

## **Mission Impossible: International Students as Key Players in Cross-Cultural Team Activities**

Heather Ranson

*University of Victoria, Canada*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*An annual undergraduate project called Mission Impossible is designed to reduce issues of power and status that hinder the effectiveness of cross-cultural teams. Domestic students often think they must compensate for international teammates, and international students understand that they are seen as a burden by domestic teammates. To prevent students from falling into this common but damaging dynamic, this undergraduate full-day event is designed to help international and domestic students engage as equals. This sets the stage to allow collaborative relationships to deepen between domestic and international students in the rest of the program.*

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural teams, international students, power and status

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Students find working in teams stressful and time consuming (Loo & Thorpe, 2002), but employers emphasize the need for these skills in the workplace. In particular, cross-cultural teams are becoming an important part of international firms. Many large companies such as Ernst and Young, Royal Dutch Shell, and Marriott use cross-cultural teams (Mateev and Milter, 2004). As a business school preparing 250 undergraduates a year for the workplace, the Gustavson School of Business at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada, saw the importance of giving students practice at working in cross-national (i.e., international plus Canadian/domestic students) teams. The School purposefully recruits a high number of international students from its non-English speaking partner institutions (over 80 in 40 countries) in order to build the international pillar of the School and to give both international and domestic students the skills

needed to work with colleagues both in Canada and abroad. International students currently join programs in both undergraduate and graduate courses.

The diversity of cultural backgrounds among international students makes it challenging to prepare them, and our domestic students, for differences they will face in teamwork. Such differences include a mix of individualist and collectivist cultures as well as high and low context differences, and, perhaps most importantly, cultural differences in use of time (Hall, 1983). Other well-documented differences include communication styles, power dynamics, and intercultural adjustments (Gundykunst, 2004; Jon, 2012; Hotta & Ting-Toomey 2013). Examples of these issues are revealed throughout the semester: Japanese students expect to work together in teams by setting up weekly team meetings (a collectivist approach), while Canadian students tend towards an individualistic approach where they divide the work assigned to a group and use a Google doc to assemble each participants' efforts into a group submission. This low context, individualist approach may encourage individual productivity, but it fails to develop inter-personal relationships that smooth problems in the group when they occur (Hall, 1983). A second example—a common issue of power dynamics—occurs when Canadian students edit group papers to improve the spelling, punctuation, and grammar of group members who have English as a second language. This puts the Canadian student into a position of power, where they can change the meaning of thoughts and skew the overall paper to fit their analysis of the situation.

Jon (2012) documents issues with power in the Korean context which happen outside the classroom. In one study, Jon (2012) found that Korean students preferred Western European students who had strong English skills as their “buddies” in a faculty matching program, and they avoided building friendships with Chinese students who were not as adept at speaking English. The goal of the Korean students to improve their English speaking skills drove them to give more power to the Western European students. While not every student will experience all of these cultural differences, many of them will be challenged by one or more. A further complicating factor is that the differences may appear at different times and in different groups during students' course-work on international teams. The Mission Impossible activity aims to give power to students with fewer skills in English and a higher level of expertise about their home country, thereby removing the English dominant power structure.

The difficulty of developing strong cross-cultural and cross-national groups on campus is well documented (Kim 1988, Brown 2009). Gundykunst (2004) builds a case that communication with people from

outside of one's own culture is difficult because "interaction with people from other cultures is less routine and involves new and novel situations compared with interaction with people from our own cultures" (p. 6). While language barriers and cultural differences are usually blamed for the ghettoization of different cultures in the classroom, Hsieh (2007) notes that unequal power relationships are an issue between domestic and international students, especially in group work. Every year, Gustavson faculty handle complaints about international students from domestic students including lack of preparation for group meetings (or not even attending), and submissions that are poorly-written, plagiarized, and/or unreferenced. Complaints from international students about domestic students, by contrast, include exclusion from discussions, unfair division of work, and expectations that are not clearly communicated.

In order to reduce group friction, a Gustavson professor's assignment has been adapted for an annual program-wide initiative at the start of the fall semester that strives to accomplish three goals: first, to give students an opportunity to work together in groups in a non-threatening, low-stakes activity that helps them get to know students from different cultural backgrounds; second, to impress upon students the importance of environmentally sustainable business (one of the values of the School); and finally, to increase students' oral and visual communication skills. Students are sorted into groups of five with four domestic students and one international student in each group. Power in the groups could easily default to the four domestic students, sidelining the international student. However, Mission Impossible is designed to establish the international student as a subject-area expert on their particular country. As a result, the international students need to be consulted at every step in the activity. They are often able to generate resources and research that the domestic students are not aware of, or were unable to access due to language limitations. Changing the power dynamic in the group allows barriers to come down and students to get to know each other in a more respectful environment.

## **THE MISSION IMPOSSIBLE ACTIVITY**

To reduce friction and build stronger teams, the Bachelor of Commerce (BCom) program holds a one-day competition (Mission Impossible) that emerged from a course assignment with a sustainable business theme. The Mission Impossible activity occurs every fall in the first semester of the program when students are still getting to know each other. The activity includes 60 international students who are assigned to 60 student teams. Further, the groups are selected for male-female balance and remain active

for five courses over the semester. The Mission Impossible day begins with staff members briefing students on the goal to develop an idea for an environmentally sustainable business *that would work in the international student's home country.*

*Table 1. Mission Impossible timeline.*

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Time	Staff Responsibility	Activity
7:50 – 8:30	Hand out materials.	International student pre-briefing and materials distribution.
8:30 – 8:40	Ensure matching occurs.	International and domestic student match up.
8:40 – 9:00	Brief students.	Clarify instructions with PowerPoint slides.
9:00 – 12:00		Project Work Time.
12:00 – 1:00	Set up for poster session and pitches.	Students travel to poster-making location.
1:00 – 1:45	- Welcome students. - Brief judges. - Hand out score cards.	All students convene in campus venue.
1:45 – 2:15	Keynote addresses.	Dean and Program Director offer opening remarks.
2:15 – 2:35	- Whistle/bell to start/end pitches. - Collect judge score cards.	Rounds 1 and 2. Presentation Fair and Official Judging. Whistle indicates the start of a round – bell indicates the end of a round.
2:35 – 2:45		Judges on break (can discuss questions and compare notes).
2:45 – 3:15	- Collect score cards.	Rounds 3, 4, and 5.
3:15 – 3:30	- Final marking.	Refreshment break.
3:30 – 4:00	- Photographer. - Prizes handed out.	Announcements: Prizes/Winners (1 per cohort plus one special mention), thanks and closing.
4:00 – 4:30		Clean up/Take down.

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Students are instructed to build the idea into a concept, then design and construct a poster, and develop a verbal pitch to sell that idea to judges. Student groups work through the morning on the assignment. All students convene in the afternoon to pitch their ideas to a group of judges made up of

their professors and members of the city's business community. One might expect multiple similar ideas to occur with multiple students coming from some countries. However, even ideas with a similar theme (composting or recycling) differ enough in their details that the judges are impressed with the variety of ideas. The winning group is rewarded with gift cards for each member as well as certificates authenticating their win. All groups benefit from achieving better team relationships and appreciating the specific knowledge of the international student in their group. The aim is to work toward developing equal power status for all group members.

## **DISCUSSION**

The Mission Impossible exercise evolved from a classroom activity in one course to a program activity for all students because of its impact on reducing power imbalances between domestic and international students. The faculty had previously used the inter-cultural game "Bafa Bafa" to get students to work together and to create a basis for discussion of common issues when working in international groups. Mission Impossible is a better fit for students at this school, because it aligns with three of the school's pillars: international, innovative, and sustainability/social responsibility.

While innovation is threaded throughout the school, one example of how Mission Impossible ties into the program is through the entrepreneurship specialization. Faculty in that program run "Pitch-It" and "Plan-It" competitions on campus where students compete for prize money for the best entrepreneurial idea. Mission Impossible lays the ground work for students who are interested in the entrepreneurship program, and it gives them a head start on brainstorming and analyzing ideas that could be entered into the competitions. In the past, some Mission Impossible teams have taken their ideas to national competitions.

Sustainability and social responsibility are also embedded in the program. For example, all students coming into the Bachelor of Commerce program are required to take a Business and Sustainability course. Professors from that course are judges in the Mission Impossible competition and are able to use the students' ideas as discussion points in the classroom. Last year, one group of students suggested using cricket flour as a source of protein to reduce the need for environmentally damaging beef-based diets. To build on that discussion in a class, one professor ordered protein bars made of cricket flour so the class could try them and evaluate for themselves how successful it might be as a protein replacement and an entrepreneurial venture in addition to evaluating its impact on the earth.

Hotta and Ting-Toomey (2013) state that “international students need to feel welcomed, accepted, and included” if they are expected to integrate into a new culture, connect and make friends, and ultimately create a similar support structure to the one they left in their home country. Mission Impossible creates an environment where international students are valued for their country’s knowledge and given the opportunity to demonstrate their expertise in a low stakes activity. The power of the native English speaker is reduced, which opens dialogue, forces listening, and builds early bridges to future group work.

## **RESULTS**

Mission Impossible changes the views that domestic students commonly have about international students and improves group relationships and thus team project quality for the rest of the semester. While orienting students to the Gustavson School’s values of social and environmental sustainability, we have also been able to change power dynamics in groups and create a learning context where international students are valued from the beginning. In fall 2018, a research team plans to use surveys, short interviews, and formal observations of changing power dynamics before and after the activity to formally assess its impact. The following results are based on qualitative interviews with professors, program staff, and students.

Professors and program staff note fewer group difficulties and increased involvement of international students in class discussions and projects since Mission Impossible was implemented. One professor noted that international students who were unfamiliar with sustainability did not contribute to idea generation during Mission Impossible but instead took on a researcher role in the group in order to live up to the title of expert that was given to them. Program staff like the activity because they see students learning from each other. Not only does the power dynamic change between international and domestic students, it also changes between faculty and students. Students are the country experts and have an opportunity to share and be valued for their knowledge.

Students offered several insights into the success of Mission Impossible. First, because it happens early in the term, students haven’t formed strong bonds with each other. As a result, judgement is deferred and Mission Impossible allowed students to “determine our individual strengths and weaknesses right then and there.” One student, who had students from the Netherlands in her group, emphasized that even when the group came up with ideas, it was the international students who “were able to communicate how locals felt about issues in their country, which helped make our idea

more realistic.” This deference to international students is new to our students. It opens up communication and discussion in a way that other inter-cultural activities did not and builds a sense of mutual dependence among group members.

## **CONCLUSION**

Gydykunst (2004) asserts that “as we get to know strangers, the anxiety we experience in interacting with them tends to decrease” (p. 26). Mission Impossible provides a forum where students get to know each other; the activity requirements increase the probability every student will participate in getting to know other group members. The collectivist nature of this activity emphasizes the benefits of group meetings and discussion. This paves the way for future group work to also be conducted in the same manner. At the same time, the activity allows for individual participation and expertise, as well as a discussion on personal strengths and weaknesses, which can also be applied to upcoming projects and reports. With a strict three hour time limit for the activity and a public presentation before community business leaders and professors, students were mindful of time and even those with a culturally relaxed attitude towards deadlines could see the necessity to develop their ideas within the given time constraints. Mission Impossible addresses several inter-cultural communication difficulties students encounter in the university setting. Working through these in a directed and supported setting allows domestic and international students to meet each other on common ground where there is more openness to listen to each other and appreciate the strengths that students from different cultures bring to a joint project.

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**HEATHER RANSON**, BA, MBA, is an Assistant Teaching Professor in the Gustavson School of Business at the University of Victoria, Canada. Her major research interests lie in the area of business and sustainability, management education, and communications. Email: hranson@uvic.ca

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