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Using an Experiential Simulation to Build Cross Cultural Understanding: a Qualitative Study of Graduate Students

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Using an Experiential Simulation to Build Cross Cultural Understanding: a Qualitative Study of Graduate Students

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper presents a qualitative investigation into the experiences of 64 graduate business students participating in an experiential simulation designed to build cross cultural understanding. The research was undertaken at Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia which has over 10,000 international students and strong educational policies supporting cultural diversity. Curtin's Graduate School of Business develops student with an international outlook and uses experiential learning as a key teaching strategy. The 4 -hour intensive exercise, based on the simulation Bafa-Bafa with a modified debriefing process, is outlined. The holistic engagement of participants at the behavioral, affective and cognitive levels is argued to be the source of effectiveness for such simulations. The research data, the written reflections of participants gathered in the weeks following the simulation, were collected from 3 cohorts of international and local Australian students using open-ended questions in a learning journal format. Qualitative interpretivist research using content analysis with NU*DIST™ for text management, was undertaken on these data. The results presented showed the experiential simulation was effective in increasing cross-cultural understanding on six dimensions (identifying parochialism, the role of language, recognising the basis of prejudice, recognising conflict, challenging existing values and building a new understanding and value set). The reflections provided strong evidence that the simulation promoted greater respect for cultural diversity. As a teaching strategy the simulation encouraged greater interaction between local and international students and built on their prior knowledge and experience. These pedagogical benefits are particularly important to graduate business schools. The study supports the continuing contemporaneous nature of the Bafa Bafa simulation tool, albeit with modified debriefing processes for graduate students. Although experiential simulations require considerable resources in both time and facilitator expertise, this study provides persuasive evidence of their effectiveness for graduate students.

KEYWORDS. International business simulation, experiential learning, graduate students, cross-cultural understanding, qualitative evaluation

Figure 1: Graduate Business students participating in the Bafa Bafa simulation

Introduction

As Universities seek new ways to engage in truly international education, experiential learning programs using business simulations are proving effective. The literature reinforces the powerful role that experiential learning plays (Larson & Benson, 1994) and provides several examples of simulations that can be used to develop cross-cultural understanding (Shirts, 1977; McGraw & Palmer, 1999). These learning strategies are often considered difficult because of the complex facilitation required and the extended time demands. This paper investigates the qualitative outcomes of a cross-cultural experiential exercise, based on the Bafa-Bafa simulation (Shirts, 1977) in one Australian University.

Sullivan & Duplaga (1997) presented the reflections of seven staff from one European and six US universities on Bafa Bafa together with their comments *about* student reactions. This paper focuses on the students' *own reflections* of their experience within the simulation. It presents the results of a study into the effectiveness of experiential learning strategy for developing deep personal cross-cultural skills in graduate business students. The case study organisation and the teaching simulation are described before going on to outline the research and its results. The constructivist research used a grounded theory approach and this paper seeks to retain the authenticity of the research by extensively using participants' own words.

Teaching for Internationalisation

Business schools increasingly see their role as developing managers and leaders who can understand and meet the challenges of the global marketplace. But what are the most appropriate pedagogic strategies to achieve these outcomes? Laughton and Ottewill (2000) suggest that undergraduate business courses need to shift student thinking from ethnocentricity to ethnodiversity. However mature postgraduate students with varying levels of prior international experience recognize the need to go further. Lectures, research projects, case studies and more recently study-abroad programs (Henthorne, Miller, & Hudson, 2001) seek to develop skills to prepare managers for managing in culturally diverse settings. Structured programs using international students to work with local students in teams, role plays, language activities and field trips have been suggested (Cheney, 2001).

But what does it mean to truly *internationalize* management and executive education? Hoyer and Camp (1990) suggest three criteria for international or global education for business managers. They advocate that courses should produce managers with:

- an integrative framework that utilizes cultural diversity in effective thinking and decision making,

- acquired skills for use as managers of expatriate firms, domestic firms with diverse workforces, and foreign owned domestic firms, and

- a world-wide view based on a broad set of countries not just a comparison of two countries.

Many business schools conduct courses with a cross-cultural orientation using individual lectures which present the integrative frameworks such as those by Hofstede (1980), or Hall and Hall (1990). An approach using lectures and guest speakers who merely describe or list the particular characteristics of another country's culture has been argued to be flawed. This descriptive comparative approach implies that business people behave similarly with their domestic colleagues as with their foreign counterparts. Adler and Graham (1989) found this assumption to be a fallacy in several important matters.

There is a greater pedagogical challenge in developing the skills needed for managing diverse workforces, being an expatriate manager or working for a foreign-owned firm. Ensuring that the curriculum addresses the full range of cognitive, affective and behavioural skills requires considerations of the appropriate and achievable levels of student involvement. Readings, lectures, films, guest speakers, interaction with international students and field trips require only moderate or low levels of student involvement in the learning process (see Figure 2). Research projects requiring an analysis of another country's culture and its impact on class room concepts, travel abroad or international internships are high student involvement methods (Brislin, 1989). Participating in a culturally diverse team can vary in terms of the level of involvement from low to high depending on how the experience is designed and the level of reflection required of participants. An effective teaching strategy using high student involvement to develop managers' affective skills is cultural simulations.

1. Skill Development Level   Low Student Involvement

Cognitive   Readings about other cultures,

                                   Class lectures

Affect   Films

                                   Guest speakers

Behaviour   Observation @ University international events

2.   Medium Student Involvement

Cognitive   Analysis of current cultural, social or work events

                                   International case studies

Affect   Completion of self awareness tests

                                   In-class discussion

Behaviour   Participation in a culturally diverse team

                                   Interaction with international student groups

                                   Field trips with international student partners

3.   High Student Involvement

Cognitive   Research project requiring analysis of country's culture
                                   and considering impact of class concepts on context

                                   Language studies

Affect   Role play

                                   Cultural simulations, experiential learning

Behaviour   Travel & study abroad

                                   International internship

Figure 2: Impact of learning activities and student involvement on skills development
Adapted from Brislin (1989), Lars & Benson (1994) & Cheney (2001).

Role of Experiential Learning

Experiential learning using simulations enables students to learn with their feelings as well as their intellects. They offer the potential for deep personal learning because they engage participants at the behavioral, affective and cognitive level (Larson & Benson, 1994; Gentry, 1990). In cultural simulations the culture is experienced.

"Culture is the collected experience of a group of people that includes their thoughts, feelings, values, behaviours, communication and their interpretation of sensory stimuli. Living the culture is the best way to fully appreciate the issues and complexities of inter-cultural business communication." (Chaney, 2001:94)

During simulations students are exposed to 'culture shock' in a low risk environment. Wolfe and Keys (1997) argue that business simulations prepare managers for the global economy insofar as simulations challenge their beliefs. As a learning device Boyack and Berman (1997) conclude that students internalise their experiences gained from well-designed simulations because of the time pressures, conflict and emotions associated with them. However the conduct of these simulations, where powerful emotions among participants can surface, requires facilitators with a high level of professionalism, training and skill.

There are several business-oriented simulations including:

- News Ltd (Ruhe & Allen, 2001)

- Royal Flush (Robinson et al 2000)

- OrgSim (Murrell & Blanchard, 1992)

- Socofrance SA (Andre & Quinquis, 2000),

- Foodcorp International Simulation (McBride, 1992)

One of the most effective simulations remains the Bafa Bafa exercise (Shirts, 1977) which is widely used in management schools (Sullivan & Duplaga, 1997). Woods (1990) argues that Bafa Bafa is particularly useful in preparing managers who manage employees from many different cultural backgrounds in industries such as hospitality. Preuger and Rogers (1994) used an experimental design to test the effectiveness of

Bafa Bafa. They compared three groups – one receiving lectures on cross cultural issues and awareness only, another, the lectures plus Bafa Bafa simulation and the third, a control group, had no simulation or lecture. They found students undertaking Bafa Bafa experienced a 61% positive change in cultural awareness compared with only 41% for the lecture-only group, with no change for the control group

The need to ensure careful debriefing for cultural simulations such as Bafa Bafa has been discussed and structured process developed (McGraw & Palmer, 1999). The potential of these simulations is realised through the high involvement levels required of participants and facilitators. The problems of conducting experiential simulations relate to the need for expert facilitation, extended time requirements and affordability (Robinson et al, 2000).

Case Study Context

Curtin University has a strong commitment to international education through "the development of students and staff as citizens of the world, emphasizing an international outlook, cultural diversity and an informed respect for indigenous people," (www.curtin.edu.au/curtin/dept/planstats/plan/strategicplan2000.doc.). Curtin's diversity policies promote cross-cultural understanding and informed respect for cultural diversity amongst the student population, which includes some 10,000 international students.

Curtin University's Graduate School of Business (GSB) provides doctoral programs and three Masters level programs focused on developing global leaders; its flagship Master in Business Administration (MBA), the Master of Leadership and Management (MLM), and the more recently introduced Master in Future Studies (MFS). These are conducted at its Perth campus, in several Asian countries and through its e-learning programs. Experiential learning is seen as a crucial component in developing cross-cultural skills for graduate students in business and leadership at GSB. All students within the MLM program undertake the Bafa-Bafa simulation in a core cross-cultural leadership unit. Increasingly MBA students are selecting this unit as an elective because they are interested in global leadership and recognize the value of cross-cultural skills and understanding in their personal and business environments. GSB's Masters level students are mature age, with considerable workforce experience and include many international students or students who work with international businesses.

Whilst the simulation can handle from 10 to over 60 participants, around 24 seems to enable participants to best keep their concentration. Invitations are extended to class members to bring work colleagues or partners and some have accepted this offer. Invitations are also made to other Curtin staff who may have an interest in cross-cultural issues and several GSB staff have participated. This extended learning opportunity is one of the unique aspects of the Bafa-Bafa simulation.

GSB Staff Member: Bafa-Bafa was a great experience and apart from enjoying the whole simulation I took away a number of learnings for my own teaching. I would recommend it for any staff teaching international students or international business.

Many courses today provide students with knowledge about other cultures and theories of culture. The GSB was interested in going much further- in developing within students a deep and personal understanding of how they experience their own culture and the culture of others. This understanding was seen as a prerequisite for successful personal and business cross-cultural interactions. The development of values such as 'respect for other cultures', are ultimately personal processes that can, however, be aided by the structuring of holistic experiences (cognitive, affective, perceptual, social, political, spiritual and psychic). The literature supports the use of experiential simulation to achieve this (should put main refs in here again). Australia's Overseas Service Bureau (OSB) has used the Bafa Bafa simulation to prepare their volunteers about to go overseas. An OSB facilitator initially trained Curtin University staff in 1998.

The GSB Business Simulation

The Bafa-Bafa Simulation is conducted over a four-hour period one afternoon with no breaks. After an initial briefing by the facilitators, Bafa-Bafa participants are assigned to one of two groups (Alpha culture and Beta culture) in vastly different physical settings. The Alphan room is spacious, light and airy with comfortable lounges and other informal props. The Betan room is cramped poorly lit, with no seating and one prop – a whiteboard. Participants proceed to learn and practice their assigned culture including its language and behaviour norms.

Figure 3: Facilitators at work. Barrie Hepworth facilitating Betans & Assoc Prof Sue Fyfe facilitating Alphans

The patriarchal Alphans have to transact with each group member using strict rules (protocol) of social interaction which include initial small talk, physical touching and politeness. They value intimacy and enjoy life. With no instructions to the contrary they continue to speak English and are free to spend the afternoon interacting with fellow participants in a relaxed manner. The oldest male takes on responsibilities and powers of 'chief'. Meanwhile, the egalitarian Betans pursue a card game and trade among themselves to gain points that are recorded on the whiteboard. They can only converse in the Betan trading language that includes straightforward (non-English) words which can be constructed through simple rules together with a special sign language (i.e. raising eyebrows twice means "I want to trade").

Figure 4: The Betans trading cards

Both groups are given a series of props such as cards, and independently rehearsed in the 'game' that each culture will play for the afternoon. Within approximately an hour and a half the facilitators can confirm that the participants have adopted and begun to internalise their new culture. Three participants below provide a description of these two cultures.

Local Student: The Alpha group was hierarchical with the eldest male being at the top, males next and females last. Males were very protective of the females who could not approach a male directly. Each group had to play a different game – our game was a social interaction game played with cards, the aim being to engage in social interaction, play the cards, continue with social

rapport, extra points for touching not hand shaking, with points given to opponent on the level of social interaction engaged.

International Student: *I was a Betan. As such I experienced the need to learn a new language and a new way of 'living'. This gave me the experience of how one must feel when they enter a new culture with the intention of becoming part of that culture.*

Local Student: *I was transformed into a "Betan", a member of a task oriented society hidden away in a dark, poorly ventilated room communicating in a strange, very limited language. Life was simple - trade cards to receive points. Points that had no apparent value or significance other than an activity to occupy time and to practice our new found language. In isolation the Alphans and Betans each were individual culture[s] artificially formed. It was the integration of the two cultures that provided the experiential learning.*

Once each group has a robust culture, interaction between the groups is carefully managed. Firstly observers from each culture visit the other, having first passed through a Border Checkpoint where props are exchanged. When the observers return each group is given the opportunity to hear their report and to discuss what they have learned of the other culture. Sometimes groups will develop a strategy for how to interact with the 'other' based on their early observations. They then proceed with their own game. Later this is followed by a carefully managed and timed visitor program, where all students have the opportunity to visit the other culture. Upon their return they may discuss their observations and experiences with their own group if they wish. The facilitator does not initiate this discussion. The visit process enables students to experience another culture as an outsider and this can be a very emotional experience.

Figure 5: The Border Customs Checkpoint with visitors handing over props and receiving new ones for their visit to the 'other culture'.

International Student: The second experience related to visiting the Alpha group. In this situation I was a visitor and the odd man out in their culture. I was unable to communicate and could not understand their way of life. Initially I experienced a feeling that they were displaying prejudice towards me. To some degree I found this offensive. But late [r], I realised that I had failed to demonstrate sensitivity towards their culture. The end result was conflict.

The rest of the simulation, conducted over a 2-hour period, proceeds until all participants have experienced the other culture through timed visits.

The Structured Debriefing Process

All participants are finally brought back together for a very carefully constructed two-part debriefing session based on the simulation instructions as modified by the recommendations of McGraw and Palmer (1999). The first debrief, immediately at the conclusion of the simulation, is critical for participant learning because it provides them with an opportunity to explore their experience and the feelings it engenders. The second part is undertaken by individual reflection using a learning journal format in later weeks.

Each group during the careful sequence of the first debrief, talk about their 'own culture', how comfortable they were with it and then discuss the 'other' culture from

their impressions based on the observations and visits. Once both groups have done this the facilitator provides the actual rules for each culture (as provided in the simulation notes) and the two groups then consider how close their perceptions of each other were to the 'facts' and what caused them to develop misconceptions. Many participants are genuinely shocked to find out these 'facts' about the other culture and need time to process their experiences in terms of this new information.

Local Student: Listening to the cross-cultural observations at the conclusion of the exercise was enlightening – how conclusions drawn are often the opposite of the actual cultural dimensions!

Finally, each person is asked whether they would have preferred to be placed in their 'own' culture or the 'other' culture and why. Despite the randomness of original allocation the vast majority of students state a preference for their assigned culture. It seems familiarity is mainly seen as preferable to the less known – again a learning experience for these students who often see themselves as flexible risk takers in their own careers.

Local Student: "My" culture: In our version of the Bafa-Bafa game I was a Betan, which was a trade-focussed group with limited language. Our language was a little more extensive than just "Bafa-Bafa" but the entire vocabulary related to commercial transactions and therefore there were no words for any emotions or manners. It was a short, sharp and functional language. I felt comfortable as one of the Betans.
Local Student: Initial difficulty in learning communication cues [was] quickly overcome as [I] became engrossed in the game and membership of the Beta team.

Methods: Data Collection and Analysis

The constructivist interpretivist research sought to interpret and understand the perceived meanings (Patton, 1990) held about the Bafa-Bafa phenomenon. Qualitative data were collected from 64 local and international student participants in three experiential simulation cohorts using open ended questions gathered in a learning journal format. Because the simulation challenges students' values and invokes strong emotional responses, time was needed for deep personal learning to develop. These journal reflections around the themes of *language, 'my/their' culture,*

and *my feelings* formed the second part of the structured debriefing process and were collected at least two weeks after the simulation had been undertaken. These data were collated and transcribed into standard text format and NU*DIST ™ software (Richards, 1996) used as the text management system. Analysis of student experiences used content analysis and was based on a grounded theory approach (Whiteley, 2000). As constructivist research this paper has sought to retain the authenticity of the research by extensively using participants' own words in reporting findings.

Results

The nature and quality of student reflections in the second and later debrief indicated the considerable impact of the simulation on student learning over time. The major results of the iterative and grounded analysis were that the GSB simulation:

- Increased cross-cultural understanding among student participants identified on six dimensions,

- Built on students' previous cultural knowledge or experience,

- Promoted an informed respect for cultural diversity, and

- Encouraged greater interaction between local and international students.

Each of these findings is discussed below using examples of the participants' reflections.

Finding 1: The GSB simulation increased cross-cultural understanding among participants

The data provided strong evidence that the participants' experience with the GSB simulation had increased the students' cross cultural understanding on six dimensions. Each of these dimensions is given below.

a)   Identifying Parochialism

Even though participants were merely assigned to one of the cultures, participants generally concluded that they preferred their assigned culture to the 'other' culture at

the conclusion of only 3 hours of that new culture. The debrief session made this learning public.

Local Student: After listening to some others who had visited the Beta group I fell into the mind trap that when I visited with [named female] I would have to protect her, and that was about it. I did not think of anything else, which now astonishes me that I could get so fixated on our particular idiosyncrasies and not have a fuller understanding or picture of what was happening…. I was fixated on protecting the female and adhering to the Alphan cultural values.

b) Role of Language

The role of language in mediating communication between cultures was identified as a crucial factor in cross-cultural understanding from the simulation. Even when everyday English was spoken participants found this often disguised other cultural differences. The structured differences in language created by the simulation provided this learning.

Local Student: The fact that the Betan trading language meant nothing to the Alphans and hindered cultural interaction was an obvious learning point. At least attempt to learn the basics of the language in any new culture, especially if you want to break new ground and lead.

Local Student: Language is MUCH MORE than the verbal component. The Alphans considered us Betans to be a bit "weird" with all the non-verbal communications.

Local Student: Also found very difficult to understand other culture, even with them speaking English.

c) Recognising the Basis of Prejudice

Simple everyday differences in culture were seen to contribute to the development of prejudice when visitors interacted with the resident or host culture. The simulation ensured this through the use of two very different constructed cultures.

Local Student: [I learned] that people judge from the paradigm with which they are familiar. [Application for me] it improved my awareness of how my own cultural paradigm will influence [my] understanding of other cultures,

communications and perceptions. [Need to] take the time to learn about the culture and how best to initiate contact with that culture.

Local Student: *as a 'stranger' in another culture it is easy to offend without intending to do so.*

d) Recognising Conflict

Conflict was seen to quickly develop from different cultural norms. The simulation contributed to this dimension by the 'high value' playing cards that visiting Alphans were given. Alphans quickly became the subjects of 'stealing' or 'conning' when they visited Beta. Betans, on the other hand, found themselves physically challenged when they transgressed Alphan patriarchal rules by speaking directly with the women.

Local Student: *Some of the Betan group abandoned the polite ethics established among the Betans for trade and simply snatched or grabbed the available cards from the visiting Alphans without offering anything in trade and roughly pushed to convert the cards into points.*

Local Student: *The hurt at being in the Alphan culture and being (seemingly) taken advantage of by others. This left me hurt and wanting to move on in their culture, but eventually I had to leave. At the debrief of the game, I found out that a lack of information had let me feel this way, and I could have survived easily. A profound view of our comfort zones.*

Local Student: *I found this experience [visiting Beta] very similar to being a tourist in some less developed countries where they do not understand Westerners, but have come to associate us with the things we can provide.*

e) Challenging Existing Values

The simulation challenged participants' personal value set in an explicit way that enabled long held beliefs to surface and become the subject of reflection.

Local Student: *The Bafa-Bafa exercise tormented me for days after the event. I was confused as to my ability to assimilate and understand others and their culture. I didn't realise that I was so culturally mind-set or influenced to the degree that I was. I was very humiliated that I did not have a better awareness about me. On the other side I was very annoyed that I was not as empathetic with the visitors to Beta as I should have been. Instead of being helpful and*

assisting the visitors I saw them as different and in some instances took advantage of them and exploited them for their chips.

Having completed the exercise and becoming more aware of the effects and aspects of differing cultures it has greatly opened my eyes as to how strong an influence this is in our everyday life. It is something that affects us sub-consciously and if we are not wary or alert to this we can become or behave in a very culturally insensitive manner. From now on I hope to be a little more perceptive of cultural differences. Instead of being ignorant and allowing my subconscious to dominate, I can be more empathetic of others.

f)   Building a new Understanding and Value Set

The structured reflection provided students with the time and framework for reflecting on the learning and enabled them to integrate this into their personal and business understanding and value set.

Local Student: What I learned from this process was the need to (a) display sensitivity towards other cultures. Do not judge but instead try to understand. (b) accept that other cultures will not be immediately understanding or accepting of your ways. You need to be patient and give others the chance to adapt and accept your culture.

Local Student (born overseas): This was an exercise that started a self-critical thought process and a provoked new look at one's own behaviours to outsiders, and how others see us. Having been through it I would certainly be more tolerant of other culture's value systems, and try to understand why they do things the way that they do them prior to passing judgment.

Finding 2: The GSB simulation built on students' previous cultural

Knowledge and experience

The simulation learning strategy draws on the formal knowledge students gain from their Masters studies together with their informal and tacit knowledge based on their cultural backgrounds, their work with diverse workforces or organisations and their personal experiences as tourists or travelers.

The 64 students in the study came from many different cultural backgrounds on six continents: Australia (with and without recent migrant experience), China, Indonesia,

Thailand, Germany, Brunei, Brazil, Taiwan, USA and South Africa. Many of the students undertaking the Masters program do so because they have already worked in international firms or aspire to do so. Others bring their tourist experiences to the simulation and used it in their later reflections on the game's visitor experience.

Local Student: I think it was a great exercise in terms of applying some of the 'theoretical' issues we'd discussed during lectures. This hands-on exercise really honed in on specific behaviours and attitudes relating to culture, giving us an idea of how cultural norms develop and are re-inforced.

Local Student: The Bafa-Bafa cross-cultural game developed two cultures (Alpha and Beta). In terms of Hofstede's model, Alpha was a collective/non-competitive based culture whilst Beta was individualistic/competitive. [Shows use of theory presented in class]

Local Student: In reading we only see the tip of the iceberg through our reading, translation and limited trade. We are lulled into a feeling of confidence that we "know" about the different culture. The experiences obtained from the Bafa-Bafa game emerge in reality when we least expect them, and they can really knock us flat. I believe that this demonstrates the need for more humility, respect, open-mindedness and a quest for learning when operating in a foreign culture.

Local Student: When we visited the Beta community we were not able to communicate with them, did not understand the game they were playing, and they either ignored us or tried to take playing cards from us. I found this experience very similar to being a tourist in some less developed countries where they do not necessarily understand Westerners [student goes on to relate two lengthy tourist experiences in Africa and Egypt.]

Finding 3: The GSB simulation promoted informed respect for cultural diversity

The simulation learning strategy provided students with an informed respect for cultural diversity. They had not only learnt *about* other cultures but also developed a respect *for* cultural differences. It also encouraged many to have a deeper view of their own culture.

International Student: The exercise was useful as it taught me to be sensitive to other culture(s). In looking at other culture, we must not judge it from our own perspective but to observe in terms of the culture itself. There are no right or wrong, it is just how they act according to their culture.

Local Student: Bafa-Bafa really showed me the importance of understanding my own culture. Even more importantly, it made me realise that my understanding of the motivators or cultural norms and behaviours won't be shared by people from outside my culture, who don't have the same grounding in the history and application of the culture that I do. Unfortunately we tend to assume that those that see our culture differently to how we do are silly or uneducated. The reality is that they just have a different background and sort of experiences, therefore they will have a different perception of our culture.

International Student: Being a foreign student, understanding the Australian culture is important. It is not easy to be able to adapt to this new environment. But with some skills that I have learned from the [Bafa-Bafa] activity, it encourages me to value other peoples' culture.

Local Student: In summary the Bafa-Bafa game provided a unique experience to challenge my perceptions about how I interact with different cultures. I concluded that the more I tried to think of alternate ways, the more reliant I became on my past experience and perceptions, my making sense of what happened to me.

Finding 4: The GSB simulation encouraged greater interaction between local and international students

In the Bafa-Bafa game local and international students were allocated deliberately across the two new cultures. One outcome of this Bafa-Bafa distribution was to build a strong cross-cultural comradeship through the new common culture. Informal feedback from past students is that both international and local students have a new bond through being Betans or Alphans that carries over into later units in the course. Students anecdotally refer to themselves as 'Alphans' or 'Betans' to each other in quite unrelated settings.

Because the simulation is intense there is no choice for quiet or shy students to take less active roles in the groups. All students seem to interact in this game setting where

the new rules are for all members of a group not just the dominant group. Conversely many local students are able to raise their own multi-cultural background or tourist experiences as shown in findings one and two. The simulation also provides the skills that promote interaction between students and those of different cultural backgrounds in their own workplace settings.

International Student: The interaction in the group brings us closer. We tend to know our classmates better than in the normal lecture [format] we had.
Local Student: This is a good resource for working with international students or employees. I think this exercise could easily be adapted to use with students prior to them leaving Australia to participate in a student exchange or cultural exchange experience. It is also a useful activity to run with staff who may be going to visit another country for a period of time or who will be hosting or working with a group of international visitors in WA… The process reminds us of the importance of perception and shared experience
International Student: I was chosen to be a first observer for the group because I was an overseas student. It brings me self-confidence

Concluding Discussion

This paper reports on a qualitative study of student reflections upon an experiential simulation during a graduate course on cross-cultural leadership. The findings provide powerful evidence that these students developed a deep personal understanding of the nature of culture through the simulation. This exercise challenged their prior personal beliefs in a relatively controlled and safe environment and helped them internalise their learning. The use of the two-part formal reflective strategy played an important role in ensuring that the experience became integrated into the students' ongoing values.

The findings provide strong evidence that the intervention provided sustained attitude change. This qualitative study of student reflections supports the use of experiential simulations in courses designed to achieve learning outcomes in the areas of cross-cultural understanding (including the role of language) and promoting respect for cultural diversity. For many of the students it provided deep personal insights which had not been stimulated by their earlier traditional lecture/discussion format classes on cross-cultural issues. These findings are aligned with the work of Larson and Benson

(1994) and Gentry (1990) which identify the potential of holistic engagement in learning (affective, behavioral, and cognitive). As a teaching strategy it encouraged greater interaction between local and international students and built on students' prior knowledge and international experience. Both these pedagogical benefits are particularly important to graduate business schools. The study also supports the continuing contemporaneous nature of the Bafa Bafa simulation tool found by Sullivan and Duplaga (1997), albeit with modified debriefing processes for graduate students. Although experiential simulations require considerable resources in both time and facilitator expertise, this study provides persuasive evidence of their effectiveness for graduate students.

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