vary in different countries. They work across time, space, and culture to accommodate the needs of these multinational companies.

As PR becomes increasingly international, there is an increasing demand for students to partake and practice international public relations. However, it is rare that students have the opportunity to truly experience and practice at that level. Most of the time, they tend to work on case studies, listen to guest speakers who have traveled the world, and when possible, they can participate in a study abroad program. These activities are limited in their scope. They do not let students practice their skills and apply their knowledge toward this growing field. Organizing students in global virtual teams, however, allows them to practice these skills. In 2003, VanSlyke Turk & Martin (2004) experimented with that model by grouping students from six different universities, and saw the benefits for students to work at the international level. However, this was a one-time project and was not replicated the following year.

One project that has been ongoing since 2003 and that provides students with the opportunity to develop these skills is GlobCom. GlobCom is an international project that has grown to involve eleven universities in eleven countries on five continents. The students are grouped into global virtual teams (GVT), and each virtual team works on the same public relations brief, developing and submitting an international public relations strategy. The students communicate and cooperate with each other in chat rooms, through email, and/or by Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), such as Skype. At the end the project, the educators and students meet in a symposium where the top teams present their strategy.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe and analyze the global communication student project in terms of diversity. One of the most common and basic issues in GVT is overcoming the challenges of cultural diversity. Rather than looking for differences amongst the various cultures of the team, this research is designed to understand how students perceive their teams and work through the challenges of communicating with a diverse team via communication technology. Through online interviews, students answered open-ended questions that provide an insight into the ways students dealt with diversity and overcame cultural barriers.

The first part of this chapter will provide a brief review of GVT literature and an introduction of the GlobCom project. The second part of this chapter will analyze students' perceptions of diversity. Finally, the author concludes with recommendations for use of GVT in international education.

BACKGROUND

As virtual teams become more common in the business world, education institutions need to prepare students to excel in that environment. Some academic institutions emulate this by creating virtual teams. Students participate in projects with other students using a variety of communication technologies. Only a few projects incorporate a more international component by including students from various countries to create Global Virtual Teams (GVT).

Global Virtual Teams are of great use in the field of international public relations. They offer the responsiveness and expertise needed in certain situations. Jarvenpaa & Leidner (1999) define a Global Virtual Team as "temporary, culturally diverse, geographically dispersed, electronically communicating work group" (p. 792). This definition focuses on three important defining components. The first one is about whether the teams tend to be permanent or temporary. It does not provide a sense of time in terms of length,

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whether the team will be together one month or one year. However, GVT are usually formed with team members who have no common history and will not work together in the long term.

This definition also emphasizes that GVT members are located in a variety of different countries, but also need to be culturally diverse. A group of American managers located in different countries and working together on a project together would not be considered a GVT, because the members are too similar culturally. The last component of the definition emphasizes that all the communication is done electronically via technology, thus making the team virtual. There are many challenges for GVT to overcome in order to become effective and productive.

In general, there is a tendency for researchers to compare virtual teams with face-to-face teams (Krebs, Hobman, & Bordia, 2006; Polzer, Crisp, Jarvenpaa, & Kim, 2006; Staples & Zaho, 2006). Trust and leadership are two significant areas of research concerning GVT. Trust is an essential element of effective teamwork (Meyerson, Weick, & Kramer, 1996; Jarvenpaa, Knoll, & Leidner, 1998; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Paul & McDaniel, 2004). Leadership is another area of interest with regards to virtual teams (Carte, Chadambaram, & Becker, 2006; Kayworth, Leidner, & Mora-Tavarez, 2000). Virtual teams have also been studied in the education environment, including looking at learning outcomes (Ferris & Godar, 2006; Liu, Magjuka, Lee, 2008; Rutkowski, Vogel, Van Genuichten, & Saunders, 2008).

However, this chapter's focus is to understand how students communicate with different cultures using communication technologies, particularly in terms of diversity, as this is one main component of the GVT definition. Most of the research on diversity has been to compare homogeneous team to non-homogeneous teams (Staples & Zhao, 2006), to compare virtual teams to face-to-face teams (Staples & Zhao, 2006; Krebs, Hobman, Bordia, 2006), and to look at the relationship between cultural differences and technology use

(Karpova, Crreia, & Baran, 2009; Lee, 2002; Shachaf & Hara, 2007).

Dafoulas & Macaulay (2001) presents diversity in GVT as an advantage in terms of time zones and geographical dispersion. These become competitive advantages for companies as they can decrease costs. However, diversity is more than just about times zones and geographical location. There are many different types of diversity: 1) demographic diversity (age, sex, race); 2) deep level diversity (attitudes, values, preferences); and 3) functional diversity (knowledge, expertise), resources (Pinjani & Palvia, 2007). The most obvious type of diversity in GVT relates to the national and cultural background of team members thus including diverse nationalities (demographic diversity) and diverse cultural values (deep level diversity). Shachaf (2008) defines cultural diversity as "the heterogeneity of national cultures of team members" (p. 132). Global Virtual Team members are different in terms of national culture, as thus have different beliefs, values, attitudes, competencies, perceptions, experiences, etc. (Hofstede, 1991). However, the issue with cultural diversity is whether these differences are seen as strengths or weaknesses.

Polzer, Crisp, Jarvenpaa, & Kim (2006) review the various arguments supporting diversity as a source of higher performance or diversity as a source of conflict and malfunctioning teams. However, there are many factors affecting the two outcomes such as the types of diversity, stages of a team's life, and organizational contexts. VanSlyke Turk & Martin (2004) observed that diversity stimulated creativity. When students worked together, they started understanding the different cultures better and eliminated the stereotypes. After these barriers were gone, students listened to each other's contributions and ideas. The main advantage of having diversity in a team is to utilize the different opinions and the larger pool of skills. When companies use GVT for international public relations purpose, they need the understanding, the knowledge, and the experience

of each country member's perspective. It is the strength of diversity in this context.

When comparing virtual teams to face-to-face (FTF) teams, diversity is found to be more advantageous in virtual teams. Diversity in FTF teams is found to lead to group dissatisfaction and below average performance when compared to virtual teams (Schoenecker, Martell, Michlitsch, 1997). Staples and Zhao (2006) compared heterogeneous and homogeneous teams and virtual and FTF teams, and found that the virtual heterogeneous teams performed better than the FTF heterogeneous teams. Similarly Krebs, Hobman, Bordia (2006) found that virtual teams who were dissimilar in country of birth (i.e. diverse) reported higher level of trust than FTF teams. Peters & Karren (2009) also found that diversity in virtual teams was positively related to performance. More specifically, they found that functional diversity was significantly related to team-rated performance. Interestingly, they also found that skill dissimilarity was positively related with helping behaviors, meaning that team members do not possess the same level of skills, they will tend to help each other.

Overall, most research supports the claim that diversity is advantageous for GVT. The fact that these teams are completely virtual (participants only communicate electronically) is one reason diversity leads to more trust, helping behaviors, and performance. Shachaf (2008) found that communication technology mitigates the disadvantages of diversity. Specifically, the bridging of space and time differences as well as the coding and decoding abilities of certain technologies help overcome the differences in communication. In fact, Carte & Chidambaram (2004) advances a theoretical model proposing that computer-mediated communication helps leverage the advantages of diversity while reducing the disadvantages of diversity. However, their model has yet to be empirically tested.

METHODOLOGY

In order to look into some of the issues of diversity in GVT, this chapter uses a qualitative analysis of students' answers to an open-ended question. Students expressed their opinion from their experience in participating in the GlobCom project. Because the purpose of this chapter is exploratory and descriptive, qualitative methodology is appropriate.

During the Spring Semester 2009, 118 students were emailed four different times a set of open-ended questions. These questions were sent by the GlobCom team coordinator and dealt with a variety of issues, such as leadership, technology, and preparation. One series of questions asked specifically about diversity. All students were asked to reply to the following questions: "How diverse is your team? Do you feel that most students are similar or different? Similar in what ways? Different in what ways?" 55 students answered these questions in small paragraph format. The respondents represented all the various countries involved in the GlobCom project: Australia, Germany, India, Italy, Portugal, Russia, South Africa, Spain, UAE, United Kingdom, and United States.

The students' answers were analyzed using thematic coding. Common themes and trends were identified and analyzed.

Description of GlobCom Project

GlobCom is an international public relations project run by various universities from across the world. This program started in 2003 with only a few universities from only a few countries across the world. In 2010, students from 11 universities of 5 continents formed 10 virtual teams. The students study public relations and/or communication. All the virtual teams are tasked with responding to a public relations brief and to develop a strategic communication campaign for a specific and real client. These students communicate and collaborate with each other using various technologies,

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including a special chatroom created for the GlobCom Project.

The main reason behind the project was to overcome the lack of experience among public relations professionals with the necessary skills of running international and global accounts. Increasingly, companies demand professionals to have international and intercultural experiences. The GlobCom project provides a platform to train public relations students to be a part of a multicultural team in a real international situation. In order to be successful, these teams must overcome cultural barriers and recognize cultural diversity as a strength.

In general, the GlobCom project is part of the curriculum of the participating university. It can be a special seminar or part of the International Public Relations curriculum. Course credits are granted by all participating universities. In most cases, a lecturer in each university is in charge of the project and responsible for the course.

The teams consist of 14 to 22 students, 1 or 2 students per university on each team. They all work together to solve a global public relations problem, similar to the work of an agency, and the communication is in English. Each global virtual team is led by a Global Team Leader (GTL). This leader is appointed, elected, or volunteered for the position. There are no direct guidelines in terms of how teams should organize. For example, the virtual teams can form working groups based on time zones or topics. All decisions are made within the team by their members.

Each virtual team must prepare a public relations strategic plan for a client, in essence acting like an international public relations agency. In the past, clients have included General Electric Foundational Policy, Kingdom of Swaziland, Gognis GmbH, and Brand Abu Dhabi. The team organizes itself by allocating tasks and work for each team member and by keeping all team members informed. Teams conduct research, create promotional material, write drafts, develop

strategies, and submit a detailed response to the PR brief at the semester's end.

RESULTS

The results indicate that, in general, students were overwhelmingly focusing more on what brings them together rather than what sets them apart. The themes are discussed below. Each theme is illustrated by two or three direct quotes from the participants.

Diversity: Force Toward Similarity

The obvious similarity that most virtual team members mentioned was the fact that they were all college age students. Many of them stated that they were all around 20 years old and studying at a university. They can communicate easily as they understand each other.

“The students I have communicated with seem similar to me. Enjoyable college students. It seems we are all trying to balance GlobCom with 100 other things in our lives?” (USA)

“all the students in my team are just normal young studentswhich are pretty alike to the Germans I know. Everyone has his problems with university, many have similar spare time activities, have jobs besides their classes at university, many are doing extracurricular activities.” (Germany)

The fact that participants could relate to one another based on age is a strong factor in perceiving each other as similar (Krebs, Hobman, & Bordia, 2006). It is not only the age, but also the fact that they are college students and as such have certain lifestyles. College students from all universities face similar experiences, such as lectures, exams, social activities, and friendships. Related to their experience as college students is also the fact that they study the same field.

“All our group members have similar previous knowledge and preconditions” (Germany)

“Most of us have comparable professional experience” (Germany)

Many students acknowledged that their similar educational background provides a strong common ground, similar to the concept of mutual knowledge. Davis & Khazanchi (2007) define mutual knowledge as “common ground, common knowledge, and shared knowledge.” They suggest that mutual knowledge should positively affect virtual teams’ outcomes. In GlobCom, students have a shared understanding of public relations, and their strength as a team can be seen through their focus on being public relations practitioners and “speaking the same language.” When they speak about public relations, they understand each other because of their common background.

“The majority of my team members have a united passion for Public Relations.” (Australia)

“It is true that our values and beliefs are so different, but our idea how to make our campaign and the tactics are similar. Most of the students are similar in their thinking about public relations.” (Spain)

Most participants’ attitudes towards the project appear to be similar as they worked really hard to finish the strategic plan in less than four months. As participants are located in different countries, this common focus actually helps. The fact that GVT are temporary implies that team members have a limited amount of time to accomplish the task. This limitation of time can put pressure on members to focus on the task at hand and not on socializing which is easier done face-to-face than virtually. Interestingly, the lack of commitment for the project can also be what differentiates and fragments the virtual team.

“We all love this project because it’s a perfect opportunity to reach all this objectives” (Italy)

“There are two main groups of students in our team. The first is very alike: the students who are very involved in the project, no matter in what year they are, or how much they know, that group has also different cultural background. Then there’s the other group: students who show up from time to time and upload a document when they are reminded for the third time” (Germany)

Diversity: Force Toward Differences

Global Virtual Teams, by definition, comprise people from different countries and cultures. These differences were obviously felt by participants, especially when it came to communicating in English. Not everyone had the same skill level in English, and that accentuated the differences within the team, even though it was not a real concern or problem to students. Some students were more fluent in English than others, but this did not lead to many problems.

“I find that the Spanish and Italians struggle a bit with the English, that is where I differ a lot to them.” (South Africa)

“The only big difference I notice is spelling. As English is the second language of many, the way sentences are phrases and spelled can be interesting and hard to decipher at times” (UK)

Language is an important issue, and some participants spoke English as a second language. However, students did not describe language as a barrier or an obstacle, just as a difference. Participants also felt differences by the sheer number of different nationalities involved in the project.

We have members from Australia, the UK, the US, India and other countries. I think the great-

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est thing of diversity is the timings of our group meetings! Night in one country, early morning in another (India)

Similar to language, countries were just noted as a difference, not as an obstacle. Students expressed more of a concern with the differences in education. Many focused on the fact that, even though they were all studying public relations, there were major differences in perceived knowledge about public relations. Students perceived that concepts about public relations and communication were being taught differently in the various countries.

“The only ways in which I believe we all differ is in the ways in which we have been taught. Some members didn’t even know what a PR planning model was and how to carry out a SWOT and PEST/EL analysis” (UK)

“We all have separate educational background, at least in terms of teaching methods and syllabi, there are times when only a few can immediately grasp a particular term or references...these minor hurdles are usually crossed without much difficulty” (India)

Pedagogical issues and knowledge about public relations were perceived as impediments to the process of planning a successful strategic plan, with students expressing more understanding toward participants not knowing English than participants not knowing public relations. They perceived knowledge as an important factor in the success of the project. However, again, students did not express these differences as source of conflict or problems within the GVT. One student from Portugal states: “I don’t think that are a big difference between us because we know that we are in different years academics and when someone doesn’t understand something someone who understand will make it clear.” This statement provides support to Peters & Karren’s

(2009) claim that skill dissimilarity is positively related with helping behaviors. When there are different skill levels within a team, members will step up and help.

The main source of conflict is one that is common in teamwork. It appears that one universal issue when working with others remains: some people work harder than others. This difference was the most cited and one that students perceived most negatively.

“What is apparent to me is the very different workload of students within our team, and consequently, the resulting disparate involvement in the project.” (Germany)

“All of the active people, even if they are more or less prepared, they always want to be part of the group and they bring some element, which are fundamental for the group itself.” (Italy)

Slacking students is a universal phenomenon that will create conflict. When students were having team problems, most of the time it was due to the lack of commitment to the project by some of the team members. One last surprising finding was the fact that certain students perceived differences in the team as a reinforcement of cultural stereotypes and cultural barriers. A few students expressed wide cultural differences as “boxes” where you categorized individuals.

“I am like the Indians from a developing world and understand the difficulties and stigma that may be attached to your nationality” (South Africa)

“It’s not worth to make prejudices thinking about the same stereotypes but at the end we come from different and long aged cultures and we won’t change in some habits. For example the fact that German people are very serious and strictly minded, on the other hand Italians are very funny and social living.” (Italy)

Diversity: Strength or Weakness?

The overwhelming sentiment of participants in GVT was that diversity served as a strength for their project. There were four mitigating factors team members identified that helped with diversity: multiculturalism, rule-making, leadership, and communication technology.

Multiculturalism

Students recognized that the diversity of opinions and ideas made their project stronger. Students did not indicate that those differences were a hindrance in their work. It made their project more interesting, because people were approaching it from different perspectives.

“And everybody has different opinions, but that is the strength of our team, because on that way we can learn for each other.” (South Africa)

“Interacting with people who live in a different country, speak different language and share different perspectives than I am is just an amazing experience that I am going through by interacting with people from 11 different countries. Each member from our team have different ideas and we share them to have better results” (UAE)

The diversity of ideas and opinions was seen as the core component of their team and their project. Participants felt the benefits of these multicultural teams. They increased their cultural knowledge and discovered that different was not always bad.

Students reported that differences are normal, and therefore do not seem important or noticeable.

“I think that we are young and for this reason I feel similar and I don't notice and I don't want to notice differences between us.” (Italy)

“I think there are not too many differences between countries...some countries are more punctual,

accurate, others less, but...I suppose it is the normality” (Italy)

These cultural differences appeared to be an accepted norm for students working on an international project. These students expected to find cultural differences and as a result, are prepared to deal with them. Students accept those differences, and can focus on the project and not focus on the difficulties. Accepting cultural differences is a main component of living in multicultural world. Some participants mentioned their attitude towards the world and their acceptance of being part of a multicultural world as a way of being similar.

“We all value multiculturalism and we all share an interest in wanting to learn about different countries” (Australia)

“My team is not so diverse, the people who work really good in the project are well open minded to every idea of the others, and accept ideas of everybody” (Italy)

These comments indicate that some students are already open to new cultures, and thus seek situations that will expose them to people similar to them. Being open-minded is one way to overcome cultural differences and is an indicator of intercultural communication competency. Penbek, Yurdakul, & Cerit (2009) found that student with international experience are more open minded and respectful of different cultures. Overall, students indicated that they are accepting of cultural differences and ready for multiculturalism.

Rule-Making

Students accommodated for cultural differences by creating mechanisms that allowed for the differences. The mechanisms created are similar to the concepts of rule making in groups by Walther, Buz, & Bazarova (2005). The researchers found the presence of rules in virtual teams leads to a

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greater level of trust and liking. Students reported that teams made everything possible to ensure that everyone knew what was expected of them but also that everyone had a chance to participate.

“Everybody do their respective tasks in their own way but at the end of the day we all reach a consensus and decide on what’s best for the team (India)

“All of us realize that we have a common goal and an objective that we have to reach together hence even if there are differences in opinion, we try to resolve them amicably” (India)

The development and emergence of rules was organic. Yoon & Johnson (2008) found this procedure to be a normal development pattern of virtual teams. However, some of these procedures were not always organic and developmental. Occasionally the rules were dictated by their team leaders.

Leadership

Even though students were not asked specifically about leadership in their GVT, many group members identified leaders as an important factor of success. The main communication conduit ran through the global team leader.

“More than anything else depend on our group leaders to take the final call” (India)

“For the convenience of the team, our team leader has chalked out a pattern according to which all of us work” (India)

These comments confirm the importance of leadership in GVT. Sivunen (2006) points out four techniques that a leader can use to strengthen members’ identification with the team: catering to the member, giving positive feedback, outlining common goals, and working the meetings. As

illustrated above, the students mentioned a few of these tactics.

Communication Technology

Finally, as Carte & Chidambaram (2004) suggested, similarities were mitigated by communication technology. Students mentioned that technology was a mediating factor in their perception of similarity and differences.

“I am sure that all the people in my team are very different but when we work online it doesn’t really seem that way.” (India)

“The team has a common goal which is to do the communication plan for the client and because we are all working on a virtual team I still can not find many differences.” (Portugal)

“The meetings couldn’t be verbal they had to be written on MSN; I feel that with a verbal conversation it would be far easier to communication and that team differences and similarities would have been further highlighted.” (UK)

These students’ comments provide insight as to why diverse virtual teams can outperform FTF teams. Communication researchers tend to view virtual teams as less effective because of the lack of nonverbal communication. However, as Carte and Chidambaram (2004) suggest, communication technologies are a “bundle of capabilities” and can enhance the virtual team.

CONCLUSION

All GlobCom teams completed their project and performed very well at the conclusion of the course. Surprisingly, they never complained that the task was too hard or too complex, and they never complained about technological problems. Through these online interviews, students

Table 1. Diversity as force towards similarity and differences

Forces toward similarity	Forces toward differences
Age	English language skills
Lifestyle	Cultural stereotypes
Educational background	Nationalities
Shared knowledge	Lack of shared knowledge
Involvement in the project	Lack of involvement in the project

provided interesting insights as to how they perceived diversity in GVT. The majority of the students focused more on the similarities than the differences. The main themes are listed in Table 1.

Students identified their knowledge for PR as a force towards similarity, but the lack of knowledge had the opposite effect as a force towards differences. If students felt that other team members lacked the same type of knowledge, they felt more differences within their team. This conclusion is consistent with Davis & Khazanchi's (2007) discovery about how mutual knowledge can affect virtual team performance. When teams have a shared knowledge, they tend to perform better. Thus, when creating GVT, educators need to consider not only the knowledge the students possess, but also the type of educational system students come from.

Regardless of whether they felt different or similar, students explained how they overcame these barriers. There were four mitigating factors that played an important role in making diversity an asset to their GVT's success. First, students recognized and learned the value of diversity. Teams expressed not only an interest in listening to others' opinions and ideas, but valuing these opinions and ideas. Second, students self-managed their teams successfully. Rules were established, teams scheduled meetings, established work procedures, and so on. These self-imposed mechanisms were important and established guidelines for everyone, regardless of the country or nationality. Third, students recognized the importance of a leader. Teams can create their own rules and guidelines,

but they still need a good leader to provide more authority to the team. The last factor was that the communication technology mitigated the differences. Many researchers tend to look for cultural differences in use of technology (Karpova, Correia, & Baran, 2009). The fact is that these technologies de-emphasize cultural differences as they eliminate certain cues, such as physical appearances and accents. This claim provides more legitimacy to a concept called "perceived similarity." Zellmer-Bruhn, Maloney, Bhappu, & Salvador (2008) argue that perceptions of diversity are as important as the actual diversity. The fact that certain students did not seem to notice the differences amongst their team members indicates that their perceptions of the team would lean toward being more similar than different.

The overwhelming outcome of the GlobCom project is that students do not perceive cultural diversity as a barrier. Students bring different perspectives from their own culture, but focus on the commonalities among members. Participants in the GVT did not express some of the problems that are put forth in other studies, such as lack of nonverbal cues. In fact, students stated the opposite. These students experienced the closest simulation to practicing international public relations. This experience will be incredibly valuable for employers. Courses at higher education institution can integrate the use of Global Virtual Teams in their curriculum as technology is more widely implemented and international collaboration among faculty increases. With less expensive technology and international cooperation

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increasing, projects such as GlobCom are becoming more common. The resources required for virtual teams are minimal: faculty members willing to create an international project and internet access.

The use of global virtual teams in education encourages students to work in an environment of international cooperation and enrich their academic knowledge of diversity. For teaching international public relations, this type of experience facilitates the understanding of one of their main challenges of “think global, act local.”

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Diversity: Recognizing and accepting individual differences based on culture.

Intercultural Communication: Understanding how people from different cultures communicate and perceive the world.

GlobCom: International student project that require global virtual teams to create a public relations strategic plan for a client.

Global Virtual Team: Group of dispersed individuals from various cultures who communicate primarily through electronic communication.

Multiculturalism: Belief that multiple cultures are valuable to an organization or society.

Mutual Knowledge: Knowledge communicated to team members and that is known to be shared.

Public Relations: Communication activities that support an organization's goal of creating and maintaining relationships with various publics.