

# X-CULTURE: AN INTERNATIONAL PROJECT IN THE LIGHT OF EXPERIENCE GAINED OVER THE YEARS (2010-2016)

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## ABSTRACT

The X-Culture project is an innovative modern form of experiential learning predominantly in International Management and International Business. Although experiential learning has some advantages, namely, developing cross-cultural competencies, cultural intelligence, intercultural communication and management skills, differences in personality or conditions also arise as a downside. X-Culture has been evolving throughout the years since 2010 when the original objective was to supplement the theoretical material and in-class teaching. Nowadays more than 4000 master, bachelor and MBA students, mostly of management and economics from more than 37 countries, take part in the project every semester. X-Culture is aimed at students of International Business college courses and training programs with the task of writing a business report or consulting propositions by offering business solutions for a hypothetical client. This paper outlines the theoretical background of the X-culture project. It describes the evolution and practical and theoretical experience of this project since 2010.

**Keywords:** X-culture, Experiential learning, Theoretical and practical experience, International management.

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## INTRODUCTION

Our paper discusses X-Culture, a large-scale international business student collaboration

project and business plan competition. Every semester over 4,000 students from 100 universities in 40 countries participate in it. Most of them have been enrolled to International

Business courses at different universities. The students, usually in global virtual teams of seven, work with each student on the team coming from a different country. The project serves as an excellent opportunity for collaboration across courses and universities.

The initial idea for X-Culture was rooted in an attempt to find a colleague abroad who would like to team up his or her students with student for a different country to develop a joint team project. Collaboration was announced via the Academy of International Business mailing list. Surprisingly, within a short time, a number of academic collaborators from around the world expressed their interest in joining the project. And so X-Culture was born.

The first time (fall of 2010), lecturers from seven countries took part with their students. A total of about 450 students participated. Since then the project has been growing each semester, reaching almost 3,000 students, from 100 universities in over 40 countries as of spring 2014. Table 1 provides more details on the participation numbers for the project.

**Table 1.** X-Culture Participations Dynamics

Season	Students	Teams	Universities	Countries
2010-2	463	125	7	7
2011-1	682	157	15	15
2011-2	1,150	145	26	22
2012-1	1,889	307	42	38
2012-2	2,105	280	54	39
2013-1	2,447	435	75	41
2013-2	2,567	379	84	42
2014-1	2,642	399	99	43
2014-2	2,910	452	101	43
2015-1	3,050	455	107	43
2015-2	3,718	667	112	42
2016-1	3,738	750	110	40
(Total	27,361	4,623	301	61

Source: Project's administrative records

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

X-Culture is part of experiential learning theory that dates back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, based on Jacob Levy Moreno Kurt Lewin's social psychology experiments used in management education and training (Highhouse, 2002).

As Kolb (1984) states "Learning involves transactions between the person and the environment" (p. 35). More specifically, experiential learning is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 1984: 41).

More recent theories of experiential learning can be traced back to earlier theories of human development and psychology of learning (John Dewey, Paulo Freire, William James, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, and Carl Rogers, amongst others).

According to the Experiential learning theory (ETL) the learning process consists of four dynamic modes involving action/reflection and experience/abstraction (Kolb & Kolb, 2009): concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC), and active experimentation (AE). The ETL model is based on three stages of human development: acquisition, specialization, and integration (Kolb, 1984). ELT suggests that the learning cycle includes experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting, and that concrete experiences are the foundations for observations and reflections (Kolb & Kolb, 2009).

Several studies have emphasized the positive effect of the practical component in economics (Herz & Merz, 1998), marketing (Gremler, Hoffman, Keaveney, & Wright, 2000), business communication (Saunders, 1997), entrepreneurship (Cooper, Bottomley, & Gordon, 2004) and other fields (for review studies see Cantor, 1997; Gosen & Washbush, 2004; Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2001).

Few empirical studies were written on the relationship between learning styles and cultural background (Joy & Kolb, 2009). Kolb (1984) discusses that experience plays a central role in both human adaptation and the learning process, rather than in acquisition, manipulation and abstraction (as other learning theories).

Experiential learning approaches can most challengingly be used in International Business and Management training and education as simulating multi-cultural global environment in the classroom is often a daunting or even an impossible task. There have also been studies evaluating experiential learning in the field of International Business and Management education (Taras et al., 2013), and using virtual teams as experiential learning vehicles (Gonzalez-Perez et al., 2014).

Experiential learning tools have increased in the recent years (Hawtrey, 2007). Several studies show that experiential learning has a positive effect on learning in general business education (Alon, 2003; Krbec and Currie, 2010 among others).

### MATERIAL AND METHODS

X-Culture is a great example for experiential learning in International Business. X-Culture is a good way to develop cross-cultural competencies. Moreover, cross-cultural interaction also contributes to developing cultural intelligence (Early and Peterson, 2004).

Although X-Culture is unique in some respects, it is similar to other exercises such as Global Marketing Management System Online - GMMSO (Janavaras, 2012) and GEO (Thavikulwat, 2007a, 2007b). GMMSO has a similar task to the one used in X-Culture while GEO primarily focuses on international trade. Other projects such as Global Business Game or Global View have also same-class teams.

The basic difference between X-Culture and other experiential learning projects is that while the former one uses publicly available resources (e.g. Skype, Dropbox, Google Drive, Google Docs, Facebook, Skype, Viber, and WhatsApp among others) so that the students can continue using them in other projects, the latter one relies on specially designed platforms or simulators.

X-Culture is an excellent opportunity for students to experience international collaboration first-hand. The students are divided into Global Virtual Teams, usually about 7 students per team. Sometimes the student teams are smaller (only 4 or 5 students) or larger (up to 11 students). Also, depending on the number of the participants, some teams would have two students from the

same country (usually United States, that tends to be overrepresented).

Although X-Culture takes up an entire semester, the time for the teams to work together is limited to a little over two months. As the semester length varies considerably across different countries, the active collaboration period is shorter than a typical semester.

The basic task for X-culture students was to write a business report for a hypothetical client following the structure of an International Business textbook and covering issues related to differences in economic, political, and cultural environment, international market entry modes, international strategy, marketing, and so on. Later on, the X-Culture task has been evolving towards more creative and more universal components.

In most cases, the students would choose large multi-national corporations, such as Walt Disney Company, BMW or Apple. Typically, the companies were not aware of the work the students were doing but in 2013 companies started contacting X-Culture and inquiring if they could present their real-life challenges that the student could try to tackle.

Mostly, medium-sized and smaller companies were particularly interested but a number of large multinational corporations also expressed interest in collaborating with X-Culture. For example, Daimler AG requested ideas for a new truck for developing countries.

In the first year of the program students were asked to devise a concept connected to the 6 million-dollar investment plan for Capstone, a medium-sized American company in international teams of four. Later on, the subject of case studies shifted to working out business solutions for large corporations or other companies of their choice including

- the German trade concern, ALDI
- BP international oil concern,
- Google international IT company,
- HSBC, the world's second largest commercial bank,
- McDonald's, the world's largest fast food chain,
- Toyota, one of the biggest car manufacturers,
- VF from the textile industry and

- Or the well-known Walt Disney Entertainment.

In addition to virtual collaboration, X-Culture added personal meetings of the best students at semi-annual X-Culture symposium. The ultimate goal is to give students and opportunity to experience the challenges and learn the best practices of international collaboration while gaining business knowledge and skills.

X-culture database contains more than 1,200 variables. Over 2,500 cases (400 teams) are added to the database every semester. The student and instructor surveys include over 500 questions asked over the course of the project. Overall, the X-Culture database contains over 2,000 variables at the individual level of measurement, and about 500 variables at the team level. Experiments have also been started with different learning conditions, team composition, assignments, and evaluation systems to see which teaching approach gives the best learning outcome and student satisfaction.

The main research questions include finding more information on workgroup dynamics and improving performance in the global workplace. Moreover, the effects and effectiveness of experiential learning are also analyzed not only in International Business but also in Management, Psychology, Marketing, Economics, Sociology, and other disciplines.

## RESULTS

The principle objective of the X-Culture project is to provide students with an opportunity to experience the challenges of cross-cultural collaboration and thereby improve learning in International Business Courses. A recent study published in the Academy of Management Learning and Education (Taras et al, 2013) detailed the findings of a multi-study evaluation of effectiveness of X-Culture.

The results show that in addition to raising student satisfaction with their course, X-culture also improves cultural intelligence, reduces stereotypes, induces interest in further cross-cultural interactions, and actually improves student performance on tests.

Environment and individual differences, such as personality, geographical location, culture,

occupation, age, time availability, educational background, personal history, gender, genetic information, social status, and expectations, may influence different learning abilities. In Table 2, some of the expected challenges (before participating in X-Culture) relate to their observed challenges (after participation).

**Table 2.** Expected vs. Observed Challenges of International Collaboration

Challenge	Expected	Observed
Cultural differences	28.2	2.9
Language differences	21.2	7.0
Time zone differences	20.6	15.5
Other communication barriers	20.5	11.1
Coordination	16.2	34.8

Source: Authors' own research

However, some outcomes were unexpected. Students shared their experience how X-Culture helped them land internships and jobs. It supports the belief many companies really value first-hand international experience. Many students developed close personal connections with their team members and stayed in touch long. Some teams informed us that they considered starting a business around the business proposal they developed for X-Culture.

## CHALLENGES AND BEST PRACTICES

### Recruitment

Participants are recruited by sending calls through the Academy of International Business (AIB) and Academy of Management (AOM) mailing lists. Also, many new participants are recruited by the word-of-mouth. The number of applications has been rapidly growing since the project was first launched. Most of the applications come from North America and Europe where the Academy of International Business and Academy of Management have most of their membership. Africa, Asia, and Latin America still remain underrepresented, although the number of applications from these regions is steadily growing.

### Selection

X-Culture receives hundreds of applications each

semester. At the beginning, all applications were automatically accepted. Nowadays, after selection only a few applications are approved as quality is given more attention. As the students work in large teams, even one underprepared or under-committed student can spoil the experience, so selection is a very important issue.

All students are subject to a Readiness Test. Prior to the test, the students are expected to review materials on X-Culture including instructions and a student training module. Then the students take an online test on the project rules and procedures, online collaboration tools, as well as assess their interest and commitment. Additionally, the test also provides some information on the student's ability to communicate in English, if only with written test. The test also ensures that each student has access to the internet and his or her email address works.

### Academic Calendar Difference

The biggest challenge is that the academic schedule varies across regions of the world. For example, the long summer break tends to be in June-August in the Northern hemisphere and in December-January in the Southern hemisphere. The semester start and end dates vary considerably across locations, some universities are at semester schedule, some use trimesters, and some use quarters.

To tackle the schedule difference problem, X-Culture is run in two tracks every semester. The early track starts earlier and the late track starts later, by about six weeks. Although the students in the early track generally do not directly communicate with the students from the late track, they often exchange ideas on the X-Culture Facebook page. Both tracks tend to be quite popular with enough countries represented.

### Pre-project training

The well-preparedness of each student is essential for the success of the X-Culture experience. That is why a standardized mandatory pre-project training module for students was developed to which new features are added. Strategies have been shown to be effective when dealing with these challenges. Additionally, the students can watch a 20-minute long video

interview with former X-Culture participants where they share their experiences and advice for future participants. The X-Culture Facebook page also provides records of discussions of challenges.

Before the project starts, each student receives a Welcome Letter with a link to an X-Culture pre-project training page. The students are instructed to review all X-Culture materials and take a Readiness Test. This way, all students have an opportunity to receive quality training regardless of how experienced their instructors are with X-Culture. Still, individual instructor support is paramount. There is a huge difference in student performance across instructors. Of note, instructors need training too. A similar training module for instructors, named Instructor's Handbook, has also been developed. The document contains a detailed overview of everything an instructor needs to know about X-Culture, including links to external sources, templates, FAQ, and other materials.

### Grading

Since the project is part of the required coursework, student performance grading is an important issue. Instructors are asked to evaluate performance of their students and give them a fair grade, which is a powerful motivator for the students to do well in the project. After the initial enthusiasm, when faced with the demands and requirements of the project, many would simply dropout or do not perform up to the expectations of their team members.

Therefore, to ensure that all students are fully committed to the project, it is now required that:

- The X-Culture project must account for no less than 20% of the course grade/mark;
- Peer evaluations account for no less than 20% of the X-Culture project grade/mark;
- Every milestone (there are a total of 10 throughout the project) must be included in the project grade.

The instructors receive weekly updates on their student performance. Most instructors have one final grade for the project, but many have weekly grades. It is very important to underscore that X-Culture project is rather designed to help students gain knowledge and skills than evaluate performance by grades.

**Table 3.** Grading system design

Performance Indicator	Recommended Value
<b>Individual:</b>	
Completion of the pre-project training (completed before the deadline, % correct answers, check for response non-randomness);	Must be completed to enrol *
Weekly progress reports, submitted individually by each student (completed fully and before the deadline)	5%
Post-project survey (completed before the deadline, % questions answered, check for response non-randomness);	Must be completed to receive project grade/mark*
Peer evaluations (as evaluated by the other team members in terms of effort, intellectual contribution, help with writing the report, coordinating team efforts, other comments).	25%
<b>Team</b>	
Quality of the team report (as rated by the instructors along 7 report quality dimensions)	45%

Source: Authors' own compilation

The pre-project training test and the post-project survey are *mandatory* components of the project to ensure that students come sufficiently prepared and that all necessary data are collected.

### THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE OF THE PROJECT

One of the consequences of globalization is that the various forms of contact with our business partners are becoming independent of place. Changes take place extremely fast and to teach how to adapt to them successfully at school tends to be very difficult. Adaptation to the new dimensions of business life can be eased if the students of economics and management can take part in international cooperation. It is when the students of Selye János University (SJU), Faculty of Economics and Szent István University (SZIU), Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences majoring in Management and Business Administration, BSc have taken part in this program coordinated by Greensboro University in the USA. In addition to the existing Erasmus student exchange program, X-Culture serves as a very modern cooperative form of studying for all the students who would like to improve their English knowledge. Table 4 below illustrates the changes in the number of students participating in the project between 2011 and 2016.

Therefore, the instructors are encouraged to design their grading scheme in which some team-level dimensions of performance must also be included in addition to the individual grades.

The following template presented by Table 3 is recommended when designing grading systems. These are only suggestions and instructors are allowed to deviate as they see fit.

**Table 4.** Students' participation dynamics in X-Culture (2011-2016)

Academic years and semesters	SJU students	SZIU students
2010-2	0	0
2011-1	0	0
2011-2	11	0
2012-1	22	0
2012-2	3	18
2013-1	9	13
2013-2	4	4
2014-1	4	0
2014-2	3	0
2015-1	3	0
2015-2	3	0
2016-1	4	0
Total	66	35

Source: Authors' own compilation

Our students summarized their experience in connection with the program in Table 5 below.

**Table 5 X-Culture experience of Slovakian and Hungarian students**

No.	Students' opinion
1.	<p><b>A correspondent student:</b> It was most interesting to work together with my team members who came from different parts of the world. At first I did not even know on the basis of the names, except Brianna, whether it is a boy or a girl :) As far as team work is concerned, I can say that everyone had an equal share of it, except Cheng Yang, who did not take part at all. It was not obvious at all that our team was made of totally different cultures. Everyone kept promises and we helped one another. We also talked about private issues in addition to work and we are still friends on several social media platforms. We promised to advise the others should we travel to their country. Despite of the initial fear, primarily due to language barriers, I can say that I can assess the program only positively and thank you for the opportunity to have gained such precious experience.</p>
2.	<p><b>A full time student:</b> During my participation in X-Culture program I gained a lot of experience. There were many challenges and we had to find the solutions. We also had to face cultural differences, language barriers and different time zones, as well. We were trying to find the best solutions to the problems with my team mates. To this end, we were negotiating regularly, almost on a daily basis. Due to this, not only our English improved but also our communication skills and our cooperation with people from different cultures. All in all, I can say that my participation in the program was very advantageous.</p>
3.	<p><b>A full time student:</b> X-Culture program made it possible for me to participate in an international program with students from different parts of the world. So the program significantly contributed to getting to know different cultures, customs and traditions to extend my knowledge. In addition, I also gained experience in international management as we had to work out a successful business plan for a company. Of course, there were hardships but fortunately, they could be managed. It was difficult to make appointments as in certain cases there were 10 hours' difference in time. To cooperate more efficiently, we tried to keep in touch and talk every day. I think X-Culture served as an excellent opportunity for making friends so I can recommend it for all young students who wish to gain experience.</p>

Source: Authors' own compilation

Just like in the previous years, all the students participating in the program agreed that participation in such an international program is very useful. Although problems arose while working together, they could be solved, fortunately. As a result, not only their language skills and communication improved but also their willingness to cooperate from someone from a different cultural background. X-Culture also served as an excellent opportunity to make friends. To sum up, participation in the program resulted in mainly gains and benefits.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As our students have been participating in the International Student Collaboration Project since 2011, they are asked to share their experience with us, what they think the challenges are and also what knowledge and skills they gained while working with other team members from different parts of the world.

To sum up, the following points were made:

- ❑ Most participants considered the program to be *very useful*.
- ❑ The following points were stressed in connection with acquiring tacit knowledge competencies:

1. The program assisted in developing *these competencies* most.
  2. They made the greatest progress in *understanding and communicating* with others from different cultures.
  3. They also improved their skills in organizing and managing *non-hierarchical team work*.
  4. The students also appreciated working and collaborating with the others *from different working cultures*. In some cases they had to cover or replace their slower teammates or the dropouts but generally, they could succeed in doing so, as well.
  5. Of the labor market competencies projected by the *Institute for the future* in their study „Future work skills 2020” X-Culture improved some, among others, *virtual work*. ([http://www.iff.org/uploads/media/SR1382A\\_UPRI\\_future\\_work\\_skills\\_sm.pdf](http://www.iff.org/uploads/media/SR1382A_UPRI_future_work_skills_sm.pdf))
- As far as *explicit* knowledge competencies are concerned, the participants highlighted the following ones:
1. Using new *social media platforms*, mostly e-mails, Facebook and Google Doc.
  2. Deadlines were met in most cases and project tasks could be completed.

Within the framework of a program of such nature, it is natural to experience not only positive things but also some hardships such as different cultural background or the significant differences in time due to the time zones.

X-Culture is still very much work in progress. Every semester changes are made and the format of the project is modified together with the task, policies and procedures.

Our immediate plans include experimenting with a few new features of the project.

First, we are considering running X-Culture in languages other than English. There are regular request to have a Spanish language track for Latin America and Spain, and possibly a French track for French-speaking countries.

Second, we are considering adding a non-business track. At this time, pretty much all X-Culture participants are business students and, hence, the task is very much business related.

However, international collaboration is equally important in arts, engineering, natural sciences, and humanities. We are exploring opportunities to add a group of students from non-business disciplines with a task that is more suitable for their areas of studies.

Third, we would like to expand our collaboration with real-life businesses. Our initial experience with our corporate partners has been extremely positive. Not only do the companies receive valuable input and ideas from our bright students. Involvement of real business and work on real-life business challenges makes the project more practical and educational for the students. Furthermore, working with a real company, students get a chance to impress their “clients” and possibly get a chance of an internship or a job.

Fourth, we would like to devote more attention to exploring funding opportunities. At some level, volunteer time is not sufficient to run a successful project. Even Wikipedia has a small group of paid staff. In addition to exploring grant options, we are also considering soliciting sponsor funding.

Finally, in our spirit of open collaboration, we are experimenting with opening up our immense database to the public and inviting researchers of all background and interests to download our data and use them in their research. While it is common in the publish-or-perish academic community to closely guard one’s own data, we believe open data sharing and collaboration will speed up knowledge creation and ultimately benefit all parties.

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