

Enhancing Global Competitiveness Through Experiential Learning: Insights Into Successful Programming

Nabarun Ghose, University of Findlay, USA

ABSTRACT

International exposure of students is very essential in today's globalized world. Experiential learning, such as study abroad, plays a major role in developing global competencies in students, making them more marketable globally. This paper highlights one experiential activity that injects global competencies in students, thereby making them more valuable to the organizations that utilize their services.

Keywords: experiential learning, global business competencies, cultural immersion, business immersion

INTRODUCTION

Today's world of business is global and it is the responsibility of marketing educators to provide the tools for the preparation of students to succeed in this global environment. Such tools include experiential learning in classes. Corporate ownership and governance, even in the United States, is rapidly evolving into a union of diverse culturally influenced business and marketing philosophies and expectations. A look at these giant business moves taking place all over the globe throws light on the fact that trade liberalizations are creating a lot of new opportunities in many new lands. As a result, competition is also increasing rapidly. Businesses are seeking job candidates with adequate international knowledge and experience in order to succeed in the global village.

Most American students' knowledge is limited to the national boundaries and they are completely unaware about what is happening in the world outside of the US. In order to be competitive with students from all over the world, the American students have to understand that there is a world beyond the US that is progressing rapidly; and for them to be able to enter this global market, they will have to gain as much international exposure - to gain critical global business competencies (Caligiuri and Santo, 2001) - as soon as possible.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning is not restricted to a particular field of study. Research indicates that educators in varied disciplines have been using experiential learning techniques in both semi-structured and/or loosely structured formats in order to equip the students with tools that would increase their understanding of the discipline. Although experiential learning has been used for many years in education in various disciplines, many academics are quite oblivious to the use of experiential learning techniques in enhancing education and training for careers (Illeris, 2007).

In a nutshell, research suggests that experiential learning can help a student develop a positive attitude towards life, encourage acceptance of responsibility, promote community involvement, develop power of thought and help them understand their strengths and weaknesses in the real world context, thereby inspiring personal growth through the development of global competencies.

CULTURAL IMMERSION THROUGH STUDY ABROAD

Discipline-focused study abroad programs, especially, provide the sustainable competitive advantages (Vance, 2005) of first-hand insider knowledge and invaluable observations of backstage culture. In addition, they provide direct networking with essential contacts for current and future endeavours. However, for these programs to be meaningful, we need to be aware that the basic types and stages of experiential learning are addressed by the variety of activities built into such study abroad programs. Many leading universities have recently incorporated such meaningful immersion study abroad programs into their business curriculum and other schools are incorporating them in order to make their graduates competitive. Examples include:

- Yale, Stanford, Tulane, MIT Sloan require students to travel abroad – a week or longer (Backman, 2007);
- Stanford MBA requires a “Global Management Immersion Experience” (a four-week internship) (Backman, 2007);
- Yale offers a choice of eight foreign itineraries (Backman, 2007); and,
- In January 2008, NAFSA reported that Study Abroad Programs are critical to leading, collaborating, and competing “effectively in the global arena” (NAFSA 2008).

ADVANTAGES OF STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS

The advantages of study abroad programs can be categorized into two sets of competencies. The first set is cultural competency and the other set is professional competency. Koernig (2007) emphasized that in order to make a study abroad program effective, focus has to be placed on “... balancing academic content with cultural activities, selecting types of learning activities, and facilitating a student exchange program with a local university”. The two categories addressed are highlighted below:

1. Cultural Competency
 - Understanding the role of culture and its impact on a profession.
2. Business Competency
 - Real-time learning from highly successful and influential professional leaders.
 - Provides real-time exposure to the challenges and opportunities of transnational cooperation.
 - Observing and studying major global and local organizations in operation.
 - Establishing personal contacts in the professional world.

A sample meaningful study abroad program is presented for the benefit of those desirous of starting one or improving an existing program. This program utilizes the services of a renowned organization, PRAKRUTHI – Outwardbound Experiential Learning Centre (advn_nat@yahoo.co.in) - that has over 28 years of experience in successfully developing and coordinating such programs for visiting groups, especially universities and corporations.

Cultural Competency

- Visit and Attend a Lecture and Guided Tour of a Living Cultural Village

The purpose was to interact with typical village artisans and witness folk performances set in an authentic ambience. The mid-day meal served was authentic Indian and a gourmet’s delight.

- Visit Various Religious Institutions

Participants were exposed to the different religions that thrive together in India, which included Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim institutions. They were able to acquire first-hand information and answers to their questions.

- Visit Historic Landmarks

Participants could trace the development of history and its impact on business. This gave them an understanding of business traditions and prevalent norms.

- Go Shopping in Chennai

Chennai is famous for shopping for silks, paintings and carvings, and also modern malls for clothes, etc. This was a good time to order custom-made clothes so they could be collected before participants left India. Participants could also observe lifestyles and demands, retailing and customer service.

- Visit a Variety of Leading Educational Institutions

The program included a critical analysis of the Indian educational system that has drawn positive worldwide recognition in recent years. The participants visited and studied a variety of educational institutions -- Pre-K to 12 and undergraduate and graduate academic institutions. They observed and analyzed the feasibility of combining the best of western and Indian schools of educational practices. Participants also visited and explored a premier world renowned technological educational institution.

- Explore the Representation of US Interests in India

Visits with the senior officials of The US Consulate General provided participants the opportunity to attend lectures on rules, regulations, culture, and expectations on social interaction between US and Indian citizens. They explored educational and business opportunities between the two nations. Officers of the United States Educational Foundation in India entertained queries and assisted participants in identifying student and faculty development opportunities, such as research, learning, teaching and international collaborations.

- Business Debriefing

Business Competency

- Visit and Attend On-Site Seminars and Guided Tours of Leading Information Technology and Outsourcing Service Providers

India has become the world's leader in knowledge processes outsourcing. Participants visited and studied corporations that are rated by Forbes, Financial Times and Pricewaterhouse Coopers as being among the world's most respected and reputed companies that have thousands of employees abroad, including the USA. They observed the security measures taken by these corporations to protect client data. The top executives of these corporations conducted seminars for the educational and other informational benefits of the participants. These corporations provide software solutions and services to clients around the globe and have business offices in the US, Europe, Japan, Mexico, China and other countries.

- Visit and Attend a Lecture and Guided Tour of the Healthcare Industry

Participants visited a new one-stop hospital run by a world renowned surgeon who is listed in the Guinness Book of World Records for his achievements in the field of medicine. Additionally, the surgeon had an impressive record of humanitarian service, such as treating 4,000 plantation workers free of charge and for performing endoscopic surgeries for hundreds of poor in India and Sri Lanka.

- Visit and Attend a Lecture and Guided Tour on Vocational Training

Participants visited India's largest construction organization - an Indian multinational operating in Asia, Africa, & Europe. This firm set records in terms of speed, size and sophistication in virtually every segment of

construction. Here vocational training was combined with life-skills training to develop world-class construction workers.

- Visit a Country Club And Dine With Experts

This leading country club hosts some of the world's largest events, such as international cricket matches and tournaments. Leading experts in the participants' fields of interest joined us for dinner to discuss their questions, concerns, and opinions.

- Visit And Attend a Lecture And Guided Tour Of The Petrochemicals Industry

This was a key supplier to major oil companies in the USA. They manufacture polyisobutylene that consists of several industrial applications.

- Visit And Attend a Lecture At the Corporate Headquarters

Participants visited a leading corporation, run by three successive generations, that is highly successful in agricultural, financing, and petrochemical businesses, among others. They were able to get invaluable insights into backstage culture and sustainable competitive advantage information for international business.

- Visit and Attend On-Site Seminars and Guided Tours of Ecotourism and Conservation

Participants got insights into this rapidly developing industry. They also observed the collection and dissemination of scientific information from on-going research projects. Information on multinational collaboration in native industry was explored.

- Study Foreign Investment in Hospitality

The visitors were able to study the standards and expectations in this industry. They were also able to identify the challenges, stages of development, and the needs for this industry.

- Study the Movie Industry

"Bollywood", a part of India's motion picture industry, has, until recently, been the world's largest producer of movies each year. They have just been surpassed by another part of India's motion picture industry - "Kollywood". The center for Kollywood - the world's number 1 - is Chennai. Participants visited the studios that enabled Kollywood to become the top producer, far exceeding Hollywood.

- Business Debriefing

CONCLUSION

Businesses find it challenging to incur the expenses for global competency training of its employees. New recruits are at an advantage if they have prior experience and skills. With globalization, it is absolutely necessary for employees to possess marketable global competencies. Meaningful experiential study abroad can greatly add to the student's career portfolio.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dr. Nabarun Ghose is Professor of Marketing and Business at The University of Findlay, Findlay, Ohio, USA. Dr. Ghose got his Doctor of Business Administration in Marketing from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, his Masters in International Journalism from Baylor University, and was the Gold Medalist in his Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Madras Christian College. Dr. Ghose's major interests are in the areas of developing cross-cultural soft skills, market assessment, market entry strategies, ethnocentrism, country-of-origin image, and content analysis of advertising.

REFERENCES

1. Backman, Marjorie (2007), M.B.A. Field Trips: More Business Schools are Requiring Students to Travel Abroad. *Condé Nast Portfolio.com*, July 19, 2007, <http://www.portfolio.com/careers/features/2007/07/19/MBA-Field-Trips>.
2. Caligiuri, Paula and Santo, Victoria Di (2001), Global Competence: What is it, and Can it be Developed Through Global Assignments? *Human Resource Planning*, 24(3), 27-35.
3. Illeris, Knud (2007), What Do We Actually Mean by Experiential Learning, *Human Resource Development Review*, 6(1), 84-95.
4. Koernig, Stephen K. (2007), Planning, Organizing, and Conducting a 2-Week Study Abroad Trip for Undergraduate Students: Guidelines for First-Time Faculty, *Journal of Marketing Education*, 29(3), 210-217.
5. NAFSA: Association of International Educators (2008), Strengthening Study Abroad: Recommendations for Effective Institutional Management for Presidents, Senior Administrators, and Study Abroad Professionals, 1-14.
6. Vance, Charles M. (2005), The Personal Quest for Building Global Competence: A Taxonomy of Self-initiating Career Path Strategies for Gaining Business Experience Abroad, *Journal of World Business*, 40, 374-385.

NOTES