Building global competencies through experiential coursework in international travel and tourism

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine strengths and limitations of current experiential approaches for enhancing international business education, and propose a new, particularly cost-effective approach grounded in the travel and tourism industry and specific context of international cruises.

Design/methodology/approach – This study combines an analysis of current literature with an examination of actual case experience.

Findings – A particularly successful short-term experiential learning approach was used at a private university in southern California that is focused on the specific international business context of the international cruise industry within travel and tourism. The authors believe that this approach has significant merit to be included as a viable option for helping students develop important international business competencies required to compete in an increasingly global marketplace. With its specific focus on the international cruise industry and experiential travel agency operational design, this approach provides not only the opportunity to learn about general culture and business environments in the areas of travel, but also allows the practical application of many international and domestic business concepts and skills within a specific global industry context.

Research limitations/implications – The present study is limited to a very few experiences and within the international cruise industry. Future applied research in international business education should provide more rigorous analyses for verifying intended student learning outcomes, as well as examine applications within other contexts within the growing field of international travel and tourism.

Practical implications – The approach described here provides practical information for developing similar experiential coursework for enhancing international business education, and is particularly useful for smaller educational institutions that may lack the ability to offer and participate fully in more extensive options such as study abroad and international internships.

Originality/value – The approach described in the paper provides a highly relevant context for international business experiential education that is economical for students and schools alike.

Keywords Global competencies, Experiential learning, Business schools, Coursework, Travel, Tourism, Cruising

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

Organizations worldwide are placing a greater premium on global competencies as they seek to build workforce talent to help them compete in an increasingly globally integrated marketplace (Billing *et al.*, 2010; Shetty and Rudell, 2002). They recognize that global competence among managers and professionals translates into increased cross-cultural sensitivity and relationship-building capability, more effective problem solving, and greater creativity. Other benefits include more effective self-management and adjustment to foreign surroundings, greater ability to build multinational teams, improved ability to deal with rapid change and uncertainty, and enhanced savvy in adjusting and responding to differing competitive and political environments (Bird *et al.*, 2010; Maddux *et al.*, 2010; Mendenhall *et al.*, 2001).

The old maxim, "Experience is the best teacher," is increasingly serving as a general guide for multinational organizations in the effective development of global competencies (Ng *et al.*, 2009). In one survey on developing global leadership competencies, 80 percent of the executives interviewed described their foreign work assignment as the single most influential developmental experience in their lives (Black *et al.*, 1999). This finding is consistent with expatriate training literature that recommends forms of intense experiential learning for achieving learning objectives associated with active performance in the foreign working environment (Bird *et al.*, 1999; Black *et al.*, 1992).

In mirroring, the recognition by multinational firms of the great importance of international experiential learning activities for developing global competencies, business schools in several countries that offer graduate and undergraduate education are increasingly employing international experiential learning approaches for building these competencies, including international internships, study abroad, cross-cultural virtual teams, and short travel study tours (Johnson *et al.*, 2010; Metcalf, 2010; Ghose, 2010; McKenzie *et al.*, 2010; Vance and Paik, 2006). The purpose of this paper is to briefly examine strengths and limitations of these current experiential approaches for enhancing international business education, and to propose a new approach that is on the one hand cost-effective, and on the other shorter in duration than typical experiential approaches to cater for students from mature age backgrounds who juggle education with work and family responsibilities (Carney-Crompton and Tan, 2002; Giancola *et al.*, 2009; Home, 1998). This new approach is grounded in the international travel and tourism industry, and specifically within the context of the international cruise industry. Using a simple case teaching experience of two of the present authors, we explain how this approach provides a very attractive and compelling alternative experiential option that business schools and their faculty may consider in enhancing their coursework offerings and improving learning outcomes related to international competency development addressing the demands of our global marketplace.

2. An analysis of current international experiential education approaches

Grounded in experiential learning theory (Kolb *et al.*, 2001), various direct experiential learning approaches are being utilized to enhance learning outcomes in international business education and global leadership competency development. We now will examine strengths and limitations of these major approaches, including international internships, study abroad, cross-cultural virtual teams, and short-term programs, which educators should keep in mind as they continue to plan new curricular directions and course offerings.

2.1 International internships

In his field research among American expatriates working in East Asia, Vance (2005) identified international internships as a frequently used and highly recommended strategy for individuals in developing their international careers. These international internships were viewed, based on the expatriates' own experience, as very helpful in beginning to develop valuable international business experience and competencies, as well as very instrumental through establishing personal connections and networking in leading to subsequent international career opportunities. Several other studies also point to an international internship as extremely valuable in preparing future international managers for the challenges of the global marketplace (Fugate and Jefferson, 2001; Marlowe and Santibanez, 2000; van Hoof and Verbeeten, 2005). Some scholars even assert that international internships as a form of intense experiential learning, built upon a solid international business interdisciplinary foundation, represent the most effective approach for helping students develop critical international business competencies (Toncar and Cudmore, 2000; White and Griffith, 1998). This high regard is due to the fact that of all experiential approaches, an international internship, with its potentially rich and intensive, concrete field learning nature, most closely approximates a traditional international expatriate professional assignment.

Despite notable curricular advances in international business education, a great majority of accredited US business schools – even those that claim to have an emphasis or specialization in international business – fail to require or even offer their students opportunities to gain the valuable experiential learning provided by international internships. Some of the most common barriers reported by Vance and Paik (2006) for not having an international internship component are lack of resources (especially funding, faculty, and administrative staff), lack of student foreign language proficiency, and international internships simply not being viewed as a high priority, often due to a school's lack of perceived control over the quality of the student's international learning experience.

Any foreign internship program has high associated resource costs, which typically range from having some type of local support staff in the host countries to the added costs of international internship program staff at the parent educational institution. Other costs typically involve staff traveling to foreign sites to set up internships and other local arrangements, as well as ongoing site visits for internship monitoring purposes. High overhead costs are a substantial obstacle to current programs that wish to expand their international internship sites, or that struggle to maintain quality relationships and student learning experiences with their existing company sites and partnering educational institutions (Parkinson, 2007). Regarding the foreign language challenge, particularly problematic for American students who typically speak only English, arranging to have a student placed in a country where a foreign language prevails poses a significant obstacle that could easily impede the international internship learning process, or rule out the possibility of the experience completely (Fryer and Day, 1993). There is always the solution for English-speaking students of participating in an internship in a country whose primary language is English, but this option does not always fit with the student's foreign experience interest, and also represents less of a growth opportunity due to the often relatively small cultural distance involved in the experience (Paulsell, 2008).

Current schools that either outsource the coordination of their international internships or handle them internally may have difficulty ensuring or validating the quality of the student's learning experience because of lack of direct control, and especially when there may be many different contexts in which the students are placed for their internships. An external internship provider or an international university partner overseeing the internship may not have the same high-quality expectations that the home university possesses. There often is no close control over or reliable attention to specific learning objectives or assignments. Much learning depends upon chance, and often the only student requirement is to keep a journal and/or write a reflective final paper assessing the learning experience. In diverse international internship programs, the educational rigor and quality of the experience provided by the internships are inevitably inconsistent and may be questionable.

2.2 Study abroad
Most universities make a wide variety of opportunities for their students in studying abroad, whether through programs they manage directly or through recognized institutional providers of study abroad for whose educational experiences they award academic credit (Moghaddam *et al.*, 2009; Bhandari and Chow, 2007). Here, study abroad is defined in a more traditional, limited sense of moving to another country for a summer term, regular semester, or longer and taking local coursework. Such programs typically also offer international tours and cross-cultural experiences to enhance students' more traditional classroom learning experiences. The use of study abroad in business education continues to grow dramatically (Sachau *et al.*, 2010). This growth often is due to confirmed learning outcome evidence that students who study abroad, compared to those remaining in a traditional campus setting, may develop greater personal insights, intercultural awareness and proficiency, increased openness, as well as self-efficacy in intercultural communication (Clarke *et al.*, 2009; Black and Duhon, 2006, van Hoof and Verbeeten, 2005).

Although traditional study abroad programs are valuable to students in providing initial exposure that can whet a student's appetite and lead to further international experiences characterized by deeper foreign environment and cross-cultural immersion (Vance, 2005), they may represent superficial learning experiences consisting of little more than extended tourist travel within an over-protected, culturally homogenous bubble and with minimal cross-cultural interaction outside of the student cohort group. There also is a common criticism, particularly regarding American students, that a typical junior-year semester abroad is considered more as an opportunity for extended partying and reckless, irresponsible behavior (Hummer *et al.*, 2010; Petersen, 2003). Finally, the length of traditional study abroad programs may represent insurmountable obstacles for many students on a limited budget or who also work part-time to support their studies (Carver and Byrd, 2008).

2.3 Cross-cultural virtual teams
The global workplace is characterized by ever expanding and distant operations involving an increasing number of different forms of work assignments in multinational and multicultural teams. These new work arrangements include cross-functional task forces and more enduring teams at middle or upper executive levels, as well as fairly autonomous and self-managing teams working regularly on a virtual basis and, where appropriate,

meeting occasionally in person. It is recognized by many international organizations that such experiences involving meaningful interactions with team members of other national and cultural backgrounds can provide a rich exchange of cross-cultural knowledge as well as more tacit knowledge and capability of many forms, including global leadership competencies related to project management, communications, technology, and broadened perspectives for improved problem solving and decision-making (Mancini, 2010; Ubell, 2010; Maznevski and Di Stefano, 2000; Kayworth and Leidner, 2000). With these real-world learning benefits in mind, as well as additional learning objectives to build skills in international networking and information resource and data base utilization to support international entrepreneurial ventures and partnerships, several schools are employing cross-cultural team projects that are completely virtual or may involve a short international travel experience to provide at least brief face-to-face interaction (Flammia *et al.*, 2010; Elenurm, 2008; Gareis, 2006).

Despite potentially valuable student learning outcomes from participating in cross-cultural virtual teams, this approach typically involves very significant communications and work task coordination challenges between the cross-cultural teams, exacerbated by often significant time zone difference and distance, differing school term schedules, uncertainties related to telecommunications, and differences in student team learning objectives (Gareis, 2006). The work involved in surmounting such challenges can be extremely time intensive for instructors, who may find it difficult to sustain such an approach beyond early experimental efforts that, due to their novelty, provide adequate intrinsic motivation. Moreover, due to the variable project-based nature of these approaches, from one course to the next teams may differ dramatically in the nature and quality of their learning experiences. Finally, due to the brief in-person (where feasible) and especially virtual nature of such programs, the richness and intensity of these international learning experiences for building global competencies are inherently limited (Flammia *et al.*, 2010).

2.4 Short-term programs

An increasing number of international experiential programs are being offered to meet the needs of smaller schools with limited budgets and faculty resource flexibility, as well the economic, and flexibility needs of many students who cannot afford the cost and time away from work required of traditional study abroad programs (McKenzie *et al.*, 2010; Doyle *et al.*, 2004; DeLoach *et al.*, 2003). One basic form of the short-term approach is an economical modification of the traditional semester or year abroad arrangement to much shorter summer terms, such as for six weeks. Another short-term international experiential program that is gaining popularity involves foreign travel to perform service or a community-based learning project, often from one to three weeks in duration (Sachau *et al.*, 2010). One of the most common and popular forms of short-term experiential programs, provided to business students from freshman-sophomore undergraduate to executive MBA levels, involves an international travel tour to study and compare international business environments, and typically lasting from one to four weeks (Johnson *et al.*, 2010; Tuleja, 2008; Koernig, 2007). Many of these international business tour programs often involve a follow-up project in the back-home school environment, including work with a cross-cultural virtual team that was contacted in person during the travel experience.

One limitation of short-term programs is, due to their relatively brief nature, the difficulty in pushing learning from mere international exposure to a deeper level of immersion (Vance, 2005). This short duration also tends to prevent student adjustment and personal development to deeper levels beyond a superficial "tourist" phase (Thomas and Inkson, 2009). Some of these short-term programs involve visiting multiple country locations, with only a few days spent in each location and, therefore, providing minimal exposure to a given foreign business environment (thus reminiscent of Alexander Pope's famous caveat, "A little learning is a dangerous thing"). In addition, these relatively brief international business study tours often focus on only a general level of analysis regarding international business environments encountered during the tour.

Nevertheless, short-term programs can provide valuable experiential learning that often lead to later more significant, immersive experiences. In addition, these programs offer international experiential learning that otherwise would not be available to smaller schools with limited international program staff and financial resources, and to students with a limited personal budget and/or time flexibility constraints. We now will examine a particularly promising form of short-term international experiential learning program that focuses on the travel and tourism industry, thus providing a richer and more concrete international business operation context than usually is offered in typical short-term international tour programs that focus on general business environments. In this case study examination, we also will describe recent experiences of two of the present authors in providing coursework on the travel and tourism industry that involves planning and direct international experiential learning.

3. Case study: building global competencies through the experiential study of travel and tourism
3.1 Background and information
Travel and tourism has often been described as one of the world's largest industries, providing employment for more than 258 million people worldwide and generating over 9.1 per cent of global gross domestic product (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2007). International tourism has been recognized as a key stimulant of international trade, and as a dominant tool for economic growth in many developing and emerging countries (Bakic *et al.*, 2010; Fischer and Gil-Alana, 2009). Thus, it is no wonder why, in efforts to increase academic relevance, business schools would provide coursework in travel and tourism for students interested in a career in this promising industry. Yet beyond preparation for a career in this field, there are several different competency areas in which coursework in travel and tourism can provide valuable preparation for general career success within our global marketplace. Wang (2010) has described travel and tourism coursework with critical learning objectives related to environmentalism and sustainability that are important for our future leaders in securing a healthy, sustainable shared future on our planet. Innovation skills, essential for effective problem solving in our increasingly complex global business environment, have been described by Qiumei (2007) as an important focus for student learning in tourism education. Jennings (2000) describes project-based coursework in tourism that, beyond specific industry knowledge, assists students in developing critical transferable skill sets in customer orientation, problem solving, team effectiveness; and in written, oral, and interpersonal communication.

Besides, the above more general and transferable skills derived from coursework in travel and tourism that are pertinent to all students' future career demands at home and abroad, additional key competencies associated with a global mindset and global leadership career success include cross-cultural sensitivity, emotional intelligence, inquisitiveness, openness to new perspectives and influences, cross-cultural negotiations, managing uncertainty and complexity in international business environments, international adjustment and adaptability, and self-management (Vance and Paik, 2011; Rhinesmith, 2001). And as asserted earlier in this paper, international experience abroad can provide a powerful source of experiential learning in these key global business career competencies. Many universities have long sought to help students develop these global competencies through traditional classroom learning as well as through international travel and study abroad. In the course of our efforts in developing applications of experiential learning, we have identified a particularly successful, economical approach that combines traditional study of travel and tourism within the international cruise industry with experiential learning through planning and implementing an actual short-term international cruise experience.

With the growing popularity and demand in the travel and tourism industry of international cruises, there is a parallel need for professionals with an appropriate level of preparation and expertise in this particular area of travel and tourism. As a result, there is an increasing demand for cruise industry courses to meet this need. In responding to this growing career opportunity and need for specialized preparation, two of the present authors developed within a broader travel and tourism curriculum an advanced elective course offered in the spring semester and geared to the cruise industry. From our experience, we have noted the strong value of our course for building global career competencies that will be of use beyond the cruise industry and the broader field of travel and tourism.

3.2 The course
A traditional part of this course involves classroom instruction and reading assignments providing a conceptual foundation of the cruise industry, as well as key business processes and operations. Although intended for students preparing for a career in travel and tourism, this course is also open to other business students as a general international business elective, and we believe it has been successful in attracting increasingly more students from other disciplines due to its broad applicability to international business. In departing from a traditional approach to more experiential learning, the class is also organized into a travel agency, with the students beginning to plan for an actual class cruise.

3.3 The tour
Using our own universities as an example, where three of the present authors are based in Los Angeles, there are several reasonable cruise choices available for the class, including a seven-day cruise down the western coast of Mexico (scheduled during the semester's spring break), a three-day weekend tour to Ensenada, Mexico, and a four-day tour to Santa Catalina Island and then to Ensenada. The students typically choose the shorter tours to minimize cost and conflict with other courses and activities during the regular semester, as well as to not interfere with personal plans for their highly cherished ritual holiday of spring break.

3.4 Student preparation

In preparation for the cruise the students, in various small group assignments, make all arrangements with the designated ship company. This preparatory work also includes field learning through ship tours and student-led question-and-answer planning meetings with ship officers. Typically, other students and family members who are not in the class are very interested and sign up for the cruise, providing the student travel agency relevant experience in customer service in attending to all guest arrangements. These customer service arrangements include selecting Mexican tours for when the ship disembarks in Ensenada, a very popular tourist destination, as well as organizing various recreational activities while aboard ship. In addition, students receive information on the business environment of Mexico, including general cultural information, which they are able to experience first-hand while disembarked and touring in Mexico.

3.5 Assessing experiential learning

Student learning on foundational concepts regarding the tourism industry is assessed through a mid-semester and final short-answer essay exam. For assessing the experiential learning component of the course, class discussions following the cruise focus on debriefing the various insights and overall learning gained from the cruise experience, including planning and implementation. Individual students also complete an essay paper to engage in "active reflection [to] deepen learning from experience" from the travel agency and cruise encounter (Kolb and Kolb, 2005, p. 208). In addition, small groups provide class presentations on their previously assigned tasks and activities related to their cruise experiential learning. In our analysis of student evaluations of the course, students consistently describe their cruise-related experiential learning to be the most powerful source of their learning, and a definitely perceived high point of the course, which mirrors other findings (van Hoof and Verbeeten, 2005).

4. Discussion

We have briefly described a particularly successful short-term experiential learning approach used at a private university in Southern California that is focused on the specific international business context of the international cruise industry within travel and tourism. We believe that this approach has significant merit to be included as a viable option for helping students develop important international business competencies required to compete in our increasingly global marketplace. With its specific focus on the international cruise industry and experiential travel agency operational design, this approach provides not only the opportunity to learn about general culture and business environments in the areas of travel, but also allows the practical application of many international and domestic business concepts and skills within a specific global industry context. Although short term in duration and thus sharing many of the limitations described earlier, this approach provides a particularly vivid and intense learning experience that greatly surpasses the depth of learning typically offered in traditional classroom learning that emphasizes comprehension and memorization (Black and Mendenhall, 1990; Bloom, 1956). In its relative brevity, this approach also is much more economical than other forms of experiential learning described earlier, making the international experience much more feasible for a broader number of students, including those with work and family responsibilities, and providing for many an initial exposure to

the international stage that can spark interest for future more in-depth and longer learning experiences (van Hoof and Verbeeten, 2005).

Although we have evidence from informal student feedback and more formal end-of-semester course evaluations that students perceive the present learning approach to be very valuable for their learning about international business, future learning outcomes assessment studies should empirically examine in more detail the nature and success of student learning, both related specifically to the travel and tourism industry as well as more general global business competencies. Future applied research in international business education also should examine other travel and tourism experiences beyond the international cruise industry, including trips via train and air transportation, yet still within the applied business context of a travel agency. These activities providing opportunities for international travel, even when destinations are visited for only a short amount of time, can result in valuable student learning.

Beyond mere tourism junkets or specific task-focused foreign activity, travel abroad can be leveraged as a strategic learning tool for the development of such important global competencies as being savvy and sensitive to cultural differences, developing inquisitiveness and curiosity to propel further learning about foreign business environments, stretching one's mental maps, managing uncertainty, increasing openness and understanding of differing viewpoints, and building flexibility in seeing things from new perspectives (Oddou *et al.*, 2000). These authors propose helpful learning strategies for international business executives and other professionals involving attitudes (e.g. "Accept that there is more than one way to do something," "Be willing to take risks") and actions (e.g. "Observe carefully the verbal and nonverbal behavior of host nationals," "Ask 'how' and 'why' questions") that can greatly enhance global competency development through international travel experiences (Oddou *et al.*, 2000, pp. 161-2). Future applied research in international business education involving international travel should examine how these strategies can be more consciously and purposefully used to enhance student learning.

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