

INTERNATIONAL TRIPS IN MBA PROGRAMS: PLANS FOR INCREASING
INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Robin Sronce, PhD, SPHR
Assistant Professor
Drury University
900 N. Benton Ave
Springfield, MO 65802
rsronce@drury.edu

and

John Taylor, PhD
Associate Professor
Drury University
900 N. Benton Ave
Springfield, MO 65802
jtaylor3@drury.edu

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the theoretical and pedagogical outlines of a class-based international trip for MBA students at a comprehensive university in the Midwest. Students complete the international trip before the course begins, after which they participate in in-class instruction during the final semester. We outline the conceptual basis of this trip, and we discuss the format in which this concept is applied.

KEYWORDS: Intercultural, International trip, Course Design

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INTRODUCTION: INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS AND BUSINESS EDUCATION

In his bestselling work *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, Thomas Friedman examines what he considers a seminal moment in human history: the flattening of the world as a result of historical, technological, logistical, and tele-communicative developments at the dawn of the 21st century. As the Internet enables more efficient (and cost-effective) communication; as technological advances allow for the globalization of supply chains; and as heretofore Communist, or statist, countries open their economies both internally and externally, the scope of human activity draws to a global scale, and with it new opportunities and challenges.

Business schools have always had an important role to play in preparing students for the workplace. Today, this must continue to remain the case where exposure to the international business environment is concerned. As a number of researchers have noted, more businesses are expanding their markets and operations beyond traditional state borders; this makes it likely that today's young professionals will find themselves in cross-cultural interactions well outside of their comfort zones (Albers-Miller, Sigerstad, & Straughn, 2000, Cant 2004, Ang, Van Dyne, Koh, Ng, Templer, Tay-Lee, & Chandrasehar, 2007). This makes the need for an internationalized curriculum in business school curricula ever more acute.

Today's MBA programs are working to meet this need. Stanford and MIT, for instance, offer immersion internships and study abroad programs, while the University of Pennsylvania now makes a joint degree in International Affairs available to its MBA students. Meanwhile, Northwestern University offers a program, Global Initiatives in Management, which combines in-class work on a student's area of interest with a research trip to a region outside of the US. With very few exceptions, it is clear that business schools are rising to the challenge of providing an internationalized curriculum to graduate students in business.

As a pedagogical matter, and as a matter of the often-considerable costs of providing business education beyond borders, business schools must evaluate and demonstrate the success of their programs to their stakeholders: students, administrators, and prospective donors. In this article, we present our framework for developing and evaluating the goals, implementation, and assessment of an international studies initiative developed for an MBA program at a comprehensive university in the Midwest.

THE NEED FOR INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Intercultural "Effectiveness" in a Global Environment

More companies today are doing more business beyond their own national borders than ever before. In light of this, the development of an employee who is effective in a non-native context represents a critical success factor in business today.

The idea of "effectiveness" goes by a variety of names and stems from various conceptual frameworks in research literature. Building on earlier work by Earley and Ang (2003), Ang et al. (2007) offer a concept of *cultural intelligence* as "a specific form of intelligence focused on capabilities to grasp, reason and behave effectively in situations characterized by cultural diversity" (337). In line with theories on general intelligence and emotional intelligence, cultural intelligence presupposes a set of cognitive, motivational and behavioral dispositions that lend

themselves particularly well to the (sometimes) stressful context of a culturally diverse environment.

The concept of cultural intelligence relies on a set of generalized capabilities, and this is its strength. Researchers are able to ascertain the extent to which subjects exhibit an overall capacity for managing culturally diverse situations, and the heuristic power of this construct gives warrant to its claim to broad cultural coverage. Such theoretical breadth also poses a potential weakness, however: It remains unclear whether culturally intelligent capabilities can be adduced solely without reference to specific cultural practices or knowledge. It is also unclear whether these capabilities are inherent (that is, *traits*) or subject to learning/development (*states*) (see Luthans 2002). Cultural intelligence as a concept is thus limited by certain conceptual and pedagogical concerns.

A much more culturally-specific framework is offered by Scollon and Scollon (2002), who dispense of sweeping cognitive theories and cultural frameworks by focusing on the question of *intercultural discourse*, which is at the core of a culturally and situationally layered set of discursive practices. To take an example: There is a differentiating trend between Asian and Western argumentative forms (the former inductive, the latter deductive), but there are certainly also sharp differences *within* Asian and Western culture that refract from gender differences (see Tannen 1990), industry and organizational variations, as well as subcultures arising within units as small as office spaces (Wegner 1999). For researchers of intercultural discourse, understanding effectiveness in a culturally diverse context requires insight into a multitude of cultural/discursive layers on which action is based.

Conceptually, intercultural discourse draws from a rich body of literature that seeks an analysis of specific actions. As such, its strength lies in its focus on action as mediated by multiple discursive layers: The richness of analysis derives from multitudinous factors that serve to shape action. This targeted focus also limits the scope of its analytical power, however: It becomes virtually impossible to rely on this perspective as the basis for any generalized claims about cultural effectiveness (or culture in general). Furthermore, and as a pedagogical matter, the concept of intercultural discourse deals mainly with the question of spoken/written discourse, and it does not lend itself well to self-reporting or non-observer forms of data gathering. For assessment purposes, the benefit a discourse perspective on intercultural effectiveness is limited by certain conceptual and pedagogical concerns.

Notwithstanding the shortcomings of a broad intelligence-based or a focused discourse-based perspective, we have attempted to appropriate their strengths by adopting and implementing a model of *intercultural competence*, or the ability to use appropriate interpersonal, informational, analytical, action and adaptive skills in intercultural situations (Yamazaki & Kayes 2004). These skills are redundant and cyclical: As more information about a particular culture (or some facet thereof) is attained, this information can be integrated into a broader analytical set in which generalizations and conclusions about that culture can be modulated. In turn, these analytical outcomes will have an impact on how an individual will act within that culture, which will form the basis for new informational intake. Conceptually, the strength of this concept lies in its cyclical nature: As an actor completes new experiences, gains new forms of knowledge, or views an artifact through a new analytical lens, these elements redound in a cycle of increased intercultural competence. Pedagogically, this conceptual strength lends itself well to assessment purposes, as it allows for guided tracking (through multiple modes) of the steps students take as they gain competence in a culturally diverse environment.

Intercultural Competence in a Curricular Environment

Increasing students' intercultural competence is, as a curricular matter, often addressed in one of two ways: in-class and out-of-country. Likely in response to findings by and similar to Albers-Miller et al. (2000), which found that recruiters generally prefer students from "internationalized" business programs, schools have long been modifying their curricula to emphasize the role of culture in business, whether by instituting an international business degree in the department, integrating a course on international business into a program of study, or infusing international business topics into the traditional curriculum. Cant (2004), for the most part, finds programs that offer a dedicated degree in international business the most effective option: By creating a clear and direct object of resource allocation, this option creates the appropriate programmatic incentives for effective learning. For their part, Boyacigiller, Goodman, and Phillips (2003) offer a compilation of concrete and effective pedagogical inputs that can be used in a variety of in-class instructional settings, while Chaves (2008) demonstrate the extent to which in-class instruction can achieve meaningful learning outcomes through experimental modes and materials of instruction.

Out-of-country efforts to increase students' intercultural competence can also take a variety of forms. Perhaps the most common effort is the study abroad experience, which can last from a couple of weeks to an entire academic year. Often, the underlying assumption guiding these programs is that students will gain a level of intercultural competence simply by being there: Much like a second language immersion program, the study abroad will develop greater cultural fluency through daily contact with members of a foreign culture. One of the difficulties in this assumption, however, is in tracking students' progress from the concrete experience abroad to the generation of abstract and analytical understandings of a new culture. Sizoo (2007) also demonstrate that, without a theoretical underpinning to shape the international experience, there is evidence to suggest that simply being abroad does not result in significantly greater intercultural competence.

In light of this difficulty, Kolb and Kolb's (2005) concept for *experiential learning* as a complete cycle "where the learner touches all the bases: - experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting - in a recursive process that is responsive to the learning situation and what is being learned" works well (p. 194). In this framework, time abroad provides the foundation for experiential learning, but it demands additional inputs in order for the experience to develop into learning. The trip needs to be embedded in a recursive process that encourages reflecting, thinking, and acting, usually in conjunction with contact with an instructor or facilitator. Providing the structure for this type of learning not only assures learning from the current experience; it also teaches a process that students can follow to increase learning in other intercultural situations.

By contrast to a study abroad experience, an international trip (combined with experiential learning) brings additional benefits, especially where MBA students may be concerned. They reduce the contact time abroad, usually in exchange for an allocation of in-class instruction. Given the constraints on graduate students' time (work schedules, families, and so on), short-term experiences represent a better fit within graduate-level business programs. They also hold great promise with respect to the level of intercultural competence that programs can hope to achieve.

In designing an international experience for graduate students, it is important for business schools to address the need to assess the impact of these programs. At a programmatic level, the time and resources necessary in order to provide and coordinate such a program can be

considerable, and the quality of these programs needs to be at par with their perceived (or marketed) value to students. In addition, these initiatives often come as an incremental cost to students themselves, who demand a high-quality return on their personal investment. Finally, the installation of an international trip as part of a graduate curriculum naturally raises issues that can be connected to accreditation: Given the high profile of the trip as part of students' course of study, programs should be prepared to offer evidence as to the efficacy of this component (as well as its in-class counterpart) to students. Rexeisen et al. provide an excellent case study that examines the alignment of their school's learning goals for international business study with the assessment tools used to determine their program's efficacy (Rexeisen et al., 2009).

In light of the increasing role of global considerations in business graduate study, with respect to the growing importance of intercultural competence as a theoretical matter; and in response to the need for clear curricular and assessment goals for international study experiences, our efforts in designing an international trip for MBA students along the theoretical lines sketched above has seen initial success. We have found the conceptual structure of intercultural competence, combined with the redundancy implicit in experiential learning, to be a sound basis for course design and implementation. We have also discovered great benefit to this framework in defining learning goals for the course in which the international trip is embedded. Finally, we have been able to gather a wide variety of data (surveys/journals/interviews, etc.) on which to base our assessment of this trip, which has allowed for strong cycles of continuous improvement. While more experience will sharpen the contours of our findings to this point, initial results bode well for the application of the above framework in the context of international business curricula.

Conclusion

We proceed from the assumption that a sound theoretical framework, accompanied by thoughtful pedagogical considerations, constitutes a necessary basis for a successful international study experience for students. In particular, we hold that a model for intercultural competence that captures the cyclic nature of learning in an international environment reflects the student experience well, and we consider the international trip (1-2 weeks in duration) the best option for an MBA cohort. In the appendices that follow, we provide background documentation for our course, including an excerpt from a syllabus and from the trip assignment, as concrete reference points for which our concept and pedagogical model served as guides.

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APPENDIX A
PORTION OF CLASS SYLLABUS

METHOD OF EVALUATION

Current Events and Chapter Discussion Starters: 10%

PreTrip Discussion – you will be responsible for 2 discussion postings. These will include one chapter summary, one current events, or as a substitute 1 special event posting.

Current Events and Chapter Discussion Responses: 10%

PreTrip Discussion – you will be required to respond each week to either the Current Event or Chapter Discussion Posting.

Clissold, T. (2006). *Mr. China*. New York: HarperCollins.

Bissky, G. (2007) *Wearing Chinese Glasses: How (Not) to Go Broke in Chinese Asia*. New Bern, NC: Trafford Publishing

Journal: 10%

Students will be required to complete a class journal reflecting on the China trip.

Visit Preparation 10%

Student teams will prepare for the visits to business and cultural sites. This includes collecting background information on the company or site will be visiting and disseminating this information to the group. Included in preparation will be purchasing and presenting appropriate gifts. Debriefing discussion after the visit will also be conducted by the group as well as any follow up contacts.

Participation: 10%

A successful graduate class requires participation from everyone. Students are expected to be prepared to discuss all assignments and to actively engage in any class activities. This participation grade will include, pre-trip, trip, and post-trip discussions.

Short papers, exercises and cases: 20%

Students will be assigned a series of short papers, exercises, and cases.

Group Project: 20%

Students will form teams of 4 – 6 and prepare a group project.

Final Exam/Case: 10%

Students will individually complete a case that will be the final exam.

APPENDIX B

MBA INTERNATIONAL TRIP ASSIGNMENT. (LO 1, 2, 6, 7)

1. Site Visit Responsibilities

Your team will be assigned to be the lead delegation for one of the visits during our international travel. This means you and your partner will

1. Gather as much information as possible about the company and the people we will be visiting – brief the class before the visit. *This will be first entry in your journal*
2. Be responsible for introductions including any rituals that are common in the country we will be visiting. (For countries such as China this would include gifts).
3. Prepare questions to ask. *Add to journal*

Greeting Rituals

Research the greeting rituals in the country we will be visiting.

Example: In China it is customary to provide gifts to business partners. Your team should research appropriate gifts and how those gifts should be delivered. You will each select a gift and bring it to class Wednesday. As your research will show these gifts do not need to be expensive \$10 or so, however there are definite guidelines to follow. *Add to journal.*

Note: The rest of the class should still prepare on their own for the visits. Business leaders should not visit a company without adequate background information on the visit.

(INSERT VISIT LOCATIONS)

2. Journal Requirements

Before, during, and after the visit you will want to reflect on the experience. You will be required to keep a journal. The journal can take whatever form you want. (i.e. blog or handwritten)

Entries required. (12)

1. Information gathered in preparation for the visit.
2. Questions you will ask your assigned visit. Information about introductions and expectations.
3. Greeting ritual research
4. Pre trip thoughts
 - What do you hope to get from this experience?
 - What are you nervous about?
 - What are you excited about?
 - What do you want to do or see?
 - How do you think this experience will benefit you?
 - How will you integrate this experience with you education?
 - What things did you learn from the readings that you want to watch for on

the trip?

- What things did you learn from the readings that you want to apply on the trip?

5. 5 – 11 Daily entries

You will post a daily reflection that will include reflective observation, abstract observation and active experimentation. Follow the form outlined in the Reflective Activity instructions.

Some ideas for information to include in your entries:

Interactions with local residents

Reaction to food

New experiences you enjoyed or didn't enjoy.

12. Post trip entry

Use Reflective activity to assess the experience