

Experiencing Global Culture in Vatel: Implications of Using Knowledge Management Concepts for Approaching Culture in Professional Communication

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Abstract: To explore the meaning of “global culture” in a professional communication context, this paper explores the “unsettled” global culture of Vatel, a private business school educating students from nearly 50 different countries for the hospitality industry. This paper explores the role of knowledge management in understanding global culture, arguing that the notion of “unsettled” cultures demonstrates how ideologies function in global settings and draw on national “settled” cultural resources. In unpacking different aspects of Vatel’s culture this paper questions assumptions built into cultural frames of reference by offering a global culture frame, drawing on cultural resources from country based “settled” cultural contexts and reflects on how global cultural contexts can benefit from a knowledge management approach to this dynamic between “settled” cultural contexts and “unsettled” cultural ideologies that frame global cultural experiences. This approach to culture offers an opportunity for professional and technical communicators to reflect on global cultural contexts in the workplace.

Index Terms – Global culture, learning experience , knowledge management, branding, virtual business game

INTRODUCTION

What is global culture? And what does cross-cultural interaction mean when one attends classes with people from nearly 50 different nationalities? Currently, the field of Technical Communication focuses on global and local configurations of culture related to translation. However, when the scope of languages and national cultures involved is sufficiently large, it is not possible to pay attention to these configurations of local and global because too many local cultures involved make the

analysis too time consuming and difficult to accomplish. There are many areas interactions between people can involve people with cultures from 50 or more different backgrounds, Examples include 1) global cultures like Vatel, a private business school educating students from nearly 50 different countries for the hospitality industry; 2) smartphone apps that can be simultaneously released in many languages worldwide; and 3) large global project settings that hire engineers and designers from around the world.

Because of the scope of this phenomenon, understanding global cultures can be of interest for technical communicators. One area that is currently of relevance is “born global” [1] technologies such as smartphone apps. Because of crowdsourced translation tools, these apps can be quickly and cheaply crowdsourced for translation into 50 or more languages. As technical communication and technology have historically been intertwined, this technological ability to produce globally targeted smartphone apps implies that professional and technical communicators also need to be aware and ready to adapt to “born global” products and companies as these types of products become more commonly expected and used. To begin to understand how “born global” culture functions, examining an instance of global culture in Vatel University through their globally played game offers a starting point for reflecting on concepts which can serve as tools for technical communicators and engineers entering global contexts and working for “born global” companies.

To explore the features of global cultures, this paper addresses implications for understanding global culture based on connections and disconnections in communication during an experiential learning business game experience for graduate students. This gaming experience was run in one of the 30 Vatel Business Schools in Hospitality and Tourism Industry, situated in Switzerland. Students represent 47 different nationalities

from all over the world. Being together with so many different cultures results in an “unsettled” [2] common culture shared by Vatel students and faculty who interact on a daily basis with people from up to 47 different national cultural origins. On the campuses, up to three different languages are used on a daily basis among students, academic staff and hotel staff. A four star hotel on campus serves real customers. The students use English as a business language with different customers and suppliers in the hotel. English is used as a lingua franca, although it is a second language for most of the community. Different levels of English, or other languages are not considered to be culture barriers; rather, any language skill is considered as part of the professional competency portfolio needed for success in the hotel industry on an international level. The level of acceptance and tolerance towards language imperfections among individuals is high in both oral and written interactions.

To go beyond dimensions of national culture and approach global contexts, this paper uses Swidler’s model for understanding culture [2]. Swidler differentiated cultures as being “settled” or “unsettled.” She defines “unsettled” cultures as ideology-based, and “settled” cultures as being rich in resources that are drawn upon for action. This characterization of Vatel focuses on “unsettled” cultures operating as a form of **ideology** or knowledge which draws on the knowledge resources in “settled” cultures which have rich history and shared contextual experiences as resources. “Unsettled” cultures can be seen as shareable forms of culture which need “settled” cultural resources in order to survive [2].

The VIBG (Vatel International Business Game) is an illustration of a learning context which operates as a form of global culture, based on the organizational culture instilled by Vatel. This experience demonstrates that cultural differences can function as a barriers with regard to learning and knowledge acquisition. However, these culture effects on learning processes, experiences and expectations can also be understood fruitfully as adding value through establishing an “unsettled” global culture. Our notion of a global “unsettled” culture is based on Swidler, but also incorporates knowledge management concepts such as Communities of Practice [3]. Here, Wenger focuses on ways in which identity, learning and meaning work together in informal groups through mutual engagement, shared repertoire and joint enterprise. This global culture based on learning and knowledge management concepts supports insights about how people can come together and work successfully in teams with members from around the globe. These game experiences will be explored from the students’ perspective, giving learning collaboration insights related to “unsettled” global cultures and knowledge management.

LEARNING CONTEXT BASED ON IDEOLOGIES INHERENT IN VATEL’S GLOBAL CULTURE

Because this section describes an ideology, it can be seen as over emphasizing the positive in terms of content. However, the intention of this section is to demonstrate the aspects of an ideology that acts as a kind of global “unsettled” culture.

How does Vatel bring together people from so many different backgrounds in a manner that builds an “unsettled” global culture in the school? First, in establishing the use of the title, *Vatel Culture*, second in reflecting on their interactions, and third in managing cultural knowledge from settled cultural contexts. So this “unsettled” culture in Vatel directly and consciously draws from resources that students and faculty bring with them from their diverse settled cultural contexts.

Establishing “Vatel Culture” as an explicit concept

First, to establish Vatel Culture explicitly, the introduction to the education includes an explicit focus on “Vatel Cultural Values.” These are communicated from the first day that undergraduate and graduate students begin their programs. These global cultural values are based on a 30 year old business concept by the founders, Mr. and Mrs. Sebban. Mrs. Sebban describes the values through a book she wrote, called *The Vatel Spirit* [4]. This book gives insights about global culture through the use of storytelling.

An “unsettled” cultural sign of the Vatel global culture, for example, is the Vatel school uniform. Even if there is a general uniform policy, there is room for differences in the way uniforms are put together. Vatel faculty can see this because second year Bachelor students participate in an exchange program, called Marco Polo, and visit campuses in different countries. These uniforms share common features, like the logo on the uniform and color used that is often dark blue or black with white blouses and ties. But the common Vatel identity is always visible even across different cultural interpretations of the uniform code. The uniform is explicit, but at the same time, students integrate some aspects of their identity in the way they choose. Thus, this symbol of the “unsettled” Vatel culture still draws on resources that the students bring with them from their national cultural contexts.

Reflecting on interactions

Second, reflecting on interactions is another way that Vatel builds an “unsettled” culture. Key concepts designed for helping students reflect on culture include *dynamic knowledge*, and *intercultural ease*. To establish the Vatel culture through helping faculty and students reflect on their interactions, the chapter describing the

creation of “dynamic knowledge” offers insights about social positions of teachers that are facing Vatel students within the community. Mrs. Sebban describes this through the place and roles of teachers within a private university and the way of transmitting knowledge. A part of this book focuses on “essential life skills.” One of the key concepts is “intercultural ease” and Mrs. Sebban [4] describes it in the following manner:

“Most of our students will spend a part, albeit sometimes short, of their working life abroad, as mobility is a key in the Hospitality Industry. It is our job to help them accept cultural differences, to take the best parts from each culture for themselves, to gradually adapt themselves to different ways of life, while showing others the envied European hospitality traditions... The more students are exposed to different cultures while attending school, the less they will be afraid to travel around the world. They want to quickly be able to live new experiences abroad. If this open attitude could help bring cultures closer together, we would certainly be proud.”

Intercultural ease is a concept that contributes to building an “unsettled” culture because it requires reflection both on student and faculty choices in their behaviors in interactions and on the resources in the form of assumptions and understanding that they bring with them from their settled cultural contexts.

Vatel uses the notion of intercultural ease to get a better understanding of different members of the Vatel University community, as well as future international clients. The notion of “intercultural ease” focuses on constructing a common learning context that is used for communication among different cultural and social groups comprising the Vatel community. This focuses on preparing students effectively for the Hospitality and Tourism Industry.

Managing Cultural Knowledge

Third, the Vatel “unsettled” culture explicitly addresses the notion of managing cultural knowledge drawn from national “settled” cultural contexts. This knowledge management process can be understood as encompassing both identity elements inherent in communities of practice [3] and the transformational elements of Nonaka’s model for knowledge conversion [5].

In her book [4], Mrs. Sebban offers insights about learning across cultures and managing cultural knowledge. This can be seen as complimentary to the business-based field of knowledge management, but focused precisely on how to manage cultural knowledge. So the intercultural basis for Vatel’s global culture can be

considered as a knowledge management tool for learning that facilitates communication and knowledge exchange related to culture within the Vatel context.

The experience of the global Vatel culture manages cultural knowledge in order to promote cross-cultural work relationships among hospitality professionals. Characteristics of this knowledge management process include regular direct contact between students, faculty, academic staff and professionals, and places for the development of communities of practice. This contact is integrated and part of the way in which students build their global Vatel identity because any given campus has nearly 50 different nationalities present at any given time. Each campus has opportunities for students to develop communities of practice [3] because places of practice are located in hotels and restaurants placed on the school campuses. The business concept of Vatel as an educational institution includes students regularly changing between theory courses and practical application courses positioned in real hotels, or restaurants.

The management of cultural knowledge is also demonstrated through communicating cultural values of the “unsettled” Vatel culture explicitly. These values represent the expectations of the hospitality industry. For example, “respect” is one of the Vatel “unsettled” cultural values and is both taught and experienced explicitly throughout theory and practical courses. This value of cultural “respect” encompasses both human and professional sides of working in the international and richly intercultural tourist industry. A description of the Vatel values hangs in each classroom, as a visible reminder for students, teachers and academic staff. These values are part of the identity of Vatel schools.

These values can be considered as the basis for the Vatel shared repertoire [3] of tools, like the uniform process and procedures. In addition, the faculty, staff and students work together on a joint enterprise—the goal of effective preparation for the hospitality and tourism industry on a global level. The students live together on campus, and this experience where they study, work and live together can be seen as a form of mutual engagement in action. Thus, it can be argued that Vatel’s “unsettled” culture operates as a knowledge management system based in Wenger’s notion of communities of practice [3]. This identity perspective on knowledge management, where learning, meaning and identity are central to knowledge sharing, serves as a mechanism for spreading Vatel’s “unsettled” global culture.

These communities of practice operate in what Nonaka et al call a space, or *ba*, of socialization [5]. This *ba* includes many areas set up for face to face interactions. For example, student, faculty and practical teachers, as well as school staff, spend their leisure time together on campus in areas which include the four star hotel, restaurant, and bar, located directly on campus.

From both the human and professional side, this way of living is quite intense in regard to the respect of private life. But at the same time, the shared space, or *ba*, intensifies both the quality of communication, and sharing of knowledge because of the opportunities to ask questions of each other and also engage in what Nonaka et al describe as an “externalizing *ba*.” This enables both students and teachers to engage together in the knowledge conversion process of converting tacit cultural and professional knowledge to explicit knowledge.

This process offers a second feature of “unsettled” culture knowledge management processes—a perspective on knowledge management as innovation. Nonaka et al work with knowledge conversion from implicit to explicit and back again to implicit as part of a cycle of innovation [5]. This innovation process also plays a part in establishing a global culture of respect based on high quality communication. Teachers and students become involved in the co-creation of what it means to be in a global culture because of their continual interaction which includes and incorporates each others’ cultural contexts.

Cultural differences are integrated in this context and considered as an added value that enhances interaction and can be used as knowledge assets [5]. In addition, regular internships in a business context are part of the educational program. Professional and human values are directly linked to the daily experiences which could be understood as knowledge management practices for each group. It is all about the “Vatel Spirit” that grows with each student joining this community.

The International Vatel Business Game (VIBG) is one of the experience which both are affected by and reflects the Vatel global culture. It is based on the Vatel expression of professional and human values as a global cultural space. It acts as a reference point for any member of the Vatel global community, even for students that have graduated for a long time. Graduates are called “Vateliens” and organized throughout a huge Alumni social network. This multinational simulation game demonstrates Vatel as a global “unsettled” culture and reveals some elements of knowledge communication practices in action, which will be discussed in terms of knowledge management concepts .

EXPLORING THE VATEL INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS GAME AS AN ENACTMENT OF A GLOBAL CULTURAL CONTEXT

1. Game context

The VIBG is used as a pedagogical tool for students who have completed their program. It could also be considered a knowledge management tool because it requires alumni to bring together all of the learning that they have accomplished during the BA and MA programs. The program is a three year Bachelor program with a certified title which follows the European Bologna

agreement for standardization of education. There is a following Master’s level which offers two years of coursework in the Business School Vatel. This master’s degree is a terminal degree, representing the highest degree possible within the Vatel schools. Again, it is a certified title being part of the European Bologna agreement. As announced in an internal brochure focused on teachers and students, the game is defined as follows:

Vatel International Business Game is a business management simulation serious game in which 5th year students in 30 Vatel Schools throughout the world take part. Each team manages three companies belonging to the same group. Students, in real time simulation, must take decisions based on sales, finance, technical and personnel issues. When the game is over, the team that was able to make the best strategic decisions, thus accumulating the highest number of points, is declared to be the “Vatel Dream Team.” [6]

The group of companies consists of a holding company, a resort and a city hotel. In this real time simulation, participants make decisions based on sales, finance, technical, and personnel issues. When the game is over, the team that was able to make the best strategic decisions, thus accumulating the highest number of points, is declared to be the “Vatel Dream Team.” In December 2014, 14 teams from six different Vatel schools participated in the weeklong simulation. The focus of content for Monday was an illustration day explaining the content and technology of the game. And from Tuesday, students started playing at 7.00 in the morning and finished on Friday noon.

The game announcement and team structure are examples of shared repertoire related to the Vatel Game, and it shows the numbers for schools, teams, companies and managers every time the game is played. The prominence of the numbers in the game announcement underscores the importance of placement in the game. The groups are presented with photos and the type of company for which they are responsible, shown in Figure 1.



FIGURE 1. GROUP PRESENTATION DURING THE, VATEL GAME 2014

The shared repertoire used in the game context can be seen by the uniform, team presentations on the photo and the choice of team name chosen by the students. These choices involved and motivated students to participate in this learning game as a community of practice which will extend beyond the game after graduation. As the game is part of the global Vatel culture, this learning context demonstrates a connection between knowledge management concepts and global cultures as learned cultures which can be picked up in a relatively short time. Because of the knowledge management features of the Vatel global culture, teachers can focus directly on the content of courses and how to link this knowledge to the game because motivation is already built into their identity as Vatelians.

II. Game and Team setup

The game runs on a shared server, connecting teams from the different locations. Each team can elect to connect to one of the three companies. The team divides into three sub-teams: one managing the holding company, one the city hotel and one the resort. Upon the first connection, players can download the three player manuals—one for each company. The teams are supervised by local coaches, who can guide and advise and even offer additional training. The game is centrally administered by a team of coordinators who play the role of partners who publish information, studies and analyses on the simulator online, negotiate bank financing, give the teams challenges and inform the teams about subsequent events. An event can be a challenge that has been sent from one team to another. Figure 2 demonstrates the first challenge in the game.

Message from : firstname.lastname
 Sent on : 09-12-2014 11:14:09

Subject : challenge 1
 The VICI President wants the managers in charge of the Vatel Resort to prepare a special advertising campaign to promote sustainable tourism stays at the Vatel Resort for the next semester. You will decide on the budget. Mr. Veni-Vidi has asked you to propose the slogan of this campaign as he wants to agree on it before using it for advertising. The same slogan will be used in America as well as in Europe and Asia. The Communication Agency has reminded you that such a slogan must not include more than 15 words and that the “shorter” is often “better”.

FIGURE 2. CHALLENGE NUMBER ONE EMAIL INTRODUCTION.

The Vatel Culture facilitates this interaction, because the students are familiar with cultural needs related to global contexts and have the tools to create and justify a global slogan across three continents. The teams perform tasks by communicating with each other. First, they receive a message, work on it, prepare an answer and send it to a different team, at a different school. The six schools involved in the 2014 VIBG edition are located in Singapore, Spain, two different places from France

(Nîmes and Bordeaux), Mauritius, and Switzerland. In order to make effective decisions, students' work can be understood through Choo's rational decision model [8] based on a combination of sensemaking [9] and an innovation perspective on knowledge management [5]. Both sensemaking and innovation work together to explain a focus on knowledge for decision making. This decision making framework also demonstrates the knowledge management characteristics of Vatel's global culture.

III. Team Interaction

The sub-teams need to coordinate their actions, as their decisions will affect the performance of their own company as well as the holding company. Negotiations between the sub-teams are frequent, especially in financial matters as the holding company acts as central financiers. At any time, the team can interact with the coordinators via the internal email system. The following example in Figures 3 and 4 shows the subjects of different types of interaction between the team and the coordinators during the game named in the message headings. These interactions include challenges, follow up, and decisions that mirror project communication in the hospitality industry.



FIGURE 3. EXAMPLE OF THE TEAM INBOX DURING THE GAME

The following message in Figure 4 is an example of how politeness and financial consequences of player choices are handled in the game situation. The message models business messages which have a polite tone, yet are strongly worded and relate the financial actions of the players to the social consequences of breaking trust, implied through the phrase “we would like to confirm our trust.” The message also uses a form of world English that is not idiomatic to native speakers of English in saying “address you our sincerest regards.” The use of English as a *lingua franca* [7] rather than in native speaker structures is also realistic to a global cultural context.

Message from : firstname.lastname
Sent on : 09-12-2014 11:12:57

Subject : Follow-up Letter

We have observed that after various payments, your bank account here this day, except in case of error or omission on our part, has an overdraft balance of:1285500.09€ We would like to remind you of your obligation to cover this amount at your earliest convenience. In the meantime, Sir, Madam, we would like to confirm our trust, and address you our sincerest regards. For the Agency Director

FIGURE. 4. EXAMPLE EMAIL RESPONSE DURING THE VATEL GAME.

At times Skype Q&A sessions can be organized between the team and the coordinators, incorporating interpersonal communication elements into the game and encouraging teams from different country locations to interact with each other. These interactions are characterized by using English as a *lingua franca* [7] and connecting technical knowledge about the financial consequences of business decisions with the social relationships in which they are situated. Through these types of experiences modeling workplace issues, the groundwork for operationalizing Vatel's global culture is laid. Students are challenged to use not only their knowledge, but also their values to play in the simulation. Thus, the game reflects an "unsettled" culture by offering opportunities to manage their social and cultural knowledge in a global space where responses to students' communication choices have explicit consequences in the simulation context. Thus, there is no need to adapt the VIBG culturally because the game itself could be understood to be an experiential knowledge asset [5] for Vatel's global culture.

The teaching inherent in the game is not driven by the cultural origins of students and teachers, but rather can be understood as a way of working with knowledge management from identity [3], decision making [8], and innovation [5] perspectives. The combination of these different forms of knowledge management facilitates the global "unsettled" Vatel culture, and leverages knowledge resources from the national origin cultural contexts that the students came from as resources for knowing, resources for respecting, and resources for interaction across many different thick cultural perspectives. One could also argue that the Vatel teaching practices are not driven by monocultural influences, but rather by the combination of many resources from different "settled" cultural contexts.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

One of the key differences between global and cross-culture communication contexts is the presence of explicit ideologies mediating the global contexts. These

ideologies can be found in other professional contexts outside the hospitality industry such as qualification driven organizations (i.e. the International Project Management Association, or the Project Management Institute). These ideologies shape the ways in which we are able to understand and use our cultural resources, and offer points of intersection across cultural contexts in global environments. One of the questions this notion of ideology raises is whether or not Technical and Professional Communication has (or should have) an ideological core that could be beneficial to our graduates working global cultural contexts. In order to approach that question, we need to broaden our understanding of how professional communication is used in global projects and global industry contexts.

The VIBG illustration was used to explore the Vatel global culture as an "unsettled" culture using ideology to connect people with 47 different country culture origins. The different ways in which knowledge management concepts and perspectives played out during communication in the game offers a perspective on global cultures as rooted in knowledge management practices. Understanding culture from an "unsettled" global cultures perspective is an emerging skill that can support Technical and Professional communicators who need to operate in "born global" companies and write about "born global" technologies and innovations.

The findings of this exploratory analysis also imply that a focus on knowledge management perspectives can be a useful direction for developing professional and technical communication curricula. Knowledge management concepts can be used to understand "unsettled" global cultures where people from so many different places are interacting. These "born global" contexts are problematic for older tools based in cross-cultural interactions and single culture analysis as a point of departure. The global culture focused situation is becoming more predominant in global companies and in global projects where it is simply not possible to take all the different cultural perspectives of team members from a national culture perspective into account and still manage the project.

Finally, the connection between the three knowledge management perspectives described here—knowledge as identity, knowledge as innovation, and knowledge as decision making—can be used to further develop our understanding of what it means to communicate and function in the global "unsettled" cultures emerging from "born global" environments and "born global" companies.

So why does a global game in a service industry matter for how we approach culture in the field of professional communication? First of all, it offers a perspective on culture that is global in nature—that of "unsettled" cultures which operate as ideologies and use resources from "settled" national cultures. This

perspective is useful for technical and professional communicators when they need to work in global environments with people from many different country contexts. Being aware of ways in which ideologies can be used to build global “unsettled” cultures and understanding how they can work together with one’s own “settled” cultural resources is a useful tool for engineering or technical communication professionals working in global project contexts. This awareness can also be used in international technical communication courses to offer a perspective for reflecting on culture from a resource point of view. This perspective is useful to graduates in contexts where dimensional views on national culture contexts with their categories and specific suggestions for action cannot be used because people from so many different national cultures are involved that such an analysis becomes difficult to navigate.

The concept of using knowledge management theories for managing cultural knowledge offers a fruitful direction for exploring how global cultures work through identity and knowledge transformation processes in organizational culture contexts. The organizations and corporations that employ professional communication graduates may either have or need to develop strategies for dealing in global environments with both “settled” cultural resources from the people involved, and “unsettled” ideologies to succeed with their work. Recognizing this mechanism and the role of knowledge management in dealing with cultural knowledge are first steps in developing tools for effective communication in global environments.

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