

Delivering a Graduate Information Systems Course in France: Observations, Experiences, and Professional Development Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

This essay describes an international graduate business education experience involving a US and a French university in which a graduate course in information systems was prepared and delivered. In addition to describing the overall experience, several problematic issues and challenges are identified and discussed. Special emphasis is placed on three areas of differences, communications, technology, and culture. Areas in which faculty growth and development occurred also are identified and discussed. Awareness of these differences and opportunities, their impact on course and professional conduct, and possible actions and outcomes may be useful to other educators and academic administrators interested in developing and/or operating a similar program internationally.

Keywords: Information systems, international business education, and faculty development

1. INTRODUCTION

Most academicians and practitioners embrace the notion that those involved in the global marketplace need greater exposure to the international business environment. Consistent with this charge, the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business's (AACSB International) accreditation standards have identified the international sector as a key aspect of business education.¹ This international mandate applies to all institutions.

In addition to an international charge, business faculty and administrators also are charged with a professional development responsibility. According to the AACSB, professional development is an on-going process that includes such activities as participation in professional organizations, research and publication, continuing education, the acquisition of new and/or additional

technical and discipline specific skill sets, and other enriching activities. Participation in a short-term study abroad educational experience, such as that described here, is consonant with that charge.²

This manuscript, and the international program it profiles, has been developed predicated upon the acceptance of these charges and the perceived relevance and criticality of international exposure to both students and faculty. Faculty members, administration, and the university as a whole must accept and satisfy the responsibility for preparing students and faculty for these international challenges and opportunities. The program and experience outlined in this document details how this professional development experience and responsibility have been defined and

¹ See "Achieving Quality and Continuous Improvement Through Self-Evaluation and Peer Review," *Standards for Accreditation Business Administration and Accounting*, AACSB International, February 14, 2001, pg. 17-19.

² Visit Angela Maynard Sewall's, "New Frames for an Undefined Future" in *National Forum*, Winter 1999, v79, i1 p3(2). For a discussion of professional development in higher education, a discussion of contrasting views associated with short-term study abroad programs may be found by reading "What Direction for Study Abroad? 2 Views," in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 18, 2001, B7-B10.

operationalized in the Jennings A. Jones College of Business at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU).

The purpose of this article is to share the experiences, insight, outcomes, and conclusions realized from the development and delivery of graduate information systems course offered in France. Serving in the roles of program administrator and coordinator and based upon previous experiences, this chronicle of activities and associated professorial reflections was developed. In addition to the above, this paper presents a programmatic profile, identifies and discusses multiple areas in which the experience contributed to professional growth, and offers several professional development suggestions.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

A dynamic global marketplace requires that organizations of all types, including universities, become more international. In turn, foreign universities are aggressively seeking out American partners and professors to come to their home countries and classrooms and deliver an American education. The intent is to prepare foreign business students with the international skills necessary to lead their country in a global economy.

Some of the impetus for the increased participation of US universities in the delivery of foreign business education may be the result of variability in many foreign business schools' pedagogy. Further, while many foreign universities offer graduate business degrees that are gaining in "credibility" and "presence," they do not confer the same esteem as the American MBA (Waddock 1997).

American education and professors have much to learn about successfully juxtaposing one system on another. Berendzen (1981) noted that "Americans have, overall, an abysmal lack of understanding about foreign cultures." More recently, Varner (1999) observed that the high rate of failure of American expatriates in international settings is due to a large extent to the cultural adjustment problems.

Despite these shortcomings, international partnerships are eagerly sought. Virtually all US universities have established or are in the process of establishing international relationships. According to Ray and Ryder (1995) "more and more universities are making commitments to expand its global exposures so its students can participate in a global society." Such is the case with Middle Tennessee State University and a sister institution in France.

Reasons to study internationally abound. A decade ago,

Beamish and Calof (1989) documented the importance of an internationally oriented education system for the future economic health of a country. Since that time, other scholars have identified specific goals of graduate education. White and Griffith (1998) noted that "graduate education in any country should help students to develop critical thinking skills, so they can move beyond their inherent biases." Goodman (1999) noted that because the American marketplace is maturing, the essential motivation of cross-cultural learning is commerce. Goodman also noted that this educational experience adds "knowledge, translating into valuable cooperation and communication skills."

As US professors strive to deliver graduate business education abroad, the question of which pedagogy to use often arises. While numerous instructional models exist, most scholars agree with the assertion that there is no ideal educational model (Dickson and Segars 1999; Jochems, et al. 1999; Wilson and Balfors 1994). Likewise, while there is virtually universal agreement among scholars that faculty development efforts and initiatives must be developed, pursued, and be on going, there is almost unanimous disagreement as to how best to accomplish such. Since the development of both taxonomies is likely to evolve from a collection of educational experiences, perhaps the experience described here can contribute to higher education's understanding of both delivering graduate business education abroad and professional development.

Specific objectives of this project were the following:

1. To identify programmatic difficulties that exist in conducting an American computer information systems course using EXCEL spreadsheets™ in a French setting.
2. To identify cultural and communications difficulties that may exist and determine how these difficulties impact classroom conduct.
3. To identify the difficulties that an American educator may experience when traveling to France for the purpose of international exchange.
4. To acquire new skills, insight, and perspectives that would directly contribute to the professional development of faculty members.

Information for this essay was gleaned from interviews with students, as well as observation of classroom and lab conduct. Classroom discussion and conversations regarding communication challenges and opportunities also were part of the project. Finally, a journal was kept containing notes made during and after each class.

3. PRE-TRIP PREPARATION

In anticipation of the international exchange, numerous conversations and information exchanges took place. In

addition to identifying specific educational objectives, student academic profiles were provided, class schedules were developed, pedagogic resources were identified, as well as numerous cultural and logistical issues. Among other things, these discussions led to numerous pre-arrival adjustments, both educational and personal, being made by the professor. Still other adjustments (many of which are described in this essay) were necessitated upon arrival or shortly after the class began.

4. COURSE PEDAGOGY

The course's objectives were to instruct foreign students in spreadsheet applications (Excel™) and in the various theories and approaches to information systems analysis. There were 21 MBA students in the class representing France, as well as Morocco, Hungary, and Germany. The course met for three weeks, three hours per day, three days per week for a total of 27 contact hours. This is somewhat less than that required in a US course, but typical of French classes. Programmatically, this temporal difference required the first pedagogic adjustment. To meet AACSB accreditation requirements, several lab hours and pre-arrival, Internet assignments and readings were added to augment the reduced number of student contact hours.

5. EXPERIENTIAL OUTCOMES AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

Based upon the experiences and observations, numerous experiential outcomes and professional "growth opportunities" were encountered. These outcomes and opportunities may represent a departure from the normative model of graduate business education that might have been expected. As the following discussion indicates, outcomes and opportunities have been grouped into three categories, (1) communication, (2) technology, and (3) culture.

5.1 Communication

There were two areas of communication differences worthy of note. The computer software, Excel™, was written in French, and some of the conversational words used by both the Americans and the French did not translate well from language to language. Both of these conditions provided numerous pedagogic challenges.

Excel™ in French: The foremost objective of the course was to teach a western style graduate information systems course using spreadsheets without using an English version of Excel. The responsibility for acquiring (prior to departure) some French language skills was assumed by the professor. However, the course was to be taught in English and communication (technical and social) proved challenging.

The initial communications obstacle encountered was the French version of Excel™. To address this problem, a translated spreadsheet was quickly created with the aid of an on-campus interpreter. However, as the class progressed, the translated spreadsheet was abandoned, as students were able to provide their own translation.

English as a Second Language: Despite the professor's language acquisition attempts (noted previously) and the students' fluency in English, the translation of simple words, terms, etc. offered continuous communication challenges for both students and professor. The foremost pedagogic consequence of this problem was the reduced pace of the class. Lectures required twice as much time to deliver. In a typical class, only half the scheduled material could be covered. In turn, this necessitated major revisions in the syllabus, class schedule, and planned activities.

Direct translation usually was not a problem. However, on other occasions, translation and comprehension proved more challenging. For example, consider the standard financial concept or term "Net Present Value" (NPV). This term and its acronym do not directly translate from English to French. Therefore, when discussing this concept, the term had to be converted to 'VPM', the French version of "NPV".

Communication challenges proved paradoxical in that they were frustrating, yet challenging. Most communication difficulties were identified and addressed in class, while more substantive issues required considerable effort and time to resolve. This challenge ultimately proved to be the best acculturation learning experience.

5.2 Technology

Because the class was an information systems applications course using Excel™, the requirements of updated and advanced software and hardware were essential. Within the technology area, four problematic issues were encountered. These included (1) keyboard, (2) database usage, (3) computer accessibility, and (4) classroom equipment.

Keyboard: French keyboards are different from American keyboards. While these differences were somewhat problematic, "key" location differences made it instructionally difficult, as the lessons were predicated on the English layout. When shown an example of an application, keystrokes would not show up as intended. The keys that are in different locations are "A", "W", "S", "M", "Q", and the "comma." This hardware difference was unknown prior to arriving in France. Making the adjustment required minimal effort of the professor and greatly enhanced the demonstrations.

Database: Database information was needed to complete homework assignments. Ideally, the database would have been loaded (as was discussed and agreed upon during preliminary discussions with university officials) and accessed via a common or shared drive. Unfortunately, after the class began, it was discovered that there was no way to 'load' the database nor was there adequate time to load the database individually (yet another example of a communications problem). To address this need, the database was loaded on a floppy, then onto university computers, and ultimately downloaded by the students.

Computer Accessibility: The expectation was that the computer room would readily be available. It also was assumed that Excel™ was available in English. Both of these assumptions serve as excellent examples for the widely known axiom (that will not be repeated here) regarding assumptions, as well as reinforce the typical American stereotype of "all the world should speak English," to which the professor pleads "guilty." Exacerbating the paucity of computer terminals available for classroom use was the limited availability of the computer lab. While these obstacles ultimately were resolved, students developed the most useful solution by developing small study groups in which at least one computer was available and shared.

Hardware and software limitations proved problematic, but not without resolution. In addition to changing the lecture schedule, a more customized approach to the demonstration of course material was adopted. Students were divided into two groups with each group receiving individual demonstrations of the assignments. While inefficient, this approach proved workable and academically refreshing.

5.3 Culture

French students initially appeared to be like any American classroom full of graduate students. However, the culture of these French students demonstrated itself to be different in several respects. These cultural differences, which included academic expectations, academic conduct, and academic relationship, necessitated several pedagogic adjustments.

Academic Expectations: The request (by the French institution) and expectation (of both universities) was that a graduate information systems course analogous to the core information systems class required of MTSU MBA students would be delivered with many of the same lectures, demonstrations, readings, assignments, and exams being applicable. In effect, French students would receive the same exposure and be required to satisfy the same requirements as their US counterparts.

With this goal and plan in mind, course delivery proceeded. Students immediately began to comment about the course's workload, as their academic expectations were quite different. The students were not expecting or accustomed to a lengthy readings list or extensive computer projects. Given the communications and resource problems identified earlier, significant adjustments to the course's academic requirements were made. These changes ameliorated the incongruence in academic expectations.

Perhaps the most relevant academic point to examine is the French grading system, which is significantly different from its US counterpart and offers tremendous insight into French graduate student academic performance and behavior. French grades are awarded on a twenty-point basis, where 14-20 = A, 11-13.99 = B, 8-10.99 = C, 4-7.99 = D, and 0-3.99 = F. To graduate from the French DESS (graduate school), students must obtain an overall average grade of 10 out of 20 points.

Academic Conduct: The classroom conduct or behavior of the French students is significantly different from their American counterparts. French students rarely take an active role in classroom discussion. Culturally, these students prefer to think or consider the professor as the "expert" and (s)he tells them all they need to know. Such behavior is considered "learned behavior," as many French professors often do not solicit or want open questions and/or discussion.

Another aspect of the students' conduct concerns intra-group discussions. During class, it was not unusual to see groups of students clustered together talking during the lecture or demonstration. Initially seen as disruptive, students explained that this was the French way of asking and receiving information regarding the material without "insulting" the professor by interrupting the presentation. While this intra-group learning continued throughout the course, subsequent changes (e.g., individual presentations, Q&A sessions, and designated discussion periods) introduced and designed to facilitate participation proved fruitful.

The most disconcerting aspect of the students' academic conduct was their passive approach to deadlines, due dates, starting times, etc. For example, the class was scheduled to start at 9AM. The class rarely started before 9:15AM. Regarding the submission of assignments, some were not submitted, others were incomplete, and still others were late. When these issues were discussed with the students and administration, it was discovered that the French often take a "more flexible" approach to starting times, due dates, and the like. While some temporal adjustments were made, the overall situation was resolved when academic

expectations were reiterated and emphasized.

Academic Relationship: As noted earlier, French professors often do not allow or want active student participation. Perhaps this behavior explains why developing a line of communication was difficult. Only after repeated attempts was an acceptable line-of-communication established. While characteristic of the French academic culture, the conclusion was that French students could adapt to the American system with ease.

6. FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

Faculty development fosters the creation and transfer of knowledge through teaching, research, and service. It was anticipated that preparing and delivering a graduate information systems abroad would contribute to this objective. Specific aspects of professional development that resulted included academic validation and professional credibility, intellectual growth, acculturation, academic administration, and reflection.

6.1 Academic Validation/Professional Credibility

An aspect of professional development often sought through the international experience is the grounding of concept and theory in reality. One of, if not the primary benefit of the international experience, was the professional validation that occurred. Meetings with corporate officials, observation of business practices, directly experiencing cultural idiosyncrasies, etc. served as an “academic refueling” and/or academic validation. In turn, because students generally respond favorably to first-hand experience (i.e., examples) and because students typically ascribe greater expertise to faculty who present such material in class, the experience fostered academic credibility.

6.2 Intellectual and Professional Growth

After teaching the same class over an extended period of time, faculty may think (s)he knows the material so well, new information is not required. Regardless of the readers’ acceptance of this assertion, faculty participation in this international experience resulted in the achievement of significant intellectual growth. For example, intellectual growth occurred (often vicariously) on multiple occasions via multiple sources (e.g., visits and discussions with executives from multiple companies, shopping, informal social gatherings, etc.).

Given the opportunity to observe, listen, and experience, it was possible to identify a multitude of issues, topics, behaviors, practices, etc. that are rarely identified and discussed in an international business text, but are key elements to the successful conduct of international business. A prime example of this is the specificity, formality, and character of business protocol evident in

all institutions visited.

Growth also occurred in the area of research focus and productivity. In addition to finding new international colleagues with whom to work, new research initiatives with international dimensions manifest themselves. Further, opportunities for new and/or increased international professional service and involvement have been identified. These outcomes directly contributed to professional growth.

6.3 Acculturation Training

Regrettably, faculty may carry biases, stereotypical images, as well as misperceptions into their everyday activities and perpetuate these misrepresentations in the classroom. Specifically, in teaching and researching international subjects, faculty must be mindful of how such biases may be transferred to their students and colleagues, thus need to correct these inaccuracies.

When faculty participate in another culture, a number of opportunities for better understanding are presented, as faculty often are in the minority—in terms of language, ethnicity, religion, etc. This exposure can be a powerful and valuable diversity training/learning experience. A faculty member is provided an opportunity to review his/her own attitudes and behaviors through a self-reporting mechanism. This offers a challenge to contemplate and reflect on what has been “learned” from published sources and prior experiences and compare such with current personal observations.

6.4 Academic Administration

While not a high priority, experience in academic administration (i.e., developing and operating an exchange program) proved a valued growth outcome. Such growth includes a greater understanding of budget development, funding sources, grant preparation, schedule development, operational issues and arrangements, as well as direct experience interacting with foreign administrators and executives.

In turn, the chronicling of this experience may prove helpful to those faculties seeking to develop their own international educational experience. Given the voluminous amount of preparatory work that must be done, the experience may result in a more rewarding educational experience, mistake avoidance, and professional growth.

6.5 Personal and Professorial Reflection

For personal reasons more so than academic purposes, personal and professorial “reflection” is a highly valued benefit of the international experience. Confidence in one’s ability is an admirable quality and plays an integral role in classroom excellence. However, confidence may unintentionally progress or regress to

academic arrogance or ignorance. An academic experience, such as that described, often remedies this academic malady by providing a dose of academic humility and/or reality. In turn, this cognitive repositioning serves to invigorate participating faculty and administrators, encourages them to critically review and enhance their pedagogies, rethink their professional status and standards, thereby introducing substantive professional change.

7. CONCLUSIONS

International academic relationships and exchanges, especially in business courses, are increasing in economic and cultural importance. Universities and colleges that broaden their academic boundaries with cross-cultural experiences, such as exchange programs or international trips for college credit, will easily move into a leadership role.

The intent of this chronology of academic events and the challenges encountered was to identify areas in which US professors teaching abroad may experience problems. Insights into the nature of these challenges and possible courses of action have been profiled. While the course described in this experience was in the area of information systems, it is likely that many of the challenges, problems, situations, etc. encountered and discussed may be encountered in other business and non-business areas. Further, while the host country in this academic exchange was France, many of the issues identified are likely to exist in some form in other countries. Awareness of these differences, vis-à-vis an American counterpart, should assist an American exchange instructor and/or administrator in developing, preparing, delivering, and understanding the foreign academic model.

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