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Service Learning and International Business Education

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"I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand" Confucius c. 450 BC

Abstract

In recent years, business schools have come under increasing scrutiny for teaching relevant and practical skills to their students. Experiential and service learning – learning by doing – has been one area in which business schools were able to complement their traditional classes to enhance their students' learning outcomes. International business is an area in which the growth of experiential learning has been slow. This paper seeks to explain a unique model for providing international business experience to MBA students using a high-ranking small MBA program in Florida as a case study.

Introduction

In order to enhance their students' competitive advantage in the marketplace and provide practical knowledge to their students, business schools have embraced a variety of experiential learning models in recent years. These models vary in their duration, intensity, commitment, and required level of involvement. Despite the importance of globalization to businesses, international experiential learning has grown slowly. This is partly because experience in international business requires international travel, a higher level of monetary commitment, and qualified and experienced faculty members to participate. Webb, Mayer, Pioche and Allen (1999) suggested that schools use internationally experienced faculty and an interdisciplinary international business curriculum which embodies cross-cultural education to prepare their students to the global business realities of the 21st century. The purpose of this paper is to examine a particular experiential learning model for teaching international business. To accomplish this task the paper is divided as follows: first, the institutional framework for developing the experiential learning model in international business is described; then, an example of a recent project relating to the internationalization of a small and medium sized high-technology company is given as an example. The paper ends with practical suggestion to business school for implementing these types of projects.

Institutional Framework

In order to have a viable international business education program, the mission of the organization, the business school, and/or the department should support this effort. The mission statements of Rollins College and the Crummer Graduate School of Business encourage international experiential programs. The college emphasizes innovation in the curriculum, diversity among its students (including international students), and cultural enrichment activities.

The Rollins MBA has been ranked among the finest graduate business programs in America. Forbes magazine ranked leading business schools by comparing the cost of attaining an MBA to the monetary rewards for obtaining the degree-and the Rollins MBA was ranked 12th among America's Top 25

regional business schools. The Rollins MBA was the only MBA program in Florida ranked by Forbes. It is also an AACSB accredited program. Among the special features of the Rollins MBA are two major international initiatives:

International Study Trip

Studying the effects of cultural influences on business is one thing; seeing them in action is another. Full-time Accelerated MBA and Early Advantage MBA programs and Executive MBA students gain a multidimensional understanding of cultural issues from the International Study Trip (the cost of the trip is included in the tuition). Students travel overseas. Recent trips have included visits to England, Belgium, France, Germany and Hong Kong. Students have the rare opportunity to meet one-on-one with high-ranking executives of premier multinational corporations. On recent International Study Trips, students have visited the headquarters of BMW (Munich), met with senior managers at Morgan Stanley Dean Witter (London), and attended a private briefing with a member of the European Parliament (Brussels).

Global Consulting Project

The Global Consulting Project elective course allows students to earn credit and gain international experience, thanks to an exclusive partnership between the Crummer School and leading multinational corporations and small and medium enterprises. Students work on real-world projects whose success depends on their intellectual and practical application of key business concepts. Over the past few years, students have participated in nearly 50 consulting projects with such international corporations as Estée Lauder (Czech Republic), AT&T (Spain), DPT (Saudi Arabia), Tupperware (China), Disney Development (France), Lucent Technologies (Singapore), and Custom Electronics (Germany).

The Global Consulting Project

The global consulting project is experiential in nature. A number of scholars, such as Burnard (1989), Joplin (1981), and Kolb (1984), have argued that experiential learning is superior to traditional methods. Experiential learning requires active participation; it is student-based; it allows students to build on subjective evaluations and perceptions; it is inductive and explorative. Gremler, et al. (2000) proposed that experiential learning assignments in Business classes are more likely to develop students' interpersonal and communication skills, understanding of course concepts, teamwork and team building, listening skills, and critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. The net effect according to proponents of experiential learning is that students become more interested and engaged, retain the information better and for longer periods, and learn how to apply otherwise elusive theoretical constructs.

Scope and Background of the Global Consulting Project

Each global consulting project is unique and the deliverables are defined jointly by the company, the students, and the professor. In here, one such project is brought into focus to illustrate the learning outcomes that follow.

In 2002, students worked on a project to help internationalize the operations of a small electronics manufacturer of capacitors from Upstate New York – Custom Electronics Incorporated (CEI) – in establishing additional business in Germany. The student group focused on Germany because sales have dropped to almost nothing in the country over the last couple of years. To achieve this purpose, specific objectives were developed prior to departure for Europe, which allowed the students to better understand the electronics market in Germany.

In the past, CEI had conducted business in Germany through a component distributor, but the trade

volume disappeared and the relationship was under reevaluation. Without considering the internal relationship between CEI and its distributor, the student team focused on investigating other factors that could have affected the decline in sales, such as the slow economy and domestic competition. The MBA students also sought alternatives that could be employed to generate revenue, such as direct sales to the German defense, power generation and aerospace industries.

Although other countries could have been chosen for analysis, the consulting team decided to pursue Germany as CEI's target market because of the size of its economy and the strong defense, aerospace, and energy sectors, the target markets of CEI. To successfully complete the objectives of the project, the team approached it by researching what is required to do business in Germany. Students gathered information about the country's business culture, the industries in which CEI's products can successfully compete, and the potential venues for approaching the German market. This research was complemented by visits to the cities of Düsseldorf, Cologne, Frankfurt and Munich which allowed the consulting group to meet and discuss opportunities with the American Chamber of Commerce, the German Chambers of Commerce, the US Commercial Services, and the US Consulates. The group gathered advice on how to approach potential customers, how to handle the relationship with the current German distributor and what companies in Germany could potentially be direct customers or distributors of CEI's products.

Learning Outcomes

A number of learning outcomes can be directly attributed to this project as they relate to international business education.

First, students learned to *interact and communicate in a cross-cultural international setting with top governmental officials and business constituents*. Our meetings included discussions with:

- Dr. Gerhard Eschenbaum, IHK (German Chamber of Commerce), Düsseldorf
- Christopher Hanke, Director, International Business Section, IHK (German Chamber of Commerce), Cologne
- Dr. Edward C. Fantasia, U.S. Commercial Services, Düsseldorf
- Christine Hoffman, American Chamber of Commerce in Germany, Frankfurt
- Bryan Smith and Dagmar Winkler-Helmdach, U.S. Commercial Services, Munich

From these meetings, students developed valuable contacts, learned to ask the right questions and be active listeners, and gleaned much information about doing business in Germany in general and penetrating the electronics market in specific.

Second, the *students developed intimate knowledge, both tacit and explicit, of a foreign market, namely Germany*. In structuring the report to the company, the students had to write up a summary of the German economy and culture in addition to analysis of the electronics markets in which CEI competes.

Equally important is the tacit knowledge that the students acquired about the foreign culture and market. For example, the trip allows students to visit various cultural attractions such as museums, city tours, outings, etc. In several instances, interactions with locals provided insight to the German culture and to the American culture from the standpoint of foreign nationals. Such eye opening experiences are invaluable in developing a global understanding of the world.

The third student outcome is *learning how to work as a team on an international project*. While MBA students work on teams in each of their classes, the international project poses additional difficulties, beyond the typical group dynamics associated with class projects. For example, when traveling abroad

with students, many disagreements may arise from choosing where to sleep, where to eat, where to go, when to meet, how to conduct one-self, etc. These problems are especially pronounced because the consulting trip is not structured and because the environment, language, food and accommodations are less familiar. Additionally, the total involvement in each others' lives, the day-in day-out interaction with one-another, is a source of additional stress not encountered in a classroom setting. This immersion requires from the students and the supervising faculty a greater level of flexibility, patience and maturity.

Finally, students *learn how to write a professional business report that is presentable to top managers* in a real company. This skill is relevant to the students' training for managerial leadership in the future and prepares them for increased level of responsibility. The report writing stage begins prior to the international trip through background research and ends after several iterations are completed after students return and are able to digest the materials that were collected during the trip.

Discussions and Conclusions

The international business consulting trip is a high-level preparatory experiential class that requires a high level of coordination and preparation by the students and faculty alike. Thus, it is probably more appropriate for an MBA program than an undergraduate program. Even within an MBA program, it is more appropriate for students who have some training in international business and who have a certain level of maturity and business experience. An application process is highly recommended and the team makeup should be examined in detail prior to departure.

Unlike the MBA international study trip, described in the section on Institutional Framework above, in which most students are involved (about 85% students or all the full time students), the international consulting trip is exclusive and requires an application process. It also counts as 3 credits and students receive a grade at the end. The consulting project is a semester long project, out of which one week is used for field research, usually during the mid-semester break. It is an elective international business course. The school runs these consulting projects twice a year.

Students are chosen by examining their academic and professional background. Oftentimes, these students are identified by the professor while they are taking his/her class. This way, the professor can better assess their academic qualifications and interpersonal skills. About five students participate in each consulting project. Most students that participate in the consulting project have some work experience, but students with no work experience that are in the second year of their MBA are also allowed to participate. Therefore, the consulting project is open to all of the MBA programs offered by the school.

The learning outcomes from an international business practicum complement the traditional class setting and give the students perspectives which are difficult to bring into the classroom. The students value these experiences because they provide an element of realism which is difficult to emulate in the classroom and allow the students to synthesize and apply the courses they have already taken. Given the positive outcomes that are possible, MBA programs are advised to develop experiential international business education curriculum to their students in order to prepare them for managerial positions in the global business environment of the future.

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