Chapter Sixteen

Virtual Collaborative Learning: Culture and Interculturality

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Introduction

Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL) is a highly effective methodology that is widely used in the higher education sector in various countries around the world. This concept has created opportunities to enhance collaboration between professors and students from different universities and countries. Internet-based applications and techniques enable the implementation of projects and assignments, even complex ones, in a virtual environment with the simultaneous participation of professors and students. However, while this may sound simple, in reality, it is more complex than it appears, as cultural and intercultural factors influence the methodology. Certain cultural and intercultural conditions must be met to ensure that this methodology can be applied by everyone and is acceptable to all.

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Factors such as foreign languages, respect for hierarchical structures, communication styles, adherence to rules, adaptability to schedules, compatibility with different geographic zones, proficiency in using information technology, access to appropriate devices, and many other elements influence the readiness to accept such a learning methodology. Not everyone has equal access to the internet, equal knowledge and skills, equal availability for schedules and assignments, or the same communication style.

The factors mentioned above make virtual collaborative learning challenging, and this is precisely the focus of this chapter. A survey was conducted involving participants who are part of the COWEB project. The questionnaire was designed based on stable indicators identified and extracted from relevant literature. Comparative analyses reveal that cultural and intercultural factors influence the implementation of VCL; however, the overall readiness is high, with some limitations in certain cases.

Theoretical Framework

Virtual Collaborative Learning is revolutionising education and professional development, breaking geographical barriers and promoting an interactive, inclusive, and flexible learning environment (Herrera-Pavo, 2021; Schoop et al., 2021). The scope of VCL extends across various fields of education and training, including academic education, corporate training, and skills development. Universities and colleges implement VCL for online courses, discussion forums, and group projects. Schools use VCL for interactive learning, enabling students to collaborate on assignments and projects remotely. To offer professional courses, companies use VCL for student discussions, assignments, and teamwork. Experts and students exchange ideas through online forums and discussion groups.

Virtual group activities help improve communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills (de Hei et al., 2020). Students and professionals engage with peers from different cultures, fostering a global perspective. VCL provides access for students with disabilities and those living in remote areas (Qureshi et al., 2021).

VCL is continuously gaining significant attention worldwide, enabling both internal and external stakeholders of educational institutions to work remotely in a virtual environment. The adoption and implementation of VCL as a working method have been made possi-

ble due to the widespread availability of the internet in all countries, households, institutions, and public spaces. This integration includes information technology devices and the development of effective applications that facilitate various virtual activities (Mena-Guacas et al., 2024). A crucial factor in the expansion of VCL is the willingness of teachers and students to accept virtual work as a useful and preferred method for remote collaboration and for enhancing their information technology skills (Schoop et al., 2021; Weinberger & Shonfeld, 2018). However, this willingness is only moderate, as a significant portion of people have yet to embrace or prefer it as a collaboration method in the learning process.

The reasons for this vary, is a lack of knowledge, skills, and readiness to adapt to change. This chapter addresses Culture and Interculturality as factors influencing the implementation of Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL). Both dimensions, Culture, and Interculturality, play a significant role in shaping VCL experiences, impacting through communication styles, collaboration, learning approaches, and the use of technology. VCL usually involves teachers and students from diverse cultural backgrounds, differences in communication styles, approaches to virtual learning, physical distances, and values that can impact engagement, virtual collaboration, and learning outcomes (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). To create an effective VCL environment, educators and learners must embrace cultural diversity, practice inclusivity, and adapt teaching strategies to accommodate different cultural perspectives.

Depending on communication styles, in some cultures, communication relies on implicit understanding, where messages are implied rather than explicitly stated. In contrast, other cultures require messages to be explicitly communicated (clearly outlined). During virtual collaboration, these differences can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of messages.

Cultural preferences also influence communication hierarchies, where some individuals prefer a clear hierarchy in communication, while others favour informal interactions. In certain cultural settings, students expect the teacher to have authority, and they do not ask questions. In more liberal cultures, however, students are encouraged to debate and challenge their teachers.

Another key aspect is individual versus collective learning. In some cultures, teachers and students prefer working independently and

achieving personal success, while in others, group collaboration and harmony are prioritised. Similarly, some cultures emphasise practical learning and the development of critical thinking, whereas others focus more on lecture-based teaching and rote memorisation of theories.

Cultural attitudes toward feedback and criticism also vary and have a direct impact. In some cultures, direct criticism is seen as constructive, whereas in others, it may be perceived as disrespectful.

Another crucial cultural dimension is the availability of technological infrastructure. Not all teachers and students have equal access to high-speed internet, advanced devices, or digital tools. Some cultures place a strong emphasis on educational technology, while others may have less experience with digital learning tools.

Norms and values also play a vital role in the successful implementation of VCL. In some cultures, punctuality is highly valued, while in others, strict adherence to schedules is less common, and flexible timing is more acceptable.

Last but not least, equal inclusion and cultural sensitivity are essential for the effective implementation of VCL. This includes ensuring that learning materials avoid cultural biases or stereotypes. Examples and explanations should be diverse to resonate with global learners. VCL group projects should bring together students from different cultural backgrounds to foster global learning experiences. Educators should mediate discussions to prevent cultural misunderstandings and promote mutual respect.

Research Methodology

To analyse the cultural and intercultural factors that played a significant role in applying VCL techniques in Higher Education, this study is based on primary data analysis. For purposes related to the topic, a survey was conducted within the framework of the COWEB project, through a questionnaire distributed to three different groups that have applied VCL during the COWEB project (professors, students and e-tutors), and some useful findings have been achieved to the issues raised above.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections:

1. Questions regarding cultural factors and VCL in Education.
2. Questions focused on intercultural factors and VCL in Education.

The sample was drawn from participants in the Cobweb project, and the questionnaires were distributed to 10 partner universities. We received answers from 6 partner universities, such as the University for Business and Technology, Prishtina, Biznesi College, Prishtina, Epoka University, Tirana, European University of Tirana, Tirana, International Burch University, Sarajevo, and University of East Sarajevo, Sarajevo.

Data Analysis

Cultural Dimensions and VCL

In Table 16.1, the data reveal some key findings regarding culture and VCL, which help us understand the influence of the participants' culture within the framework of the COWEB project. The survey addressed indicators such as understanding proposals, hierarchy acceptance, team leader's approaches, digital skills equality, adherence to deadlines, understanding limitations in digital skills, strengthening personal relationships, maintaining academic ethics and quality, and confidence in virtual collaboration:

- *Understanding Proposals/The articulation of Proposals.* Most of the participants understood each other's proposals very well (33%) and well (29%), meanwhile 25% of them understood each other's proposals completely. With a low percentage, 4% not understanding each other's proposals at all and 8% to some extent, the data indicates a positive experience of all participants in articulating and comprehending proposals during group work.
- *Hierarchy Acceptance during Group Work.* Most of the participants (35%) stated that they have accepted very well the hierarchy of the group members and well (23%). Moreover, 25% of them agreed that the hierarchy of group members was completely accepted by them. With a low percentage of disagreement (2%), the data indicate that the hierarchical structure within the groups during VCL collaboration was not accepted but did not pose significant issues.
- *Team Leader's Approaches.* A significant portion of participants stated that the team leader's approaches were completely acceptable (35%) and very acceptable (33%). Meanwhile, 21% agreed that the team leader's approaches to the participants during virtual group work were well accepted 6% agreed to some extent with this aspect, and 4% did not agree at all. The overall result reflects positively on the leadership within the virtual groups.

TABLE 16.1 Cultural Dimensions and VCL

Statements/Indicators	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
How easily did the participants understand each other in terms of articulating proposals during group work?	4	8	29	33	25
To what extent was the hierarchy of group members accepted during group work?	2	15	23	35	25
How acceptable were the team leader's approaches to the participants during virtual group work?	4	6	21	33	35
Were the digital skills of the participants equal for working together virtually in the group?	2	8	33	35	21
To what extent have the participants adhered to the deadlines for completing the assigned tasks virtually?	4	6	27	38	25
To what extent was there understanding from the participants for members with limitations in digital skills?	6	4	23	38	29
To what extent have personal relationships between participants from different countries been strengthened as a result of virtual collaboration?	8	13	17	38	25
To what extent has academic ethics and quality been maintained by all participants during virtual group work?	2	4	19	33	42
Did the participants have confidence in collaborating virtually in the group?	2	9	19	38	32

NOTES Column headings are as follows: (1) not at all, (2) to some extent, (3) well, (4) very well, (5) completely.

- *Digital Skills Equality.* In this aspect, participants were somewhat divided, with 35% feeling that digital skills were very well-matched and 33% well-matched during VCL collaboration, and 21% feeling they were completely equal. However, up to 10% felt that there was only some extent of equality, indicating room for improvement in digital skills balance.
- *Adherence to Deadlines.* Most of the participants (38%) adhered very well to deadlines (27%) well and (25%) completely during VCL collaboration. Meanwhile, the results show up to 10% disagreement with this aspect. The overall results show that during VCL collaboration, all groups had a strong commitment to meeting deadlines, which is crucial for successful virtual collaboration.
- *Understanding Limitations in Digital Skills.* Most of the participants during the VCL collaboration showed a very good understanding of participants with limitations in digital skills (38%), 29% showed complete understanding, and 23% showed a good

understanding of Digital Skills. With a moderate to low percentage, the results show that (up to 10%) participants had no good understanding of another participant who had limitations on digital skills during VCL teamwork.

- *Strengthening Personal Relationships within Different Countries.* This part was especially important for the results of the project since the aim of this question was to identify if participants from different countries have managed to strengthen personal relationships with other participants from other countries in VCL collaboration. Our data shows that personal relationships were very well strengthened (38%) and completely strengthened (25%). However, a significant percentage of 13% responded by saying that VCL-based cooperation has enabled the growth of relations only to some extent, while 8% said not at all. This result shows that there is a need for improvement in this aspect, and work must be done to improve it.
- *Maintaining Academic Ethics and Quality.* The results show that academic ethics and quality during VCL collaboration were maintained completely (42%), very well (33%) and well (19%). With a level of disagreement with this statement up to 6% and the data suggests a high level of integrity and quality in virtual group work.
- *Confidence in Virtual Collaboration.* The results show that confidence in virtual collaboration was very high, with participants feeling very confident (38%) and completely confident (32%). Even though some of them (9%) declared that they felt confident to some extent, the overall result indicates a strong sense of confidence in the virtual collaboration process.

Interculturality and VCL

In Table 16.2, the data reveal some key findings regarding interculturality and VCL:

- *Clear Communication in Language.* On the question of whether clear communication has been achieved in terms of language so that everyone can understand each other during VCL collaboration, 29% of participants' state that they completely agreed with the fact that they had clear communication in terms of language, 48% agreed very well, and 19% responded well, indicating effective

TABLE 16.2 Interculturality and VCL

Statements/Indicators	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
To what extent was it ensured that group participants had clear communication in terms of language?	2	2	19	48	29
To what extent was it ensured that all participants understood and approved of the approaches for decision-making related to the project?	2	10	17	40	31
To what extent has the critical thinking of the participants been managed regarding the specifics of the project?	2	6	19	56	17
To what extent has feedback been gathered from all participants in the group?	6	4	19	40	31
To what extent has collaboration been strengthened among participants from different countries who were part of the working group?	8	8	6	50	27

NOTES Column headings are as follows: (1) not at all, (2) to some extent, (3) well, (4) very well, (5) completely.

communication within the groups. Up to 8% of the participants had language barriers during VCL collaboration.

- *Understanding Decision-Making Approaches.* Decision-making approaches within the participants in VCL projects were understood very well (40%) and completely (31%), even though 10% felt this was only to some extent, suggesting some challenges in decision-making clarity.
- *Managing Critical Thinking.* The results show that critical thinking was managed very well (56%), well (19%), and completely (17%). Even though up to 8% did not agree that the critical thinking of the participants while applying VCL techniques has been well managed regarding the specifics of the project. The overall results indicate a positive approach to fostering critical thinking within the groups.
- *Gathering Feedback.* To the question, to what extent has feedback been gathered from all participants in the group, respondents answered very well (40%) and completely (31%), even though 4% felt it was only to some extent, and 6% did not agree at all with the statement. The result suggests a generally effective feedback mechanism; however, there is still a need for improvement.
- *Strengthening Collaboration.* The results show that collaboration among participants from different countries that have applied

VCL techniques was very well strengthened (50%) and completely strengthened (27%). Even though up to 16% did not agree that collaboration within VCL has been strengthened fair enough among participants from different countries who were part of the working groups. The overall results indicate a strong sense of collaboration.

Comparative Approaches Across Different Groups

The results of the above survey were conducted by including three categories of respondents (professors, students, and e-tutors) who are part of the COWEB project. This survey aimed to understand the effectiveness of work based on VCL in cultural and intercultural aspects. The data from the Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL) program indicates that professors, students, and e-tutors generally had positive experiences, with some variations in their responses. Professors consistently rated aspects such as understanding proposals (50% well, 37% very well), hierarchy acceptance (50% well, 37% very well), team leader's approaches (50% well, 37% very well), digital skills equality (50% well, 37% very well), adherence to deadlines (50% well, 37% very well), and understanding limitations in digital skills (50% well, 37% very well) higher than e-tutors and students. Students had a high level of confidence in virtual collaboration (33% very well, 36% completely) and felt clear communication in terms of language was ensured (33% very well, 36% completely). E-tutors showed strong support for participants with limitations in digital skills (71% very well, 29% completely) and felt personal relationships were well strengthened (71% very well, 14% completely).

Conclusions

Overall, the data suggests participants in VCL had a positive experience in terms of understanding proposals, accepting hierarchy, leadership approaches, digital skills equality, adherence to deadlines, understanding limitations, strengthening relationships, maintaining academic ethics, and confidence in virtual collaboration. Communication, decision-making, critical thinking, feedback, and collaboration were also generally well-managed, though there are areas for potential improvement.

The separated responses from (a) professors, (b) students, and (c) e-tutors reflect a thriving and supportive virtual collaborative environment, with positive experiences in communication, leadership, digital

skills, adherence to deadlines, relationship building, academic ethics, and confidence in collaboration. There are areas and needs for potential improvement, particularly in ensuring complete equality in digital skills and enhancing feedback mechanisms.

Some main recommendations for the educators, based on the findings, are:

- Encourage cultural understanding and teamwork by incorporating small activities or discussions that foster intercultural awareness and team spirit.
- Ensure clear structure and communication by setting clear roles, deadlines, and using simple, inclusive language to avoid confusion in multicultural teams.
- Support digital skills for everyone by providing short training or guidance to help all participants feel confident with the digital tools used during VCL activities.
- Strengthening collaboration with e-tutors by communicating and actively involving them-they are key to supporting learning and group connection.
- Gather regular feedback and improve by checking in with students and staff frequently to adjust the process and ensure a positive learning experience for all.

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