ASPECTS OF INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS THROUGH AN MBA STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM: GOING “BACKSTAGE”

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Understanding the globalization of business practices is an important area of learning for students studying in master of business administration (MBA) programs today, and many graduate business programs offer study tour programs for experiential learning. This article examines the instructional design of one program and makes recommendations for how to place greater emphasis on intercultural learning in conjunction with business learning. A description of student learning through presurveys and postsurveys, as well as reflections through term papers, is explored.

Keywords: MBA education and curriculum; global business communication; international business education; study abroad; intercultural communication

THE WORLD IS not just getting smaller, it is smaller. Today’s reality is that we deal with an international marketplace as we go about our daily lives—whether working or studying. In fact, according to the 2007 Annual Report on International Education published by the Institute of International Education (IIE), in 2006-2007 there were over 580,000 international students studying in institutions of higher education in the United States, with the most popular field of study (18%) being business and management (IIE, 2007b). Furthermore, over 220,000 U.S. American students earned credit for study abroad during the 2006-2007 academic year, also 18% of them business majors. Study abroad in nontraditional destinations such as China and India has increased as students see the potential for emerging economies and how they will affect the overall global economy. Interestingly, the number of students who chose China as their host
country for study abroad in 2006-2007 continues to grow, with an increase of 38% from 2006, which makes this the seventh leading host country for outward-bound U.S. American students (IIE, 2007a).

The trends of study abroad show that it is not enough to simply engage in class discussions and exercises or read about business development elsewhere. Actually going to another country on an academic study program or for work is the best way to begin the long process of understanding what it means to function in a global economy (Ortiz, 2004). As educators and administrators in the field of management communication, we understand the importance of hands-on learning about cross-cultural communication and business practices. When experiencing business practices in a cross-cultural setting, the process of culture learning—awareness, understanding, and competency (Arpan, 1993)—becomes a vital learning experience that enhances traditional classroom learning.

However, during the preparation for a study abroad experience, the process of culture learning is often seen as ancillary, something added on to the business focus, such as international finance or some other type of business practices (Varner, 2000, 2001). In the context of an overseas study tour, the instructional emphasis is usually on the actual business-place experience (site visits at companies and organizations), and predeparture training is therefore focused on alerting students to the particular business issues and the climates in which they will travel and observe. This makes the course lopsided—it becomes “business-heavy yet interculturally lean.” For example, while on a site visit, students may experience firsthand how the supply chain works in a garment manufacturing company or be exposed to the many factors affecting infrastructure; however, the underlying issues of the many tacit dimensions of culture that dictate the norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes of a given culture (and which ultimately affect issues of supply chain management or infrastructure) are not addressed. Therefore, while students may begin to understand what is happening in this particular industry, they lack the essential foundation of why it is happening.

Such a myopic view can result from a lack of resources, knowledge, or motivation, among other things. Varner (2001) says of international experiences,
Students need to realize that culture is not something that is in the past. Culture lives and changes. It expresses itself in politics, government policies, business regulations, educational systems, and business practices. . . . One cannot separate culture from these issues and study culture in isolation. (p. 104)

As such, it is crucial to have a balanced approach to addressing business and culture issues in any study abroad program. How we prepare our students to experience the dynamic link of culture and business depends on the solid instructional design of the course—the goals, purposes, and outcomes.

While many programs attempt to introduce culture learning beforehand, inadequate preparation for students occurs because a lack of understanding of intercultural issues confounds the program objectives. This article therefore looks at both the strengths and areas for improvement of a particular master of business administration (MBA) study abroad program in the United States that fits the description of business-heavy yet interculturally lean and analyzes how it can be improved so that culture learning is at the center of its instructional design and not just treated as an addendum to the business curricula.

After briefly looking at the purposes of international business education, this article describes a 4-week study tour program at a 2-year MBA school on the U.S. East Coast in order to look at what students learned about intercultural communication and cross-cultural business practices, using Greater China as the backdrop. It then focuses on the design of this particular program, including the learning outcomes of its participants through the use of presurveys-postsurveys and student reflection papers. Finally, it discusses the pros and cons of this particular program, making suggestions for improving specific instruction in intercultural communication and linking cross-cultural understanding with business practices.

INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS EDUCATION

Why provide opportunities for understanding international business practices when resources, staffing, and fitting in new curricula are already tight? The answer is twofold. First, the goal of an MBA program should be to help foster critical thinking and analytic skills beyond one’s “inherent biases” (White & Griffith, 1998, p. 108).
Second, the growth of multinational corporations and their increasing thrust into international markets has caused both opportunity and challenges for organizations and institutions of higher learning (Webb, Mayer, Pioche, & Allen, 1999). The internationalization of the business curriculum involves developing the awareness, knowledge, and skills to be able to manage business interactions competently in the global environment and being specifically trained to do so (Beamer, 1992; Shetty & Rudell, 2002; Ulijn, O’Hair, Weggeman, Ledlow, & Hall, 2000; Varner, 2000; Varner, 2001). When we understand our own values, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors, we are then able to compare and contrast them in a face-to-face interaction or experience. The ultimate goal is to develop a deeper understanding of issues of cross-cultural differences (Stewart & Bennett, 1991).

While there is no substitute for an extended period of work or study in a culture foreign to one’s own, even short-term experiences abroad can help to foster a new awareness and the beginning of a deeper understanding of the complex issues of culture—both “other” culture and one’s own culture (Davis & Redmann, 1991; Slate, 1993). Understanding the globalization of business practices is an important area of learning for students in business programs today, regardless of how short or long a study abroad program may be. Study tours can take many forms, based upon the motivations, needs, and resources of the institution. A growing number of U.S. MBA programs are creating 2- to 4-week intensive study tours. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB; 2002) has stated that “the length of the program must be balanced against intended results. . . . Short-term programs, when well structured and value-added, are quite useful and may stimulate students to undertake longer programs subsequently” (p. 6) and that “different kinds of programs allow for different kinds of learning” (p. 11). Therefore, it is imperative that close attention be paid to the instructional design of the course so that both goals and outcomes are clearly identified, defined, and delivered.

PROGRAM DESIGN

Overview of the Global Immersion Program

The Global Immersion Program (GIP) is a credit-bearing elective course within the MBA general curriculum designed to provide
students with an in-depth exposure to the business environment of a significant global market and to foster greater awareness of a certain area in the world economy. Every year, the destinations include three separate geographical areas: Southeast Asia, South America, and China and Taiwan. Each of these three regional groups makes up one section of the course, with 45 students being the maximum enrollment for each section. The GIP has proven over the last 10 years to be a sought-after and highly esteemed elective course because it provides students with a real-world experience to test, firsthand, the theories they learn in class. Because it was one of the first programs of its kind and because of its unique design, numerous other U.S. MBA programs have used it as a model for their own. The overall objectives of the program are stated in the course catalog as follows:

- to provide an understanding of the region’s business, cultural, and political environments
- to achieve a working knowledge of regional business practices through direct interaction with managers, employees, and government officials
- to explore the value of different economic models as benchmarks for global business practices
- to promote intercultural awareness and communication skills

**Greater China Program**

The China GIP offers a comprehensive tour of China, including Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the mainland’s two most important cities, Shanghai and Beijing. Through alumni and institutional contacts, students are provided the opportunity to develop a solid understanding of the business environment and an appreciation for the ancient Chinese culture. Particular themes addressed during the immersion experience in Greater China most often include government regulation of commercial activity, joint ventures, market-entry strategies, capital development structures, privatization, special economic zones, import/export issues, cross-Strait relations with the Republic of China (ROC) of Taiwan, and the future of Hong Kong. So that the program content is geared toward the interest of students who register for the course, each year the themes are developed once students complete a survey that details their specific interests and concerns.
The GIP consists of three main components: on-campus sessions (predeparture in the spring semester), a 4-week immersion experience (during May), and a written assignment due at the beginning of the 2nd-year fall semester (September). A traditional semester, or term, in the United States consists of about 14 weeks from September to December or from January to May. Since the GIP is offered for academic credit to students entering their 2nd year of the 2-year program, students are evaluated based on attendance at on-campus lectures, active participation during the 4-week immersion experience, and written work. Grades are given on a credit/no-credit basis. At the head of each group is a program director who is a member of the school’s staff and whose primary role is the official representative of the school. The program director is intimately involved in planning the immersion experience itinerary in cooperation with the faculty area specialists and ensures that program arrangements are realized en route. The program director also facilitates group decisions and serves as a formal link between the group and the university in case of emergencies.

Students register for this highly popular course through an “auction” system where they bid course points that they accumulate: Students speculate how much the course might cost and then bid their points in the hopes of winning a place in the course. Once the bidding has ended, students must pay an additional fee (approximately US$5,000) that primarily covers the cost of travel, hotel, and administrative fees. Additional paperwork must be completed, such as visas and updating passports prior to departure. During the spring semester, students participate in an initial program meeting that briefs them on health and safety and other issues.

In addition, all are required to attend a series of four to five academic lectures, each 1 hour and 20 minutes. Led by faculty area specialists, this lecture series covers primarily business aspects of the region, drawing on faculty research and activity in the regions of travel. While the course description claims to also address the history, political systems, and social structures of the chosen region of study—based on my active participation as a participant-observer in the predeparture lectures—very little is introduced. Assigned readings are included to augment classroom discussion, often current articles from a variety of media sources such as The Wall Street Journal and Financial Times.
Students also participate in two additional sessions: discussion of cultural issues and a restaurant visit. In these sessions, the student coordinators, who are hired to assist in each major city visited, provide information on business etiquette, language, and cultural expectations. These individuals are selected based upon their nationality from a particular city or region being visited. In addition to being interpreters of the local culture, student coordinators serve as liaisons between the group and the GIP staff to help deal with any problems that might arise. Students also receive information on social and recreational opportunities from their student coordinators.

Upon returning to campus in the fall semester, student participants meet in a final wrap-up session to evaluate their experiences. The program concludes with a 10-page paper drawing conclusions gained from the immersion experience. The course manual states,

The GIP is more than just a trip; it is intended to be a comprehensive learning experience. Sessions prior to departure, the 4-week immersion experience, and the written assignment upon return are designed to fulfill the academic and programmatic requirements of students, faculty, and staff.

In order to demonstrate this comprehensive learning experience, the following section examines the learning outcomes of participants in the 2005 China GIP by examining three forms of data that were collected: presurveys, postsurveys, and student papers.

**DOCUMENTATION OF STUDENT LEARNING**

**Surveys**

Students filled out presurveys and postsurveys to record their perceptions of their cross-cultural knowledge before the trip and their reflections on culture and business practices after the trip. The survey also helped determine student demographics, including who had previously lived or worked abroad. The presurvey consisted of 15 Likert-type questions concerning background demographics and international work and living experience. For the 2005 China GIP program, 45 students attended, along with 4 student coordinators. A little over half of the students (54%) were United States-born; the
rest were classified as international students, which made for an interesting mix of perspectives and experiences.

When asked to select from a list of the most common aspects of culture, students found the most challenging to be dealing with communication contexts, language, and identity; dealing with customs was ranked fourth. The final question on the survey was an open-ended question prompting students to identify what they wanted to gain from their overseas experience regarding business and/or cross-cultural understanding. Thirty-one of the 49 students chose to answer the final open-ended question that asked about what they hoped their learning outcomes to be. Their responses are discussed below.

**Survey Findings**

Several trends are evident. First, these students were rather savvy about cross-cultural issues, with the majority (about 60%) having lived and worked abroad; more than half self-reported that they were fluent in a second language. What is particularly encouraging is that while the majority of students did have overseas working and living experience, which clearly would have presented them with long-term opportunities to learn about interacting in an intercultural business setting via trial and error, they chose to spend an intense month studying and learning in a lab-type experience in order to learn more. One possible reason is that while such students may have had substantial overseas experience, it may have been in a different region of the world. The survey revealed that students wanted to learn about world markets in other cultures, and how to do business in China was crucial.

Secondly, while more than half of the students had substantial overseas experience, less than 30% claimed to be very comfortable when dealing with ambiguities while in a foreign culture, and just over 30% reported that they were very comfortable in a cross-cultural communication context. This finding is telling in that students indirectly attested to the fact that they did not know how to be effective in a majority of situations. Such a revelation demonstrates a clear need for more explicit learning about working and communicating in a different cultural context. This need is key to the argument of this essay in that the focus of predeparture instruction should be not only about specific business markets but just as importantly about intercultural communication.
Finally, and not surprisingly, many students acknowledged China’s increasing importance as an emerging global economic power and wanted to know how to explore the major challenges that come with the territory. In addition, another important theme was that they wanted to gain an understanding of “how business is done,” “how to do business,” or “how business works” while exploring the major challenges presented to companies breaking into China’s rapidly growing economy. Probably the most interesting theme comes as this third point of discussion. As the final survey question indicated, students not only had a desire to analyze China as an emerging superpower, learn how to do business in this country, and discover what challenges lie ahead, but also seemed intrigued by the notion that culture is inextricably linked to business practices. This point will be demonstrated in the excerpts from student papers that follow in the next section.

In essence, students identified the need for better cultural understanding as a precursor to “doing business” successfully. Included with this theme was the idea of needing to understand the drivers of big business as implicit in the cultural practices and norms of the people. Linked to this was a concern for learning reciprocal values and developing an appreciation of those values of others in the hopes that they would appreciate theirs. This is an exciting finding, because this type of inquisitiveness goes beyond mere surface learning and implies digging deeper into how to understand in order to become competent by “doing business interculturally.” Comments about the values theme were, “What parts of my culture do they value?” and “not just understanding the cultural aspects of the Chinese, but what they value” and “a different perspective about how the Chinese view life . . . gain a greater appreciation of [it].”

The idea here is that they wanted to develop an understanding of how to interact and communicate as a global businessperson. Figuring out how to do that—developing the competencies—would be the challenge. It is easy to say that one wants to “gain a global perspective,” but what does that really mean? And how is that held up against what students actually learned in their predeparture lectures? Perhaps what underlies this theme is the very detailed and subjective nature of “doing business from a global perspective” as well as the issue (explored in the Discussion section) about more purposeful and direct instruction in intercultural communication
issues. Students are concerned with what they feel will help them, as future business leaders, be more comfortable when dealing with ambiguity and cross-cultural communication encounters.

Papers

The formal written term papers served as the summary of each student’s interests and learning throughout the presessions, lab experience abroad, and postsessions. A total of 41 of 49 papers were collected and sorted based upon the paper topic at the time of the data collection process. The nature of the papers varied greatly by student, since they were given very broad requirements with the purpose of eliciting from each student what interested them the most. The general assignment was as follows:

This paper should be based on your observations during the immersion experience. It can take the form of an evaluation of a specific institution or industry, or overall impressions gained during the immersion experience related to a particular topic with specific examples used to back them up.

Papers were read and reread based upon qualitative methods of coding (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993) and separated into thematic categories. Then, it was important to look for specific words and themes that were repeated in order to substantiate the themes (Maxwell, 1996). Topics fell into six broad categories:

- social/political topics
- business practices ("doing business")
- growth (including infrastructure, emerging economies, environmental issues)
- financial topics (real estate, private equity, currency)
- branding (including retailing, advertising, and marketing)
- other (manufacturing, multinational corporations)

For the purposes of this article, the first two categories (the ones most students wrote about) will be examined for student learning outcomes.
Social/Political Topics

One of the most popular topics of the final paper, and perhaps the most interesting, was the intrigue around China’s single-party authoritarian government and the view that it represents a major threat to the country’s long-term stability. Students also addressed concerns regarding the cross-Strait relations of the People’s Republic of China’s claim on Taiwan (ROC) and Taiwan’s refusal to concede its status as a sovereign nation. Eight students wrote about the imbalance of political power and social reform in relation to massive economic reforms. One theme that came up repeatedly was that China had “the potential for growth” because of the massive economic advancements sweeping the country. Yet, there was great concern about such advances of economic change occurring before social and political reform could take hold and how this is creating a huge imbalance for both the people and the country.

Probably the most notable aspect of these student papers was that they compared autonomous views of power to those of a more authoritarian nature. As extrapolated from the excerpts of student papers written on sociopolitical topics, authoritarian policies of the Chinese one-party political system were compared to the Western multiple-party systems that ultimately have led to freedom and prosperity. There was concern over the government’s control of the people, the media, and the infrastructure. Much discussion centered around the disconnect between rapidly expanding businesses, yet the lack of appropriate marketing; the building boom in all of the cities, yet the lack of proper infrastructure; the explosion of global mass media access, yet the single party’s authoritarian hold on what media outlets its people can consume. It is not surprising that students would compare this emerging economy with all its promises to the free-market economies of the world that are thriving because of democracy. What makes this even more interesting is that students, regardless of whether they were United States-born or not, made such comparisons.

It is also noteworthy that students grappled with the systematic nature of doing business in an emerging economy and how all of the pieces of the puzzle must fit together: manufacturing, advertising, infrastructure, currency, private equity, and so on. One student (a Taiwanese national whose father fled to Taiwan during the Cultural Revolution) concluded,
Turning from authoritarianism and dictatorship, Taiwan has embraced freedom and become one of the World’s democratic countries as a sovereign, independent country. Taiwan takes its place in the global political, cultural, and financial economy as an economically prosperous, democratically, free, pluralistic, open, and modern nation.

It is quite appropriate to examine the inextricable links between economic growth and social and political freedom based upon one’s personal viewpoints, yet from the comments that students made, it seemed apparent that they attempted to step away from their Western-centric views and ponder the differences in cultural norms from a different perspective. As one student put it, “Regime change and a more democratic system is not an inevitable outcome for China, as many pundits in the West would like to have people believe.” One student began his paper with the opening statement, “The instinctive first impression that most westerners have about the Chinese political system is that China should be democratic.” This view distinctly contrasts with the previous student’s comment, which was based upon his family’s first-hand experience of persecution and lack of freedom.

One student, after completing his global immersion experience, identified what he believed to be four major perceptions of U.S. Americans regarding China and refuted each of them (skepticism about nondemocratic nations, loss of jobs for Americans due to large labor supply, image of low-cost manufacturing and quality, and China’s dependency on the United States for its economic survival). He reflected,

While I hope that the level of knowledge regarding China amongst the American people continues to increase . . . it is difficult for me to imagine that the American people will fully appreciate the subtleties of Chinese culture without taking a month-long immersion trip themselves.

Business Practices

Another popular theme of doing business emerged, as 10 students addressed issues related to this topic, such as the challenges and/or differences of doing business internationally (e.g., India, South
America, Iran). One student talked about China as a land of paradoxes: On the one hand, China is ready to take a central role in current world affairs, but on the other hand, he observed “a certain humility . . . and a communal connection to the greater whole that makes [its] presence a much less threatening player on the world stage.” One of his themes was the value of collectivism and the understanding of guan-xi, or relationships, in networking:

We have a sense of networking in the West, and no one is more attune to that sense than the fresh MBA student, but guan-xi goes many degrees further. It is so much more about who you know than what you know or can do.

Another popular theme was infrastructure. Almost every single student, whether talking about China’s growth, financial capacities, or sociopolitical issues, gave their opinions regarding infrastructure. An Indian student pondered,

Infrastructure seems China’s most obvious and greatest “edge” over India. Beijing’s impressive roadways and Shanghai’s high-rises and skyline made it apparent that China was years ahead of India in its physical infrastructure development. As I compared the two countries . . . I realized centralized decision-making [through Communism] resulted in rapid execution. In India, democracy means gaining consensus among several political and economic stakeholders about the next areas of investment. While this is the norm in most developed countries, some would argue it is not the most efficient system in a developing economy.

All in all, common themes emerged: manufacturing, service, infrastructure, cultural/social/political openness, freedom of press, company performance, market economy competition, growth, advertising and branding, currency, and private equity. While student papers encompassed a wide range of topics, each paper, in its own way, was about doing business in China. Throughout the month as the adventure progressed, students began to make connections between the many forces that drive culture—the government, economy, and social policies. It became clear to the students that the important aspects of doing business in China were all interrelated—business practices were
inextricably bound to national culture. The very reason that the GIP begins in Taiwan is to subtly yet powerfully make an impression of such interrelationships. The fact that students engage in governmental and educational appointments as well as corporate appointments also supports this function. One student summed it up quite well:

Having spent 4 weeks in Greater China, my observations of doing business in the region are best encapsulated by the phrase, “anything is possible, nothing is easy.” After visiting more than 40 companies, government and educational institutions throughout Greater China, I believe the phrase accurately captures the contradictions which inevitably arise in a rapidly developing economy that remains a socialist state.

She continued:

My paper examines both sides of the story. Under the heading “Anything is Possible,” it explores China’s astounding record of economic growth; its entrepreneurial culture; successes by local and foreign businesses; progress towards reform; and future growth opportunities. “Nothing is Easy” outlines the difficulties of doing business in China. These include restrictions imposed by the communist government; the poor performance of the Chinese stock market; difficulties enforcing intellectual property rights; and the struggle to establish brand recognition for Chinese goods.

By getting out of the classroom, away from theory and into an active lab setting, students experienced firsthand China’s potential for growth economically, politically, and socially. China’s potential is like that of a little-known actor who has recently been discovered for his/her talent and is poised to take center stage in the global economy. In sum, students saw this powerful nation as “China in transition.” While paper after paper attested to the feeling that nothing in China is easy at present and many of the issues are deeply complex, students revealed their enthusiasm and optimism for a future where anything is possible.

Postsurveys

A postsurvey also provided insights into students’ culture learning. When asked why they chose the China GIP program in particular, the
responses revealed three themes: (a) to learn about business and cultural practices of China; (b) to have a unique experience that the students wouldn’t be able to replicate outside of the program; and (c) to travel to one of the harder to reach regions. When asked how valuable a trip such as this was, 73% felt it was valuable; when asked if it was realistic that they will put these experiences and insights to use at work, 69% expected to use this knowledge in the future. Responses to the question “How will you put this knowledge into practice?” were fascinating, given their specific nature:

- I intend to work in China at some point. Even for those who do not work in China, most will work with Chinese companies.
- Over the summer, I helped launch a quality of life product in China. Understanding the patent laws and the importance of full employment allowed me to change my marketing strategy.
- I will put it to work as it was a valuable experience. Whenever I read a story or engage in a conversation about China (which is often) I will always think back to my time there.

When asked about key takeaways concerning cultural practices, specific comments included the following:

- Guan-xi—relationships are key across culture
- I learned that it is not easy to do business in China as a foreigner. One needs to be exceptionally committed to conforming to cultural norms, learning the language and adapting to values such as lack of freedom of speech, etc.
- Americans do not get China. It is an ambiguous place, with an ambiguous mindset. Things are not as black and white as westerners would like to see them.

When asked about key takeaways concerning business practices, specific comments were as follows:

- Business is relationship-based. Capital markets [in China] are still far behind the West.
- Business ethics seem different, more tenuous than in the United States, meaning there is more grey area. This is reflected in their lax intellectual property laws, etc.
• I learned a great deal about doing business in China—legal system, intellectual property, areas to invest in, differences between regions, entrepreneurial nature of people

When asked to contribute any other helpful comments or thoughts regarding their learning, students commented as follows:

• Spending time in China is the only way to really understand what is going on there, what the risks and opportunities are. Thanks.
• It was one of the deepest and most valuable experiences while at my MBA program.
• There is no substitute for visiting a region and getting a three-dimensional experience.
• It is an entirely different experience to read about a country. Visiting with people in their home country, walking factory floors, and witnessing first-hand the blossoming of the Chinese economy cannot be replicated.

DISCUSSION

How realistic is a program such as this in terms of cross-cultural learning? What can students honestly take away from it? Asking tough questions is vital when dealing with course development and pedagogical concerns in any academic program. Checks and balances must be in place; as Woolf (2002) contends, “There is a tendency to assume that the rhetoric of globalization matches the reality” (p. 5). The caution here is that while it may appear to be good that one’s institution has internationalized the curriculum, the focus may only be giving lip service to what internationalization really is (Lovitt & Goswami, 1999; Neelankavil, 1994).

Another question is, Can intercultural communication be taught? A more accurate question should be, Can intercultural communication be learned? Chick (1990) argued that while you can’t teach intercultural communication as a body of knowledge (i.e., being prescriptive and making sweeping generalizations about “people from ‘x’ culture will do this and that”), you can learn how to deal effectively in communicating across various cultures. If culture means that many composite beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors make up any given group’s identity (granted that within our cultures we
are all individuals and will not ascribe to all norms), then living among, interacting with, and learning from nationals can present opportunities for students to experience firsthand (Beamer, 1992).

A final question is how to assess learning outcomes. Measuring the outcomes of such an experience is very subjective; however, the individualized and very personal connections made in each student’s papers provide evidence of meaningful learning. Arpan (1993) identifies three primary goals when considering an international component for learning:

- Awareness involves expanding one’s knowledge base about the various economies of the world markets and how they work.
- Understanding follows basic awareness as students make connections between how these world markets and economies interact, connect, and are thus vital for productivity and survival.
- Competency requires that students build skills so that they can handle diverse situations, with competence leading to the “transformation of understanding into action” (p. 17).

When assessing the GIP program for cross-cultural teaching, it clearly emphasizes the first goal described by Arpan: awareness. The majority of predeparture preparation focused on business lectures based upon each lecturer’s area of business expertise, with very little being said about culture issues. As an observer at each lecture, I tried to assess if any direct links were made between business practices and cultural practices. Few were made. Students were grounded in several economic, marketing, and financial theories, backed by international case examples, but these were not linked to culture or communication. The one lecture that did deal with history and politics came at the very end and was the most well received by students. But there were no in-depth lectures on culture or communication. The closest form of cross-cultural information came from a session led by the student coordinators consisting of a humorous skit about “do’s and don’ts” of culture, followed by a night out at an area restaurant.

In terms of the overall outcomes of student learning, surveys and student papers indicate that the students understand the basic notion that culture is inextricably linked to business practices. It appears that they understand the “what” of the matter, but based upon
observations of the reading materials, predeparture lectures, and
information sessions, one may question whether they fully under-
stand the “how.” Perhaps students were just beginning to cross over
to the understanding phase as they attempted to make connections in
their individual papers. But what is evident is that while there was
much preparation beforehand (which was creative), the predeparture
training was mostly “awareness”-type information designed to help
students understand the “what” of culture. If we are to truly do our
business students a service, then we must systematically and specifi-
cally create a curriculum that will link the what of business and cul-
ture to the why so that the program is not business-heavy yet
interculturally lean. Doing so would provide more of a logical path of
moving students towards better understanding.

For example, numerous students talked about the importance of
building relationships with Chinese business people because of guan-
xi, but there was no discussion about why this is important. Probing
deeper into the rich traditions of the Chinese history, philosophy, and
language would have made the purpose of guan-xi much more mean-
ingful. The students were introduced to such concepts, but there wasn’t
any direct, explicit instruction, such as using cases, lectures, and class
discussions for getting to the why behind the what of doing business
in China. Varner’s (2001) theatrical metaphor of “front-stage/back-
stage” culture learning is a useful way of differentiating between the
why behind the what. Front-stage culture (the what) includes the
familiar things we readily recognize, such as food, customs, and hol-
days. Backstage culture (the why) is what needs to be learned in
order to understand the what. If one truly wants to move from mere
awareness to a better understanding of culture, then it is not enough
just to understand that people from one culture do “this or that.”
Rather, if students can understand the historical, political, and philo-
sophical foundation for why people do this or that, then they have a
better way of making sense of what goes on behind the scenes of
what actually happens on stage. Therefore, if predeparture lectures
had first explicitly addressed several of the most important aspects of
Chinese culture (such as the practice of guan-xi) as the foundation and
then discussed business aspects, I believe that students would
have made the connection sooner and this would have deepened the
understanding of the why of guan-xi and not just the what.
If we reflect back on the GIP’s primary objectives, we will recall that the goals were modest: “to achieve a working knowledge of business practices; to explore the value of different economic models; to promote intercultural awareness and communication skills.” The overall purpose of the program is met very well because the program sets up top-level appointments with key people in education, business, and government. It takes students out of the class and into real-world settings in order to experience business practices firsthand. It also uses the school’s alumni base and students’ personal contacts, which provide a wealth of current resources and networks that are invaluable for the students. The program does a good job in beginning the cultural awareness process, but there is always room for improvement.

Questions to ask in order to improve the intercultural aspect of learning include the following: Did this program truly show students how to develop proper knowledge about cross-cultural aspects of the many regions visited or the communication skills needed to understand how to do business in different cultural contexts? Or did the program do them a disservice by focusing only on the external aspects of understanding business culture abroad? And what about the all-important aspect of understanding one’s own self in relation to others (Beamer, 1992; Cheney, 2001; Earley & Ang, 2003; Earley, Ang, & Tan, 2006; Varner & Palmer, 2005) as the starting point for all other culture learning?

Several suggestions about how to improve the GIP follow. First, the instructional design must be very clear regarding the intercultural element. The question must be asked: What are the primary goals, how will we accomplish them, and what are the expected outcomes of student learning? Such goals can help set the bar higher by putting more emphasis on the intercultural aspect of learning about business—to set this up as the foundation for doing business. Then, students should be asked to write more about specific aspects of how culture can reveal why people in the region do things the way that they do. They should also be required to do some research and write about the theories in relation to the experience, using proper citations of sources in a bibliography at the end of the term paper. An expert in intercultural communication in business should be consulted to help set and evaluate these learning objectives.

Second, the curriculum should be more student-focused. As such, lectures before departure need to be more focused on what students
need to learn about the basic aspects of Greater China rather than just the specific research interests of the professor. More attention needs to be made towards educating students about the history of the country (e.g., China-Taiwan relations) and specific cultural aspects of doing business, as well as the political ramifications on business and economy. If students can read a case and then discuss it in class with a knowledgeable expert who specifically and purposefully links the what and the why, then better connections will be made. Most of the predeparture lectures consisted of very narrow business topics from the perspective of professors who have done research and have traveled in the regions. Presentations were not necessarily helpful or adequate. Mixing business-specific lectures that deal with concrete cross-cultural issues (especially if there was an initial workshop on developing personal awareness and what the concept of culture is) and then introducing business problems would be more effective. Again, an expert in intercultural communication in business should be consulted to present lectures and cases and lead discussions that focus on the culture learning and not just the business topics.

Third, proper staffing must be considered. At the time of the author’s participation in the GIP program, all aspects of the program were handled by only one administrator, who also was responsible for other duties (e.g., student advising). All operational details—liaising with the travel company; planning the itineraries and making contacts with the political, educational, and corporate sponsors oversees; recruiting student coordinators; dealing with passport and visa issues; overseeing the volunteer program coordinators (faculty and staff who volunteer their time to lead the 4-week tours); and organizing the faculty lectures—fell on the shoulders of this one person. This type of program is a massive effort and needs the attention of the higher administration to include administrative support for the program director. Having administrative support to take care of the myriad of details would allow the program director to perhaps focus more on the instructional aspects of the study abroad tour—such as screening and selecting faculty who could provide better substance in lectures not only with business topics but with cross-cultural issues as well. It would also allow more time to develop a solid reading list with more depth and purpose. Also, the program director must be well versed in teaching the fundamental issues of culture,
at least hire an expert to do so. In essence, more time needs to be placed on instructional design and not just on the administrative details of getting the program off the ground.

Finally, better supporting and instructional materials should be provided, including specific readings (e.g., a course pack) to direct students in learning about the major tenets of the particular regions. Generally, the area directors of the particular regions assemble a random mix of newspaper articles. Although current, these articles were not necessarily representative of the major issues happening in the region and tended to reflect personal interests. A suggested improvement is to have a course pack that covers four areas: the general aspects of culture/doing business in that particular region; the general history of the country; political aspects; and economic and financial trends. In addition, there should be a current case included that directly addresses the cross-cultural issues of doing business in another culture. Then, to hold students accountable, these readings should dovetail with the lectures, and students should be required to include a significant number of citations in the paper.

CONCLUSION

Part of the outgrowth of any immersion experience is to expand a student’s worldview so that he or she will think twice before reacting to someone else who holds a cultural value that may differ from the student’s. In the globalized business world, getting students out of the theory-based classroom and into a “lab” experience allows them to see, firsthand, how business operates and to draw conclusions for themselves. One student wrote of her experience while at Taiwan’s TSMC (Taiwan Semiconductor) in the famous Hsinchu Science Park and envisioned how she and her classmates would want to act based upon their growing knowledge as business students:

It was not the list of TSMC’s accomplishments that stunned our group, but [our host’s] declaration that TSMC was content continuing to compete in the same part of the market in the future that it occupies today. She explained to us that TSMC occupies the middle of the value chain in the semiconductor industry. Specifically, TSMC’s suppliers provide the vast majority of its raw materials while TSMC’s customers focus on the design, marketing and sales. Therefore, TSMC is dependent
upon customers to provide a market for its products. This strategy runs counter to general management theory. At [our school], our professors speak about the need to “own” the end customer.

[Our host’s] statement shocked our group. Very few students on the China GIP had heard of TSMC before our visit, but after seeing the fancy headquarters, meeting our polished host and hearing the impressive statistics of this company, our group expected that TSMC would want to expand its control in the semiconductor industry, most likely moving to control the end customer and increase its presence worldwide. The bankers in the crowd were anxious to give TSMC any financing necessary to add the required capabilities. The consultants were already dreaming the growth strategy business plans and identifying potential acquisition targets.

Such connections between classroom theory and the reality of business practice are part of what the GIP is all about. This program’s purpose is to serve MBA students by exposing them to market economies outside of the United States and perhaps outside of traditional student experience, as well as to social, cultural, and political environments. Such a program provides simply a snapshot that will hopefully be added to a repertoire of many pictures in each student’s global awareness album.

Our purpose is to implant awareness and to begin to foster understanding. The ultimate goal is to help students achieve competency as students understand the why and not only the what of doing business in a cross-cultural setting. When students make significant connections (like the example above) regarding the business world, their business professors will say, “Good job.” But even better, if we as communication educators can get students to connect these business practices more closely with issues of intercultural communication so that they understand the why behind the what of doing business globally, then we will cheer.

References


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