

## **ENCOURAGING MULTICULTURALISM IN A MARKETING EDUCATION CONTEXT**

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### **Abstract**

In Marketing courses, students are taught cultural complexity of consumer segments, regional differences with regard to culture and subculture, and methods for avoiding problems that arise from cultural differences. There are various methods for teaching cultural differences including the use of cases, simulations, and experiential learning activities. Here an experiential learning assignment is tested over two semesters as extra credit in an upper level Consumer Behavior course. Students were asked to seek out a multicultural experience that takes them outside of their own culture and write a short paper about the experience. Which activities students considered outside of their culture, how far outside of their own culture they were willing to go to seek the experience, which emotions students expressed about these experiences, and which types of experiences resulted in the most learning are assessment targets. Sixty-two (N = 62) students completed the assignment over two semesters.

### **Introduction**

Marketing students are taught diversity of consumer segments, regional differences with regard to culture and subculture, and methods for avoiding problems that arise from cultural differences. These topics are offered in multicultural marketing courses or as an integrated curriculum in existing courses (Burton, 2005) in reaction to a growing need for cultural literacy among graduates (Jones, 2003). This shift toward teaching multicultural marketing is due to a relatively recent increase in diversity for the United States (Raval and Subramanian, 2004), an increase in international travel that enhances exposure to people from other cultures (Rivera, 2010), and increasing globalization of corporate employers (Burton, 2005).

Strategies for teaching multiculturalism include the use of cases and study abroad programs (Clarke et al., 2009), where the goal is to increase multicultural experiences for students. The purpose here is to introduce an experiential learning assignment where students design and reflect upon their own multicultural experience. We present results of a qualitative analysis of written student reflection papers. This analysis offers insight with regard to how students define multiculturalism, how they recognize differences between their own and other cultures, and how they define their own learning outcomes from the experience.

## Literature Review

The *Multicultural Marketplace* is a marketplace of consumers who together make up a diverse consumer group. Discussions of multicultural marketing have emphasized differences in ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, disability, lifestyle preference, socioeconomic status, and cultural values (Burton, 2005; Raval and Subramanian, 2004). Multicultural individuals either claim multiple cultures in their own background or identify with a larger group of people that is made up of individuals with culturally diverse backgrounds (Korzenny, 2008).

Teaching multiculturalism has become more crucial at U.S. universities for three primary reasons. First, students seek employment from U.S. corporations managing global brands, regional offices, and import/export portfolios. These companies seek a diverse workforce to manage multinational alliances, advertising, and partnerships (Clarke et al., 2009). An increasing number of domestic brands are expanding to become international brands as companies recognize potential profits in developing countries (Kuvykaite and Mascinskiene, 2010). Business school graduates will be managing these brands and creating new brands to fulfill the needs of countries with expanding spending power. According to the International Trade Administration (2011), U.S. exports of goods and services increased in the first quarter of 2011, with the major growth belonging to energy and chemical export. However, China's desire for imported luxury consumer goods is on the rise, driven by Chinese yuppies with expensive tastes (Degen, 2009). Given this rapid increase in globalization, successful business leaders will be increasingly challenged to understand and communicate with not only a diverse consumer base but also international partners and employees as well (Clarke et al., 2009).

Secondly, increased diversity within the U.S. population makes it more likely that students will become involved with people different from themselves on a daily basis. The U.S. Census data show Hispanic population increased 43% in the decade leading up to 2010, with over half of that population residing in only three states (Census, 2010). Although the Hispanic/Latino population is the most rapidly increasing, all other minority group growth outpaced that of whites in the same decade. The U.S. government predicts that over 50% of the population will identify with an ethnic minority group by 2050 (Burton, 2005; Jones, 2003). This changing face of the U.S. population will lead to increased diversity in university classrooms and corporate boardrooms (Misra and McMahon, 2006).

Third, students are likely to experience initial culture shock and difficulty with cross-cultural communication simply due to increased global travel (Rivera 2010). The International Trade

Administration (2011) reports a steady increase in international visitors to the United States over the last decade. Approximately 60 million people visited the U.S. from other countries in 2010, and the government forecasts a steady increase to 89 million visitors in 2016 (International Trade Administration, 2011). In the event that students are hired for regional companies with no affiliation outside the U.S., conditions are strong for providing goods and services to a multicultural consumer base regardless of location.

Universities have attempted to expose students to multicultural experiences using a variety of pedagogical strategies. The multicultural curriculum usually involves a text or other reading that presents differences in cultural values, potential conflicts, and solutions (Burton, 2005; Jones, 2003). Many courses tackling this topic rely on experiential learning to increase student involvement in handling cultural differences.

### **Experiential Learning**

Kolb's (Kolb, 1984) model of experiential learning cycle contains four elements: 1) concrete experience, 2) observation, 3) forming abstract concepts, 4) experimentation in new situations. Experiential learning in the context of multicultural competence requires students to experience cultural diversity directly rather than reading and thinking about what they might do in such a situation. Jones (2003) requires that groups of students work through written scenarios that illustrate different cultural conflicts and resolutions. While this might resemble case-based teaching, this professor increases relevancy for students by forming groups with  $\frac{1}{2}$  American students and  $\frac{1}{2}$  international students who have been in the U.S. for a short period of time.

Study abroad programs are frequently cited as a method for providing students with the opportunity to become immersed in culture, language, and business practices (Clarke et al., 2009). The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) has recognized that employers are now requiring employees to interact in a global environment and have urged universities to emphasize student exposure to multicultural environments (McKenzie, Lopez, and Bowes, 2010). As a result, business schools have increased the number of international business and study abroad programs offered (Wardrope et al., 2009), and student involvement in these programs increased 150% between 1999-2009 (Clarke et al., 2009). Students report that studying abroad has made them more accepting of other cultures, understand global business practices, and gain insight into their own cultures (Peppas, 2005).

Unfortunately, even though study abroad may be the ultimate experiential learning opportunity, not all students are able to participate in these experiences. Non-traditional students may have

financial or family obligations (Peppas, 2005). Some students may not be able to pay for the extra tuition involved for these programs. Still others avoid these programs due to a fear of new situations perceived as risky (Relyea, Cocchiara, and Studdard, 2008). For these students, some universities have established short term study abroad programs (McKenzie et al., 2010). Others design projects using internet-based communication tools that allow U.S.-based students to communicate with “live reporters” in foreign countries about global business issues (Ha-Brookshire and Stoll, 2009).

The changing demographics of the U.S. and cultural variation that arises as a result of these changes offers students and faculty an opportunity to explore multiculturalism within their own communities. Although subcultures within the U.S. may share many similarities with our students, many subcultures contrast sharply with student beliefs with regard to religion, language, gender roles, racial issues, etc. These subcultures are made up of longstanding isolated groups as well as recent immigrants. Although exposure to these subcultures for limited periods of time may not offer the same experience as immersive study abroad programs, they do offer students common ground and typically common language with which to communicate. This is particularly important for students who avoid experiences that take them too far outside their comfort zone (Relyea et al., 2008).

The assignment in which students engaged for the current paper is not meant to substitute for any of the valuable experiential learning opportunities that are currently being used in multicultural curriculum. This activity is supplemental to other pedagogy within either a multicultural course or within a broader course that encompasses the topic of multiculturalism. The current project demonstrates how such an assignment offers insight about what students consider when asked to design an experience for themselves outside of their culture, how they reflect on such an experience, and what they perceive themselves as learning from the experience.

## **Method**

### **Assignment Instructions and Procedure**

Students at a large, public, research university in the Southwest United States were given the opportunity to earn extra credit by completing an assignment where they participated in an activity that pulled them out of their own culture. Extra credit points amounted to 1/10 of a letter grade, offering a moderate incentive. The instructions for the assignment were:

“This opportunity for extra credit involves learning about something or someone outside of your own culture. You may feel that you have had many multi-cultural experiences, some of them fairly recently. Your past experiences cannot be used for this extra credit assignment. You must seek out a multicultural experience in the next several weeks in order to get credit for this activity. Each of you may come from very different backgrounds, so you will be graded on a paper that you write describing what was learned from the experience. The further you go into another culture, the more points you will get, so your job is to choose something convincing and then try to get the most out of it that you can. At any point in the semester between now and the last day of class you should turn in a short description of your experience (no more than one page). The description should include the following: the cultural activity that you chose; why you chose that activity; how the culture is different from your own culture; what you learned from the experience; and what, if anything that you learned can be related to class concepts. Each of these topics can easily be summed up within a few sentences each, but you should feel free to elaborate up to one page. The goal of this exercise is for you to become familiar with other cultures, as marketers often must dive into cross cultural issues regularly when entering new markets.”

### **Student Demographics**

Student demographics at this university are fairly homogenous. 24% of students enrolled grew up within 100 miles of the university, 47% moved from a metropolitan area within the same state as the university, and the majority of the remainder came from rural communities. The student body is 68% White/Caucasian, 15% Hispanic, 5% African American, with the remaining 22% being Native American, Asian, resident-alien, or unknown.

### **Coding Method**

NVIVO software is currently in use to code sixty-two (N = 62) reflective papers written by students over the course of two semesters. In accordance with Grounded Theory methodology, sixty-two student reflections should result in saturation of topics. Coding categories include: types of activities (how students defined multicultural); emotions expressed; learning outcomes; and internal/external motivators for activity choice. Although qualitative analysis is incomplete, preliminary results are discussed in the next section.

## Discussion

Multicultural activities were chosen by the students opting to participate in the exercise. These activities were diverse, and the interpretation of what qualified as multicultural exposure varied greatly. The observations included personal interviews with foreign students and residents, regional independent film screenings with filmmaker panel discussion, symphony concerts, theatre or plays, religious ceremonies/services, volunteer opportunities, and other activities. Because of the university's proximity to Mexican-American cultural opportunities, approximately a quarter of the students participated in activities related to exposure to this culture. Students, regardless of which type of cultural opportunity they chose, typically expressed initial hesitancy around the experience in their narratives, but many indicated both surprise and satisfaction with the experience in their reflection. Narratives related to performing arts tended to be shorter in length than personal interviews, volunteer activities, and religious ceremony participation, which may indicate lower student involvement or cognitive activation in these activities.

As with the diversity of activities chosen by the students for this activity, the reactions and cultural understanding achieved varied significantly between participants. Initial hesitancy expressed by students in narratives was typically followed with openness and a stated desire to extend the learning opportunity related to their chosen cultural activity. Several students attending a panel about Mexican-American veterans expressed surprise about the experience of the "Veteranos" in the Vietnam War, and several elaborated on the comparison with returning veterans of current conflicts. Students visiting religious ceremonies expressed surprise at the welcoming attitude of the congregants. While most confirmed that one visit did not change their stated religious beliefs, several indicated a greater appreciation for the alternative religious practice. Students participating in volunteer activities expressed a need to expand their attitudes toward the American marketplace, as they have a deeper understanding that not all people are like them. A student participating in an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting indicated extreme discomfort at the personal testimonies of participants. However, the student left the experience feeling empathy and understanding, emotions he believed he would have not otherwise felt without this immersive experience. Not all students identified a benefit from the experience or a desire to have future multicultural experiences of the type they chose. One student in particular recounted a visit to a gay bar as his multicultural experience, which he indicated reinforced his (self-declared) homophobia. While this is one outlier in what most students deemed a positive experience, it is important to note that not all participants desire exposure to experiences out of their comfort zone.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

Although preliminary results are discussed above, results are not yet complete. Continued coding will result in frequencies of mentions within each category, patterns of topics of the narratives, and more detailed analysis of the quality of activities chosen. Further, independent coders are currently rating activities on the degree of difference between the students' own culture and the activity chosen (i.e., to determine how distant the activity is from their own culture). This will allow for an analysis of emotions and learning outcomes by the distance between the chosen activity and the student's own culture.

This study is not without limitations. First, the study is both temporally and regionally limited; it captures the experiences of college aged students in the Southwest United States at a particular point in time. Regional and university differences may not be represented within this sample. Future research will compare and contrast these students' experiences with those of students from other regions of the U.S. Further, these multicultural experiences were single instances of exposure; marketing education may benefit from multiple exposures or similar reflection activities from extended cultural exposure, such as study abroad or hosting exchange students. Additional research is needed to examine how a single, limited occurrence compares with or subsidizes traditional types of multicultural pedagogy.

This research contributes to the marketing education literature by exploring how the integration of multicultural experiences into marketing education opens students' minds to the inherent diversity around them and in the marketplace. As the demographic and cultural makeup of the market changes, students will need to be prepared to work in multicultural and diverse teams, market to different cultures, and appreciate different perspectives. By integrating these opportunities for multicultural experiences into a marketing course, we believe we have enriched students' learning inside and outside of the classroom while preparing future marketing practitioners for the type of empathy and cultural acceptance they will need to embrace in order to succeed in a world where heterogeneity will be the rule, not the exception.

References available upon request