

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 20, 1993

MULTI-CULTURAL ADAPTABILITY USING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN A GRADUATE COURSE

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ABSTRACT

A context is presented for understanding multi-cultural dimensions as they relate to experiential learning. A graduate class example illustrates how experiential learning is adaptive to the multi-cultural backgrounds of the students.

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who teaches both undergraduate and graduate classes very likely notices differences in motivation and maturity of the students. The supposition is that the graduate class will exhibit a higher level of maturity in taking responsibility for learning, and will seem to have greater intrinsic motivation to learn. But even at the graduate level, the teaching-learning discourse faces another challenge when confronted by students with diverse country and cultural backgrounds. The multi-cultural background becomes very apparent when a teacher first experiences a graduate course with a number of foreign students (Kilkenney, 1992). Most faculty in U.S. higher education are a product of European culture which was transmitted by nineteenth and twentieth century European immigrants to the U.S. (Adams, 1992). In contrast, most foreign student's first encounter the Euro-American academic culture upon entering higher education in the U.S. Adams observes that:

"those students who have not already been socialized into this [academic] culture by previous schooling or a congruent home or community culture often become painfully aware of it."

In addition, Adams suggests the diverse cultural background has implications for teaching.

"For example, classroom engagement in competitive or assertive behavior, "talking up" in class, and acceptance of grading curves by which one's gain is another's loss are likely to be in conflict with cultures that do not endorse individual success at the expense of one's peers or that value modesty over assertiveness and cross-age tutoring over competitive interpeer debate."

The teacher, in designing a course and conducting a class, must make decisions on how adaptive the teaching-learning discourse will be to the multi-cultural class. The more active discourse expected in using experiential learning versus the more passive lecture dominated mode sharpens the contrast in cultural backgrounds among students, and between students and teachers. While it can be argued that the foreign student's adaptation to U.S. academic culture is a worthwhile learning outcome in itself, there are additional positive learning outcomes that come from using the experiential approach.

The objectives of this paper are two-fold. First, a context is established for understanding multi-cultural dimensions as they relate to experiential learning. Second, a graduate class example illustrates how experiential learning is adaptive to the multi-cultural backgrounds of the students. Since the author comes from a college of agriculture instead of a business school, it is worth noting that a significant portion of the graduate program is populated by students from many different countries. The term "multicultural" is used here in a broad context that goes beyond the notion of minority and gender dimensions in the U.S., and includes cultural differences arising from different countries and regions of the world.

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MULTI-CULTURAL TAXONOMY

The comparison and contrasting of cultural differences across many countries, or even within a country, can not be done in a single paper or in a daylong discussion. With this in mind, the following taxonomy is presented as one perspective to better understand the cultural differences present in a graduate classroom with a significant foreign student enrollment. Hofstede (1986) described four dimensions of culture are described which contribute to differing expectations in teaching and learning.¹

Individualism versus Collectivism. Individualistic cultures assume a person looks primarily after his or her own interest, and the interest of the immediate family. Collectivist (the word is used in an anthropological sense and not a political one) cultures assume that a person through birth, and possible later events, belongs to one or more tight "in-groups" from which the person cannot be detached. The in-group can be an extended family, clan, or organization, which protects the interest of its members, but in return expects their permanent loyalty. The collectivist society is tightly integrated, and an individualist society is loosely integrated. Table 1 gives descriptive characteristics of collectivist and individualist societies, and the differences in teacher/student and student/student interaction that would be expected.

Small versus Large Power Distance. This describes the extent to which the less powerful people in a society accept inequality in power and consider it as normal. Inequality exists within any culture, but the degree tolerated varies between one culture and another. Table 2 describes the educational differences expected in small versus large power distance societies.

Weak versus Strong Uncertainty Avoidance. This defines the extent to which people are made nervous by situations they perceive as unstructured, unclear, or unpredictable, and therefore should be avoided by maintaining strict codes of behavior and a belief in absolute truths. Cultures with strong uncertainty avoidance are active, aggressive, emotional, compulsive, security seeking, and intolerant. Cultures with weak uncertainty avoidance are contemplative, less aggressive, unemotional, relaxed, accepting personal risks, and relatively tolerant. Table 3 describes the differences in educational interaction related to uncertainty avoidance.

Masculinity versus Femininity. The masculine cultures strive for maximal distinction between what men and women are expected to do. Men are expected to be assertive, ambitious and competitive, to strive for material success, and to respect whatever is big, strong, and fast. Women are expected to serve and to care for the non-material quality of life, for children and for the weak. Feminine cultures define relatively overlapping social roles for the sexes. Men may not need to be ambitious or competitive, but may pursue a different quality of life other than material success. Men may respect whatever is small, weak, and slow. In both masculine and feminine cultures, the dominant values within political and work organizations are those of men. In masculine cultures the political and organizational values stress material success and assertiveness, while in feminine cultures they stress other types of quality of life, interpersonal relationships and concern for the weak. Table 4 gives the differences in educational interaction related to masculinity versus femininity.

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¹ Reprinted from the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 10, Geert Hofstede, "Cultural Differences in Teaching and Learning," pp. 301-320, Copyright (1986), with permission from Pergamon Press, Ltd., Headington Hill Hall, Oxford, OX3 0BW, UK

TABLE 1. DIFFERENCES IN EDUCATIONAL INTERACTION RELATED TO INDIVIDUALISM VERSUS COLLECTIVISM DIMENSION

COLLECTIVIST SOCIETIES	INDIVIDUALIST SOCIETIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · positive association in society with whatever is rooted in tradition · the young should learn, adults cannot accept student role · students expect to learn how to do · individual students will only speak up in class when called upon personally by the teacher · individuals will only speak up in small groups · large classes split socially into smaller, cohesive subgroups based on particularist criteria (e.g. ethnic affiliation) · formal harmony in learning situations should be maintained at all times (T-groups are taboo) · neither the teacher nor any student should ever be made to lose face · education is a way of gaining prestige in one's social environment and of joining a higher status group ("a ticket to a ride") · diploma certificates are important and displayed on walls · acquiring certificates, even through illegal means (cheating, corruption) is more important than acquiring competence · teachers are expected to give preferential treatment to some students (e.g. based on ethnic affiliation or on recommendation by an influential person) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · positive association in society with whatever is "new" · one is never too old to learn, "permanent education" · students expect to learn how to learn · individual students will speak up in class in response to a general invitation by the teacher · individuals will speak up in large groups · subgroupings in class vary from one situation to the next based on universalist criteria (e.g. the task "at hand") · confrontation in learning situations can be salutary; conflicts can be brought in to the open · face-consciousness is weak · education is a way of improving one's economic worth and self-respect based on ability and competence · diploma certificates have little symbolic value · acquiring competence is more important than acquiring certificates · teachers are expected to be strictly impartial

TABLE 2. DIFFERENCES IN EDUCATIONAL INTERACTION RELATED TO THE POWER DISTANCE DIMENSION

SMALL POWER DISTANCE SOCIETIES	LARGE POWER DISTANCE SOCIETIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · stress on impersonal "truth" which can in principle be obtained from any competent person · a teacher should respect the independence of his/her students · student-centered education (premium on initiative) · teacher expects students to initiate communication · teacher expects students to find their own paths · students may speak up spontaneously in class · students allowed to contradict or criticize teacher · effectiveness of learning related to amount of two-way communication in class · outside class, teachers are treated as equals · in teacher/student conflicts, parents are expected to side with the student · younger teachers are more liked than older teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · stress on personal "wisdom" which is transferred in the relationship with a particular teacher (guru) · a teacher merits the respect of his/her students · teacher-centered education (premium on order) · students expect teacher to initiate communication · students expect teacher to outline paths to follow · students speak up in class only when invited by the teacher · teacher is never contradicted nor publicly criticized · effectiveness of learning related to excellence of the teacher · respect for teachers is also shown outside class · in teacher/student conflicts, parents are expected to side with the teacher · older teachers are more respected than younger teachers

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TABLE 3. DIFFERENCES IN EDUCATIONAL INTERACTION RELATED TO UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE

WEAK UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE SOCIETIES	STRONG UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE SOCIETIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> students feel comfortable in unstructured learning situations: vague objectives, broad assignments, no timetables teachers are allowed to say "I don't know" a good teacher uses plain language students are rewarded for innovative approaches to problem solving teachers are expected to suppress emotions (and so are students) teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as a stimulating exercise teachers seek parents ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> students feel comfortable in structured learning situations, precise objectives, detailed assignments, strict timetables teachers are expected to have all the answers a good teacher uses academic language students are rewarded for accuracy in problem solving teachers are allowed to behave emotionally (and so are students) teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as personal disloyalty teachers consider themselves experts who cannot learn anything from lay parents - and parents agree

TABLE 4. DIFFERENCES IN EDUCATIONAL INTERACTION RELATED TO MASCULINITY VERSUS FEMININITY DIMENSION

FEMININE SOCIETIES	MASCULINE SOCIETIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> teachers avoid openly praising students teachers use average student as the norm system rewards students social adaptation a student's failure in school is a relatively minor accident students admire friendliness in teachers students practice mutual solidarity students try to behave modestly corporal punishment severely rejected students choose academic subjects in view of intrinsic interest male students may choose traditionally feminine academic subjects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> teachers openly praise good students teachers use best students as the norm system rewards students academic performance a student's failure in school is a severe blow to his/her self-image and may in extreme cases lead to suicide students admire brilliance in teachers students compete with each other in class students try to make themselves visible corporal punishment occasionally considered salutary students choose academic subjects in view of career opportunities male students avoid traditionally feminine academic subjects

CULTURAL CONTEXT FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Given the four dimensions of culture which contribute to differing expectations in teaching and learning, the next step was to relate experiential learning to the multi-cultural dimensions recognizing that the relationship is not concrete and requires a certain amount of subjective interpretation. In reviewing the contrasting elements in each of the four cultural dimensions given in Tables 1 - 4, a judgement was made to classify the majority of cultural elements that seem to characterize U.S. and foreign societies, in general, and the experiential learning method. The purpose was to compare the cultural dimensions of the societies to experiential learning. The results are shown in Table 5.

Both U.S. and foreign societies were congruent on three out of the four broad cultural dimensions, although when individual elements of a particular dimension were identified, there were differences. Foreign societies were not summarily classified as either collectivist or individualist because of the wide range that exists across all countries. Instead, some were regarded as individualist while others were collectivist. Experiential learning matched up with the U.S. and foreign societies on the individualist and masculine dimensions of culture, but differed on the power and uncertainty dimensions. Experiential learning still has elements of large power distance societies such as: a teacher merits the respect of his/her students; students expect teacher to outline paths to follow, but it also has elements of small power distance such as: student-centered education (premium on initiative); teacher expects students to initiate communication;

teacher expects students to find their own path. The majority of elements in the small power distance societies seemed consistent with experiential learning. Similarly for weak uncertainty avoidance societies where teachers are allowed to say "I don't know," and students are rewarded for innovative approaches to problem solving, compared to the strong uncertainty

TABLE 5. CULTURAL DIMENSION FOR SOCIETIES AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

SOCIETIES		
United States	Foreign	Experiential Learning
Individualist	Individualist/Collectivist	Individualist
Large Power Distance	Large Power Distance	Small Power Distance
Strong Uncertainty Avoidance	Strong Uncertainty Avoidance	Weak Uncertainty Avoidance
Masculine	Masculine	Masculine

avoidance society where teachers are expected to have all the answers, and students are rewarded for accuracy in problem solving.

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A partial answer to the question, "Why isn't experiential learning used more extensively in higher education?" becomes apparent in Table 5. The teacher, in designing a course and conducting a class, is pre-disposed by cultural background into conforming with the dimensions of large power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance. This is characteristic of most undergraduate programs. When students enter graduate school they expect the cultural dimensions and momentum of past behavior to continue. Both U.S. and foreign students send signals to the classroom teacher and in individual discussions with their major professor indicating a willingness to be highly directed in their activities. Yet a distinctive feature of graduate school is the expectation that the student will take more independent responsibility for learning. An expanded range of literature beyond the textbook and into journals, along with some independent research activity, are component parts of this responsibility. So while experiential learning is partially contrary to the cultural dimensions of large power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance, it becomes a useful tool for encouraging graduate student responsibility.

GRADUATE COURSE EXAMPLE

Four years ago a Master's level course titled, "Commodity Demand and Price Analysis," needed a teacher and I accepted. Coming from industry into an academic position, I didn't even think about the cultural diversity present with half the students coming from foreign countries. In developing the course, I reflected on my own graduate experiences and outlined the following general objectives. First, disciplinary knowledge should be integrated with real world observations through the student's own empirical work. This sets up the experiential learning component. At the time, I had no insight that many foreign students had little or no experience in problem solving or laboratory work, and thus they would prefer theoretical work versus experimentation. On academic relevance, I did not realize that foreign students might be less cognizant of how theories studied in formal courses can be implemented for actual programs in society. What I did suspect though, for both U.S. and foreign students, was that many of their courses were purely formalistic and much of the learning was by rote. They therefore had little experience in solving comprehensive, ill-defined problems (Aigner, 1991). The second objective was that much of the responsibility for learning ought to rest with the student. The third objective was to require demonstration of both oral and written communication skills.

The method used for achieving these objectives was to have each student be responsible for their own semester-long research project. The student selects an agricultural commodity and becomes familiar with the balance sheet components included in supply and disappearance, and how they are related to prices. In addition, an assessment is made on the competitive nature of the market, and how government and institutional factors affect it. The student is responsible for finding historical data, developing an econometric model for the commodity, estimating the model, evaluating adequacy, generating forecasts and communicating the results. The quantitative analysis is done using the Statistical Analysis System (SAS) software, and all students are expected to know SAS as needed for the course. Cooperative learning on SAS and computer use is encouraged.

The lecture and discussion periods complement the project activity, and the subject matter increases in complexity to coincide with higher expectations on project development. The student is not allowed to procrastinate until the last two weeks of the semester and quickly throw together a paper. During a normal week there are two periods of lecture and one period of lab work. In the lab sessions the student shares results, techniques, and project progress. Both professor expectations and peer pressure, which I suggest is substantial in a multi-cultural class, keeps the student on task.

Students have a number of learning experiences that result from the semester-long project. Many of those experiences could be presented here, but a representative sample of two serves to illustrate the multi-cultural adaptability that occurs.

Once the students are oriented to the course, and have selected their own commodity for the project, then comes the first learning experience. It is the search for data. Rather than give the students a data set, they are required to find, collect and prepare the data on their own. The experiential component of the assignment is reinforced by the difficulties they will have in finding all the data. The degree of difficulty depends on the commodity they select, with corn in the U.S. being relatively easy, and wheat in Pakistan more challenging. As part of the experience, they are taken to the

departmental reference room and shown where data can be found in government periodicals and other publications. The next stop is the campus library where a librarian instructs them on finding information. As the teacher following the cultural dimension of weak uncertainty avoidance, I take the position that I don't know how the data search will turn out, and the students will need to discover it on their own.

Once the data search is underway, students frequently inform me they cannot find all they need. This exhibits the cultural dimension of strong uncertainty avoidance with the teacher expected to have all the answers. In addition, the students revert to the dimension of large power distance by expecting the teacher to outline the path to follow rather than taking initiative on their own. It is at this stage in the teaching-learning discourse where the response of the teacher is crucial. If the teacher tumbles too far in the direction of the student plea, then the necessary tension in the experiential exercise is broken. I usually do not answer the student's question but rhetorically ask, "What have you found?" If considerable effort is evident and a clear roadblock exists, then I offer a few suggestions. On the other hand, a student reverting back to high dependency on the teacher will receive little guidance, and a reaffirmation to keep searching. For some students, it is the first time they encounter such an experience, and it is evident from their body language. Some consoling is needed at times. The student is counseled that they probably have never done an extensive search for data in previous academic exercises, but to keep trying. The encouragement is that if they can do it now on their own, then they will be able to repeat it in their professional career with much more confidence. Most students have this experience, as is intended in the course design, and it highlights the cultural differences that result from experiential learning. Once they are started down the experiential path, it is encouraging to see the students adapt and persevere in their search for data.

The trip continues. A second experiential learning outcome occurs when the students estimate their first empirical demand function. They have expended considerable effort in collecting the data, becoming proficient in using the computer, and developing the demand equation as a function of the variables unique to their chosen commodity. With all this careful effort at building a model, they have high expectations that the empirical results will confirm demand theory. They anxiously scan the SAS computer printout seeking to interpret the prolific output of statistical results. For most students the high expectations come crashing down when the results, which they believe should reflect reality, do not confirm the theory. In many cases, almost everything is insignificant and no causal relationships are evident. It is a sobering experience. The students regress back to the cultural dimensions of strong uncertainty avoidance and large power distance by seeking the teacher's direction on how to deal with the disparity. A characteristic comment is, "Just tell us how to fix the model!" As teacher, the experiential learning process is compounded by having the students give in-class reports on progress and problems. Other class members are asked to offer suggestions that could assist the reporting student on their project. If viable suggestions are forthcoming, I remain silent. If not, I may provide a few leads. However, I again advertise that the students are to search for solutions themselves before they can expect any help. In monitoring progress, I usually wait one to two weeks before offering suggestions, if needed, so the students do not lose their motivation on the project. In all projects, students have overcome the initial problem of a dichotomy between theory and reality, and eventually they develop their own credible model.

The planned exercises of searching for data, model development, and classroom reporting all combine to compound the effectiveness of the experiential learning process. These exercises continue through the semester and are nurtured with lecture material that increases in complexity. Higher expectations follow, and the students take more responsibility for learning because of the reinforcing motivation coming from the experiential project.

CONCLUSIONS

U.S. students quickly adapted to the experiential learning approach because they were in a familiar cultural setting. Foreign students were more reticent. Each was an individual case with some adapting more quickly than others depending on their academic cultural background. As they saw others participating in their own experiential project, they overcame the reticence. In all cases, the students moved closer to the cultural dimensions of small power distance and weak uncertainty avoidance.

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An unexpected outcome from using experiential learning, as applied in this course, was the opportunity for the students to work and learn at their own pace, to a certain degree. It reduced the tension generated by a lockstep schedule for completing assignments, and some of the inter-student competition. Although a schedule does exist, and the classroom reporting requirements helped maintain student progress, the non-threatening nature of setting one's own pace facilitated the cultural adjustment.

One of the enlightening outcomes for students was the realization they were connecting theory with reality through the experiential project. They departed the course confident of their ability to repeat this on their own during a professional career. An unsolicited comment was, "I now know how to do my own research on commodity demand and price analysis."

Experiential learning is contrary to some of the cultural dimensions of higher education in both U.S. and foreign societies, but it serves as a useful method for adapting to the multi-cultural backgrounds of students in this graduate course.

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