

A CASE FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: USING CENTRAL EUROPE AS A CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

With the evolution of emerging economies, especially in Central Europe, teaching the global aspect of business is becoming increasingly important to assure that students are prepared for positions in companies that have interests in the global market. One method of teaching international business that has proven to be successful is the study abroad programs that are offered by many universities. This paper focuses on student perceptions of a study abroad program and how their perceptions of international business and culture vary from what they expected to find and what they actually found during the exposure to the foreign culture. Students were given pre-tests and post-tests as to their perceptions of business, cultural, and other environmental differences that they would face in a study abroad program. These changes in perceptions can be used to better prepare students for the study abroad experience and enable them to enhance their learning experiences. They can also be used to help faculty better prepare the students for the study abroad experience.

INTRODUCTION

Experiential learning is used to describe the sort of learning undertaken by students who are given a chance to acquire and apply knowledge and skills in an immediate and relevant setting (Brookfield, 1983). Study abroad programs give students the opportunity to witness international businesses in operation. It also provides them with the opportunity to hear CEO's and CFO's explain their operations and how they carry out their day to day chores that make the business successful. Students can and do learn about international operations in the regular classroom, but the prospect of visiting businesses and becoming immersed in the foreign culture for several weeks gives students an excitement about international business that does not always exist in the classroom. This experience provides students with a distinct advantage over students who have not traveled abroad when they are seeking jobs with an international company.

Critics of short study abroad tours suggest they only offer a superficial look at foreign businesses. In some cases, they say the trips are only a little more than a sightseeing trip (Managan, 1997). Another concern that has been expressed about study abroad programs is that a three week experience in a foreign country, even though the experience is an excellent one, suggests that there are many topics covered in a traditional International Business class that are not addressed during the trip abroad. This potentially could be a problem unless the study abroad program is carefully structured.

Foreign language requirements are also another area of concern. Only a few schools, including Thunderbird, Monterey, and the University of South Carolina, require students to be able to speak a foreign language before entering a study abroad program. However, The University of Rochester's business school is one that encourages but does not require a foreign language. Ronald W. Hansen, associate dean for academic affairs at Rochester states "Time that students spend studying a foreign language takes away from other things that could be studying that might be more important for their business careers. And, quite, frankly, English has become the language of business, so many of our graduates who work overseas won't have to conduct business in another language"(Managan, 1997).

A common text used in international business classes is *International Business - The Challenge of Global Competition* (Ball, McCulloch, Jr., Geringer, Minor and McNeet, 2007). Major topics include international trade and investment, international institutions, monetary system and exchange rates, economic, political and legal forces, marketing, export and import and human resource management. A well structured experience abroad can expose students to all of these topics by including not only business visits, but also government entities, embassies, trade associations and cultural events. Even though the study abroad experience may not cover topics in as much depth, the experience itself can give the students an understanding that can not be learned in a traditional class.

STRUCTURE OF STUDY ABROAD CLASS

International business is an important part of the curriculum for many undergraduate and graduate schools of business (Wheeler, 2000). To properly structure a program, much preparation and thought must be given as to what the program should accomplish. A program at a small public institution in the southeast has structured a program that provides students with a study abroad experience that allows them to gain knowledge about many facets of business in Central Europe. Recent study abroad trips have been to Slovakia (Stara Lubovna and Bratislava) and Czech Republic (Prague) and to Slovakia and Austria (Vienna). The study abroad experience begins several weeks before the students leave the United States. Classes are held on campus to prepare the students for their experience. Typical classes include student presentations on businesses they will visit during the trip. They are required to research the various businesses (in groups) and present what they have learned about the businesses to the other students in the class. This gives them a background on the business and allows them to know what to expect before they visit the company. Students also research and present government, economic, social and cultural aspects of the countries they will visit.

Professors from areas other than business also make presentations during the sessions on campus. The history department presents lessons on the history and political climate of the countries to be visited. The fine arts department gives background for the opera and other cultural experiences that we will encounter. Other classes include basic language lessons, movies of the countries, and safety issues. They also learn about monetary exchange rates and other issues to help make their visit both an excellent learning and cultural experience. Individuals from the countries that are to be visited come to classes and speak to them about customs in their country. This program interacts with such diverse companies as US Steel, Whirlpool, Hewlett-Packard, Skoda Volkswagen, Papyrus, a major office supply company in Prague, IKEA Furniture, T-Mobile, Josef Manner, various banks and other financial institutions. The business visits always include a presentation by senior management of the company and a tour of the facilities. Students have the opportunity to ask questions and management is able to explain any questions concerning operations, marketing strategy, or management issues.

In addition to the business visits, students have the opportunity to visit various government entities. The US Embassy in Bratislava, Slovakia and Vienna, Austria and the United Nations in Vienna were impressive visits on the most recent study abroad trip. Students also visited the Slovakian parliament while it was in session and met with various government officials. These experiences give students the opportunity to compare the US government with that of a foreign country and understand what the role of the US Embassy is.

It is very difficult for students that do not take part in the study abroad to have the same type of experiences as the

group that goes abroad. The number of businesses in the area that would be appropriate for visits is limited. Also, scheduling presents problems. Many students work and they all have varying class schedules. It is difficult to schedule a company visit locally that all students can attend. The study abroad group has no conflicts with scheduling and the number of businesses available for visits gives the group the opportunity to interact with many different types of businesses, CEO's and CFO's, and company representatives.

SURVEY RESULTS

A survey was used to measure students' perceptions of what they expected to find when they went on the study abroad trip. The survey was designed to measure three general areas – quality of life, government control, and characteristics of the citizens of the foreign country. At the end of the trip, the group was tested again to determine if any perceptual changes had occurred. The quality of life questions were based on standard of living, public transportation, housing, prices, healthcare, crime, business opportunities and poverty. The government control section was based on new coverage, government corruption and personal freedoms. Friendliness of citizens, family ties and number of citizens who spoke English were in the characteristics of the citizens section.

The survey was designed to fill a two-fold purpose. The first was to determine if the actual experience gave the students any significant changes in their perception after completing the program. The second purpose was to use the change in perceptions of students to help faculty determine those areas that needed more class instruction before the actual departure. The survey did not include any business related topics such as differences in management styles, ethics, or financing options. Faculty believe if students are more prepared in other areas that the time abroad can be devoted to the business topics that must be covered. The survey was based on a Likert-type scale that measured the student' perceptions of differences in the Czech Republic and United States societies. The same survey was administered the last day before leaving for the study abroad and on the last day before returning to the United States. This same survey has been administered for several years and the results are presented below in Table 1.

CONCLUSION

After taking part in the study abroad trip, students changed their perceptions of the Czech Republic in several areas. Significant changes in student's perceptions in the quality of life were in the standard of living, public transportation, housing, prices of everyday goods, street crime, and availability and prices of restaurants. There were no significant changes in the government control area. Students found that Czech citizens were less friendly than they anticipated them to be. Based on the above results, the pre trip classes appeared to be preparing the students well

TABLE 1
Scale, Means and P-Values

SCALE				
1	2	3	4	5
Much Less	Somewhat Less	Equal	Somewhat More	Much More

COMPARED TO THE UNITED STATES:

QUALITY OF LIFE	PreTest Mean	PostTest Mean	P Value
Standard of Living is	2.17	1.73	.02
Public Transportation	3.50	4.06	.00
Availability of Single Family Housing	2.42	2.33	.00
Availability of Public Assisted Housing	2.43	3.06	.01
Prices for Everyday Goods	1.77	1.42	.02
Quality of Health Care	2.50	2.30	.32
Use of State-of-the Art Technology	2.50	2.15	.09
Street Crime	2.38	1.57	.01
Availability of Restaurants	3.05	3.75	.00
Restaurant Prices	1.72	1.27	.00
Opportunity to Start Own Business	2.61	2.48	.59
Poverty	3.05	3.15	.73
Gap Between Rich and Poor	3.28	3.30	.95
GOVERNMENT CONTROL			
Amount of News Coverage	2.66	2.43	.27
Personal Freedoms	2.63	2.48	.44
Government Corruption	3.19	3.42	.32
CHARACTERISTICS OF CITIZENS			
Friendliness	2.77	2.15	.02
Family Ties	3.75	3.63	.56
% Who Speak English	3.10	2.75	.07

for the governmental area. Extensive coverage by speakers, movies, and student research appeared to prepare them well and no changes in pre trip preparation was needed in this area. However, the quality of life issues presented several areas that need better coverage by faculty before leaving for the study abroad program. More exposure to these quality of life issues must be presented to the students. Using students who have previously been on the trip as mentors to those new students who are going is one way to help students understand the issues in question. Student research and presentations, in addition to the business presentations, can also be required for students.

The fact that students' perceptions do change leads us to the conclusion that the experience is one that enhances the students' education and provides them with a view of business and culture that can not be experienced in the classroom. We can further enhance the study abroad experience for the students by using our past experiences to better structure the program to meet the needs of the students.

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