

# **Cross-Cultural Communication Via Videoconferencing: What, How, and To Whom?**

**Doreen Sams**  
**Georgia College and State University**

**Minna Rollins**  
**University of West Georgia**

*Studying and experiencing different cultures are integral parts of curriculum in many business schools. The ways to study and experience culture have changed due to innovations in technologies. When international travel, a study abroad or the semester long exchange programs, are not possible, technology can provide the online tools to fill the gap in learning other cultures in real time. The authors describe the complexity of a successful international learning experience conducted via videoconferencing between two cultures. Based on their experience, they offer practical advice on how to set up a cross-cultural learning via video-conferencing.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Learning and experiencing a different culture is an integral and vital part of studies in many business schools. In many international marketing and management courses, studies of other countries and cultures are mandatory. A number of researchers have confirmed the power of face-to-face cross-cultural experience in developing and practicing cross-cultural skills (e.g. Kaufman, Melton, Varner, Hoelscher, Schmidt, & Spaulding, 2011), but only some students can participate in a study abroad or exchange programs during their college studies (Institution of Education, 2013). According to the Open Doors 2011 report by Institute of International Education, approximately 270,000 USA university students studied abroad for academic credit in 2009/10 (Institution of Education, 2013). This paper describes how to provide a cross-cultural learning experience for the students without leaving the college campus. This paper sheds light on the success factors, pitfalls to avoid, and best practices for planning, developing, and carrying out a cross-cultural learning experience online via video-conferencing. The authors have used this assignment in International Marketing courses.

An individual's culture is influenced by other cultures such as local, national, and global (Lu, 2006). Groups of individuals (e.g., local, regional or national) also hold to various cultural norms and traditions that influence individual behaviors within groups and across groups. Although this type of assignment can be used in many courses that focus on cultural differences, this teaching innovation is well suited for the marketing discipline as marketers deal with groups (sociology) and individuals (psychology). Marketers today face multiple levels of culture at Internet speed while typically working in groups; thus, facets of marketing (e.g., commercials and promotions) have a direct impact on perceptions of culture at all levels.

Therefore, the learning culture through different mediums is a valuable experience for future marketers. Merryfield (2003) found that online learning technology such as use of discussion boards or chats (i.e. “faceless” communication) can be an effective way of learning a new culture. Yet, these communication mediums fall short of the face-to-face experiences of other technology. However, advances in information and communication technology, such as video-conferencing and a variety of other online teaching tools over the last decade have provided opportunities for many students to experience a rich experiential learning experience by fostering face-to-face information exchanges with *others not just like me*, while satisfying course objectives through a creative methodology (Chilton, 2012). Through access to high quality online teaching technology, one liberal arts college in the USA has been providing students an opportunity to communicate and participate in discussions with Spanish and Chinese business students via videoconferencing.

## **VIDEO-CONFERENCING IN INTERNATIONAL MARKETING COURSE**

In this paper, authors describe the assignment that used video conferencing. Students from two countries participated in International Marketing class via videoconferencing technology. Both classes use the same guidelines and material for preparation and both sets of professors use the same objectives and assessment.

Video conferencing and web conferencing are very similar technologies, there is a significant difference and each has its own place in the educational world depending on the need. Products such as Wimba, Eluminate, and Webex are web conferencing tool. In a web conferencing environment, you have an audience spread out across the network and/or Internet, with a host site that controls the audio and video activity. The host can share control with other participants, but with limitations. Usually, in web conferencing, you have a presenter with a microphone and he/she might incorporate a power point slide show or video as part of his/her presentation. The capability of allowing participants to be seen and heard exists, but is controlled by the host. Products such as the Polycom system (H.323) used in this study are videoconference systems (Carslie, 2012). They were originally designed to create a “big room” effect where people in two or more different locations would have full audio and video access to each other at all times. No one site is the host and they all have equal access. The technology was expanded to include many of the features that web conferencing has, such as PowerPoint presentation sharing and even computer desktop sharing. The Polycom system provides high quality audio and video, but its success depends upon the quality of the network that carries the communication information. Skype<sup>®</sup> is a software that provides video and audio as well as document and desktop sharing. It is not as robust as Polycom, but is an adequate, and a very affordable alternative when both parties do not have compatible videoconferencing systems.

Next, we explain the three stages of setting up the video-conferencing: 1) preparation for the videoconference, 2) actual videoconference, and 3) follow up and reflection. Table 1 provides a summary of the stages and responsibilities of the different stakeholders.

### **Preparation Stage**

The maiden voyage of this learning experience requires participation by multiple staff and faculty across participating universities. The following provides example from the perspectives of those involved as to what needs to be taken into consideration.

*University Agents’ Responsibilities:* The learning experience begins long before everyone gathers around large conference tables. In this case preparation for the learning experience involved the Vice President of International Education working for months with faculty, technology staff, and administrators from both universities to make the opportunity as seamless as possible.

**TABLE 1**  
**STAKEHOLDERS AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN DIFFERENT**  
**STAGES OF THE ASSIGNMENT**

<b>Stakeholder</b>	<b>Preparation</b>	<b>Actual Videoconference</b>	<b>Follow Up &amp; Reflection</b>
<b>University Agents</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The system set up and testing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Technical aspect of video conference</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Evaluate the technical aspects</li> <li>- Determine improvements</li> </ul>
<b>Professors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Assignment guidelines</li> <li>- Assign readings</li> <li>- Setting the expectations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Observe the discussion</li> <li>- Confirm that the content is covered</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Evaluation and grading</li> <li>- Improvements</li> </ul>
<b>Students</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Prepare the presentations</li> <li>- Read the assigned readings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Present</li> <li>- Be active participant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reflect the learning experience by writing follow up essays</li> </ul>

The place, a room, for the video conferencing is vital. In an attempt to produce the best possible scenario for learning, university technology/computer services staff must conduct several pilot tests to find the best location for lighting, sound, camera angle, and transmission clarity. The design of the room is extremely important. For example, equipment placement, video and audio signal reception, lighting, and other aesthetics of available rooms must be tested and then the best choice among the alternatives must be secured. Further, the number of the participants expected in the room contributes to the attention level of the participants; for example, the more participants in the room the greater the potential for distractions making room choice paramount. As found in the sample universities, when one group gets up to present and another sits down it creates distractions and time delays if the room is too crowded and inhibits movement. In another classroom, with fewer participants in a large room, the movement of papers and chairs created distractions. From this, it was concluded that participants should be limited to the ability of the room to handle flow of movement without excessive distractions and participants and guests observing should be informed prior to the event as to behaviors to reduce distractions.

*Professors' Responsibilities:* Include working with agents of the participating universities in choosing and testing the videoconferencing system, choosing materials to be discussed, selecting times that work for both countries, and creating and distributing materials to students prior to the actual videoconferences. The first videoconference is used to build relationships and move beyond any awkward moments before engaging in course material. It is semi-structured (i.e., students are told to formulate questions about student life in the other country) to allow for free flow of information (e.g., description of life as a student, favorite television programs, music preferences, etc.). One month prior to the second videoconference of the semester, professors in both countries assign the required chapter for students to read, review the rubric to be use for the reflection piece, and go over instructions for group presentations and logistics. The time constraints necessitated that participation logistics be outline as to order of presentations, question and answer periods, timing, etc. For this study, the assigned chapter of the textbook was on *Integrated Marketing Communication*, which by its nature provided opportunities to share advertisements and promotions in participating countries (US/Spain and US/China). Further, expectations as to cultural sensitivity, ethnocentrism, and self-reference criterion were discussed with students by the respective professors prior to the videoconference to avoid putting students and faculty in

a position that could cause undue stress, e.g., asking pointed questions to students in a country where freedom of speech on political matters could have extremely negative effects or by showing materials that are not accepted by another culture.

*Student Preparation:* Students, when signing up for the course, must assure that their course schedule is compatible with attendance times for videoconferencing times. Students prepare for the learning experience by reading the assigned chapter, preparing a presentation for the discussion, developing questions, and researching the participating country and its culture. Professors were free to make choices as to secondary research. The USA students were required researched the other university, country, and particularly the city and province of other universities. The USA professors made the decision for secondary research, as they felt students could formulate more targeted questions if they had conducted secondary research. The professors in the other countries decided not to prepare their students in advance.

### **Videoconference Stage**

*Professors' Responsibilities:* Manage videoconference equipment, space, time, and flow of dialog to assure a safe environment for an open dialog. Further, the professor took notes on areas needing more discussion after the videoconference.

*Students' Responsibilities:* Groups presented in the order prescribe by the professors, they respectfully addressed questions asked by students in the other classroom, took notes for their reflection papers, and asked appropriate questions.

### **Follow-up Reflection**

*Professors' Responsibility:* Follow up with students immediately, at worst, by the next class period to discuss the successes and failure of the videoconference and to address students' remaining questions. This gives the professor time to address issue before the second videoconference.

*Students' Responsibility:* By the next week's class period (for classes held twice a week) after the final videoconference, students write a reflection paper about the experience focusing on: 1) whether the experience (e.g., met or exceeded expectations or did not meet and why), 2) their role in the dialog as well as the role of the students in the other country, 3) what they learned, and 4) the value of the experience to their education. There are no other specific guidelines given for this assignment outside of page limit, areas to cover (see above), and instructions that in #1 above any unmet expectations identified in the reflection paper must be accompanied with possible solutions. Therefore, student reports vary greatly based on their life paradigm, which in turn adds value in constructing future sessions and in assessing the success of the videoconference learning experience. In this study, students' responses varied the least as to cultural differences observed. The university for this study is a liberal arts college that has a significant emphasis on "globalization," plus these are marketing students who understand the mindset of *think global act local*; thus these factors may have influence this outcome. Future studies should tap into this finding.

## **SETTING UP THE VIDEOCONFERENCE: STRATEGIES TO FOLLOW**

For the first videoconference, preparations may take months of planning from multiple stakeholders cooperating across departments, divisions, and universities to put together a learning experience across borders that inspire depth of learning and produce measurable learning activity. University stakeholders should collectively determine the best means to create form, place, and time utility to add value to the learning experience. Technology has to be investigated as to its ability to create the best learning experience, proposals for equipment purchase, bids, etc., need to be conducted and once purchased it must be installed and tested. Room dynamics must be considered that provide the best lighting and sound. The professors have to collaborate and discuss the course requirements, potential pitfalls, their individual responsibilities before during and after the event, participation requirements, learning outcomes, the focus for the time spent surrounding the experience, etc. It also requires buy-in from students (which often means the professor has to be a great marketer). Without student buy-in, it is believed that this learning

experience may end up being just a grade for the students. However, if inspired by faculty to see the benefits (the larger picture) from the learning experience, students are expected to fully participate as happened in this sample for this paper. Without quality equipment and technical know-how, the experience cannot be as seamless as possible and could reduce the value of the learning experience. Technological difficulties do arise in spite of the best plans so an alternative plan is required as to time options, place, and delivery mediums are needed.

## **IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE VIDEOCONFERENCES**

American students who participated in the video conferencing expressed an interest in exchanging emails or using other social media to continue the cross border relationship. Because Facebook is not permitted in China, emails were the best communications with China, whereas, Facebook worked well with Spanish students. As learned from conducting study abroad programs, faculty monitored follow-up blogs on topics discussed in the videoconference are also expected to add value to the learning experience. Later, American university acquired technology that provides a means for students to continue the conversation in breakout rooms throughout the semester. This is potentially a valuable tool as colleges in less developed countries as well as economically prosperous countries can use this technology, if they have a computer with an internal or external camera and Internet access with no other cost to them.

Challenges such as technical difficulties, logistics, unmet expectations, and simply, cultural differences, must be managed prior to, during, and after the videoconferencing sessions by the professors for the best possible learning to take place. Open dialog with students once the reflection papers have been graded as to the criteria in the “student responsibility section” of this article, the overall learning experience is summarized and shared with the students adding value to the online session by further discussing similarities and differences within their own classroom and from students in the other country, which provides knowledge of self, others, and communities (Tufts University, 2009).

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