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The anonymity factor in making multicultural teams work: virtual and real teams

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The Anonymity Factor in Making Multicultural Teams Work: Virtual and Real Teams

Background – A Dysfunctional Multicultural Classroom

Students from all corners of the earth participate in Norwegian Business School's BBA program. This 3-year course of study theoretically provides a perfect arena for acquiring the ability to work effectively in multicultural teams. However, I was struck with serious misgivings when I first entered a classroom of 3rd-year students to teach a course in intercultural communication. I discovered a world map (of sorts) arranged in front of me: the African students were congregated together, the Asian students had laid claim to a section of the room, the Middle-eastern students formed a clear group, the Scandinavians clung together, and assorted "European" students had staked out one corner.

The uneasiness and suspicions inspired by this sight, unfortunately, turned out to be justified. This class of ca. 60 students had been together for two years. However, as I learned through individual conversations with the majority of these students during the beginning of this course, they had not mixed, had not broken the barriers of their ethnic identities, and consequently, they did not know each other. Nevertheless, they held some classically stereotyped opinions about each other; they didn't like each other very much. (I'd received a wealth of assurances from individual students in this class during our conversations that Americans are bossy, Africans don't work very hard, Muslims are intolerant, and Scandinavians are very reserved – except when they drink.) Left to their own devices, the great majority of these students had formed culturally-similar teams for the past two years, cutting themselves off from learning to recognize, deal with, and profit from much of the diversity of knowledge, values, and attitudes represented in the class.

Long experience working with student teams has taught me that the path to efficient and optimal teamwork is fraught with difficulty whether the teams are homogeneous or heterogeneous, self-chosen or assigned. Even supposedly homogeneous teams can be dysfunctional due to factors such as personality differences. The students in the BBA program, however, were "different others," culturally and personality-wise, and if asked to work in teams together, would face challenges above and beyond personality issues. Until now, they had not been "asked," and I was about to "ask" them.

Multicultural teams tend to represent a wealth of experience, information, and varied views and values to a much greater degree than do ethnically homogeneous teams. Much of this knowledge is implicit, and access to this implicit knowledge can be particularly fruitful; it can also be particularly difficult to achieve. (Adler, 2008) According to Chris Argyris (1993), we can access the diversity of implicit knowledge imbedded in our organizations and teams when we engage in a specific sort of dialogue, dialogue that leads to mutual learning.

Students in this class had gravitated towards "similar others" and, unfortunately, as demonstrated by their comments to me, towards prejudice. The overriding goal of this course was to enable our heterogeneous group of students to learn from each other. If they were to achieve this goal, it would be necessary for them to meet at least three basic conditions. First, they would need to make contact with their fellow students by simply talking and working with each other. Second, they would

need to recognize and understand the wide range of values represented by the different cultures in the class. Lastly, they would need to acquire skills necessary to engage in the productive mutual learning dialogue recommended by Argyris and Schön (1978), described later in this article. Measures were taken in this class to meet all of these conditions in order to enable the different others in the course to learn from and work effectively with each other.

Students worked on fulfilling the second and third conditions during the two-semester-long course, acquiring both knowledge of value differences and the tools needed to communicate with others holding different values. This article, however, will focus on the first condition. It describes how students were asked overcome perceived cultural barriers and talk and work with each other on group projects. This article will also report the results the students achieved and how the strategy used can be beneficial in promoting effective multicultural teamwork.

Finding a Way to Function

What struck me when I first entered the classroom to teach these 3rd-year students intercultural communication was the relevance of Daniel Quinn's (1992) - definition of culture in *Ishmael* (1992): the invisible bars of our cages (see also Hall, 1982). As described earlier, the students had apparently confined themselves to separate "cages" based on their ethnicities, without adequate awareness of their own cultural identities much less of those of their classmates', a recipe for failure according to Jameson (2007). The invisible bars of their "cages" were denying the students access to the rich and varied resources to be found in each other's backgrounds and experiences.

As mentioned previously, the main purpose of this course in intercultural communication in the Norwegian Business School's BBA program was to improve the students' ability to perform well in multicultural teams. This purpose was potentially both highly enlightening and difficult to achieve. So far, the students had not worked in multicultural teams, and if they did not do so, would have little hope of achieving this goal. Therefore, the first step towards achieving this goal was to thwart their track record towards homogeneity and assign them to diversified teams. Diverse teams were assigned on the basis of gender and ethnic background; other elements such as past academic performance were not taken into account. Academic performance could have been taken into account. However, I decided to limit the variables to the very visible and audible aspects of identity that had helped form their "cages" in the first place; ethnicity- and culturally-based differences. The tentative conclusions drawn from this experience are just that – tentative. A much more rigorous approach will be necessary to substantiate our findings. Nevertheless, I believe the results to be thought-provoking and potentially beneficial both for those of us who have the opportunity to work in multicultural teams and for those who teach multicultural classes.

Simply assigning the students to diversified teams, no matter what the criteria, and sending them off to perform well would have been a bit like throwing them into the proverbial lion's den – especially given their two-year history of avoiding each other and simultaneously growing suspicious of each other. They needed a tool to help them succeed, and the invisible bars of their cages, to use Quinn's (1992) analogy, inspired a possibility.

What would happen if the concept of invisibility was turned to our favor – making the visible (and audible) components of their ethnic and cultural identities (along with the baggage they'd collected concerning each other in the course of the last two years) invisible. In other words, what would

happen if the tool given to these students was anonymity – the anonymous virtual team? Would the anonymity of these teams help to release them from their cages? Would a combination of anonymous virtual-team meetings followed by face-to-face real-team meetings impact the quality of dialogue within the teams and ultimately the team members' ability to work well together?

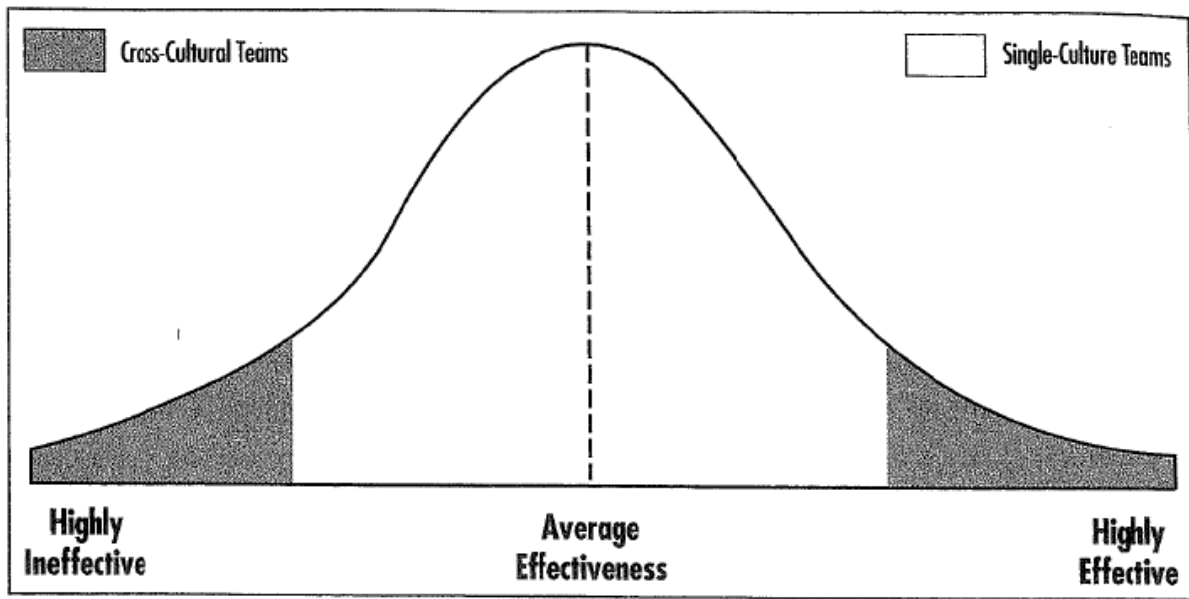
To investigate these questions, students were assigned to anonymous multicultural teams and asked to solve a problem together through virtual meetings on the school's intranet. They were then asked to solve another problem in a face-to-face meeting, a real-team meeting where their identities were revealed.

The general results of these exercises reported in this article are based upon the experiences of this class as they moved from anonymous virtual teamwork into face-to-face real teamwork. To begin, some theoretical groundwork is laid; the strengths and weaknesses of multicultural teams are briefly described and the qualities of virtual as opposed to real teams are touched upon. Next, the team assignment is described. The analytical tools used to evaluate the results of these assignments are then explained. The results are presented with a focus upon the specific results of one team, "The Dream Team." (Team names were assigned, so their name had no connection with their own personalities or expectations. This team was chosen as a focal point because it was representative for the general tendencies found when evaluating the results and in addition had a clarifying debriefing session that represented the class as a whole). Finally, some cultural aspects of the results are discussed and a tentative conclusion is reached.

Establishing Parameters

Strengths and Weaknesses of Multicultural Teams

Research (Kovach in Adler, 2008 p. 140) has demonstrated that teams consisting of members with diverse cultural, professional, and/or personal backgrounds tend to achieve either excellent or miserable results; the middle of the bell curve is reserved for more homogeneous teams.



Source: Based on Dr. Carol Kovach's research conducted at the Graduate School of Management, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

Figure 1: The Effectiveness of Multicultural Teams base don Dr. Carol Kovach's research conducted at the Graduate School of Management, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Source: Adler, N. (2008, p.140). Copyright (2008) by Cengage Learning. Reprinted with permission.

Teams with membership diversity have the raw material for excellent performance, but rarely achieve it. According to Adler (2008), it is how membership diversity is managed that separates high-performing and low-performing multicultural teams. The question for this class was whether or not the anonymity tool would help them to manage their diversity and deliver high-performing multicultural teams.

According to Samuel van den Bergh (2005), there are both advantages and disadvantages connected with multicultural teams. On the one hand, individual members of multicultural teams represent diversity of philosophy and experience, different approaches to problem solving, and different ways of communicating with each other. These multiple perspectives and styles can be mutually inspiring, encouraging flexibility and high tolerance levels for difference. When team members are aware of, understand, and respect difference, the resulting bridge-building can lead to very creative solutions.

On the other hand, according to both van den Bergh and Lehmann (2005) and Jameson (2007), problems arise if the team members are not aware of the various underlying attitudes, values, and assumptions that form their identities, are not skilled in communicating their differences, and are not even aware that communication style differences exist. When this is the case, they are unable to access their collective tacit knowledge and most likely will end up irritating and disagreeing with each other. While awareness of and respect for diversity can lead to flexibility and high tolerance levels, lack of awareness and respect most often lead to unresolved differences and opposing expectations, which can further lead to low tolerance levels, short tempers and the temptation to negatively stereotype these difficult and unreasonable "different others."

Multicultural teams, at least in a real-team setting, are double-edged swords. They can inspire their members, and/or frustrate them. They can build bridges or barricades. The potential for exceptional accomplishment is present, but so is the potential for disaster.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Virtual and Real Teams

According to Duarte and Snyder (1999, pp. 4-5) virtual teams get work done by working across distance, time, and organizational boundaries and by using technology to facilitate communication and collaboration. In connection with the multicultural teams formed for this specific course, one question was whether or not anonymous virtual teams could also work effectively across gender and ethnic differences. Virtual teams can provide an arena that eliminates many superficial differences and preconceived ideas about team members which can manifest themselves in face-to-face encounters. Virtual teams also offer the opportunity to be frank due to the anonymity that can be imposed on team members. Lastly, virtual teams offer flexibility as to when team members can participate resulting in contributions to discussions that can be made at the convenience (within reason) of the individual.

The virtual teams in our course communicated through writing, and Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) point out, another advantage that can be connected with virtual teams is that cultural differences are not as conspicuous in writing as they are in speaking. In contrast, real team meetings emphasize the differences between participants with different English skills and may inhibit non-native speakers. "I'm usually a very outgoing person, but not in English (.....), I feel much smaller in meetings." (p.393)

Disadvantages of virtual teams include the aforementioned advantage of flexibility. The other side of this Janus-faced factor is that it can slow down the work process; participants can take too much time making their contributions. Another problem with virtual teams and communicating electronically is the danger of textual misinterpretation; the nuances of face-to-face communication are lost. In addition, technical problems can arise.

Real teams *can* make miscommunication less likely. However, this is not always the case, especially when individuals who practice different communication styles and are unaware of both their own style and the styles of the others are involved. For example, linear communicators (who strive to get to the point as directly as possible) can strike their circular-communicating teammates (who sometimes never actually state "the point" at all – leaving it up to the other to extract it from a wealth of related information) as being rushed, impolite, and simplistic. Conversely, circular communicators can frustrate their linear-communicating teammates since they never seem to make their point and often are interpreted as either avoiding it, or simply not knowing what they're talking about.

Real teams tend to be more efficient time-wise. When input from all members is needed to make a decision, the process moves along more quickly if all deliver their input in the same time-frame.

However, *finding* that time-frame is often problematic. It is notoriously difficult for busy people to coordinate meeting times. More important, however, are the effects that the physical presence of team members have upon each other. Certain individuals can tend to dominate discussions while

others may tend to withdraw. The latter find it hard to say what they really mean if they are intimidated by other team members.

In an attempt, then, to combine the advantages of multicultural and virtual teams, the students were assigned to teams and given the following assignment.

(Note: Comment A25 recommended that I restate/summarize the advantages of multicultural teams and virtual teams and describe how the assignment attempts to combine them. Many of the comments quite helpfully called for more clarity – and I have tried to comply. However, in this case I have a problem drawing the line between repetition for clarity – and repetition which is redundant. I tend to believe that the above sentence/paragraph should be sufficient, but the following is an alternative.)

The goal, then, was to help these students learn from multiple perspectives and communication styles as well as to encourage tolerance and mutual respect. In short, the goal was to assist these students in becoming members of effective multicultural teams. They were assigned to anonymous virtual teams, which enabled them to experience these multicultural perspectives and communication styles, but also potentially eliminated superficial differences and preconceived ideas, enabling a degree of openness not always associated with real team work. They were given the following assignment.

Assignment

The assignment consisted of two parts; an anonymous virtual-team exercise followed by a real-team exercise. The class was divided into eleven assigned teams consisting of 3-4 diverse members. These individual members were asked to remain anonymous for the first exercise and the importance of their anonymity was explained to them quite carefully. There were no mechanisms to ensure that the students did not do detective work to try to find out who their fellow team members were. However, if attendance is the indicator I believe it to be, 100% attendance on the day identities were revealed, as well as the apparently genuine interest and surprise they expressed upon finding out who their fellow team members were, seemed to support my conclusion that they had adhered to a code of honor for this exercise.

They were given the name of their team, but not the names of the other team members. These individual team members registered for their anonymous virtual-team exercise on Blackboard (the school's student intranet learning tool) using a code name. They had to decide upon their own code names and sign off all their contributions to the exercise on Blackboard using these names. The virtual-team exercise is detailed in Figure 2.

Assignment Part One: Anonymous Virtual Team Exercise – August 24th

1. **Read** Katzenbach and Smith, “The Discipline of Teams.”
2. **Briefly formulate your ideas** on the following:
 - a. Team leadership.
 - b. Attendance.
 - c. Grade desired on the team project – and how much work you are willing to put into it.
 - d. “Free-riders.”
 - e. Differentiated grades for team members on the team project.
3. **Send your comments** to the other members of your team – by Sept. 1st. Use the reply function. Send your comments ANONYMOUSLY! Be sure to activate the “post message as anonymous” function! Give yourself a code name for this exercise. Do not begin to DISCUSS your comments on e-mail or through chat rooms until ALL team members have submitted their comments. And be sure that you have submitted your comments BEFORE you read the comments the other team members have written.
4. **Discuss** each other’s comments through Blackboard starting at the latest on Sept. 1st. If a team member has not responded by Sept. 1, carry on without this person.
5. **Achieve consensus – and write out a draft for a team contract. Send the draft to your teaching assistant by Tuesday, Sept. 6th.**
6. **Bring this contract draft** along with copies of all your correspondence to class Sept. 7th.

Figure 2: Virtual Team Exercise

As indicated above, the students were given the first two weeks of class to discuss this project, contribute their ideas to it, and to complete an assignment – anonymously – on Blackboard.

There had been a lot of suspense concerning who their fellow team members really were. Three weeks into the semester, at the third class meeting on Sept. 7th, identities were revealed to the surprise of some, the amazement of others, and the “I thought it might be you” response of a few. Team members and their assigned teaching assistant then scheduled a real-team meeting within the course of that week. The teaching assistant presented them with their real-team exercise (Figure 3) at this meeting.

Assignment Part Two: Real-Team Exercise – Due September 14th

1. Discuss your individual KOLB (learning inventory done in class) results, and how each team member can best contribute to the team.
2. Discuss any changes you should make in your team contract draft.
3. Write and sign the final team contract.
4. Turn in a copy of the contract on Sept. 14th.
5. Agree on a new meeting with your TA for debriefing.

Figure 3: Real-Team Exercise

After these exercises were finished, my teaching assistants and I analyzed the results of both the virtual- and real-team meetings, based on the tools presented below.

Before we move on to this analysis, however, it should be noted that the quality of the team contracts (as described in Figure 2) was the criterion for evaluating team effectiveness. The teams in this class produced some of the best team contracts I have ever seen, and I have been requiring teams in other classes to produce contracts for quite a few years, asking the students to deal with the exact issues raised in Exercise #1. Former years' contracts were vague, and reflected little thought given to the various issues such as leadership and free-riders. The contracts produced by this class, however, were very well-thought-through, specifically dealing with all the issues. They laid solid foundations for good teamwork during the rest of the year.

Analytical Tools

Argyris (1993) contends that we can access implicit knowledge held by our colleagues if we are able to engage in a certain type of dialogue. As Figure 1: *The Effectiveness of Multicultural Teams*, illustrates, when we succeed in taking advantage of our differences when they are great, we achieve more than when our differences are small. When insight and knowledge from different mindsets work productively together, teams realize their competitive advantage. According to Argyris and Schön (1996), one of the basic tenets of the Mutual Learning Model (MLM, otherwise known as Model II) is that we can learn from differences – if the quantity and especially the quality of what we say are high. Therefore, the focus of this study is the comparison of a combination of the quantity and quality in

individual team members' contributions to team communication (dialogue) in virtual- as well as in real-team settings.

The ability of multicultural teams to achieve excellent results does not come automatically. Members of multicultural teams are also completely capable of not learning from their differences, and to the contrary, allowing these differences to create hostile work environments. According to Argyris (1986), and my own experience, we are actually quite good at achieving sub-optimal results from our discussions, a phenomenon Argyris describes as "skilled incompetence." In any case, when the tacit insight and knowledge from different mindsets is not accessed, members of multicultural teams can move quite rapidly to the dark side of Figure 1 – "highly ineffective" teamwork.

The Mutual Learning Model (MLM – Model II) (Argyris & Schön, 1996; McArthur, Putnam & Smith, 2000) and the tools (Advocacy/ Inquiry Matrix, Ladder of Inference) developed in connection with this model can help multicultural team members to move to highly effective teamwork (see Figure 1). This article will focus on the MLM and the Advocacy/ Inquiry Matrix. The MLM advocates an open attitude to "different others," and asks us to develop the ability to refrain from jumping to conclusions, to not base our reasoning upon untested assumptions. It posits that the underlying values or attitudes held by someone who will be able to achieve good contact and mutual learning with "different others" are:

- I *might* be missing something.
- The other *might* have something to offer, *might* have seen something I did not.
- Disagreement *can* lead to learning.

These underlying values or attitudes will lead us to focus on situations, other parties, and our own roles in connection with these situations and other parties in such a way that our actions (what we say and do) will tend towards dialogue.

Argyris and Schön (1978) have identified two major components of dialogue:

- Advocacy, the statements we make, how we explain our own standpoints, and
- Inquiry, the questions we ask, the interest we show in the ideas of the other.

To achieve the type of dialogue needed to access the implicit knowledge held by members of multicultural teams, we need to be in the upper, right-hand quadrant of McArthur, Putnam, & Smigh's (2000) Advocacy / Inquiry Matrix (see Figure 4). We need to balance the quantity of our advocacy and inquiry; we need to balance the amount of time and effort we use promoting our own ideas with the amount of time and effort we invest in learning to understand the ideas of others.

As illustrated in Figure 4, each quadrant contains two characteristics. The top one represents the positive use of the quadrant; the bottom one represents a negative use. For example, looking at the lower left-hand quadrant, we find "Observing" and "Withdrawing." "Observing" is considered to be a positive function of a low amount of both advocacy and inquiry, legitimate when you are "the new kid on the block." In this situation, it is

appropriate to remain quiet, using little or no advocacy and inquiry, until you begin to understand the dynamics of your new situation. “Withdrawing” can represent the same behavior – remaining quiet – but is inappropriate long-term behavior for an established team member.

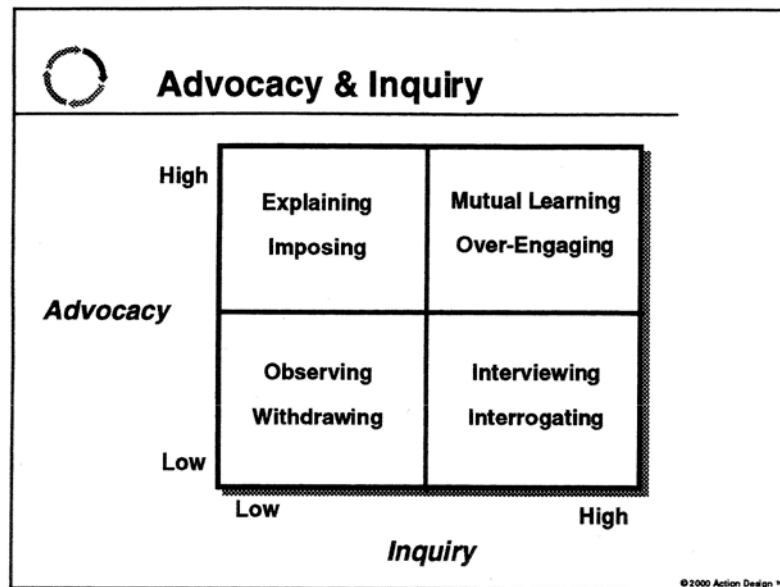


Figure 4: Advocacy / Inquiry Matrix

Source: McArthur, P., Putnam, & Smith, D.M. (2000). Copyright (2000) by Action Design. Reprinted with permission.

Balancing quantity of advocacy and inquiry, however, is not enough. The following statement and question balance the quantity of advocacy and inquiry, yet would not usually be considered to be productive.

Advocacy: That was a stupid thing to say; you must be an idiot.

Inquiry: Were you born that way?

To achieve a mutual learning dialogue, not only must the quantity of our advocacy and inquiry be balanced, but the quality of both must also be high.

As illustrated in Figure 5, we practice low quality advocacy (LQA) when we make statements like the advocacy statement above: a simple assertion stating a conclusion the speaker has reached. The speaker’s reasoning process is not made transparent, and there is no way for the other party to know why he thinks that what the other said was stupid. Neither does the speaker give any examples to help the other understand why he thinks this way.

We practice high quality advocacy (HQA) when we do make our thinking processes transparent, when we explain how we reached our conclusions and/or give examples of what

we mean. Another important element of HQA is respect for the other party. So, applying these criteria to the example of low quality advocacy above, we can produce an example of high quality advocacy (HQA): “I disagree strongly with what you just said because of X, Y, and Z.”

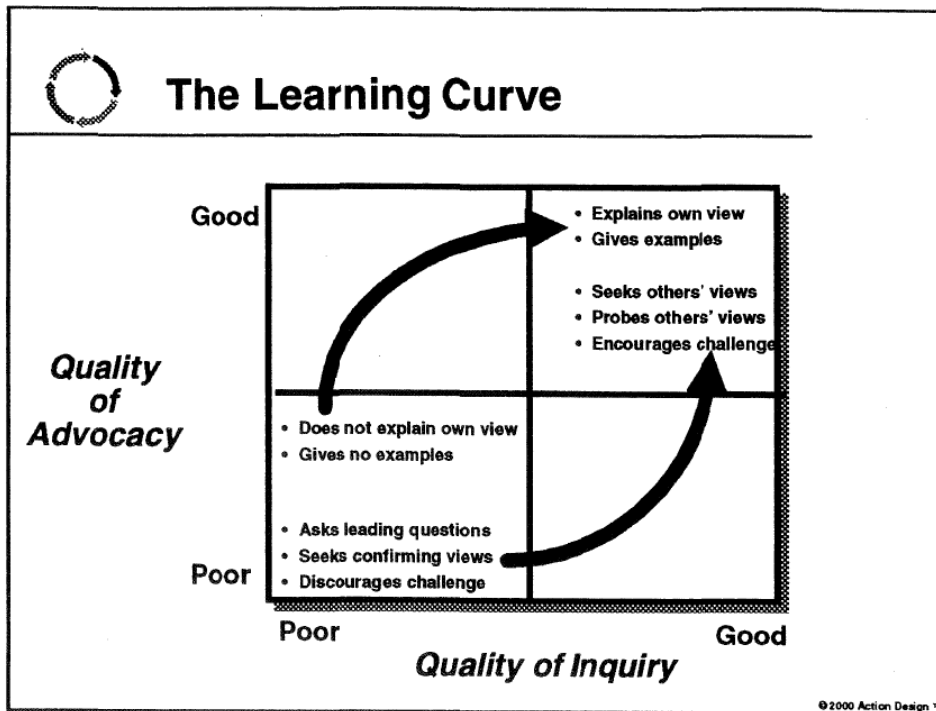


Figure 5: Quality Curves

Source: McArthur, P., Putnam, & Smith, D.M. (2000). Copyright (2000) by Action Design. Reprinted with permission.

To be more specific, an example of distinguishing between HQA and LQA in connection with the anonymous virtual-team exercise is as follows. “My thoughts on point 2a. Team leadership: I think we should elect a leader for our team when we have our first real-team meeting.” This is a clear, easily understood statement; nevertheless, it is an example of LQA because this team member states the conclusion of his train of thought and does not make clear how this conclusion was reached. No explanations or examples were given for why he believes it is best to elect a single leader or why it should be done at the first meeting.

On the other hand, an example of HQA where the writer explains his position, makes his thinking more transparent, also in connection with point 2a, is as follows. “I have experienced in other teams that no one person is always best for the position of leader. I think that leadership skills can be developed and that the three of us have an opportunity here to practice our skills. If we take turns being team leader, we can each lead a project during the year. This way we can each get leadership experience and also learn from each other.”

The two variations of advocacy distinguish themselves relatively clearly from each other. Consensus among the evaluators was, therefore, readily reached.

Low quality inquiry (LQI) is usually “dishonest” inquiry in the sense that those who use it are not demonstrating sincere interest in the other party’s ideas. LQI encompasses questions that seek confirming views as well as leading questions. When our questions clearly seek confirmation of our own ideas, our intent is not to gain new knowledge but to lead or manipulate the other into agreeing with us. We may honestly believe that we are right when we ask leading questions; we may well be right and our intentions are usually good – to produce insight. However, when the insight we are trying to elicit is strictly in accordance with *our own* insight, the question does not seek or probe the views of the *other*. When we in addition ask questions that discourage challenge, it is obvious that we are not asking; we are demanding. “I’ve explained this concept to you five times within the last hour, and it’s imperative that my teaching assistants understand it if they are going to work with me. You do understand it, don’t you?” These types of questions are not conducive to mutual learning.

High quality inquiry (HQI), on the other hand, reveals true interest in and curiosity about the views of others, something that according to Argyris (1991) we do too seldom. We tend to focus upon explaining our own views. We seem to not want to relinquish the floor, fearing that if we give the other party an inch, he’ll take a mile. A prerequisite for being able to produce high quality inquiry is an open, inquiring mind that genuinely wants to hear and understand what the other has to say. And the production of HQI together with HQA establishes the balance between interest in/respect for the ideas of others and promotion of/respect for our own ideas that is at the heart of our ability to learn from each other.

To improve the earlier example of LQI – “Were you born that way?” – we need to proceed from another mindset – one that not only respects the other party but also wants to learn even when confronted with what apparently makes no sense. HQI can often be preceded by high quality advocacy (HQA). So, if we build on the HQA from our example – “I disagree strongly with what you just said because of X, Y, and Z.” - and follow up with HQI, we could say something like: “I’m having a hard time understanding how you arrived at your conclusion, so it would help me if you said a bit more; could you give an example or explain your thinking to me?” As demonstrated, HQI probes the thinking of the other, sometimes asking difficult questions. If the others are not prepared for these questions or have not thought through their reasoning processes, these questions might not always be welcome. They are, however, essential to a mutual learning process.

There is some justice in the world, however, because asking painful probing questions implies a two-way street, and HQI also means that we encourage challenge to our own views. We make it clear to the others that we welcome *their* probing questions. “I’ve explained my thinking; do you see any logical flaws – anything I missed?”

When we can explain ourselves clearly, honestly attempt to understand the views of the other, and ask difficult questions of each other, we should be able to engage in dialogue that will enable both parties to learn from each other. This would, therefore, appear to be an

optimal communication model for members of all teams – but especially for members of multicultural teams.

It must be noted that these students had not yet been introduced to Argyris and the concepts of advocacy and inquiry. This lack of theoretical knowledge did not, however, in any way prevent them from *using* both high and low quality advocacy and inquiry. A future article will examine the difference in their use between the assignment described in this article and another assignment given at the end of the year after the students had learned about the Mutual Learning Model and the advantages of balancing HQA with HQI.

Returning to our research, student contributions in both exercises were observed and recorded. Using the categories of HQA/LQA and HQI/LQI, my teaching assistants and I went through the virtual-team and real-team exercises, categorizing what was said. Both high and low quality advocacy and inquiry were measured, however, in the interests of brevity and clarity, the focus of this initial article will be on HQA.

As explained earlier, a communication act is considered HQA when speakers explain their reasoning processes or give examples that illustrate their thinking. Statements of varying lengths were counted as one (1) piece of HQA; the demand for explanation and/or examples connected with HQA did make these statements more lengthy than those identified as LQA. The counting was, therefore not directly based on how lengthy a statement was but on whether or not the speaker's thinking was made transparent.

The Results

Anonymous Virtual-Team Results and Debriefing for “The Dream Team”

Students' participation in the virtual and in the real team exercises was determined by counting the number of high quality advocacy statements each student produced during each exercise. Although there was no change in the rate of activity for 6% of the participants, the tendency was for the more and less active team members in both the virtual and real team exercises to remain the same; in other words, the great majority of students did not switch from being one of the more active members of the team in a virtual exercise to being one of the less active members of the team in a real exercise.

The specific results for “The Dream Team” illustrate team-member activity and the debriefing session explains how team members perceived both their levels of activity and the results their team achieved in the exercises. The members of “The Dream Team” chose the names Hunter, Vivi, and Soli for their virtual-team exercise. Remember that each “point” they received did not simply correlate to one sentence – but to one statement representing high quality advocacy, demonstrating transparency of thought.

Number of HQA contributions during the anonymous virtual-team exercise:	
Hunter	16
Vivi	12
Soli	12

Figure 6: Number of HQA contributions, anonymous virtual-team exercise

We see a relatively equal distribution of input. Although Hunter has the highest number of HQA contributions, this team member does not overwhelm the other two; they hold their own.

During the debriefing of the virtual- and real-team exercises, the students were asked what they considered to be the advantages and disadvantages of the anonymous virtual-team exercise. The general class consensus was that on the positive side, they felt that they had more freedom to express themselves openly. It was easier to play the devil’s advocate to get the discussion going and to make it more interesting, and it was easier to defend their own opinions once they had been stated. They made no assumptions about each other based on ethnicity, gender, or previous experiences with each other. They also observed that those who might have been timid about sharing opinions and ideas in another setting found this to be an enabling forum. These observations were echoed by “The Dream Team.”

The class and “The Dream Team” also concurred when observing that the element of time flexibility in virtual-team participation was appreciated. In addition to making team participation easier (they could make their contributions more at their own convenience), it also gave them time to think about their input before sending it in. This had the effect of encouraging them to make more of an effort, and according to them it increased the quality of their input.

Language is an issue when multicultural teams interact, and an important question to ask in this connection is whether or not native speakers(NSs), and writers, of English have an advantage when interacting with non-native speakers(NNSs). In one sense, common sense, it would seem obvious that they do; they don’t have to worry about expressing themselves in a second language and that is one problem less to be concerned with. As noted earlier, however, Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) distinguish between perceived disadvantages for NNss in written and spoken English. Differences in written communication between NNSs were found to be less conspicuous and written communication with both NSs and NNSs was considered to be easier than oral communication (pp. 382-388).

Finally, the students found the anonymous virtual-team exercise to be fun. The elements of secrecy and surprise (who will these people turn out to be?) were captivating. The chance to have a fresh start was also appreciated.

Both the class and “The Dream Team,” however, did experience disadvantages in connection with the anonymous virtual –team exercise. The first had to do with technical problems encountered with the use of Blackboard, but these difficulties were easily overcome. Not in

connection with “The Dream Team,” but I did receive one or two desperate phone calls from students who had forgotten to activate the “anonymous” function. Fortunately, I was able to go in and erase these contributions almost immediately before their identity was discovered. Other perceived disadvantages were that virtual-team participation slowed down the work process and that the written text could be misunderstood or misinterpreted.

Real-Team Results and Debriefing for “The Dream Team”

As explained earlier, the real-team exercise involved discussing personality qualities of individual team members and refining the team contract. Again, the focus here was on high quality advocacy (HQA), and as in the virtual-team meeting, one (1) piece of HQA ranged in length from one to many sentences. The deciding factor was whether or not the statement was more than simply a stated conclusion. To be labeled HQA, the thought process of the speaker had to have been made clear.

Number of HQA contributions during the real-team exercise:		
Hunter	40	(16 in the virtual-team exercise)
Vivi	6	(12 in the virtual-team exercise)
Soli	8	(12 in the virtual-team exercise)

Figure 7: Number of HQA contributions, real-team exercise

As we can see, the situation changed drastically in the real-team meeting, with Hunter dominating the proceedings. The team now appears to be out of balance. The levels of high quality inquiry were also out of balance at this meeting, with Hunter being the only team member asking any questions at all.

Of the three team members, Hunter, was the only native speaker (NS) of English. The experience of “The Dream Team,” thus at least partially supports the research done by Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) who found that native speaker ability had little influence upon interactions between NSs and NNSs in written situations. This finding is supported by our teams’ virtual-team experiences. Oral communication, however, was another matter. According to Kankaanranta and Planken “When the interviewees were asked about their perceptions of communication with NSs versus NNSs, most of them seemed to have a clear conception about the differences between the two situations, characterizing oral interactions with NSs as unequal and asymmetrical and for this reason more difficult than with NNSs.” (p.388) Some non-native speakers found that being less fluent in English affected their professional identity.

The statistics from “The Dream Team’s” real meeting show that the members acted differently in an oral setting and that the NNSs were less active participants. The team was apparently in imbalance during the real-team exercise, and it would be easy to assume that

the NNSs, Vivi and Soli, in line with Kankaanranta and Planken above, felt overrun by Hunter, the NS. This, however, was not the case. At the debriefing, all team members justified this apparent imbalance by maintaining that they had already discussed the most important issues in the virtual-team exercise and had already achieved consensus. All members of the team felt they had given an equal amount of input to the team contract and that their views were well represented.

The members of "The Dream Team," however, had not dealt as thoroughly with the issue of their KOLB learning inventory results, the new task given to them for their real-team exercise. Perhaps it was due to the constraints, cultural or otherwise, of the face-to-face meeting; perhaps it was due to their lack of familiarity with the elements of the learning inventory. This area was not covered in-depth in the debriefing. Nevertheless, their satisfaction with their input to both meetings, justified or not, remains.

There was no indication that "The Dream Team" had perceived the oral interaction of the real-team exercise to be unequal and asymmetrical even though quantitatively it was. There was no indication that the NNSs had perceived their personal or professional identity to shrink, no indication that they felt smaller at the real-team meeting. All three members were sincerely satisfied with their teamwork and their results. Their perceptions contrast with the perceptions of the NNSs in Kankaanranta and Planken's survey who had participated in real-team meetings which had *not* been preceded by a virtual-team meeting. Perhaps in the anonymous virtual team we have a tool that will enable different others to make a good start to their collaboration.

The class, "The Dream Team" included, saw other advantages to the real-team meetings. They believed their decision-making was more efficient and that there was less miscommunication. Among other things, they had access to body language. Among team members with different cultural backgrounds, however, access to body language can be misleading or irritating, and should be considered a double-edged sword.

At the end of the real-team exercise the majority of participants felt respect for one another and satisfaction with the work they had done. This was certainly the case for members of "The Dream Team," who had produced a thoughtful and detailed contract that set up helpful, practical guidelines for the team's future work together.

The disadvantages of real-team meetings that the class remarked upon included the fact that it was harder to coordinate a meeting time, and perhaps more importantly, it was harder to say what they really meant if they felt pressured by others. This final statement was touched upon in "The Dream Team," also, and seemed to contradict their perception of harmony and justice in the real-team exercise. When challenged on this point and reminded about the major differences in their HQA numbers, however, members of "The Dream Team" made it clear that the statement about feeling pressured was a reflection of past experience and did not reflect what had taken place in this exercise.

The Numbers Revisited – Cultural Perspective

The cultural composition of “The Dream Team” was one female North American (the aforementioned native speaker), one female Chinese, and one male Ghanaian. Ethnic and gender values and communication differences were clearly represented and undoubtedly many other components of cultural identity were represented as well, such as those discussed by Jameson (2007) and others: religion, economic class, age, professional identity, etc.

Concerning cultural identity, Milton Bennett (1998) points out that it is essential to distinguish between research-based legitimate and helpful generalizations (the *tendency* of a majority of people in a cultural group to hold certain values and beliefs and to engage in certain patterns of behaviour) and stereotypes (the application of a research-based generalization to every person in a cultural group). The latter are logically flawed. Researchers such as Hall (1982), Hofstede (1994), Trompenaars (1993), and Bennett (1998) have identified many research-based value and communication polarizations which can be identified among the cultures represented in “The Dream Team.” Although some of this research, Hofstede’s for example, is based upon data collected decades ago and is subject to ongoing criticism, it still gives us a foundation for examining and discussing our differences – as well as our commonalities. As noted by Hampden-Turner (1999), the polarizations these researchers introduce are theoretical opposing ends of scales. However, nobody in any culture resides purely at one end of the scale or the other; we all find ourselves at various points along these scales, and individual members of supposedly drastically different cultures can find themselves “living next door to each other” on the scales.

To give an example of some of these polarities, one team member represented a low context, individualistic, universalistic culture, whose members have a tendency to attach more importance to what is said than to the context in which it is said, focus on the needs of the individual rather than those of the collective, and to abide by rules which are intended to apply universally to all members of society rather than to take personal relationships into stronger consideration. The other members of the team, who reside at different places on these value scales might have found it annoying if this discussion partner neglected to pay attention to the context of the situation, did not place the needs of the group above personal needs, or failed to demonstrate sufficient understanding of the significance of personal relationships.

Another “Dream Team” member represented a culture whose members use a neutral communication style; members of these cultures do not tend to overtly display emotion and conversely, tend to be suspicious of those who do. The third member represented a culture with a circular rather than a linear communication style. As explained earlier, communication between linear and circular communicators can often lead to trouble.

When members of cultures with such varied values and attitudes are placed together in a team, the potential for miscommunication and misunderstanding is great. Unless, that is, they are prepared to deal with these differences. (Adler 2008) At this point in the course our students were not prepared. Nevertheless, trouble did not ensue, perhaps at least partly for the following reason.

The intent of the written, anonymous virtual-team part of the exercise was precisely to make visible and audible cultural differences among the team members as invisible and inaudible as possible. This seems to be what happened. The visible and audible cultural differences did not come into play, perhaps making the team's work on the virtual exercise less problematic.

In the real-team exercise, as demonstrated below by Soli's explanation of his code name, ethnic cultural values were enmeshed with personality traits, demonstrating that the generalizations of the researchers in the field must be dealt with carefully. Jameson (2007, p.204) observes that "factors totally unrelated to culture" might influence how people participate in business discourse." Jameson refers to Poncini (2002) who warns "that studies of discourse in multicultural business settings should not view participants as representatives of homogenous national cultures; other factors, such as organizational roles, business contexts, and individual differences, may be important." (Jameson 2007, p.204) The performance of the class and "The Dream Team" suggests that they are.

The focus of this article confines itself to an observable aspect of the communication acts exhibited during the two exercises: HQA. High quality advocacy is a low-context, direct, neutral, and linear style of communication considered to be at the heart of the reasoning process. (McArthur, Putnam & Smith, 2000). This focus was chosen in spite of the fact that perhaps the majority of the class and two of "The Dream Team" members represent high-context cultures whose members might be expected to have a tendency to take a high-contextual direct, and circular approach to communication in the discussion and decision-making context of the virtual- and real-team exercises (Hall, 1982).

An important factor in this connection, however, is that members of high context, indirectly communicating cultures do not always communicate "vaguely" and indirectly. The type of communication they employ depends upon the situation and the participants in the situation. As indicated by Guirdham (1999), even though Japanese managers come from a high-context culture whose members tend to communicate indirectly, communication behaviour in discussion and decision-making contexts seems to cut across these culturally determined patterns (pp. 104-105). Comparing the compliance-gaining strategies of US, European, and Japanese managers, Guirdham found that in a decision-making situation, all cultures relied heavily upon reasoning. Therefore, members of both high- and low-context cultures could be expected to use HQA, an essential element of the reasoning process.

With that in mind, we can look at the cultural composition of "The Dream Team" in connection with the scores its members achieved concerning HQA.

Member meeting	Country	HQA – Virtual-team meeting	HQA – Real-team
Hunter	USA	16	40
Vivi	China	12	6
Soli	Ghana	12	8

Figure 8: Cultural Identities of “The Dream Team” and HQA results

We noted earlier that one of the team members took over, and now we see that the culprit, or leader, if you will, was American. In a real-team setting, the native speaker from a low-context, direct, linear culture dominated the meeting. The Chinese and Ghanian members stepped to the side. It was noted in the debriefing that this is not typical behaviour for Ghanians in general, and this particular Ghanian had given himself the code name “Soli” because he was atypically quiet, even at home among his peers, and enjoyed *solitude*.

According to studies conducted using *The International Team Trust Indicator* (Harper, 2004), reluctance to share information can be a problem which inhibits the establishment of trust in teams. In addition, the variety and breadth of information possessed by members of a multicultural team is a major factor when determining team effectiveness. Taking the wealth of cultural and communicative value differences represented by these three teammates into account, it is encouraging to note the relatively equal distribution of HQA among them during the virtual-team exercise. This seems to indicate that anonymity and a non-oral setting can be tools that elicit the information imbedded in a multicultural team, and at the same time help the team members establish trust. From the distinctively unequal distribution of HQA during the real-team exercise, we see that equal amounts of information were not accessed. Nevertheless, as was expressed in the team’s final debriefing, the opportunity, and indeed the requirement, to make one’s views known in the initial anonymous, non-oral virtual-team meeting established a good foundation for the team’s future work. It seems plausible that the positive effects of the virtual-team meeting carried over and into the imbalanced real-team meeting, helping to make that, too, a positive experience.

Conclusion

Initially in this article, some questions were asked: what would happen if we made the visible components of cultural identity invisible; what would happen if we gave our students the tool of anonymity? Would anonymity help to release them from their cultural cages? Would a combination of anonymous virtual-team meetings followed by face-to-face real-team meetings impact the teams’ perceived ability to work well together?

It is tempting to maintain that the enormous gaps in HQA exhibited in the real-team exercise can at least in part be attributed to cultural difference, the tendency for both Ghanians and Chinese to be high-context, circular, and collectively oriented as opposed to the North American tendency to be low-context, linear, and individually oriented. It is even more

tempting to suggest that the use of the anonymous virtual-team exercise cut through many differences grounded in cultural values, ethnic and other, as well as personality, enabling each team member to contribute towards an excellent team result. Based on this simple exercise, no such claims can be made.

In spite of the fact that no ironclad answers have been provided by these exercises, it is, nevertheless, exciting to note that the anonymity factor did seem to improve the team members' performances. Unique insights of "different others" *were* actually put forward in the anonymous virtual-team exercise and these multicultural teams *did* tend to move towards the effective side of the multicultural team curve. Work in an anonymous, virtual setting just might have helped level the playing field. A platform was created where all parties, regardless of cultural or personal propensities registered their input to an issue in a fairly balanced manner. In addition, the setting provided them with the time to work on their contributions, which both thought-wise and language-wise can be an important face-saving element. Finally, it is quite possible that the balanced and egalitarian activity in the anonymous setting contributed to a sense of being heard and respected in the real-team exercise, enabling these different others to function effectively together.

Our students were challenged to work with "different others," and our experience indicates that the anonymity factor in virtual-team meetings combined with real-team meetings was helpful. My teaching assistants and I hope our initial findings are interesting to schools as well as to organizations where ethnically, professionally, or otherwise diverse participants work in teams.

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