

# **Cultural online databases – an Instrument to promote Common Ground for Global Virtual Teams - An Application for the Global Seminar**

© Rainer Haas,  
Institute of Agricultural Economics,  
University of Applied Life Sciences, Vienna, Austria  
Contact: haas@boku.ac.at

Increasingly global virtual teams work creatively, discuss controversial aspects and implement complex decisions in multinational organizations. Due to the rapid advance in information technology and IT-usage inter-organizational and cross-national collaboration is a common scenario in organizational life. University organizations are challenged to acquaint themselves and their students with the multidimensional aspects of globally dispersed teamwork. MAZNEVSKI and CHUDOBA (2000, 473) define global virtual teams as groups „that are identified by their organization(s) and members as a team; (b) are responsible for making and/or implementing decisions important to the organization’s global strategy; (c) use technology-supported communication substantially more than face-to-face communication; and (d) work and live in different countries“. Some authors use „virtual“ only for teams, which never met face-to-face, but most refer to a virtual relationship as one that is at least mostly conducted over technology. Significant characteristics are that the team members are culturally divers and geographically dispersed.

One of the most important success factors for the performance of virtual teams with globally dispersed team members lies in the establishment of common ground. Common ground refers to that knowledge that the participants have in common, and they are aware that they have it in common“ (OLSON und OLSON, 2000, 157). CRAMTON (2002, 356f.) refers to common ground as mutual knowledge: „Mutual knowledge is knowledge that the parties to a communication share in common and know they share in common. It sometimes is referred to as ‘common ground’. ... Mutual knowledge is a building block of successful communication and coordinated activity“. Comparable theoretical constructs are „shared identity“ (ORLIKOWSKI, 2002), „shared understanding“, „awareness“ (DIX, 1997) and „mutual perception“ (ROBERTSON, 2000).

Dispersed teams with enough common ground are more successful while communicating over information and communication technology (video conferences, email, online chat rooms, ...; LANTZ, 2001, 116). This fact, which is of crucial importance for virtual project management, has to be equally considered for open distance learning. The main, until now unanswered, question is how can you establish trust between people who only communicate by using information technology?

The „Global Seminar“, which is an international intercultural open distance-program is mainly based on communication over videoconferencing ([www.globalseminar.org](http://www.globalseminar.org)). A specific challenge for the participants of the global seminar is, that they are globally dispersed, situated in North or South America, Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia and have never met personally. Nevertheless the team members of the Global Seminar have to fulfill specific project tasks. MÜHLFELDER et al. (1999) have shown that videoconferences are much less efficient for trust building than face-to-face communication.

CRAMTON (2002, 364) suggests to use databases to store all relevant information about the differences in local context between team members like holidays, time zones, working hours, topography, incentive systems, project targets and so on to improve the team communication and to lessen misunderstandings.

To provide students with information about differences in cultural, national or local context could stimulate mutual interest of team members and more important common ground to be able to cope with the challenges of globally dispersed teams.

A cost efficient instrument to achieve this goal could be an online database, which should be used at the beginning of every virtual collaboration. One of the first tasks of every team member should be to fill in important local and national cultural information. Not all of the information has to be totally serious. Include also information about typical local recreational activities, jokes or art events. The more divers dimensions of social and economical life are addressed the better. A quick growing database would be one of first common team achievements which could stimulate further team work. The online database could serve as a virtual anchor, an important boundary object for future combined efforts.

„For an artifact to serve as a boundary object, it must be both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites“ (YAKURA, 2002, 958). Boundary objects are adaptable artifacts, which help to establish a shared identity. ORLIKOWSKI (2002) emphasizes that boundary objects are an important and commonly applied mean for efficient global virtual teams. Normally project schedules and plans, mind maps, design drafts or Gantt and Pert-charts serve as boundary objects. These artifacts are for dispersed novices in the field of virtual teamwork difficult to establish. A pre-structured online database, which could also be a content management system would provide them with an much more easier way to build their first boundary object.

SAPSED et al. (2003, 12) found that visual artifacts, which have been constructed by the team members, are of crucial importance for team performance. Some participants reported that these artifacts gave them a „sensed space of centrality“.

The following list is an initial step for the content structure of a cultural online database and has to be considered as a preliminary draft especially developed for the students participating in the Global Seminar. For example, 2004 the students of the University of Applied Life Sciences Vienna will take part in a globally dispersed team consisting of members from Denmark, Ghana, Australia, Columbia and North Carolina. It has to be suggested that most of the students will only have rudimentary information about the other countries. It is planned that all of them contribute to the cultural online database before the first videoconference. Future research will investigate the influence of the cultural online database on the performance of global virtual teams.

## **Information structure for the local and national context**

The data fields in the following list can contain different types of data like text, images, audio- or video files. To improve the hedonic quality of the online database the inclusion of multimedia information is mandatory. Recall and recognition of images are superior to textual information. Humor and entertainment are part of the hedonic quality; so all contributors should try to *edutaine*. Never forget the target group of this cultural online database consists of students. No fun, no usage – no usage, no mutual knowledge!

### **Country**

Capital

Population size

Total area size

Language

Time zone (Link to local time??)

### **Economic Situation**

Gross National Product

Unemployment rate

Inflation rate

Interest rate (which one): 2,5%

Currency: Euro (Picture of one note)

## **Money spending of Country**

Percentage of GNP for agricultural subsidies  
Percentage of GNP for military budget  
Percentage of GNP for social care (pension and medical spending)  
Percentage of GNP for research  
Percentage of GNP for education

## **Political Situation**

Governmental form: Democracy  
Picture of main governmental building  
Name of president / chancellor (concerning who is more powerful):  
Parties and share of parties (please mention which ones are conservative, socialist, liberal, ecological):  
Model of society: e.g. individual oriented society vs. clan oriented society

## **Social Situation**

Main religions  
Typical church/monastery/temple/minaret: Picture !!!  
Percentage of analphabets  
Birth rate per Woman  
Average family size  
Average age for first baby  
Typical meal: Picture !!!!  
Typical dance: picture and audio file  
Typical greeting when people meet first time: body language !  
Rate of babies dying shortly after birth  
Percentage of most common death reasons: e.g. 25% cardiovascular system, 18% cancer, and so on ...

## **Landscape**

Percentage of flat land  
Percentage of mountain areas  
Typical landscape: Pictures !!!!  
Typical Animal: Picture  
Climate  
Yearly amount of rain in wet areas  
Yearly amount of rain in arable areas

## **Agriculture**

Picture of typical farm

Average farm size

Average number of cows per farm

Average number of tractors per farm

Average yield of wheat per hectare

Average yield of milk per cow (liters)

Average yield of maize per hectare

Most common brand of tractor: URL to website of the company

GNP contribution of agriculture in %

Percentage of people working in agriculture

Percentage of meat, milk, grain, oil seeds, fruit and vegetables production on whole production (percentage of value or units)

Percentage of organic farmers

## **Art**

Typical musician: picture ! or maybe a link to an audio file

Typical writer: picture ! Maybe a translation of a poem or better a short poem in the national language.

Typical painter: picture of one painting!!

## **Sport**

Most loved (practiced) sport of the population: pictures !!!

Second most practiced sport

Third most practiced sport

Most famous athlete: picture !!!

## **Education and Research**

Costs of one-year study in higher education at the University taking part at the Global Seminar (i.e. fee which has to be paid by student to the University)

Percentage of students in population

Percentage of academics in population

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