

THE EXTREME UPS AND DOWNS OF TEACHING ABROAD IN A LESSER AFFLUENT NATION BEING INTEGRATED INTO THE GLOBAL ECONOMIC SYSTEM

Terrance G. Gabel, Truman State University, Division of Accounting and Business Administration, Kirksville, MO 63501; (660) 665-3554.

David Ackerman, California State University, Northridge, Department of Marketing, College of Business Administration and Economics, Northridge, CA 91330-8377; (818) 677-4628.

ABSTRACT

This inquiry examines what was learned by a U.S.-born, U.S.-based marketing scholar while teaching abroad in Mexico. Data indicate that the researcher's experience can be characterized as being both highly gratifying and deeply disheartening. Data further suggest that understanding this bi-polar situation is predicated significantly on understanding that Mexico is a lesser affluent national being integrated into the global economic system where both the role of education and academic life differs markedly from that in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen a surge in the number of U.S. college students gaining cross-cultural experience by studying abroad. The value of this experience has been and continues to be well documented. At the same time, however, the value of teaching abroad (for U.S. scholars and their students) has gone largely undiscussed.

The present research ethnographically examines what was learned as a result of serving, for three semesters, as a Visiting Professor of International Marketing at a large private university in southwestern Mexico. Data indicate that this valuable experience can be characterized by a series of both extraordinarily gratifying and deeply disheartening events and discoveries. Data further suggest that the occurrence of this bi-polar situation can be understood by taking into account the fact that Mexico is a lesser affluent national being integrated into the global economic system where the role of education and academic life differs significantly from that in the United States.

RECENT (U.S.) TRENDS IN STUDYING AND TEACHING ABROAD

The number of U.S. college students studying abroad has grown dramatically in recent years. The most recent statistics available from the Institute of International Education (IIE) indicate, for example, that the number of U.S. students doing academic work in foreign nations has risen from 62,341 in 1987-88 to 113,95 in 1997-98

(Desruisseaux 2000a). This surge can be accounted for by considering the fact that U.S. students now both can increasingly afford the study-abroad experience and have growing interest in gaining this experience. Reasons cited for the dramatic escalation in studying abroad include: 1) the strength of the U.S. dollar overseas, 2) the strong U.S. economy, and 3) the "growing desire on the part of many career-minded students to acquire international knowledge and experience" (Desruisseaux 2000b, paragraph 3). The importance of acquiring this experience--for both students and scholars--is summarized by the president of the IIE as follows.

The most critical factor for the success of nations in the new millennium will be a population whose minds are open to the world. As a consequence, many countries support programs that facilitate international exchanges of students and faculty members. Indeed, America's place as a world leader has been built as much on the foundation of such programs as on military and economic power (paragraph 1)... RAND studies of corporate hiring preferences show nearly universal agreement among personnel directors that their companies need managers and employees with greater international knowledge--and experience abroad--than the ones they are hiring now. Only such knowledge and experience will allow employees to work in cross-cultural teams to develop new products, they believe (paragraph 13)... I urge the working group to consider ways to elevate the importance we give to educational exchanges. Only in that way will we preserve America's leadership in making students and scholars citizens of the world (Goodman 1999).

While the trend in gaining cross-cultural experience and knowledge via studying abroad is positive from a U.S. student perspective, the same thing cannot be said with regard to their faculty counterparts. U.S. scholars, as well as some top university administrators, appear to myopically fail to understand the importance of the study abroad experience. IIE president Allan Goodman contends that this lack of understanding can be attributed both to ethnocentrism and a dysfunctional emphasis on the publication of academic research. According to Goodman:

Faculty members... do not appear convinced about the value of overseas experience for themselves. Senior scholars often discourage younger faculty members from applying for Fulbright or other fellowships that would place them abroad for periods of longer than a few months. Last year, the president of Duke University, Nannerl Keohane, focused attention on the parochialism that seems to be contributing to that attitude. In a speech at Oxford University, she said that 'since English is the dominant language of international scholarship... there is little incentive for American scholars to learn other languages.' She added: 'Because American scholarship is recognized as pre-eminent in many fields, there is little incentive to be current in the work done in other countries for many faculty members.' Young faculty members may also be reluctant to risk a sojourn abroad when a tight job market puts a premium more on timely publishing than on extensive fieldwork (Goodman 1999, paragraph 12).

This reluctance on the part of U.S. scholars to teach abroad creates a situation which is both unfortunate and ironic. Students apparently understand the importance of gaining cross-cultural experience and knowledge. Those persons entrusted with the responsibility of educating these students appear not to share this view. Further, U.S. academicians, unlike their student counterparts, appear not to be willing to take the action needed to acquire important international knowledge and experience. However, it is these same people who frequently both preach the importance of this knowledge and must educate their students of cross-cultural issues. This suggests that we should question the ability of many if not most U.S. scholars to effectively educate their students with regard to critical international and cross-cultural matters. It also suggests that we should question the ability of U.S. scholars to produce valid and otherwise meaningful information on these issues.

The present inquiry is an ethnographic examination of both: 1) what it is like to teach in a culturally and developmentally dissimilar foreign nation, and 2) what can be learned about educational systems in such nations. Below, we briefly discuss our methodological approach. We then present the findings of our research along with their implications.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The essence of the ethnographic method is that the researcher immerses him/herself "in the midst of whatever it is they study" (Hill and Stamey 1990, p. 305 [see also: Atkinson and Hammersley

1994; Lincoln and Guba 1985]). Ideally, this immersion results in the elucidation of human experience as lived in the inquiry's particular physical and historical context. Also central to ethnographic inquiry is the notion that research activities are guided by an emergent design wherein the researcher's specific focus is determined by a real-time understanding of the focal phenomenon as it exists in its natural environment. Ethnographic data collection typically involves some combination of researcher observation and formally or informally discussing focal issues with locally situated persons. Also central to the ethnographic method is the keeping of detailed and often introspective researcher fieldnotes (see: Fontana and Frey 1994; Richardson 1994; Wallendorf and Belk 1989).

Data was ethnographically collected, by one member of the research team, while serving as a Visiting Professor of International Marketing at "The University of Southwest Mexico" (USWM), a large private university in Guadalajara, Jalisco (Mexico).¹ The researcher served in this capacity for three semesters--two summer semesters and one fall semester--in the middle and late 1990s. Two of the three semesters, both summer sessions, were spent working out of USWM's foreign exchange office teaching classes to foreign exchange students from various universities across the U.S.. The remaining (fall) semester was spent as a member of the USWM business faculty teaching courses to Mexican international business students. Finally, it should be noted that the immersed researcher taught independently during all three semesters in that he was employed by USWM and was not officially representing any U.S. university.

A total of approximately 12 months were spent ethnographically immersed in Guadalajara.

¹ Guadalajara, one of the Mexican Republic's three major regional centers of business, governmental, industrial, religious, and agricultural activity, is often referred to as "the hub of Western Mexico." Guadalajara is Mexico's second largest metropolitan area with a population of between six and eight million persons. Culturally, it has been described as "the most Mexican of all cities in the republic" due to its being the home of such distinctive cultural phenomena as tequila, mariachi music, and the jarabe tapatio (i.e., the Mexican hat dance) (Logan 1984, p. 16). USWM--not the real name of the university--is owned and operated by a wealthy Guadalajara-area family with both national and global business connections (in several industries). The university is also heavily dependent upon foreign exchange from the United States, Canada, and several Western European and Asian nations.

Ten of the 12 months were spent working and living in (as opposed to merely visiting) the area. The vast majority of this period of total immersion was spent living with a lifelong Guadalajara resident as a member of a local family (by virtue of marriage to a local resident just prior to the beginning of data collection). Primary means of data collection include: 1) interviewing and/or talking informally with over a dozen USWM faculty members, administrators, and students, 2) participant and non-participant observation of the education process (involving both Mexican and U.S. foreign exchange students), 3) extensive daily reading and analysis of local, regional, and/or national newspaper articles, and 4) the keeping of detailed and often introspective researcher fieldnotes.

Data analysis followed guidelines set forth by Spiggle (1994). The primary analytical operation employed was categorization, a labeling or coding process involving the identification of a unit of data (e.g., a passage of text) as being exemplary of some more general phenomenon.

FINDINGS/DATA: THE EXTREME UPS AND DOWNS OF TEACHING ABROAD

Five education-related categories emerge from our data. These categories, along with their component subcategories, are summarized in Table 1. Our discussion focuses on data exemplary of our experience of teaching abroad in Mexico as being characterized by a series of both extraordinarily gratifying and deeply disheartening events and discoveries. We first address the gratifying aspects of our experience. We then discuss data exemplary of the down side of our teaching abroad experience. The latter discussion takes place in the context of Mexico being a lesser affluent nation being integrated into the global economic system.

TABLE 1
Emergent Categories and Subcategories

=====

1. Cultural influence on educational system makes it "different"/difficult to teach in.

- A. Cultural tradition more important than class: e.g., students miss class to attend cultural events--no excuses nor advance notice often given.
- B. Bribery: e.g., to get grades and offset poor attendance.
- C. Cultural events form the basis of extracurricular activities: e.g., death rituals (i.e., Day of the Dead), traditional festivals, and holidays.
- D. Teachers treated differently by administration: e.g., teachers closely monitored and controlled via 'punching the clock' and signing in and out of class.

- E. Junior college system functions differently: e.g., terminal degrees.
- F. Staff paid poorly and treated badly.

2. Lacking resources in educational system.

- A. Technology: e.g., severe lack of computers for staff and students; extremely limited search capabilities in library.
- B. Information: e.g., online and offline (e.g., book-based) information hard to find.
- C. Textbooks: e.g., old and outdated if simply not available (on many topics); few recent editions available in Spanish language.
- D. Students don't have money to buy books and supplies.
- E. Poor faculty work conditions: e.g., very low pay; all business faculty in one non-air-conditioned office open to students.
- E. English-speaking support lacking.

3. Mexican faculty and staff highly dependent upon and servient to foreign exchange students and their universities.

- A. Forced toleration of rude, arrogant, scheming, and overly demanding (and ethnocentric) U.S. foreign exchange students.
- B. U.S. administrators put off looking into student misbehavior until after students return home.
- C. On-site coordinators who either don't seem to know about student misbehavior or, if they are aware of it, don't seem to care.

4. Sense of achievement in helping Mexican students succeed.

- A. Mexican students must work extra hard in English-language classes.
- B. Many Mexican students have overcome lacking resource issue: e.g., success despite often extreme lack of financial resources.
- C. Helping give Mexican students the opportunity to move up in the (extremely bi-polar) Mexican social hierarchy.
- D. Mexican students highly appreciative of teacher effort.

5. Learning about and educating on (misunderstood and under-researched) Mexican marketing and consumer behavior phenomena at the level of the lived human experience of local people.

- A. The globalization-driven transformation of local systems of exchange.
 - B. Culture-based difficulties faced by foreign marketers and the sometimes creative manner in which these firms try to overcome them.
 - C. Globalization's consumer choice-related consequences.
 - D. Globalization's consumer nationalism-related consequences.
-

Extreme Gratification

Numerous data incidents exemplify the fact that our teaching abroad experience in Mexico was highly gratifying (and highly informative with regard to both the Mexican system of higher education and various Mexican marketing and consumer research phenomena). Most exemplary in this regard is data contained in Categories 4 and 5 (see Table 1). As

indicated in data from Category 4, the immersed researcher experienced a great sense of achievement by helping (typically underprivileged) Mexican students to succeed in their classes and improve their chances of moving up in the highly bipolar Mexican social hierarchy. In addition, our data suggest that these Mexican students are extraordinarily appreciative of teaching efforts--more so than previously experienced by the immersed researcher. These sentiments are summarized in the following verbatim excerpt from researcher fieldnotes entered immediately after the final meeting of one of his classes taught to Mexican international business students.

SADNESS AFTER LAST CLASS: I have just left my last class with my lower-level (MR) [marketing research] students and am waiting outside an auditorium to attend a folkloric dance festival. All 3 of them got 100 on their last test and all I did tonight was hand back the tests. They were very happy, especially the man who made it over the 85% level by 2 points (and gets an A and does not have to take the finals).

THIS IS REALLY SAD... I have never felt like this after a class--not even close... I am usually just glad to be done... They did not speak English well and didn't understand me all that much better in what is traditionally a difficult class... They tried very hard and were far more appreciative of me as a teacher than any class I have ever had before. After class they were shaking my hand and thanking me repeatedly. I do not feel that they viewed this class as just something to get finished...

I never imagined being able to get this much satisfaction from teaching before... I can see, with the responsibilities and demands we face, how it can be easy to get jaded and forget about the importance and benefits of teaching. Tonight makes all the trouble of the semester worth it. (original parenthetical text [bracketed text added for clarity])

Also exemplary of the fact that our teaching abroad experience in Mexico was highly gratifying is data concerning Mexican marketing and consumer research phenomena seldom if ever discussed in scholarly research, the popular business press, or mainstream media outlets. Data in this regard concerns: 1) the globalization-driven transformation of local systems of exchange (e.g., the influx of transnational corporation [TNC] manufacturers, retailers, and products), 2) culture-based difficulties faced by foreign marketers and the sometimes creative manner in which these firms try to overcome them (e.g., Wal-Mart's use of outdoor taco stands and dance-based events to overcome a variety of inconsistencies between their core product and Mexican consumer preference), 3) globalization's consumer choice-related

consequences (e.g., the limiting of both product-level and store-level consumer level choice with respect to the consumption of tortillas), and 4) globalization's consumer nationalism-related consequences (i.e., the apparent fact that consumer nationalism is alive and well in Mexico despite disciplinary claims that it is extinct). All of these issues were the subject of course lecture and discussion while teaching in Mexico and are currently in the process of being worked into academic research and instructional materials in the United States.

The Equally Extreme Downside

Data suggest that our teaching abroad experience in Mexico was anything but a painless, joyful undertaking. Data in this regard concerns the fact that Mexico is a lesser-affluent nation currently in the process of being extensively integrated into the global economic system. Perhaps of equal importance is the fact that USWM is highly dependent upon foreign exchange, mainly from the U.S., for income. Most exemplary in this regard is data comprising Category 3 in Table 1. This data suggests that Mexican faculty and staff are not only highly dependent upon but also, as a result of this dependence, very servient to U.S. foreign exchange students and their universities. This data suggests, specifically, that Mexican university faculty and staff--and teachers independently teaching abroad in Mexico--have little choice but to tolerate: 1) at times rude, arrogant, scheming, and overly demanding (and ethnocentric) U.S. foreign exchange student behavior, and 2) U.S. administrators and study abroad coordinators who are often indifferent to student misbehavior.² Take, for example, the case of the immersed researcher's troubles with a group of exchange students from

² This statement is not meant to suggest that all U.S. foreign exchange students (nor all exchange students from the named university) are rude and arrogant--they are not. This statement is also not meant to suggest that all U.S. administrators and exchange coordinators are indifferent to student misbehavior (when it does occur)--they are not. This statement (and subsequent discussion) is meant to imply both that student behavior and administrative/ coordinator indifference do indeed occur and that Mexican faculty and staff--due to a high level of dependence upon U.S. foreign exchange students and their universities--(sadly) have little choice but to tolerate it (when they do occur). This conclusion is based on countless hours of personal observation and personal experience--observation and experience possible only if intimately immersed in the Mexican system of higher education. Further, the data here presented in support of this assertion represent but a small percentage of such data collected for purposes of the present inquiry.

educational systems--to challenge themselves by teaching abroad.

REFERENCES

- Atkinson, Paul and Martyn Hammersley. 1994. Ethnography and participant observation. In Handbook of Qualitative Research, eds. N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln, 248-261. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Desruisseaux, Paul. 2000a. Study-abroad guides on the web reveal opportunities for students and travelers. The Chronicle of Higher Education (May 12): A57. Available: <http://web.lexis.com> [accessed September 27, 2000].
- 2000b. Taking advantage of the strong U.S. dollar, Americans flock to study-abroad programs. The Chronicle of Higher Education (June 23): A55. Available: <http://web.lexis.com> [accessed September 27, 2000].
- Fontana, Andrea and James H. Frey. 1994. Interviewing: The art of science. In Handbook of Qualitative Research, eds. N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln, 361-376. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Goodman, Allan E. 1999. America is devaluing international exchanges for students and scholars. The Chronicle of Higher Education (March 12): A56. Available: <http://web.lexis.com> [accessed September 27, 2000].
- Hill, Ronald Paul and Mark Stamey. 1990. The homeless in America: An examination of possessions and consumption behaviors. Journal of Consumer Research, 17 (December): 303-321.
- Lincoln, Yvonna S. and Egon G. Guba. 1985. Naturalistic Inquiry. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Logan, Kathleen. 1984. Haciendo Pueblo: The Development of a Guadalupe Suburb. University, AL: The University of Alabama Press.
- Richardson, Laurel. 1994. Writing: A method of inquiry. In Handbook of Qualitative Research, eds. N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln, 516-529. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Wallendorf, Melanie and Russell W. Belk. 1989. Assessing trustworthiness in naturalistic consumer research. In Interpretive Consumer Research, ed. Elizabeth C. Hirschman, 69-84. Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research.