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AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO STUDYING INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

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Experiential learning has been defined in several diverse ways. Hoover and Whitehead's definition has been used frequently by researchers in this area. The definition reads:

Experiential learning exists when a personally responsible participant(s) cognitively, effectively, and behaviorally processes knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes in a learning situation characterized by a high level of active involvement. (1, p. 25)

To reduce this definition to a somewhat lower level one might say that experiential learning is learning by doing.

The authors of this paper would like to introduce the membership of ABSEL to an experientially oriented seminar in multinational business practice. The emphasis of the seminar is upon learning by doing. Each year for the past three years the authors have participated in a somewhat unique learning experience carried on outside the borders of the United States.

Our thought was that by exposing interested students to "real world" business practices outside of the United States we would be setting the stage for the experiential learning process to begin within each student. Thus the purpose of this seminar was to provide the students with on-site exposure to the business environment and business management methods found outside of the United States. Over the years several countries have been chosen for the course: the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, Holland and Yugoslavia. These countries were chosen because of the variety of business environments and methods of managing economic institutions found among them. In 1979 we will visit the United Kingdom and Ireland.

In each country studied, the authors arranged for the students to obtain an understanding of the business environment, the types of business firms, the management practices, and management education found in that sovereign state.

Course Scope

Students taking this experiential course investigate business policy, strategy and structure in an international context. Special emphasis is put on the Marketing and Management functions.

In 1979 the students will spend up to five weeks in a formal program in Europe. During this they will participate in lecture/discussion sessions with officials in various private firms, government agencies, management training institutions, trade unions and multinational corporations. Students will also have a chance to meet faculty members and students from a number of universities in the two countries.

The schedule of activities includes visits to such places as: London School of Business; London Polytechnic Institute; London Stock Market; Bank of England; Association of Scientific Technical and Managerial Staffs; British Petroleum; Wedgwood Company; Commercial Attaché at the American Embassy in London; Management Centre of the University of Aston in Birmingham;

Coventry Management Training Centre; Clark Shoes; Fry Candy; Guinness Brewery in Dublin; Industrial Development Authority of Ireland; Bank of Ireland; Black and Decker; Trinity College; and Waterford Glass Company.

Several orientation meetings are held with the students before departure to Europe. During these meetings they are given reading material on the countries being studied. The readings cover general information about traveling in Europe, more detailed material about the business-economic environments of England and Ireland, as well as material about some of the specific companies we will be visiting.

Purpose and Structure

This course is taught by two professors, in this case Dr. Sion Raveed of Southern Illinois University- Carbondale and Dr. Daniel Brenenstuhl of Arizona State University. We have found out that there are too many details to be attended to during the course for one professor to be able to handle it effectively.

The role of the professors include the following elements: 1) make the needed contacts with European institutions required to run this course; 2) recruit students for the course; 3) assemble the written materials that the students will be receiving during the orientation meetings; 4) write, administer, and grade a short test over the written material; 5) coordinate activities while the group is in Europe; 6) hold a number of discussion sessions with the students over the major topics examined over the course; 7) point out possible activities of interest during their free time; 8) guide the students in writing their papers, and 9) act as general resource people and motivators so the students will get the most out of the course.

As stated earlier the purpose of this course is to provide the students with on-site exposure to the business environment and business management methods found outside of the United States. This trip allows the students to get a better understanding of not only foreign business environments but also of the U.S. business environment. By reading about, hearing presentations and questioning people active in the English and Irish business world they can get an inside view of these countries and can also see how the U.S. business world differs from these countries. During orientation we try to provide the students with the needed background and mental attitude needed to get the most out of the course. During the core of the program, we try to maximize the interaction the students get with their foreign hosts. In the follow-up we try to get the students to analyze the major issues that came up during the course. Thus we hold a wrap-up session with the students and ask all students to write a short paper in which they are asked to bring together all they have learned. A student that reads the orientation material, actively participates in the company visits and writes the short sum-up paper will earn 3 units. Those students that want to write an in-depth major research paper on a topic that ties into the course can earn an additional 3 units. (Earning of 3 additional units credit must be approved by the

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University.) The purpose of this option is to enable a student to explore in-depth a subject that caught his/her interest during orientation or core of the course.

Studying the British and Irish business environment and business practices on this trip is much more meaningful for the students than studying the same topics in the U.S. We have found that seeing things first hand, actually living in the foreign environment and directly interacting with top business executives, government officials and foreign educators really gets the material across.

We do not expect any visit to one institution to provide the students with the total picture. It is our experience that the desired outcome is achieved by visiting a variety of institutions (various types of business firms, government offices, unions, and educational institutions) combined with the reading materials provided the students, and the one-to-one contact between our students and nationals of each country.

If each local host describes its own institution and its method of operating within the unique environment it finds itself, the students will get the best possible exposure.

We leave it to each organization we visit to decide on the format of presentation that best suits that particular host. Our past experience has taught us that a number of approaches to the students can all be successful, although the format which showed the most consistent success incorporated a thirty to sixty minute presentation by one to three executives followed by one to two hours of a question and answer session. The students seem to especially enjoy the question and answer segment. We found that executives who have operational responsibility such as managing the marketing program, responsibility for international operations, running the personnel department, heading a university program, etc., were much more effective than public relations types. A tour of the plant, university, or government office was often helpful. Any material provided the students to be read before the visit, such as annual reports, description of the unions' activities, etc., were also helpful. But the key to success seemed to center on the direct interaction between members of the host institutions and the students.

The exposure we are trying to provide our students is quite broad. We do not expect each individual company, government office, or educational institution to go into all facets of the business environment and methods of managing business operations in their countries. If each host provides us input on its own structure, policies, management strategies, methods of dealing with the international market and the environment it operates in, then our students will develop the understanding we are seeking.

It was found that directed discussion of major topics, undertaken by the authors, provided the students with additional cognitive material. These discussions were frequently conducted on return bus trips or over dinner or some similar recreational activity. These discussions often served as integrating points for the immense amount of data that was available to each student.

Duration

In our first European course the overseas part of the course lasted three weeks. We found this too short a period for all the effort and expense put into the trip. Last year the overseas portion of the trip lasted four weeks. We found this to be quite adequate in length of time. By the end of the four weeks the students were still learning. This year we will offer two lengths of time for the

European segment, a twenty-nine day period and a thirty-five day period.

We will do this for three main reasons: 1) So many institutions and businesses have offered to host us that we can't fit them all in during a twenty-nine day period. It would be a shame for those students that had the time and inclination to visit these institutions not to have the chance, 2) We have found from the past that some students wanted to stay in Europe a little longer in order to gather additional material for their papers. By staying in Europe the extra week, we can help those students get access to those additional sources of information. This information plus the research they do when they get back home, together with the material they gathered on the trip should enable them to write a strong paper, 3) We have found that having students from a number of different universities on the trip adds a positive dimension to the course. The students are able to contribute from their various backgrounds and institutions. By having a five weeks program students from universities who don't all let out for the summer in the same week can still take the course and get a full four week program. Thus by expanding the program to five weeks we will insure that all students are exposed to at least four full weeks of visits to our host organizations.

Participants

In the past we found this type of a program had a strong appeal to a wide variety of students. Some participants have come from Southern Illinois University, Arizona State University, University of Notre Dame, Indiana University, University of Nebraska, University of New Mexico, and Northern Illinois University. All of these students were specializing in a course of study that focused on business administration at their respective universities. The students consisted of both students working for their graduate degree in business (MBA) and students finishing the last year of their Bachelors degree. Some of the students were earning a general degree in business administration, while others were specializing in marketing, management, international business, or one of the other business disciplines. All of the students had an interest in the international dimensions of business. Many of them had already had previous courses in international business or international economics. All of the students were provided with appropriate reading materials before they left the United States. In summary, the group was made up of university professors and students who specialized in business administration and who had a strong interest in learning about business conditions in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

This program seems to have appeal to all university students who have an interest in how business is carried on abroad, and/or students who want to travel to Europe within a learning and credit earning context. Each year we have run this course we have had a wide variety of students enroll in the course. Each year the student make-up consisted of: 1) graduate as well as undergraduate students, 2) students majoring in marketing, management, finance, accounting, general business, economics, as well as non-business students, 3) students from three or more universities, 4) finally, in two years we had a business person who was an alumni of one of the principle sponsoring universities.

This course has appeal because it provides the students with an in-country direct exposure to top practitioners in two exciting countries, the United Kingdom and Ireland. This course enables the students to go to Europe with other students under the guidance of two experienced professors. The course offers a structured

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learning experience in combination with a non-structured leisure time.

Promotion

The experience of the authors is that roughly half of the enrollment for this European program will come from students who have had one of us for a previous course. That the most effective promotion for this course consists of personal presentations, by one of the two instructors, in front of university classes.

Last year both authors made a number of presentations both at our own universities and neighboring universities. A well written document explaining the course, the cost, and the procedure needed to enroll in the course is also needed. On the other hand, a general mailing describing the course to hundreds of universities proved to be an expensive but useless exercise.

All together we have found that 30-35 participants is an optimum number for the program. A promotional program described as above should be strong enough to reach this goal. With this size group the price can be kept down to the \$1400 to \$1500 range which seems to be acceptable to the students and their parents.

Conclusion

Participants from past years have made numerous positive comments on the anonymous evaluation instruments. The comments tended to stress the importance of being immersed in the foreign culture as a precondition to really learning about international business practices in that culture. The Importance of this seminar is the practical application of experiential techniques in the international business sphere. It should not take the collapse of the dollar as a strong world currency to make us see the advantages of the United States expanding its export operations. Nor should it take many more years to see experiential applications used to help reduce the ethnocentric viewpoint of American students who are soon to be managers.

REFERENCE

- [1] J. Duane Hoover and Carlton J. Whitehead, "An Experiential-cognitive Methodology In the First Course in Management: Some Preliminary Results," in Buskirk (Ed.) Simulation Games and Experiential Learning in Action. Bureau of Business Research, The University of Texas at Austin; Austin, Texas, p. 25, 1976.