

PROMOTING INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITIES OF INTERNATIONAL MARKETING STUDENTS: AN EXPERIMENT

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural sensitivity is a major criterion for success in the global business environment. For students pursuing careers in marketing, this means learning to manage cultural difference on three levels: self, interpersonal, and organizational. This paper describes five related and synergistic exercises that give college students experience in dealing with and solving real-world problems in intercultural sensitivity on all three levels. Anecdotal evidence suggests the exercises are a highly successful method for developing the cross-cultural skills of students. To confirm the efficacy of this process, a pre-test, post-test experiment was conducted with a treatment group and control groups. Results show that the treatment group was the only one to show a significant (at $p < .05$) increase in intercultural sensitivity.

INTRODUCTION

International business managers rate the ability to work with people of other cultures as the most important quality of success, particularly in overseas assignments (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). Nevertheless, most International Business programs in the United States fail to deal effectively with the role that cultural differences play in the management of the global enterprise. Too often the issue is addressed only at the cognitive level. Students who envisage international careers in marketing must prepare for life in alien cognitive and behavior contexts; cross-cultural considerations must be learned both intellectually and experientially (Serrie, 1992).

For significant growth to occur in intercultural sensitivity, students must be able to manage cultural differences on three distinct levels. First, they must be able to cross-culturally manage themselves: to move personally beyond culture shock and adapt to the alien location to where they have been sent. Second, they must be able to manage cross-cultural differences at the interpersonal level (i.e.: relating effectively to fellow employees, suppliers, customers, and government officials, as well as taxi drivers, store clerks, service people and neighbors). Third they must be able to cross-culturally manage at the organ-

izational or institutional level, possessing enough understanding of both their host culture and their home culture to be able to make correct decisions regarding their organization's work force, its commercial markets, the community in which it operates, and the nation which is its host.

Although the five exercises are separable, when used collectively they are especially effective in building cross-cultural management skills on all three levels—the self, the interpersonal, and the institutional (Serrie, 1992). Anecdotal evidence suggests the effectiveness of these exercises: while most American colleges and universities have foreign students enrolled, many campuses report varying degrees of separation, ignorance, indifference, ambivalence, or even hostility between natives on the one hand and aliens on the other. These exercises have been credited with significantly reducing the number of unpleasant cross-cultural incidents reported to the Dean of Students of one liberal arts college (Serrie, 1992). To empirically test the effectiveness of these exercises to develop intercultural sensitivity (the ability to function effectively in cross-cultural interactions), a pre-test, post-test experimental design was conducted with treatment and control groups. The paper next describes the five cross-cultural exercises, the experiment, the results, and the implications.

CROSS-CULTURAL EXERCISES

Cross-Cultural Interview

In this exercise each student interviews one foreign student on campus, who is from a culture different from his or her own, and whom he or she has never met before. To make the assignment more challenging, the foreign students must be in the English as a Second Language (ESL) program on campus. (ESL is a program of mostly young people who have arrived in America recently and whose English speaking skills are limited.) It is up to the college student to figure out some way of introducing himself or herself and of persuading the foreign ESL student to grant an interview.

This exercise provides experience and builds skills at the first two levels of cross-cultural management, self

and personal. It helps students overcome inertia and fear about getting to know strangers from a different culture, and provides them with an opportunity to successfully motivate a foreign stranger to expend a significant effort on their behalf.

On completion of the exercise, each student shares his or her strategy for meeting the foreign students and for getting him or her to agree to do the interview. Many students admit to having felt uncomfortable dealing with foreign stranger, and report that this exercise along with some of the others helped them to overcome it.

Cross-Cultural Incident

This exercise makes use the 110 critical incidents detailed by Cushner and Brislin in their book Intercultural Interactions: A Practical Guide, 2nd edition (1996). Each incident describes a realistic cross-cultural misunderstanding, four plausible explanations for the misunderstanding, and an evaluation of each explanation. The book is a "culture-general assimilator" in that the incidents describe a wide variety of cultural situations and reflect 18 themes that evolved from their research (i.e., anxiety, time and space, ambiguity, prejudice and ethnocentrism, etc.). In this activity students discuss and demonstrate the cross-cultural incidents. The emphasis is on having students experience the cultural conflict rather than simply considering it intellectually (see APPENDIX A for an example critical incident).

This exercise addresses the first two cross-cultural management levels--self and interpersonal--by developing skills of recognizing and correcting a cross-cultural error. Students learn to accept the virtual inevitability of their making some cross-cultural errors in the field, but not to accept repetition of the errors. They also learn that errors in appropriate behavior are far worse than mere inability to speak the host country language. The students further learn to strategically recover in such situations, and soon afterwards seek out explanation of their cross-cultural error from a member of the host culture. In addition, they correct their understanding of the host culture and develop a mastery of appropriate cultural behavior in similar situations in the future.

Cross-Cultural Skit

For this exercise, each student is assigned to one of several "Country Groups" that have been formed in the classroom. Each Country Group is headed by one or more foreign students who are native to a particular culture and who serve as the cultural experts for their group. The group also includes two to four

students who are native to the United States. The Country Groups are charged with planning, writing, and performing a skit before the entire class that illustrates a minimum of five cross-cultural blunders that an American person might make in the host culture represented by the Country Group. Groups must organize the blunders into a business-related scenario involving social interaction between one or more individuals representing Americans and one or more individuals representing host country nationals.

This exercise builds skills and emotional commitment at all three levels of cross-cultural management--self, interpersonal, and institutional--in recognizing and in rejecting the ignorance and arrogance that produces many kinds of cross-cultural errors. The true costs of cross-cultural errors are exposed, including harm to self, harm to others at the interpersonal levels, and harm to the host culture or to the work organization at the institutional level.

Because of the leadership role of the foreign students, every class member is immersed in the native view of the Ugly (or Ignorant) American. Often foreign students play the parts of the Americans; this an effective way of eliminating the real-life cultural identities of the actors and focusing even more sharply on the defective cross-cultural behavior.

Cross-Cultural News

Each student finds a newspaper or magazine article that describes an American work organization adapting, or having difficulty in adapting, to the host culture of a foreign country. The students then write an analysis of the cross-cultural differences and explain why the American organization is successful or unsuccessful in resolving its cross-cultural differences. This exercise builds analytical skills at the institutional level of cross-cultural management. Students become acquainted with cases involving well-known organizations confronting cultural differences that result in real and crucial consequences at the institutional level and which offer parallels to the personal and interpersonal levels that they have already experienced.

Cross-Cultural Management

For this exercise each student conceives, plans and carries out a program for improving the cross-cultural relations between the two most culturally separated and alienated groups on campus--the participants in the ESL program and students in the regular college program. At a very minimum, each student must bring together at least two foreign students and two domestic students who have never met before, and

organize pleasant activities and interesting discussions that will foster cross-cultural understanding and friendship. A short proposal must be approved in advance; after the program, a final report must be submitted summarizing the activity, the quality of the interaction, and evidence of improvement in cross-cultural relations among the persons involved.

This exercise builds skills at all three levels of cross-cultural management, for it involves mastery of self, of interpersonal relations, and of the dynamics of small groups. It is the most difficult of all the exercises, and represents the culmination of the four exercises preceding it. In this exercise, each student becomes an *agent of cultural change* within his or her own organization, and is equipped with knowledge and skills to figure out a way to actually make a real improvement in a problematic multicultural institutional situation. Some of the successful cross-cultural management programs have involved getting together to cook a meal, going to the beach, going bowling, or organizing baseball or soccer games.

The quality of cross-cultural relations on most campuses does not yield to official actions, and tends to remain poor or inadequate over decades. The reason why official ministrations have little impact on the quality of cross-cultural relations in campus life is that fundamentally this is a problem routed in interpersonal interaction. No structural changes can force different individuals to meet each other and develop friendly relationships. The solution lies in establishing and multiplying interpersonal connections at the level of the individual.

Although the five exercises may be used separately, when used collectively they are related and synergistic. While the news exercise is academic, the others are experiential and engage the emotions. The incident and news exercises require intellectual analysis of real events that have already happened. The interview, skit, and management exercises require planned personal action. The interview and management exercise also involve interactions in the real world. These five exercises strongly reinforce each student's sense of being empowered to make a positive difference in difficult cultural situations that they will carry into their future interpersonal careers. (Assignment sheets for each exercise are available from the authors at munrota@eckerd.edu.)

METHODOLOGY

A pre-test, post-test research design with a treatment group and control groups was developed to test the effectiveness of the five exercises described above. Participants in the experiment were a convenience

sample of incoming freshmen at a liberal arts college in Florida. The students were drawn from the International Business curriculum where Principles of Marketing and International Marketing are part of the core curriculum. These new students participate in an intense three week Autumn Term course which consists of orientation sessions and academic content.

These freshmen were used because they were similar in age and (to a large extent) experience. During this Autumn Term, the freshmen are the only students on campus. Three groups of freshmen participated in the experiment: a group of American freshmen taking "Introduction to International Business" (referred to in this paper as the "U.S. Control" group), a group of foreign freshmen taking a course called "Living in the U.S.A." (labeled the "Non-U.S. Control" group), and a group of American freshmen taking a "Cross-Cultural Primer" course (referred to as the "U.S. Treatment" group). It was this course that employed the five exercises described earlier.

A group of American adult learners taking a Marketing course in the evening also participated in the study (referred to in this research as the "Adult Control" group). During the day, these adults were all full-time employees of businesses in the area, many of which are multinational corporations.

One of the most widely used instruments to measure cross-cultural skills is the Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory (ICSI). Intercultural sensitivity "is sensitivity to the importance of cultural differences and to the points of view of people in other cultures" (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992, p. 414). To measure this attribute, Bhawuk and Brislin developed a 46-item, theory-based instrument that would assess an individual's ability to modify his or her behavior in other cultures. Those who could change their behavior in a culturally appropriate fashion were deemed interculturally sensitive and would be expected to be successful in overseas assignments or in culturally diverse settings.

At the beginning of Autumn Term all four groups completed the ICSI, which included several socio-demographic questions. Although the "Introduction to International Business" and "Living in the U.S.A." courses each contained significant discussions of culture, it was only the "Cross-Cultural Primer" course that employed the five cross-cultural exercises. The evening adult course devoted very little time to culture. After three weeks, all four groups completed another ICSI identical to the earlier questionnaire.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

A total of 88 participants completed the pre-test ICSI and 84 completed the post-test version. The participants were distributed as follows:

<u>Groups</u>	<u>Pre-Test</u>	<u>Post-Test</u>
U.S. Treatment	19	18
U.S. Control	23	22
Non-U.S. Control	26	24
Adult Control	<u>20</u>	<u>20</u>
	88	84

In addition to the traditional background questions, this questionnaire asked participants if they lived or worked outside their home countries, if they spoke and wrote foreign languages, and asked what foreign/ethnic foods they had tried. Research has shown that having tried a wide variety of foreign foods can be a predictor of intercultural sensitivity (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). Comparisons of background data revealed no significant differences between the U.S. Treatment and U.S. Control groups. The Non-U.S. Control group had obviously spent more time abroad, spoke more languages, and tried more types of food. They were also about a year older than their U.S. counterparts. As for the Adult Control group, average age was the only characteristic in which they differed significantly from the other American groups--35 years vs. 18. And again, the five cross-cultural exercises described earlier were the foundation of the Treatment Group's "Cross-Cultural Primer" course.

Data analysis

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare the ICSI means for the four groups. Table 1 (see APPENDIX B) reveals that in the Pre-Test, when the four groups were compared against each other (reading vertically); none had a significantly higher ICSI score. From a starting point, therefore, the groups were fairly comparable in terms of intercultural sensitivity. In the Post-Test, when all groups are compared to each other, only one group had a significantly higher mean: the U.S. Treatment group. And the differences were significant at $p < .01$. None of the other groups were even close to differentiating themselves from their counterparts (the closest was Table 1-C-- U.S. Control vs. Non-U.S. Control at $p = .3163$).

This increase in the U.S. Treatment mean is reflected in a comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test results (reading horizontally). The U.S. Treatment mean is the only result that is significant at $p < .01$ (actually $p = .0034$). In fact, it was the only result that was even close to showing a significant increase. The other

groups produced results of $p = .2966$ for Non-U.S. Control, $p = .7638$ for U.S. Control, and $p = .8432$ for Adult Control.

DISCUSSION

Students in the U.S. Control group had the "typical" pedagogical exposure to cultural differences in international business. They read about it, wrote about it, discussed it, and were tested on it. Their classroom test scores indicate that they intellectually understood many of the causes and consequences of cultural conflict. Yet they showed no significant growth in their ability to deal with cross-cultural problems. The Non-U.S. Control group represents the students who might be expected to be somewhat more intercultural sensitive by virtue of the fact that they have been raised abroad and were widely traveled individuals. They too read, discussed, and wrote about the issue of cultural differences. Yet in the pre-test, their scores were not significantly higher than any of the other groups and they showed no significant growth during their orientation course. And the Adult U.S. Control group represents the group who might be expected to be more intercultural sensitive because of their "life experience." But in this sample, that was not the case.

Surprisingly, the results of this study suggest that intercultural sensitivity does not increase significantly by living in a foreign country, or by gaining life experience, or by taking an introductory course in international business that focuses on cultural issues. Instead, increases in intercultural sensitivity require specific cross-cultural skill training that addresses both the intellectual and experiential aspects of cultural differences. The study also indicates that there is a practical, effective way for educators to improve the intercultural sensitivity of their students.

Still, it is important to recognize that the results of any experiment have to be interpreted with caution. The sample of this study, for example, was very small and selected purely for its convenience. As a consequence, the results cannot be generalized to a larger population. Nevertheless, the potential of the results indicate that this topic deserves further examination. As with any single-study investigation, it would be useful to replicate and extend the research.

This paper provides evidence that intercultural sensitivity is a skill that can be learned as well as measured. Since these skills are reported to be an important criterion of an individual's success in international business, educators should consider using the five exercises to provide their marketing students with this valuable attribute.

APPENDIX A

An Example Critical Incident: "Close Encounter"

Don Robinson was on the "fast track" at his multinational bank in New York City. Only in his late twenties, Don had been asked to represent the bank at a major conference in Buenos Arias, Argentina. New to the bank's Global Business Division, Don was understandably flattered that a senior executive would ask him to participate in the international conference.

His arrival in Buenos Arias had gone smoothly until the preconference cocktail party. Jorge Palencia--about the same age as Don and a rising star at an Argentinean bank--approached Don, introduced himself and immediately struck up a conversation. As he spoke Jorge seemed to be making a physical advance. Every time Jorge would advance, Don would move away and Jorge would again move forward. This went on until Don backed into a table blocking any further retreat. Still, Jorge kept his close distance. Uncomfortable and annoyed by Jorge's boorish and aggressive behavior, Don excused himself and left the party. During the conference, Don made a point of avoiding Jorge, spending most of his time with bankers from North America or Europe.

How can you best explain this situation?

1. Jorge had made a sexual advance.
2. Don was responding to Jorge's inebriated condition and the alcohol on his breath.
3. It is very unusual in a Latin American country for such a young man to represent his firm. Jorge resented the presence of another man his age and wished to make Don feel as uncomfortable as possible, hoping he would leave.
4. The comfortable social distance usually kept between two Latin Americans is much closer than

that of Americans. Both Don and Jorge were seeking a comfortable distance.

Discussion

1. While it is not uncommon to see men in Argentina walking arm-in-arm or greeting each other with a kiss on the cheek, Don's assumption that Jorge's physical closeness was sexually motivated is not accurate. It is possible that Don was feeling paranoid. When one confronts new situations and behaviors without a frame of reference, it is common to attach familiar attributions to them. Please select another response.
2. While Argentines are gregarious and enjoy their domestic wines and spirits, it would be a misconception to think that they regularly drink to excess. There is no indication in the incident that this was the cause of Don's response. Please select a different explanation.
3. There is a phenomenon called the "king of the hill" syndrome in which men who see themselves on their way to the top find ways to keep other men from reaching the top also: The king claims power by pushing competitors away. Although this is a possible explanation for the behavior described, it is doubtful that this fully explains this situation, given that Don and Jorge represented different firms. There is a better response.
4. This is the best response. Latin Americans usually stand closer to one another than do European Americans in the United States. Whereas the comfortable distance Don would keep from others in conversation is about 18 inches, the comfortable distance for Jorge and most Latin Americans is about 10-12 inches. Both Don and Jorge were trying to find their comfortable distance.

APPENDIX B

Table 1-A

Group	Pre-Test Mean/Number	Post-Test Mean/Number	Significance of F-value
U.S. Control	4.183/23	4.217/22	.7638
U.S. Treatment	4.383/19	4.913/18	.0034**
	.1190	.0001**	

**p<.01

Table 1-B

Group	Pre-Test Mean/Number	Post-Test Mean/Number	Significance of F-value
Non-U.S. Control	4.244/26	4.010/24	.2966
U.S. Treatment	4.383/19	4.913/18	.0034**
	.2553	.0024**	

**p<.01

Table 1-C

Group	Pre-Test Mean/Number	Post-Test Mean/Number	Significance of F-value
U.S. Control	4.183/23	4.217/22	.7638
Non-U.S. Control	4.244/26	4.010/24	.2966
	.5495	.3163	

Table 1-D

Group	Pre-Test Mean/Number	Post-Test Mean/Number	Significance of F-value
Adult Control	4.199/20	4.174/20	.8432
U.S. Treatment	4.383/19	4.913/18	.0034**
	.1011	.0001**	

**p<.01

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Table 1-E

Group	Pre-Test Mean/Number	Post-Test Mean/Number	Significance of F-value
Adult Control	4.199/20	4.174/20	.8432
U.S. Control	4.183/23	4.217/22	.7638
	.9569	.8550	

Table 1-F

Group	Pre-Test Mean/Number	Post-Test Mean/Number	Significance of F-value
Adult Control	4.199/20	4.174/20	.8432
Non-U.S. Control	4.244/26	4.010/24	.2966
	.4950	.5945	