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Suddenly, a Wild Collaboration Opportunity Appears!

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Abstract

International collaboration between students does not always have to be a long and fully detailed operation. Sometimes ad hoc solutions work well and quickly! Two English teachers from Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK) in Finland and an English teacher from Budapest Business School in Hungary got their students working together within a single study period. The students in both schools were grouped together, given a task, and instructed to get in touch with their foreign counterparts independently using e-mail and Skype. The students broke down their tasks in an on-line session which they also recorded and shared with their teachers. The whole process from the initial idea to the final videos submitted by the students took about 2,5 months. In addition to speaking in English, the students also learned about the working culture in the other country as well as how to conduct a live on-line session with people they did not know beforehand.

Background

Students in Finland often say they would like to work more with non-Finnish students, but very often time and scheduling turn out to be problematic. Many students cannot afford or do not want to travel abroad, either. One way of getting around this problem can be utilizing on-line tools to connect with students in other countries. This offers both groups the chance to learn to utilize technology in a way it is used in the working life as well as real-life communication situations with people they do not know beforehand.

The three teachers who decided their students should collaborate met during the International Week at TAMK in mid-February 2016. During a brainstorming session, it turned out all three teachers had students in similar degree programmes (Business Information Systems) and that it might be fun to get the students explaining each other what similarities and differences there are in their studies. There was one group of students from Hungary and five groups of students from Finland, which enabled the teachers to divide the students into smaller groups, with one student from Hungary and four students from Finland, each. Altogether nearly 120 students took part in the experiment. The teachers decided to begin the experiment as soon as possible after their first meeting as all courses were already running.

Another reason for this experiment was the fact that all the teachers involved wanted to try something new and – even more crucially – offer their students the chance to collaborate and network with their peers in the same field of studies.

Implementation

The experiment consisted of three stages: initial exchange of email messages between Finnish and Hungarian student groups, agreeing on a date for an online video meeting, and finally, conducting and recording the meeting. Furthermore, the teachers collected feedback about the experiment after it was completed.

As the spring semester was nearing its busiest phases, it was decided that the schedule should be relatively loose so that the students could allocate their work time more easily. The initial greeting task was given on week 10 and scheduled for weeks 10 and 11, thus giving each group about one and half weeks to complete it. The deadline for the video recordings was set for week 16, so the total expected duration of the experiment amounted to roughly one and half months.

The actual assignment and detailed instructions for the online video meeting were given both in a class meeting and through Moodle (a learning management system). The students were asked to talk about their studies, Finland and Hungary in general, as well as more specifically about marketing games in Hungary. The students needed to record their meeting and submit it to the teachers.

The teachers divided the students into groups, after which they were given the initial task of sending a greeting e-mail to their Hungarian counterparts, and to agree on a date on which they should have the online video meeting. Before the greeting messages were composed, the Finnish students were also reminded about the stylistic and linguistic conventions of formal business correspondence that they had studied in the previous semester.

After this setup phase, the students were given full responsibility to arrange and complete the online video meetings themselves within the given deadlines. In other words, the teachers would not interfere unless further assistance was needed.

Results

The videos of the meetings the students submitted to their teachers proved to be a good way of both actually getting the students to speak to each other and allowing the teachers a glimpse into what had been spoken. There were no restrictions for the quality or technology used in the videos, but all videos turned out to be fine.

There were a few obstacles on the way, though. Some of the students dropped out or just did not communicate with the others, which resulted in extra work for the teachers

who needed to re-organize some of the groups to ensure all students who wanted to collaborate had somebody to collaborate with. Some students ended up taking part in the work of more than one group, but this did not seem to be a big problem for anybody. Scheduling was another big issue, as it soon turned out the Finnish and Hungarian students interpreted time in a slightly different manner and it sometimes took students longer than expected to get in touch with each other. This was problematic, as the students only had a relatively short period of time to carry out the experiment, in addition to all of their other school work.

The student groups whose collaboration worked well seemed to enjoy the experiment. The general feedback was that it was good to try something like this, even though it took almost all students very far from their comfort zones, as they felt this was the sort of a situation they might encounter in their working lives. The students seemed to both appreciate and dread being placed in a situation where they needed to take responsibility of their own schedules, but this was mostly seen as a good learning experience. None of the students seemed to have any problems with the technology used. All in all, students felt the experiment was something different and sometimes even frustrating but, ultimately, useful for them regarding their future careers.

The teachers initially decided to try something similar the next year with their new students, but so far unfortunately their schedules have not matched. However, as the experiment required surprisingly little work from the teachers and enabled so many students to take part, this type of ad hoc collaboration can be recommended for any groups who do not shy away from using technology in their communication.