

Course, Interrupted

Parallel courses
on opposite sides
of the ocean
teach students
vivid lessons
about disruptive
events, change
management,
globalization, and
teamwork.

by Sharon Shinn

Undergraduates at Indiana University's Kelley School of Business in Bloomington were in the middle of a fairly straightforward course on business management software and enterprise resource planning when the bottom fell out of their world. For the first half of the semester, they happily undertook the task of mapping workflow processes for the auto supply parts companies that each team of students had created. As they reached the midpoint of the class, they were shocked to learn that their companies had been purchased by German automakers—that is, mock auto manufacturers created by teams of students in a parallel class at the Fachhochschule Brandenburg.

At the same time, to their equal surprise, the German students learned they had acquired the American companies. Students from both sides of the Atlantic were told they had to work together for the rest of the semester to prepare a joint video presentation they would give to a panel of experts on change management and process integration. Not only would they have to figure out how to merge their companies and make their processes compatible, they would have to overcome language barriers and time zone differences to craft the presentations under a very tight time frame.

A class on enterprise resources? Outsourcing? Technology? Globalization? Yes, says Dan Conway, clinical associate professor of operations and decision technologies at the Kelley School. While the umbrella category for both the U.S. and German class is business process management, the course more truly introduces students to the chaos that can be real-world business.

"In general, I think universities try very hard *not* to throw curves at students," Conway says. "Students are allowed to schedule classes so they don't have to handle too many things at once. So we are trying explicitly to disrupt them."

He doesn't disguise it. "On my syllabus, a day in November says, 'Disruption,'" says Conway cheerfully. "After that, it says, 'Change management.'"

Cross-Cultural Collaboration

Conway hatched the plan with Brandenburg's Robert Franz, a colleague with whom he was working on another project. They were speculating about ways to make a traditional business processes class more interesting than, say, a series of computer programming exercises. An international merger not only would force students to struggle with change management, it would require them to master the challenges inherent in globalization and working in virtual teams with people they'd never met.

Helping to brainstorm ideas was Amelia Maurizio of SAP's University Alliance Program, which promotes collaboration among its 700 or so member schools worldwide. Her input was key, as students would need to learn and use enterprise resource planning software as they attempted to work together long-distance. Together, they came up with Cross-Cultural Collaborative Learning—or 3C Learning—as the name of the new project.



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—Robert Franz, Fachhochschule Brandenburg, Germany

The first 3C project was unrolled in the fall of 2005. The opening weeks of class were devoted to learning about enterprise software, business processes, workflows, and collaboration. Students worked in three- and four-person teams to found their companies, map their processes, and make those processes more efficient.

“We wanted them to map out processes in a way so that disruption meant some things would have to change,” says Conway. “Students would have to evaluate, first, if the processes needed to be changed and, second, if the processes could be modified or if they had to be thrown out so students could come up with new processes entirely.”

About eight weeks into the semester, Franz and Conway mocked up an online *Financial Times* page that announced a merger between the U.S. and German companies. On a Saturday, students in both classes were e-mailed the link to the “leaked” newspaper article. Then both professors refused to answer e-mail over the weekend.

When nervous students arrived in class on Monday, they learned the details of their merger. Not only did they have to deal with language and time zone barriers to work with their new teams, they also had to find their own Web-based collaborative software solutions for sharing files and building PowerPoint slides over the Internet. While SAP software was available, students were allowed to choose whatever tools they thought might work best for them. But technology was only one challenge students met as they raced through the rest of the semester.

Lessons Learned

Some of the greatest obstacles students faced in the 3C class revolved around very human issues. For instance, cultural differences were strikingly illustrated as students discovered that not every nation shares the same holiday schedule.

“Most American students just left school over Thanksgiving, not realizing that their German counterparts didn’t know about this special holiday and were waiting for ongoing communication,” says Franz. Some of the German students believed the Americans had simply quit. When the Americans eventually returned from the break, not much time was left before they had to make their joint video presentations.

Students also had to bounce back from a certain resentment at having the rug pulled out from under them. “They had worked very hard on their presentations, then all of a sudden everything changed, and they were really put off by that,” says Conway. “But that’s the context of global business. Things happen beyond your control, and then you’ve got to change.”

Several groups struggled more than others with language and time zone differences, and none of the students tapped into lessons they’d recently learned in project management courses. “Dan and I didn’t give the students any direction about how they should work within their groups, but we were quite shocked that not a single team made a project plan or used a project management tool,” says Franz. “Sometimes students have to experience the wrong way on their own. Humans learn best from their failures.”

In the end, all the teams succeeded magnificently. At the close of the semester, Conway convened a panel in Indiana to judge the students’ PowerPoint presentations. Present were executives from SAP, John Deere, BP Products North America, and General Mills—all of whom are constantly

A for Effort

How does a professor grade the work of student teams when half the members are across the ocean—in a classroom at another university? “The evaluation process has to be nontraditional,” admits Dan Conway of Indiana University’s Kelley School.

For his students, the grade is composed of a number of elements, including fairly standard tests and essays administered during the first half of the course. Before the merger, the teams keep close track of their mapping and procurement processes, creating a document of their efforts that Conway also considers when determining a grade. This document later is swapped with teams at Fachhochschule Brandenburg for informational purposes.

During the second half of the program, students are graded partially on how well they collaborate. Students keep a diary to track how often their teams meet, what technology they use, and how much each student contributes, and this diary is also used during the evaluation process. For the 2006 class, students in Germany and the U.S. all used SAP’s NetWeaver integration and application platform, which made it easier for the teachers to monitor the efforts of individuals and also created more uniformity among the teams.

The final grading component falls into place during the students’ video presentation, given before a panel of integration experts. “The panel rates the teams on content and presentation quality, and I take my lead from them,” Conway says.



American students and a panel of executives use video conferencing to listen to German students make their presentations.

dealing with globalization and integration headaches. Using big-screen video conferencing, the German students fully participated. Students on the same team from different countries took turns making their presentations while their PowerPoint slides played on another screen.

“The final presentations would have astounded anybody,” says Maurizio. She was impressed not only with the way students mastered the software, but with the skills they acquired in the process. “They learned communication skills, how to work in virtual teams, and how to collaborate. And they also learned that business and the world change every day. You’re never going to be aware of every single change that might come down and hit you in the face.”

Ethics at the Core

Franz and Conway almost immediately planned a second collaboration for the fall of 2006, and this time they added an ethics component to the disruptive events. Early in the semester, students in both the U.S. and Germany were given the mandate to build a \$100 million dam project in Africa, and their key challenges involved sorting through suppliers and deciding on procurement processes.

The professors gave students a long list of potential suppliers, all imperfect—some known for poor environmental processes, some implicated in child labor scandals, some operating under a cloud of rumors, and some with convictions to their names. Transparency International and SAP provided information about suppliers and mock documents that looked official.

Students chose their vendors and developed a strategy for data privacy. But just as they learned that the German and American companies were being merged, they also received the bad news that the chief procurement officer had spent \$1 million of the available funds to pay a bribe. To compensate for the missing money, students had to face unpleasant choices: lay off part of the workforce or deal with cheaper suppliers they had already ruled out on business or moral grounds.

“They had to come up with three plans for how to make up for the shortfall,” Conway said. “We were curious to see how the cultural differences would play out—if German students would think child labor practices weren’t as important

as environmental violations, or vice versa. We were interested to see how the students would trade off what they considered the more important characteristics of doing business with another country.”

Other problems were interwoven into this second exercise. Students had to revamp their procurement processes so a single officer couldn’t make unauthorized payments. They also had to find common ground on data privacy and integrate their purchasing processes. “We set it up ahead of time so students were using different processes. That way, integration would have a lot of challenges,” says Conway.

While the first year had the element of total surprise, the professors knew that the student grapevine might help students in the 2006 class—and successive classes—prepare themselves a little for what might come. But Franz and Conway aren’t too worried. Even if students know a disruption will come, they won’t know what it will be, and the professors have plenty of ideas about what curves to throw at their students next.

Grandier Plans

In fact, Conway and Franz already are mulling over new ways to rock their students’ lives. For future projects, each professor wants to conduct the class in concert with faculty at a different school. “There’s no reason any two schools in the world couldn’t do this for free,” Conway says. He would love to partner with a school in Asia, South Africa, Russia, or a traditional Muslim country, where the cultural differences could seem even more profound to students from the American heartland.

Conway and Franz particularly like the idea of adding ethical dilemmas to upcoming courses. “We have to teach students that doing business is not only about making money,” says Franz. “Where is the borderline between tough competition and illegal or immoral activities? Students gain some experience in what is fair. They learn that everyone is responsible for how livable, human, and sustainable our world is.”

They also believe that embedding the ethics lesson in a core course gives it more impact than if it’s taught in a specialized ethics class. “If you’re taking an ethics class, you read assignments within that framework and you know what the questions are going to be,” Conway says. When the ethical dilemma is a key—and unexpected—part of the course, it forces students to think it through in relation to their ongoing business practices.

An upcoming disruption may revolve around an “oil for food” dilemma provided by the U.N. Students will be informed that they’re supplying \$100 million in grain or

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medical support to a country such as Afghanistan. When they learn that 10 percent of that money is going to support the opium trade, they must choose what to do. “The question there is, Do I enrich a dictator and feed people at the same time, or do I not do business in that country?” says Conway.

The “oil for food” problem is the kind of ethically gray area that the professors like. Says Conway, “We don’t want students to be going through accounting records to find illegal actions. We want to present them with situations in which none of the choices are good.”

That takes planning, he says, as he and Franz work backward from the ethical dilemma they want students to confront. “That’s the question on the top layer,” says Conway. “The next layer down is, How would different cultures respond to this dilemma? The next layer down is, How do you create a context where this will play out? The next layer down asks, How do you get processes in place so that the ethical dilemma presents itself when the teams are merged?”

Conway continues, “When the collaboration occurs, cultural differences surface. That’s something students have to live through and struggle with in order to have a meaningful learning experience. That’s something that just doesn’t make sense in a book.”

Expanding the Program

While the change management dimensions of this course work particularly well in a process management class, the collaborators believe a disruptive learning exercise could be adapted for almost any discipline. Since the first half of the class is devoted to teaching the basic material, students get an excellent grounding in a particular topic. The next stages of the class allow students to build their cases—and then figure out how to modify their cases to handle the disruption. “You could follow that structure with accounting, business law, or marketing as well,” Conway says.

Maurizio agrees. Once any kinks are smoothed out in the 3C Learning course, SAP’s University Alliance wants to introduce the class as a pilot project and make the materials available to all other member universities. “If we could encourage networking and collaboration in different countries and different schools, the synergy could be unbelievable,” Maurizio says.



Students sitting in a classroom in Germany use video conferencing to join American students in a joint presentation held at the Indiana campus.

If that’s not convincing enough, Conway and Franz offer five more reasons business schools should adopt similar classes. First, there’s no additional cost. Students can use free, widely available, Web-based software for their collaborations, and the big-screen video presentations also can be handled for free over the Internet. Since most students are fairly tech-savvy already, it is not particularly difficult for them to learn these collaborative tools, Conway says.

Second, while students might find the course stressful, other stakeholders love it, particularly parents, alumni, and recruiters. “The companies that recruit from us want students to learn to work with people they’ve never met, who have a different set of beliefs, work habits, schedules, and languages,” says Conway. “John Deere has increased its hiring from us as a result of this class.”

Third, the course encourages collaboration among faculty. “The academic rewards system is not structured for cross-discipline work,” Conway points out. “I’m a traditional operations, MIS, and quant person. I’m not an expert in ethics. If I weren’t doing this, I wouldn’t have had a reason to go talk to the ethics person in the business law department. So a course like this is helpful for the business faculty as well.”

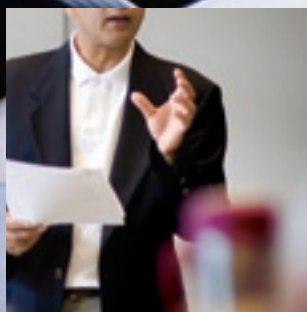
Fourth, students get just a taste of the uncertainties of working in the real world. “So many students come into class thinking, ‘This is what I have to do to get an A,’” says Conway. “They’re very good at grade management. When they’re in a situation where they have no idea what they’re supposed to do, that’s a very valuable experience.”

Finally, the class not only gives students a grounding in the realities of globalization, it has the potential for creating a true international network. Franz hopes the students of Bloomington and Brandenburg consider swapping visits between cities—but he also wonders if some of them might meet up again at a later date. “Maybe the students will see each other after graduation at a real merger, and then they’ll know better how to deal with each other,” he says.

As more business schools look for ways to break down the silos of discipline, a course like the 3C Learning project offers a blueprint for integrated learning. Hot-button topics like globalization, ethics, and multicultural teamwork are folded into an experiential learning course so memorable that students are likely to retain its lessons forever. **■**

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