**STUDENTS INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION PROJECT (SICP):**
*A cross-cultural project using virtual teams to learn communication styles*

Kathryn Hashimoto, Ph.D.
University of New Orleans
And
Jean-marc Lehu, Ph.D.
Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne

Abstract
“SICP” stands for Students International Collaboration Project. This article will explain SICP’s mission and its procedures, analyze its main concepts, and describe the outcomes. Experiences from past projects in the learning curve will be used to give a practical framework. The prototype combined French and American teams who wrote a research paper together. The learned outcomes focused on improved communication skills and team management. In the process, the students also learned about a different culture. This mentoring process constitutes an opportunity for teachers to stimulate experiential learning by involving students in a shared responsibility experience to learn new concepts.

Introduction - Project Background
Near the end of the 1990’s, Professor Stefaan Van Ryssen at the Hogeschool Gent University in Belgium developed an original project, *Marctica*, which used the Internet and the freedom of discovery as a new way to teach. Keeping the original philosophy of student collaboration, the SICP has been designed to focus on the student's actual behaviors and actions. SICP stands for Students International Collaboration Project. There are several goals to this project. The first goal is to create a virtual team crossing international borders and cultures. The second is to organize the relevant content by assigning a team-building project. The third is to learn about another culture by designing the project such that the students must integrate their efforts to accomplish their objective. The fourth goal is to learn team strategies by creating an environment where teams must work together without any interference. The fifth is to create the role of mentor where advice is given when asked, but is not mandated for action. Finally, the last objective is to give the students the opportunity to learn effective national/international communication skills on their own.

Project Organization
In the last few iterations of SICP, the French teams have been paired with American teams. The project begins by having students pairing up, usually 2-3 students on a team in each country. Then the faculty pair up French and American teams. These teams must get acquainted via email by giving a basic summary of each member’s background and interests. Once they have begun a dialogue, they must mutually decide on the needed information for a research topic of their choice. The verbalized objective is to write one paper that compares a French and American industry or business that will be submitted to both professors. Later in the semester, teams give oral presentations of the project, along with their perceptions and experiences. It is in this last stage that the real learning takes place. The true motivations for the assignments are exposed, and discussions commence on what students really learned about their own team-building abilities and communication skills.

Challenges
In creating an environment where students must learn to cope with virtual teams and assignments, there were many challenges to face.

Distance: Geographical distance is the first challenge that surfaces. Team members are not all in the same classroom and in the same time zone. Therefore, they cannot immediately communicate but must meet on the
Internet and plan commonly accepted deadlines and agree upon ways to format the data. As a result, there are inevitable frustrations in delays because there are no instant transmissions. Procrastination is not possible. Students cannot stay up all night and write the paper because there must be a team consensus on content and form. Therefore, special governance rules must be developed so that each team member can share information so that nothing important is left out.

Lack of face-to-face communication: At the master’s level, students think they know what teamwork is and how to develop a consistent strategy. However, a foreign partner is an unknown entity who has different lifestyles, working techniques and university settings. In virtual teams, the people may never meet physically. Therefore, there is no knowledge of someone’s sense of humor or personality, only the words in the message. “People who are corresponding online often seem to be or are brusque, and sometimes even rude, than they would be in face to face conversation (Bock, 2003, p. 43). As a result, care in wording is more critical in cyberspace communications than in face-to-face meetings. In addition, students are strongly encouraged to continuously exchange information because there is a very strong temptation for groups to work on their side of the ocean and then try to combine their work at the very end. However, each team ends up with different materials and different methods of writing and as a result, the two pieces rarely fit together. This strategy does not work very well in a virtual setting and is contrary to the SICP goals.

Trust: Within teams, one of the most important ingredients is trust. This is the confidence that each member can express their opinions or new ideas without fear because everyone is there to work together in completing a common task to the best of their abilities. Trust also means believing that foreign partners will collect appropriate data. If problems occur, it is because they are important and unavoidable, not because members are unwilling to do their part. In the problem teams, the two groups usually did not take time to understand each other at the beginning of the exercise, so doubt and suspicion permeated the relationship. Therefore, when even a little problem occurred, blame was placed on the other party. On the other hand, with trust came respect, one of the most important goals of SICP.

Language and International/National Communication: Since the officially used language was English, it would be expected that the French students have to make more of an effort to communicate. However, knowing words and definitions is not the same thing as creating a comprehensible thought. The style of the phraseology and the colloquialisms from each country are very different. Learning to express oneself so that other people can understand the idea is difficult when speaking to fellow countrypersons, but the effort is infinitely more problematic when adapting to different thought patterns and different linguistic experiences. These lessons had to be learned by the Americans as well. For example the American students can believe that their international counterparts are being difficult, or they can learn, that words are not interpreted the same in all cultures. Therefore, questioning and defining words and terms to assure common understanding is always an ongoing process. At least the French understood that they had a language barrier, the Americans did not, which may have been the hardest lesson of all.

Email is a special form of communication: Sometimes it appears that people are having a real conversation as messages fly across the Net one right after the other. At other time, there are long stretches without replies. Then, the concerns mount. Did they get the message? After all many messages are lost on the Web and we do not know if the other team is playing the game or ignoring the message. As a result, one valuable lesson was that the “message received” or “message read” buttons become extremely important in communication as well as making sure all team members are put in the copy message. In debriefings, students also said that they reread their emails before sending and they were more meticulous in checking all the points mentioned in the partner’s request before replying.

Student Learning Perspective
The true objective of the project is to learn communication patterns. However, students typically are too busy focusing on the other side’s misdemeanors, rather than on their own behavioral evolution, therefore they could easily miss the real lesson. The natural classic reflex of the students is to run to the professor and demand
solutions. However, solving the problem for the students is much less interesting than inviting the students to find their own solutions. In addition, the limited time of the project forces them to work quite quickly so there is no time for reflection. Finally, the personal learning must be discovered by themselves and cannot be lectured. It is very easy to blame the people on the other side of the ocean for all the problems because it is more comfortable. However when debriefing a few weeks later, students are much less embittered as they begin to understand and reflect on their own behavior. It appears then that they begin to perceive what this project is about: adapting and correcting their own communication problems.

Benefit of SICP
This arrangement is similar to the kind of projects that the students will have to manage when on the job. They will have to work with people they don’t choose and sometimes do not even know. A virtual team project offers a small-scale test of the real world. Using cross-cultural teams offers students the possibility to learn about cultural and individual differences in ways of thinking, ways of working and ways of managing people. The overall philosophy of the project was to allow students to adapt to this feeling of freedom and for faculty to let go of control. This, of course, does not mean that teachers are only involved at the beginning and at the end, and not for the remainder of the project. It means that the professor is there to support this freedom by aiding in the learning process. We believe that the learning process has just started. American and French students will have other opportunities to remember some working situation/exchange of the SICP project in the future. At that time, they will consider that it was much more interesting than the sole marketing project itself. And then we will have our full reward.

References