

Understanding U.S. business culture through contrast: The case of undergraduate business study in Peru, Nicaragua, and Cuba

Abstract

We examined the utility of study abroad in emerging economies in revealing students' preconceptions about business and society. In this session, we look at student reflections on their experiences to examine these preconceptions and surprises from the student perspective. Our submission contains course descriptions, learning objectives, and all assignments related to the trip to provide background. The purpose of the session is to discuss the "hidden agenda" in American business curricula as represented in student narrative before and after their travels.

Keywords: experiential reflection, business preconceptions, emerging nation study abroad

Introduction

Undergraduates today must better understand their own culture and biases in order to operate in an increasingly global business environment and navigate changes in management and leadership. For example, many universities and their stakeholders are examining more closely the business/society relationship and the need to create more responsible, connected, and sustainability-minded managers. The UN Sustainable Development Goals are a case in point in that they expressly examine the business/society relationship with a framework that establishes scientific, community, and pedagogic dialogues surrounding values in the evolution of business. To learn a values-based approach to management, however, the learner should understand their own values and how those translate to managerial behaviors – nearly impossible to do without first-hand experience. We have found that undergraduates possess some of that experience by virtue of a lifetime of acculturation and only need a forum to examine and articulate these. We have found that introductory research, study abroad experience, and reflection are incredible tools for understanding their own values and place in business irrespective of its location, domestic or global. We found that our use of stark contrast – study abroad in developing nations – is massively effective in examining student assumptions about business, society, and sustainability and better understanding others' perspectives.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

We approached this work with the goal of exploring Blasco's "hidden curriculum" whereby U.S. business education socializes students to view business in very narrow terms. We wished to better understand, "What do students think about business in general?" and "What do they think about business after returning from a study abroad experience in a developing nation?"

We also drew upon social business (Dart, 2008; Litzky, Godshalk, & Walton-Bongers, 2010; Rands, 2009), sustainability (Kearins & Springett, 2003; Robert, Nagaraj, Diane, & David, 2014), and study abroad literature (Batchelor & Burch, 2016; Napier, Harvey, & Usui, 2008; Peng, Van Dyne, & Oh, 2015; Robert et al., 2014; Sachau, Brasher, & Fee, 2010) to inform course design and learning.

We interviewed students and examined their coursework for related insights and content analyzed these in creating our summary report for the session. We expect this will lead to an engaging question and answer segment as well as an opportunity to discuss topics surrounding student introspection, business/society assumptions, and designing intellectually confrontational experiences.

Learning Objectives

Teaching topics relevant to our session focus on cultural understanding and cultural intelligence in study abroad contexts. Specifically, we looked at what types of personal insights students gain from study abroad at “the base of the pyramid” and what that contrast helps them learn about themselves and their preconceptions about business. Separate course learning objectives (International Business class as well as Sustainable Business) are listed in Tables 1 and 2 in the appendix. For the purposes of this session, we look only at student change in perception of what business is or is not pre- and post-trip. That is, as instructors we wanted to better understand Blasco’s hidden curriculum through contrast with an opposing business environment.

Exercise Overview

We created a series of study abroad courses specific to emerging economies primarily in Latin America in Peru, Nicaragua, and Cuba. Each course followed the same structure with:

- Two written assignments designed to provide a pre-trip understanding of international business and sustainability, respectively.
- A written assignment to demonstrate student understanding of course topics specific to each country's context.
- A written assignment that asked for open student reflection on the experience.

The courses ran in our first summer session with work due prior to the trip usually in the first week of June with a trip running roughly twelve days and reflective papers due within days after that. We travelled with two instructors and eight students from New England to our selected countries and, once there, stayed in two or three locations (towns or cities) total. We visited cultural, historical, business and industry, and tourist sites and discussed experiences semi-formally as a group and informally on a more one-on-one basis. Students could discuss their papers with one-another but their insights had to be distinct and personal. Written assignment instructions can be found in Tables 3 and 4 in the appendix. Country name was replaced with “[Developing Nation]”.

We further examined student experience in a critical incident-style interview whose protocol is provided in Table 5 in the Appendix.

Session Description

We expect to drive a discussion surround student perceptions of business in America through the following:

10 min – presentation of the course context and question “What do students think about American business?”

15 min – student reflections on the question with a focus on post-trip surprises.

35 min discussion on student preconceptions and the use of study abroad in emerging economies (and other high-contrast contexts) to reveal these to students.

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Appendix

Table 1
Catalog Description and Learning Objectives
International Business Class

Course Description: Prerequisites: Sophomore standing.

International Practicum involves pre-travel and/or post-travel study and travel of 10-14 days duration during school breaks that are chaperoned and supervised by a business faculty member. These trips take students outside the geographic borders of the U.S. and provide learning experiences beyond the classroom environment. Programs and activities enhance the ability of students to comprehend, analyze, and grasp different cultural aspects that impact successful management of organizations in the global work environment. The major goal of the International Practicum is to allow undergraduate students opportunities to enhance their understanding of cross-cultural differences and the globalization of the work environment.

The course may be repeated for credit if the location/topic varies.

Overall Course Objectives:

Upon completion of the course, you should be able to:

1. Identify key terms and concepts involved in doing business internationally.
2. Explain general problems related to international business.
3. Research issues specific to international business in the country to be visited.
4. Describe strategies used by organizations that do business in the country visited to engage in successful international business.

Appendix, Continued

Table 2
Catalog Description and Learning Objectives
Global Sustainability Management Class

Course Description; Prerequisites: Sophomore standing.

These seminar travel courses take students outside the geographic borders of the U.S. (in this case [Developing Nation]) and provide learning experiences beyond the classroom environment. The course involves research and discussion of environmental and Corporate Social Responsibility issues relevant to the country being visited, and programs and activities that enhance the ability of students to comprehend, analyze, and grasp different aspects of sustainability that are the responsibility of organizations in the global environment. The major goal of the course is to allow undergraduate students opportunities to understand the relationship between the concerns of global sustainability and the efforts of organizations to support this responsibility.

Overall Course Objectives:

Upon completion of the course, you should be able to:

1. Identify key terms and concepts involved in environmental issues.
2. Explain general problems related to sustainability management.
3. Research issues of sustainability in the country to be visited.
4. Describe strategies used by organizations in the country visited to address sustainability management issues.

Appendix, Continued

Table 3
Written Assignment Instructions
International Business Class

Paper #1 Business Practice in [Developing Nation]: Laying the Groundwork

This **first paper** is designed to meet the promise suggested by its title and 3.5 of the course's learning practice-oriented international business objectives. The first objective looks at identifying key terms and concepts, the second general problems, the third research specific to [Developing Nation], and the fourth understanding how to do business well in [Developing Nation] based on your post travel experiences and pre-travel knowledge.

The **assigned readings**, listed below, provide that background. In order of their appearance below, they get at the global mindset, characteristics of global businesses, emerging market risks, cultural issues, managing global teams, and using an important government site or two. This provides us with an introduction to international/global:

1. Management.
2. Business.
3. Opportunities.

The assignment:

Use the U.S. Department of Commerce and International Trade Commission sites to find business opportunities that seem to make the most sense for [Developing Nation]. These sites are searchable and you should begin reading the Lonely Planet Travel Guide - Lonely Planet [Developing Nation], listed in the syllabus along and browse current events that could be relevant in [Developing Nation]. Then, *based on your readings and research*, **answer these questions**.

- What are the top issues in engaging in international business with or in [Developing Nation]?
- What are the top managerial issues you might run into in making such a business work?
- What would you do in anticipation of top business opportunities in [Developing Nation]?
- Which appeal most and why?

This paper should be around 5-pages, Arial 10 font, ***double-spaced***. It should include citations and references. This is primarily a research paper so be especially careful with citations and references. See the Purdue Online Writing Laboratory [HERE](#) for an easy-to-use and searchable resource. Be thoughtful, logical and concise, use terms and concepts accurately, and edit well.

Paper #2 - [Developing Nation] Exploration: Selecting Readings

For this **second paper**, you select readings of your choosing related in some way to one or more major issues you ran into during your research for the first paper and/or related to issues brought up in Professor X's coursework. You do not have to complete all research or create an advanced draft of the first paper to identify the issues.

The assignment

1. Provide a short summary of the readings that you selected and explain your reasoning.
2. Explain how it informs, augments, and contradicts any of the coursework used to respond to assignments in either [Developing Nation]-based course.

This paper should be around 2-pages, Arial 10 font, ***double-spaced***. It should include citations and references. But this is not meant to be a research paper. It is more of an analysis and commentary based on a thoughtful integration of work to-date. The paper will be graded on how well that integration takes place in a logical and concise manner. Points will be taken off for any careless use of past terms and concepts or inadequate editing.

Paper #3 - Business Practice and Economics in [Developing Nation]: Discussions and Observations

This **third paper** is a summary of what you found to be the most important insights into doing business in or with [Developing Nation] based on any of your readings, discussions with professors or peers (including the small forum set up under Paper #3, Resources), and observations from the trip itself.

You'll have a lot to choose from. I just want around a ***two page double-spaced***, 10 point Arial font summary of the ***absolute best insights*** along with their sources whether it's an informal discussion, an interview or presentation or site visit on the trip, or something you happen to overhear. I don't care, as long as it's insightful, accurate, and you say where you got it.

Paper #4 - Business Practice in [Developing Nation]: Your Business and Reflections

As I said in the **first paper** instructions, this assignment builds on all past work - especially your experiences and knowledge gained in [Developing Nation] - to **answer the following**:

What would you have to do to engage in business either in or with [Developing Nation] specific to one of the opportunities you mentioned at the beginning of the course?

You can select a new business if the old opportunity no longer appeals to you but the second option requires a 1/2-page reason for the change). The total page length should be around ***two page double-spaced***, 10 point Arial font. Less is doable but providing that concision more difficult to accomplish and unlikely to provide enough information or detail.

Appendix, Continued

Table 4
Written Assignment Instructions
Global Sustainability Management Class

Paper #1 A Perspective on the ILP

1. **40 points:** Based on my posted lectures, please explain the concept of “organizations exist to create value”. Demonstrate your understanding of the general concepts of an open system model for organizations, “triple bottom line” and how that relates to the need for organizations to consider all stakeholders. Demonstrate your understanding of how an Open System Model is a way to frame how business activity relates to the ILP perspective, how business affects society and how society affects business.
2. **20 points:** Briefly summarize the situation described in the article *The Clutter in Kim Tindell and explain it* as a conflict in satisfying stakeholders.
3. **20 points:** Read *Does It Pay to Go Green*. This is not to suggest that business decisions it always comes back to a financial decision. It is more to gain a perspective that consideration of financial, environmental and social impact can be a win/win/win. It is not about environment versus economics but consideration of economics **and** social **and** environmental impact that is essential for long-term sustainability. Explain what the article is saying about the varying attitudes that are considered in Environmentally sensitive initiatives of companies.

Paper should be about 4 pages, just a suggestion. Write more if you need but try to get to the point. Deductions will be taken for poor spelling, grammar or structure of the paper. Edit it please!

Paper #2 [Emerging Nation] Sustainability

1. **20 points:** Using the posting of the history of [put developing nation here] and the article [article title] explain how [developing nation] found itself in a bind and needed to be extremely aggressive in implementing policies of sustainability.
2. **25 points:** Read the article *Sustainability as a Strategic Issue* and explain in your own words what the author explains how support of sustainability efforts is an important strategic issue?
3. **25 points:** Using the posted article *Economics and Sustainability* explain the concepts of “Externalities” in your own words.
4. **30 points:** Again, from *Economics and Sustainability*, in your own words, explain Herman Daly’s four rules for the management of resource use and economic development:

Paper might require 4-5 pages, more if you need but try to get to the point. Deductions will be taken for poor spelling, grammar or structure of the paper. Edit it please!

Paper #3 Sustainability Issues [Emerging Nation]

Please read the five articles on [Emerging Nation] and Sustainability posted for this assignment.

1. **Business Perspective**: Using the information and perspectives we have developed in the earlier parts of the course, and mindful of the political forces that constrained business activity, from a business perspective, explain how agricultural business activities developed as needed to satisfy the people of [Emerging Nation]. Be sure to recognize that the isolation and unity of the people dramatically influenced how agriculture progressed.
2. **Liberal perspective**: Now, discuss how the people themselves have been impacted, both favorably and unfavorably; by the way agricultural business has been conducted in [Developing Nation].

Paper should be about 3-4 pages, more if you need but try to get to the point. Deductions will be taken for poor spelling, grammar or structure of the paper. Edit it please!

Paper #4 – Your Experience

Keeping course learning objectives in mind, discuss how the experience of this trip has related to the course objectives. Consider all the lectures, readings, activities, and your personal observations, as you write your paper. Be sure to reference any readings from the course that related to the travel activities.

Paper must exceed 1,000 words and all papers must relate back to the leaning objectives of the course. Paper must be in a Word format submitted to the course Dropbox. Please use double space format for your paper.

Appendix, Continued

Table 5
Critical Incident Guide for Interviewers

Research Questions: Does developing nation study abroad positively impact student business citizenship and change prevailing and often criticized developing nation business thinking (via PRME)?

LEVEL 1

What do you think of when you think about business? What comes immediately to mind?
(Note on wording: consider using imaginary business self or ideal business/business person)
Where do you think your ideas about business came from?

Additionally note: Questions initially originated from Blasco, (2012: p.374) on socialization, teaching/learning, student ethics, and PRME.

LEVEL 2

What are your strongest memories of the [Developing Nation] trip? What stands out the most?
This gets at critical and most important incident – sets frame of mind and establishes base for transformative learning (Blasco, 2012, p.374).

LEVEL 3

Did the trip support, conflict with, or challenge your existing view of business? (habitual thinking, frames of reference, points of view)
Did the trip challenge your own thinking about business?
Did the trip introduce any new frames?
Was the trip disorienting in any way?

LEVEL 4

What do you think about business school education?
Do you think it is valuable to study in a poor country? If so, how? If not, why?
What else comes to mind about business education?

OTHER EXAMPLES OF FRAMING BELOW

I'm looking for other facets that support the above, possibly for discussion within the paper, a follow-up survey or interview, and probably extension to other study abroad experiences.

Other facets and variables:

1. Business preconceptions
2. Ideal business
3. Sustainability and ethical business focus
4. Changes in student learning