

Fostering 21st Century Skills through Cross-Cultural and Diverse Educational Practices

A blended learning approach in higher business education based on the example of an international exchange program between a university in the southern U.S. and a university of applied sciences in Germany.

Ahmed Elkassabgi, Arkansas Tech University

Benjamin Löhr, THM, University of Applied Sciences, Germany

Gabriele Haulmark, Arkansas Tech University

Heike Siebert, THM, University of Applied Sciences, Germany

Helene Lindenthal, Paderborn University, Germany

Abstract

The future of the globalized working world requires ever greater skills development in (virtual) collaboration between intercultural teams. This requires contemporary teaching methods which include integrating international students, using digital tools, and reacting flexibly to changing conditions. The pedagogical concept of blended learning is suitable for modern teaching, as it enables studying virtually (synchronous and asynchronous) with digital tools and collaboration in person and across national borders in a practice-oriented way. Moreover, it offers flexibility in the design of teaching-learning formats. Two partner universities have developed a transatlantic blended program to prepare students for these future requirements and to offer them opportunities for experiential learning of 21st century skills. This paper presents this program's background, objectives, and main features and offers literature-based and tried-and-true practical recommendations for contemporary teaching and learning. The structures and guidelines presented could serve as an adaptable "blueprint" and impulse for other actors and entities in respective higher education environments.

Introduction

Universities are responsible for shaping students into competent, capable, and working citizens (Villardón-Gallego et al., 2013; Pellert, 2016). Therefore, the modern educational mission of universities should include digitization, internationality, and interculturality, as well as the mediation of competencies (Ugur, 2020; Garson et al., 2016; Shankar et al., 2020; KMK, 2022; Pellert, 2016). These elements are central tasks and stem from the approach of sustainable learning. Sustainable learning means empowering students during their studies to navigate future personal and professional learning environments, and to facilitate lifelong learning (Crick & Wilson, 2005; Kerres et

al., 2012). Students require digital learning environments, international experiences, opportunities to enhance key competencies, and intensive engagement with learning content to generate sustainable learning.

Experiences in international and intercultural environments prepare students to work with people from all over the world and to be open to other cultures. Personal experiences abroad and internationalization at home (IaH) can be helpful in this process. IaH stands for the encounter with international students at the home university (Soria & Troisi, 2013; Rachbauer & Plank, 2021). Interdisciplinary key competencies are also called “21st century skills” (van Laar et al., 2020; Schäffer, 2020, p. 40; Bruhn, 2020, p. 166). This refers to the ability to help shape societal transformation, co-create in a cooperative and agile manner in a digitally shaped world, interact effectively, unfold creativity, and to develop personal and social adaptability (Schäffer, 2020, p. 40). Competencies that are needed for this and should be supported in university teaching are mainly global competence (OECD/Asia Society, 2018), reflective competence (Pellert, 2016), diversity competence (Aufferkorte-Michaelis & Linde, 2018), and media competence (Talman & Schilow, 2020).

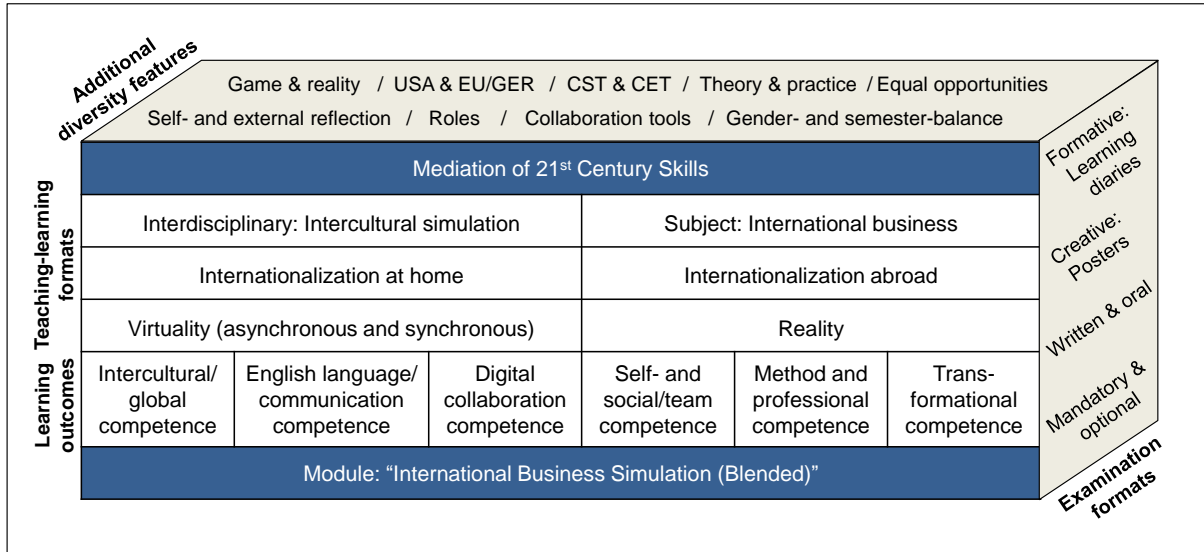
This paper aims to combine the aforementioned aspects and to present a concrete implementation proposal using the example of the international exchange program between a midsized university in the Southern U.S. and a large German university of applied sciences. For this purpose, the main components of digitalization, internationalization, and key competencies are combined in a blended learning approach and adapted to the target group of students in the field of business administration. The idea presented below is intended to contribute to university pedagogy, theoretically and practically. The result offers recommendations for current university teaching and can be implemented and extended by teaching staff. As it is located at the meso-level of educational activities, teachers can design it on the micro level and adapt it to the respective circumstances.

Background and Objectives of the Exchange Program

The plans of the pedagogical approach described below emerged in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions demanded new ways and virtual formats from both universities to develop their international exchange relationships further. In the course of mutual invitations to digital, English-taught courses, students and faculty from both universities could gain initial experiences in virtual, intercultural, and internationally oriented academic exchange. The basic idea of digital live events under the motto “One digital classroom, two international perspectives” was to further develop the partnership activities of both universities, especially in times adverse to international mobility. The objective was to strategically expand the partnership and work towards building students’ motivation and confidence to apply to study abroad in the future. As a result, a joint funding application was submitted to the European Union’s Erasmus+ funding program, which, with its objectives and the possibilities for designing the mobilities, provided an ideal framework to support the strategic internationalization of both universities. The newly established and funded teaching program now aims to combine several aspects of diversity in studying and teaching simultaneously. Figure 1 (“diversity cube”) provides an overview of the diverse program design, the associated learning

outcomes, teaching, learning, and examination formats. The components contained, their meanings and interrelationships are described in more detail in this paper.

Figure 1: Diversity cube for the pedagogical approach in the module “International Business Simulation (Blended)”



The basic characteristics of the program are as follows:

First, the new exchange format adopts the approach of blended mobilities, i.e., the combination of digital teaching-learning formats (internationalization at home, IaH) and subsequent short-term study abroad programs (internationalization abroad). The creation of blended mobilities increases not only the intercultural but also the digital competence of students and teachers in international exchange and, because of positive experiences, can also motivate future long-term exchanges.

Second, a combination of subject-specific and interdisciplinary competencies is taught. The subject-specific competence goals relate to the contextual framework of international business and include current economic (political) topics from Europe and the USA. The intention is to contribute to a better understanding of international and transatlantic economic relations. The interdisciplinary competence goals are primarily directed towards developing intercultural competence, both in the virtual and in the face-to-face environment.

The program’s core is a virtual simulation game where a complex and practical problem (in the field of project management) must be solved by multicultural teams with digital collaboration tools in multiple gameplay rounds. Conflicts (of interest) will arise automatically, i.e., out of the given constellation. Sustainable learning pedagogy focuses on reflecting on and addressing these unfamiliar challenges constructively “in a protected space” while simultaneously developing intercultural competence through experiential learning. The intention is to offer the students opportunities to expand the limits of their thinking, to learn from mistakes in the sense of a positive error culture, and further develop sensitivity in dealing with foreign cultures through a change of perspective and self-determined action. Students will experience the unfamiliar

environment of a purely virtual exchange with strangers (Swartz, 2023; Soria & Troisi, 2013) and to build-up familiar processes and team spirit during the simulation.

Third, the newly established exchange format intends to increase equity by making it easier for students with fewer opportunities to participate in international exchanges. Special considerations in the selection process will be given to students with difficult socio-economic conditions (first generation students, working students, students with children, or students with chronic illnesses or disabilities). Additionally, attention is paid to achieving a balanced gender representation and a mixture of different student-level classifications (i.e., freshmen and seniors).

Fourth, the objective is to promote student mobility away from the U.S. or German metropolitan areas. Both universities are located in rural regions, which tend to have lower levels of international mobility. By linking these areas, the program directly and indirectly benefits students, the respective higher education and business environments, as well as society as a whole.

Overview of the Module “International Business Simulation (Blended)”

The exchange program is curricularly anchored in a bachelor module “International Business Simulation (Blended)”. For an overview, the key details are presented in the table below.

Brief description	Simulation of international business with a focus on interdisciplinary key competencies (21st century skills)
ECTS credit points (CrP)	6 = 3 U.S. credit hours
Duration of the module	One semester
Type of course	Seminar, four semester hours per week
Workload	180 hours
Attendance time	120 hours
Self-study	60 hours

The Pedagogical Approach

To facilitate the implementation of the “International Business Simulation (Blended)” module, a pedagogical approach has been developed to support the achievement of learning outcomes for students from both universities. This approach is based on the principle of Constructive Alignment according to Biggs (1996), which coordinates the interaction between learning outcomes, teaching and learning, and examination. Learning outcomes form the starting point for the design of the teaching-learning situations and the examination formats. (Schoepp, 2019; Mörth, 2016). Aspects of diverse educational practices, which significantly affect the exchange program, were taken into account. These include digitizing studies and teaching and, in conjunction with this, implementing new teaching-learning formats, international and intercultural

cooperation between universities, and creating supportive conditions for developing interdisciplinary key competencies.

As envisaged by the principle of Constructive Alignment, the learning outcomes are first presented and their relevance is demonstrated before the teaching learning and examination formats are described.

Learning Outcomes

The pedagogical approach of the module allows for interculturality and the development of interdisciplinary key competencies. It is important not to relate the targeted competencies exclusively to the subject of international business but to guide the students within the module and during their experience abroad to foster their competence development across various disciplines. This should enable them to apply and develop the acquired skills in diverse situations in their professional and private lives. Therefore, the primary learning outcome is students' development of intercultural competence. Students will not only acquire theoretical knowledge about interculturality but also have the opportunity to "experience" it within the module and, most importantly, during their study abroad phases. Intercultural action is defined as goal-oriented and negotiation-based collaborative action in networking processes (Bolten, 2020, p. 101). This refers to the ability to develop one's capability for action in predominantly unfamiliar contexts while building upon the existing competence in familiar situations and settings (Bolten & Berhault, 2018; van Dyne et al., 2010).

The acquisition of intercultural competence is indispensable, especially in international/global business activities. This is accompanied by efforts for foreign language and communication skills through English as the course language and digital collaboration in multilingual student groups. Furthermore, dynamic group settings in virtual and face-to-face spaces promote not only social competence but also professional and interdisciplinary methodological competence using various methods. Students are taught to reflect on other participants' needs and find appropriate ways of dealing with intercultural situations. By implementing different methods in virtual and face-to-face spaces, students can individually contribute, try out, and thus strengthen their self-competence. Across the board, the students' professional competence is developed as they are guided by a problem-solving scenario related to international project management, which enabling them to prepare for real-world situations. Overall, students will develop a skill that is becoming increasingly important in times of a rapidly changing business world: Adapting quickly, flexibly and continuously to changes and unforeseen constellations.

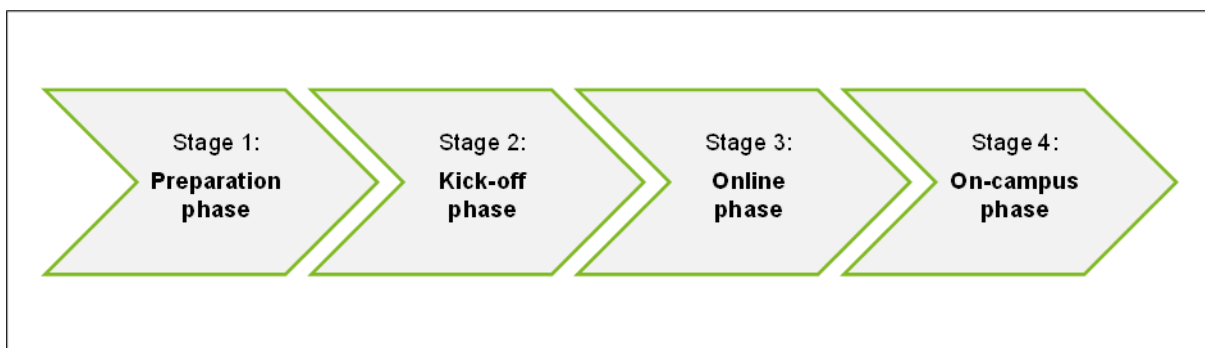
The learning outcomes form the basis for the design of the teaching and learning situations described below.

Teaching-Learning Formats

The conditions of society and professions are changing with advancing digitization and modern technology. To prepare students for this and enable them to act accordingly, they should learn how digital elements can be sensibly incorporated not only in their studies but also their professional life. The approach of the exchange program, therefore, integrates e-learning elements and is embedded within the framework of a blended learning approach to higher education pedagogy. This approach allows combining classroom and online elements (synchronous and asynchronous) to promote learning (Douglas et al., 2014; Graefe & Temmen, 2022). Intercultural competence development can be supported within diverse, multicultural settings in virtual and face-to-face spaces.

As outlined in figure 2, the module implementation starts with the preparation phase, and continues with individual and joint university kick-off events, followed by four online seminars and one-week on-campus at the respective partner university.

Figure 2: Module implementation



Stage 1: Preparation: Students need a great deal of support and guidance to be prepared for the program in the period leading up to the trip abroad (Bruhn, 2020; Chan et al. 2018; Hernández López, 2021; Ward, 2017). This applies to students going abroad and those who receive students at their home university. Therefore, this preparation time is taken into account in the pedagogical approach. Students have the opportunity to network informally before the joint kick-off event. The common Moodle course also opens ways to get to know each other.

Stage 2: Kick-off: The individual kick-off events provide supervised preparation for the virtual program and the trip abroad (Jackson, 2008) and for international and intercultural cooperation (Earls, 2018; Eisenächer & Wendt, 2020). Students are informed about cultural characteristics of the host country, safety and health instructions, housing, and the itinerary. The structure and content of the module are also addressed. As the module title indicates, the main focus is on the simulation of international business activities.

The joint university virtual kick-off event will present the basic structure of the cooperative business game, which has been developed by the Friedrich Schiller

University of Jena, department for Intercultural Business Communication (project “Virtual Interactive Games of Intercultural Learning”, <https://vigil.uni-jena.de>; Bolten & Berhault, 2018). After teachers and students have introduced themselves, students are gradually introduced to the simulation. The scenario, the rules of the game, and the course of the game, as well as the learning objectives to be achieved, are explained, and important subject-specific and interdisciplinary basic concepts are clarified. An essential rule is the independent and competence-oriented distribution of various roles within the groups, which are used at different simulation points. The group members have the opportunity to get to know each other, to exchange ideas, and to work on initial group goals. The online tools, materials, and rules for joint work in the virtual teams are also presented. Finally, the joint kick-off event ends with voluntary participation in a virtual “after-game party” in an online tool that allows coming together and interacting in a playful way.

Stage 3: Online phase: The preparation phase and kick-off events are followed by the online phase, in which four synchronous seminar events (“game rounds”) are scheduled. The four rounds are coordinated so that the diverse groups work together on various tasks, challenges, and solutions during the four days of the seminar. Each seminar begins with an introductory phase in which the previous events are reflected upon. In addition, information is provided on how to proceed. The introductory phase is also used to discuss non-content concerns, if necessary. By entering the seminar together, students can better understand the subject matter and establish connections more effectively (Farrell, 2002; Meyer, 2007). The asynchronous elements consist of additional information relevant to the simulation game (e.g. video sources, texts, annotated slides) that students can use for their self-study.

The main work phases are predominantly characterized by self-directed (self-regulated, self-organized, and autonomous) learning (Farrell, 2002; Perels et al., 2020) within the groups. Students organize their learning processes independently by discussing content, choosing solution paths, reflecting on their processes, evaluating them, and adjusting them if necessary (Meyer et al., 2008; Schiefele & Schaffner, 2020). This type of self-determination supports the development of self-competence (Meyer et al., 2008; Perels et al., 2020) and building trust and a positive atmosphere in the virtual team context. In addition, there are work phases with the whole group, which are either instructed by the teacher or designed by the group itself. As time progresses, the teacher increasingly withdraws and is mainly available for supervision and support. This encourages the students’ self-design and commitment (Meyer et al., 2008; Reinisch, 2021), who get multiple opportunities to leave their “comfort zone” and try out unfamiliar ways of acting in a protected space to simulate real challenges in international business.

Furthermore, regular reflection prompts are included, enabling self-reflection and reflection on others, thus ensuring continuous improvement of the learning processes (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Gotzen et al., 2011). This supports the development of students’

reflective competence (Pellert, 2016). Reflection is particularly necessary in intercultural situations to adapt one's actions to the unique circumstances. Feedback is also requested at the end of each seminar day, and different methods are used for this in the online setting. These final phases secure the results and coordinate the next steps (Farrell, 2002; Meyer, 2007). Needs and desires can be expressed here. The students can thus actively participate in the design of the seminar process.

Stage 4: On-campus phase: The face-to-face parts of the exchange program are divided into two block courses. These take place both in Germany and the southern U.S. in short term, faculty-led programs. These short stays abroad promote the development of students' intercultural and communication skills (Anderson et al., 2006; Jackson, 2008). Moreover, the block course format has been shown to benefit student learning outcomes (Evans et al., 2002; Bouyraaman, 2015). The engagement with the course contents and the students' cooperation is very intensive due to the organization of block sessions (Gullatt, 2006; Metzger, 2010; Lipowsky, 2020). In addition to the joint conclusion of the business game and an associated intensive debriefing, the program includes multifaceted items devoted to the module's focal points: virtuality, interculturality, and current issues in business and economic policy in Europe and the United States. This is accomplished through academic lectures, practical presentations, excursions to European and American corporations, and cultural events. Specific attention is paid to the link to theoretical concepts to understand international business holistically.

To complete the Constructive Alignment approach, the next section will introduce the examination formats of the module.

Examination Formats

The module works with different assessments to cover the diverse learning processes of the students (Evans et al., 2014; Iller & Wick, 2009). As described above, the program's implementation in all phases (online and face-to-face) thrives on a lively exchange between the participants. Therefore, it is essential that students actively participate and contribute their ideas, cultural differences, and diverse character and competence traits. Participants develop intercultural competence through personal experiences in both virtual and face-to face contexts, which go far beyond the theoretical level.

The creation of learning diaries is chosen as the formative examination format (80% of the final grade). The entry and submission requirements are communicated at the beginning of the course. Each participant prepares their own learning diary, which consists of several entries and relates to each of the rounds of the simulation. Students are encouraged to write about challenges, insights, goals, and other important aspects. This also results in regular self-reflection and intensive engagement with the contents and new strategies (Yan et al., 2020; Kornmann, 2003).

During the first attendance phase, students are required to present a creative portfolio (poster) in-class (20% of the final grade), which is the synthesis of each student's personal findings. In the second attendance phase, a voluntary experience presentation can be held. In the case of the latter, students have the opportunity to give an individual "guest lecture" at the foreign university, in which they present their experiences of the module as part of an informational event and thus contribute authentically to the dissemination of the innovative teaching-learning format in the student-student dialogue. Since the latter presentations are voluntary, the performance is included in the overall final grade as additional bonus percentage points (maximum of 10). The examination formats will be presented at the beginning of the module to ensure transparency for subsequent performance assessment. The diversity of the examination formats is based on the Constructive Alignment principle.

Conclusion and Outlook

From a pedagogical perspective, the program combines the best of both worlds: Virtual and location-independent learning units with digital collaboration tools on the one hand and face-to-face exchange in presence on the other. In addition, it provides students with an attractive learning experience that not only teaches the specifics of interculturality and international business activities but also allows them to experience them firsthand, both in face-to-face and virtual space. The presented pedagogical approach offers versatile elements and methods. The teaching and learning, as well as the forms of examination, are adapted to the learning outcomes and the blended learning format.

The description of the pedagogical approach clearly shows the orientation towards interculturality, digital teaching-learning formats, and the development of key competencies (21st century skills) under conditions conducive to learning: Students and their competence development are the focus. At the same time, however, corporate practice also benefits from the students' acquisition of competencies because most companies operate in internationally networked structures and global value chains, i.e., jobs associated with them generally have a specific international requirement profile, even if they are based locally. This means that acting confidently and interculturality in unfamiliar, virtual, and internationally networked environments is becoming increasingly important (Bolten & Berhault, 2018; Groß & Löhr, 2022; van Dyne et al., 2010), especially in "VUCA times" (VUCA standing for the increase in volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity in the business world). Given the existing geopolitical crisis landscapes, it is essential to promote the expansion of international networking and intercultural understanding in higher education.

The project is currently being implemented. The attained status can be evaluated as highly favorable, reflecting the acquisition of extensive experience in various areas. This includes the resolution of misunderstandings arising from culturally diverse language use, as well as effective management of group dynamics, and diverse strategies in new employee integration and project management. This includes contemplation of a 'growth mindset', and the enhancement of self-assurance through navigating the potential benefits and challenges associated with digital collaboration tools.

The goal for the module's further development is to make the blended learning approach accessible to other (current and future) university partners, and to expand diversity, to ideally integrate other universities from complementary cultural areas.

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