

Multicultural Academic Teamwork: Lessons from the PISH Project

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Introduction

This paper is a reflection on the Erasmus+ PISH project. The acronym PISH stands for Problem-based learning (PBL), intercultural communication and STEM in higher education. The aim of the project was to provide university teachers and students with intercultural communication training materials for culturally diverse STEM classrooms. Teamwork in diverse groups is a highly desirable but scarce skill in employees. Tech jobs offered by international companies are often project based, so employees need to be able to find their way in transnational teams. The PISH team was made up of seven partner organizations (universities and NGOs) from six countries, which meant that intercultural communication skills were also relevant for the project team. The PISH team developed four results (intellectual outputs): 1) library of best practices on intercultural practices, 2) PBL-based toolkit on intercultural communication, 3) an online course, 4) an online platform. All results are openly available online, on the PISH website. The work took 36 months. Although the project successfully completed the plan, the process design had certain shortcomings. This paper is also an attempt to address these cul de sacs and propose alternative methods for designing successful group work experience. This review is written from the perspective of a team member who was involved in the project from start to finish.

PBL and intercultural communication

PISH joined the efforts to address an actual labour market challenge experienced by international companies: many employees have poor teamwork skills. The inability to navigate teamwork poses serious challenges to the project, from delays to a complete breakdown. Educators have long been aware of the problem. The PBL methodology attempted to simulate project conditions in the classrooms, so STEM graduates could develop useful labour market skills already during their studies. It is likely that the problem with teamwork will only grow. According to Schmidt et al. (2023), people born in generation Z are significantly shyer than millennials, which suggests that they will have an even more difficult time interacting with colleagues. One possible explanation for this situation is the impact of digital technology on young people, who have fewer face-to-face opportunities to develop social skills, while being exposed to toxic culture on social media.

While PBL has established a place in STEM curricula across many schools, its implementation in the classroom is marked with the same challenges already known from the office. A diversifying classroom is one of these challenges. As European universities try to increase the enrolment of international students, effective intercultural communication becomes a highly desirable element of a PBL setting. This was the rationale for the PISH project. PBL is a somewhat flexible approach. It is sometimes referred to as problem-based learning, and sometimes as project-based learning. De Graaf and Kolmos (2003) observe that there is a lot of variation in how education institutions implement PBL activities. However, all PBL approaches are based on group work. This said, discrepancies between project and problem approaches are not significant from the point of view of this paper. What matters is that there is sufficient

evidence supporting the use of PBL activities, and its effectiveness is especially visible in long-term knowledge retention (Yeh and Goh 2016). Although it could have been relevant, the process of PISH tools' development did not explicitly apply PBL methodology. Also, the project did not organize a training on PBL, even though only the coordinating organization had experience with the methodology. This said, the need to develop multicultural teamwork skills is surely 'a problem' that can be solved by designing interventions. Hence, a PBL design could have been implemented in PISH.

Indeed, PISH places intercultural communication at the centre of successful teamwork. The student is the stakeholder to benefit the most from intercultural education. In simple terms, the intercultural communication model used in PISH presupposes that individual's behaviour is shaped by cultural norms and contexts in which they were raised. This definition resonates with Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) concept of culture as *software of the mind* with measurable categories of difference. Since norms and contexts are not identical across the world, an encounter with the other carries the risk of conflict. The conflict arises because students are unaware of cultural differences. Although the idea that culture is software of the mind is popular around the world, it has also been widely criticized. For example, Piller (2009) argues that Hofstede overgeneralized cultural traits, treating cultures as fixed. Dervin (2016) provides further criticism of intercultural pedagogy, stressing the absence of intersectionality, among other problems.

Intercultural communication in education is a well-developed topic, though intercultural topics typically appear in language classrooms, not STEM classrooms. Even so, effective intercultural education requires a comprehensive approach. Kumashiro (2000) identifies four approaches to intercultural communication, based on the perceived source of problem and expected outcome of interventions. By selecting the student as the problem's source, the project's approach to intercultural communication falls under the first two categories: education for the other and education about the other. Education for the other targets prejudice that minority students face, and aims to improve their experience. Education about the other targets stereotyping, and aims to increase empathy for minority students. This said, Kumashiro (2000) notes that neither approach can eliminate oppression that creates the need for intercultural education in the first place. Additionally, the approaches may strengthen and absolutize the perception of otherness.

While the toolkit features tools belonging to the two categories, there are also tools that could be classified under the category Education Critical of Privileging & Othering. This approach focuses on learning to uncover harmful practices, and shifts the attention away from seeing the other as the source of the problem. In Kumashiro's framework, social change requires the implementation of the category number four, which is based on anti-racism. However, since anti-racist interventions are supposed to create a personal crisis, their use may sometimes lead to controversies and pushbacks. Hence, anti-racist interventions pose certain risks when used by non-experts. Against this backdrop, PISH results provide low-risk interventions.

As noted earlier, PISH results target students. However, the teachers also participate in culture, and their behaviours and pedagogical choices are shaped by cultural norms. Hence, the teachers' decision directly shape the students' classroom experience. Álvarez Valdivia & González Montoto (2018) highlight that teachers may tend to overestimate their own intercultural communication skills. For this reason, PISH results included an online course for teachers in PBL courses. The course was designed as a micro-learning resource to address the fact that teachers are often overwhelmed with work duties and a lack of time. The objective of the course was not to exhaust the topic, but to spark interest for further study in

intercultural communication. Nevertheless, Romijn, Slot and Leseman (2021) point out that few interventions succeed in enhancing teachers' intercultural competences, because effective skill development requires a comprehensive approach, and the involvement of the entire community.

PISH tools

PISH was put together to craft specific educational solutions for topical challenges of the modern-day classroom. The project adopted a vision, according to which students should work in mixed groups, and participate with a proactive mindset. The project sought to remedy the following behaviours or practices: clustering based on nationality, in-group conflicts, management issues, stress, engagement and support issues, language barrier, ethnocentric practices and focus on product over process. Case studies uncovered the following types of challenges in the classroom: language barriers, intercultural communication, collaboration skills and intercultural management. However, each country study also illuminated case-specific challenges. With these categories in mind, the project selected the most relevant tools from a list of interventions collected in the early stages of implementation. These led to the production of two publications: *An alphabetic catalogue of non-academic best practises on intercultural communication* and *Problem-Based Toolkit on Intercultural Communications*. Both publications contain implementation instructions. The toolkit is a thematically organized and curated version of the catalogue. Also, the toolkit was translated in additional languages for better accessibility.

The tool list mostly includes games and methodological approaches that prepare students for group assignments. The activities differ with respect to how much time and resources are needed to organize them. However, most of these games require extra time, as they were not integrated in the PBL process. A lack of time is one of the most limiting challenges for educators, which creates the need to teach smart, not more. Despite such limitations, students see the need to address multicultural issues at university, in the form of anti-racism activities (Lehtokari et al. 2023). Since minority students may face implicit bias in any classroom, one may conclude that the topic should be incorporated in the teaching of any subject, STEM fields included. However, the question remains how to effectively adapt intercultural pedagogy into STEM.

Although group work seems like a natural way to organize work, the process is filled with risks. Teachers may be tempted to use group assignments to save time, but such an approach may rob students of the possibility to reflect on the group work experience critically. The experiences that students and teachers shared in the Finnish case study show that some level of discomfort is inherent in group assignments. Instead of seeing it as undesirable, students need to learn to embrace this discomfort, and learn to interpret it. What can teachers do? For example, teachers can introduce negotiation techniques to students to give them means to navigate conflict productively. Learning to express opinions without being judgemental is another useful skill. The least the teacher can do is include critical reflection in the activity.

The challenges presented in this paper so far clearly show that groupwork is not an efficient strategy to save time in the classroom. Instead, it requires effort so students can make the most out of the experience. The PISH resources are not an instant solution to better PBL activities, but they can serve as an inspiration. Nevertheless, I will use this opportunity to re-analyze data collected in the Finnish case study, as this data can illuminate additional pedagogical resources that can be included in PBL tasks more easily. The PISH process of tool collection did not leave space to add these resources to the toolkit.

The circumstances called for modifications to the research method in the Finnish case study. Although the plan was to conduct interviews, in Finland we organized a micro survey that was disseminated at several higher education institutions. This allowed us to collect responses from more participants than the project required. Altogether, 30 students answered the student version, and 6 teachers answered the teacher's version. The response rate was sufficient to extract qualitative data on the nature of challenges present during group assignments, though we are unable to determine how prevalent the challenges are in the general student and teacher populations.

Since the survey was anonymous, respondents used it as a space to 'vent', and share frustrations about peers from specific countries, among other complaints. Indeed, we learned that group tasks are a least favourite form of assignment. At the same time, students were feeling lonely but they failed to see teamwork as an opportunity to connect meaningfully with their peers. Although the project coincided with Covid-19 related, we concluded that lockdowns could not have been the only factor contributing to loneliness. In fact, students complained about the attitudes of their peers, as well as heavy workload. In other words, students felt like having to do assignments together hindered learning, instead of supporting it. Based on these insights, it seems reasonable that tools facilitating communication and negotiating expectations in a group should be integrated in the group assignment to openly promote good practices, but also provide a form of 'crisis resources' to solve more serious problems as they emerge. At the same time, we argue that efficient intercultural communication does not have to explicitly mention cultural difference. As STEM teachers may not have sufficient qualifications to teach intercultural communication, instead they may focus on more reactive resources that they themselves have used: division of tasks, time management, appropriate communication channels and so on.

We recommend that a student toolkit should include resources for team building, project management, efficient communication, wellbeing, and reflection. Although project schedules can be hectic, team building is an important stage of groupwork. It allows the team to get to know each other and build trust. Since people make instant decisions about who they like or dislike, useful tools may involve reflection on implicit bias that guides first impressions. Getting to know teammates will not only help students to work together, but it should also be an opportunity to connect with others, against loneliness. Fortunately, facilitating team building is easy, and the PISH toolkit includes some examples. While teachers can introduce structured activities, they may also just encourage students to socialize, as part of the PBL task. For example, we ran a focus group workshop where we asked participants to talk about films that feature teamwork. The activity was an opportunity to exchange information about the participants' favourite films, as well as analyse good practices that characters use on the screen. So, the discussion supported team building and highlighted specific practices and challenges of working together. Richardson (2010) notes that students rely on knowledge that is already there. Therefore, taking time to introduce useful strategies may be a better choice than leaving students to 'figure it out'. At the same time, the teacher will rarely have enough time to run a comprehensive training on teamwork. So, there is always a risk that students will face situations for which they were not prepared. This is why final reflections is also a vital step.

Second, strong management skills help to run tasks smoothly and avoid deadline panic. PBL teams should be encouraged to have a command centre where the group can find information on tasks and deadlines. The management component also concerns group roles. A situation where everyone participates with the same high level of engagement is rare. Likewise, it is rare to find a self-driven group where member just know what to do next. In addition to dividing tasks, team must also learn to manage expectations and attitudes. One way to support the development of good management practices is to provide a library

of useful templates and documentation techniques (e.g. minutes). Third, efficient communication techniques help solve conflicts in a proactive and friendly way. A lot of these techniques concern language use. Addressing problems in a group can be an unpleasant necessity, but techniques like Non-Violent Communication help people express their expectations assertively, without using hurtful language.

In the second phase of empirical tasks, during teacher interviews, we interviewed a university teacher who integrated such tools in the group process. At the start of the task, group members draft and sign a contract. The contract helps negotiate expectations towards other group members. To implement the idea, it may be useful to prepare a template or a set of questions to guide the deliberation. The contract may help approach the initial stage of the assignment more seriously and learn to manage expectations. At the end of the group assignment, the same teacher takes time to organize feedback discussions. Reflecting upon the process is a good method to re-focus attention from the product to the process. As the teacher observed, students may leave the assignment dissatisfied, but looking back at the process helps them put things in perspective, and appreciate the progress made despite obstacles. Feedback discussions surely require time and the ability to build a safe environment so a deep honest discussion can take place. Feedback discussions help the student frame the experience and process it. Whereas for the teacher such discussions are a source of information about what went well and what needs improvement.

PISH process

Having mentioned the importance of feedback culture, we now turn to discuss the PISH process. Erasmus+ projects require a collaborative effort. For this reason, the project process itself provided a perfect testing ground for the PISH tools. In this section, we will analyse whether PISH used this opportunity. PISH was a transnational partnership involving seven organizations. Three universities were involved in the consortium, and four NGOs. All partners were familiar with the topic of intercultural communication. However, only one organization had experience with PBL. Also, partner organizations differed with respect to the human resources available to complete project tasks. Some teams only had one person available to do the work, while others had more support. The consortium's working language was English, and all personnel had sufficient command of it. Since the project started during Covid-19 lockdowns, the project communication relied on video conferencing, which surely added to the intercultural challenges.

First, we will examine the project's design. The project implemented specific good practices, but without making these practices explicit, or transferring them to intellectual outputs. The following good practices were in use. First, there was a detailed workplan and a division of tasks. Although the plan took into consideration the general profile of participating organizations, it was not adapted to suit each organization's specific ecosystem. Thus, the planning followed an authoritative management style. The coordinator adhered to the plan and monitored progress regularly, using techniques like the Gantt chart. Second, tool development followed a clearly defined process that included empirical and desk research. Next, the plan foresaw intensive documentation of all work in the form of reports. The reports were made publicly available on the project website. Then, the coordinator monitored progress through monthly meetings. Finally, there was also a process to collect feedback concerning the workflow and results produces. This was done through google forms.

Authoritative management is one example of how to run a project. It creates a clear process that is easy to track, but it does so at the cost of team's motivation. The management style is an important lesson

from PISH. We argue that the authoritative style has clear advantages, but preference for it is culturally motivated. Hence, it is a space for possible tensions. Project leaders would benefit from having access to tools that introduce different styles of management and help them navigate between different options. Some groups may thrive under centralized control, while others would be more comfortable with greater space for discussion and democracy. So, it is important for projects to be open about their approach to management, as each management style has specific advantages and shortcomings.

Second, we will discuss team building activities. Team building is an opportunity for team members to get to know each other. Additionally, leaders can use team building to identify their team's strengths, and to gauge how to retain motivation. Since PISH started amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the socializing was extremely limited, especially at the early stage of the project. The process did not involve any ice breakers or other social games. In fact, none of the activities from the PISH toolkit were implemented inside the PISH team. Testing activities had to be organized through dedicated case studies with external participants. Another challenge with team building stemmed from the fact that some team members left the project, and new persons had to be onboarded mid-way. Personnel changes may indeed be disruptive events.

The PISH project did not build in intercultural communication tools in its process. One could of course assume that the staff were already experienced enough and thus did not require additional training. However, leaving reflection of the process potentially left a portion of tacit knowledge unused. Increasing potential to use tacit knowledge was one of the project's objectives. Experience discussions could have provided insights worth sharing. After all, intercultural communication is not a one-size-fits all approach. Rather, it emphasises an openness to learning. Also, a self-reflexive process would contribute to the validity of the results. Importantly, a self-reflexive process would also be more sustainable, reducing the necessity to organize tests and involve external persons. We argue that self-reflection would introduce a participatory and collaborative aspect to the project process, giving people a sense of community and democratic deliberation. However, it would also conflict with the more authoritative style used to monitor progress.

Third, we will discuss feedback culture. Feedback can be a useful tool for both the giver and the receiver. For feedback giver, discussing experience helps to process what happened, and learn from it. For the receiver, feedback tells what went well and what needs more work. Nevertheless, effective and truly transformative feedback requires a high level of trust. Therefore, it is difficult to imagine a functioning feedback culture without a strong team spirit.

In the PISH process, feedback was collected through regularly scheduled surveys, launched under the label 'quality monitoring'. The PISH quality monitoring survey collected responses about management, partnership, and communication. The partnership section included questions that indirectly concern intercultural communication. However, the survey lacked a benchmark against which such indicators as partners' engagement should be rated. The personnel involved in the project had varying experience with the Erasmus+ program, and unequal access to resources. Despite these limitations, the survey responses recorded an overall positive experience with the project.

Surveys can be an efficient way of collecting opinions, especially in large groups or about sensitive topics. However, surveys can appear impersonal, especially when the same feedback could be collected through a discussion. Babbie (1995) recommends using surveys with large populations, when it is not possible to interact directly. This said, the survey could be a useful tool to study smaller groups when the approach calls for indirectness and discretion. However, Krumpal (2013) argues that surveys can generate

inaccurate data, as respondents avoid truthful answers because of social desirability bias. So, despite its many advantages, the survey is an imperfect feedback tool. In some contexts, a discussion may be superior to surveys because it leaves space to clarify the problem, explain motivations and provide solutions on the spot. Most importantly, direct conversations help deepen relations between team members. So, solving problems through discussion leaves space for instant feedback, and a sense of participation. However, it also means that participants must demonstrate strong communication skills. Also, a project that enables conversation requires democratic and participatory management. In light of the above, using survey for feedback collection is a cultural choice in itself, open to intercultural miscommunication.

How to open communication in a project? Indeed, the need to collect feedback and reflect on it critically can be culturally motivated. Feedback culture rests on participatory and democratic principles. On the other hand, feedback is an unlikely element of authoritative management. Importantly, the cornerstone of feedback culture is continuous learning. London and Smither (2002) describe practices that nurture feedback culture. However, building feedback culture is not easy, and the main hindrance in achieving it is people's openness to receive critique. This openness is indeed influenced by sociocultural factors (Ramani et al. 2018). Thus, feedback acts double as acts of intercultural communication. Therefore, we can expect that a team with a well-functioning feedback process will also be proficient in intercultural communication. In other words, we propose a hypothesis that the team's intercultural skills can be studied through its feedback practices.

The need for intercultural communication presupposes diversity. Difference inherent in diversity creates the risk of conflict. Conflict may be proactively exploited to enable growth, but it may also be suppressed. We may be tempted to work towards more similarity within the group. However, wanting to be 'groupy' may push the team to avoid critical thinking, resulting in a phenomenon called *groupthink* (Janis 1971). In groupthink, unanimity is not a sign of smooth cooperation but a result of suppressing alternative opinions. Indeed, efforts to increase group cohesion may backfire, as members feel pressure to conform. Goby (2007) notes that multicultural teams are especially susceptible to groupthink, unless intercultural encounters stimulate creativity (Rozkwitalska 2017). Although groupthink is usually believed to lead to bad decisions and failures, Kramer and Dougherty (2013) observe that it may also affect successful teams.

It may be difficult to prevent groupthink in teamwork. However, intercultural pedagogy offers some defensive solutions, in the form of activities that target bias and stereotypes. The PISH toolkit indeed includes activities that help recognize implicit bias. Another useful tool would be a groupthink checklist so teams can check whether they are affected by the phenomenon. The PISH process did not monitor groupthink. Since groupthink is a dysfunctional attitude, a more beneficial approach to successful teamwork should concentrate on cultivating creativity through productive conflict. A productive conflict is a mode of thinking where the group uses conflict as a tool to learn. For this approach to succeed, the deliberation process must make it clear that the rejection of an idea is not the rejection of its contributor. At the same time, group members must have enough trust in the group that it can succeed even by following an alternative course. A sign of such openness is flexibility.

Conclusion

The PISH project had an ambitious objective to facilitate intercultural communication in diverse PBL teams. This paper discussed that teamwork is an extremely valuable competence in today's world, especially in international companies where diverse teams are a norm. However, growing up with technology is making it more difficult for young people to develop social skills. So, the need for teamwork competence is becoming more relevant than ever. Against this backdrop, PISH's objectives are particularly topical. Overall, the analysis of the PISH process brings forth three lessons.

First, while the project aimed to target the PBL learning environment, the PBL methodology did not inform the implementation. This decision shaped the results, which were not assessed vis-à-vis their compatibility with PBL. Moreover, we observed that the project team did not implement any of the PISH tools to support its own work. By coupling auto-reflection with the PBL framework, the project would have been able to produce a tailored solution for PBL educators. Second, the PISH toolkit contains pedagogical solutions to address conflicts from a safe distance, like games or simulations. This paper also proposed additional activities for more immediate risks, such as negotiation techniques or Non-Violent Communication. Teachers may introduce these ideas as part of PBL task instructions, for example by giving a more general task that students themselves define. Third, the PISH process reveals that navigating teamwork usually is intuitive. Some people may 'just be good at it' without knowing how they succeed. Reflection and feedback shed a light on success and problem factors so that people can be more aware of what strategies to employ in future collaborations. Successful collaboration with other people is a sum of one's skills and strategies that are correctly aligned with the partners' skills and strategies. Therefore, teamwork is not a skill that is learned once and for all. To be a better intercultural communicator one must be critical about their choices and their position in the group. Friction can be a valuable resource in a team if it is managed correctly, whereas silence does not have to be sign of agreement.

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