

**MULTI-CULTURAL EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING:
A COMPUTER SIMULATION IN CHINA**

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of a management simulation in a Chinese university in the Spring semesters of 1997 and 1998. Cultural and language differences presented special problems. Faculty members and university administrators responded positively to the use of the simulation. Student reaction was enthusiastic. Most them had never attempted anything like a classroom simulation.

MMG AT NANKAI UNIVERSITY

The author has used management simulations in business policy courses for 20 years including a 1991 session in Indonesia [Hornaday, 1993]. He arrived at Nankai University in February 1997 to teach the Spring semester on a Fulbright grant. A year later he returned to teach a five-week course in strategic management at the invitation of Nankai.

The Multinational Management Game (MMG) [Keys & Wells, 1997] was selected for use in China. MMG simulates a manufacturing firm based in the U.S. with subsidiaries in Europe and Asia, but shares of stock can be sold and dividends paid only in the U.S. The firm manufactures two products: Product A, a high profit consumer item, and Product B, a subassembly sold to other end item manufacturers. The two - products can be freely shipped between all three countries, but capital (money) can only be transferred by means of inter-company loans. Each student team must enter 12 decisions each quarter for each division. MMG "industries" are limited to no more than eight firms in direct competition. At Nankai, after three practice decisions, student teams prepared a strategic plan for the first five decisions (five years in game time). Teams then competed in eight graded decision periods after which they each submitted a written report describing their accomplishments [Hornaday

& Curran, 1996]. Simulation activities constituted

10% of the course grade in 1997. The 1998 MMG was an integral part of a strategic management course taught in English by the author. MMG counted 20% of the course grade.

ADMINISTRATIVE DIFFICULTIES

Scheduling

Getting organized into MMG teams posed a major problem both years. Nankai students drop classes at will any time during the semester.

Equipment

Computers were not available, either to introduce the students to MMG or for them to enter their decisions. The computer laboratories were reserved for students in computer courses. Others had to pay each time they used one of the lab computers. Students had no computer access, so they submitted their decisions to the author for entry.

Language Problems

The author has no Chinese language skills. The 1997 students did not speak English well. Translation was necessary. The students had trouble understanding the MMG manual. Two special classes were scheduled to explain the simulation in great detail.

Student Preparation

Most students had difficulty interpreting the MMG results. Balance sheets appeared to be the big problem as did the difference between equity and debt financing. Some students had taken accounting courses as undergraduates, but others had no accounting at all.

Teamwork

Teamwork was a new idea to Nankai students. They were not used to working together in student teams. They were shocked that they were expected to work outside of class on their decisions, plans and reports. The only work they normally do outside of class is to cram for examinations.

Perhaps more frustrating was the initial lackadaisical attitude towards decision deadlines. The 1997 students had no sense of urgency about getting their decisions in on time. Finally, after three practice decisions and two graded decisions, they settled into a routine and got the decisions in on time and all the MMG plans got turned in.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The simulation was a new experience for the Nankai students. They had never seen anything like it. In particular they liked the idea of "fast feedback," getting instantaneous results from their decisions. Graded MMG plans and reports were returned to the students the next class session after turn-in. Normally Chinese professors do not grade and return papers. Students visit professors' offices to get their grades.

Nevertheless, the Chinese students worked hard during the competition. Student interest perked up in both years after the second decision when the results of each decision were posted showing how the teams ranked. Five of the eight 1997 teams and four of the 1998 teams became very competitive. Written student evaluations showed that the simulation was wildly popular.

Unfortunately, only one or two people on each team really got involved in MMG. The rest didn't have a clue what was going on. This was partially the result of team size. Six and nine member teams were simply too large [Wolfe & Chacko, 1983]. But given the uncertainty of how many students were actually going to stay with the simulation, large teams were necessary. At the end of the course, one team each year ended up with only two members. The rest had

five or six.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several lessons emerge from this experience which may be of help to those who have the opportunity to teach in China.

Be Self Sufficient

Expect only minimum administrative support and be prepared to improvise. Bring everything you will need.

Know Your Simulation

Inevitably, things go wrong in any simulation. Students make incorrect entries. Local software and networks are not compatible with the simulation you are using. In China, contaminated software is a big problem. You are far from home. You will have to be able to fix these problems yourself.

Don't Give Up

In the confusion of the 1997 start-up, several Nankai faculty members advised that the simulation be dropped. "Our students have no experience working in teams," they said. Undaunted, the author pressed on, explaining that these were MBA students and they better be able to manage a small team of students if they expected to be able to manage real firms when they graduated.

Keep Your Sense of Humor

Old China Hands advise Americans in China to observe the Law of Three P's: Politeness, Patience and Persistence. This is good advice for those administering a simulation - especially if you add a healthy ability to laugh at oneself and the sometimes absurd situations that occur.

References available upon request.