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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN THE INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to describe a method of planning and implementing an experiential approach to international business that is a viable one in collegiate schools of business. The experiential approach attempts to move individuals from an ethnocentric management orientation to a geocentric one.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THE INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

In recent years, the subject of experiential learning has received a great deal of renewed attention in the business literature (Basurav and Shari; 1986). It has evolved from being an exploratory, experiential technique used in the national training laboratories and Esaien growth centers to being a common learning technique. The principals of experiential learning are derived from the works of Cantor (1946, Ig53Y Knowles (1970, 1975); Postman and Weinqartner (lg6g): and Rogers (1969).

According to Walter and Marks (1981), experiential learning is a sequence of events with one or more identified learning objectives, requiring active involvement by participants in the sequence. The central objective of experiential learning is learning through doing. Walter and Marks (IOB)) further point out that experiential learning is operative only when students are involved, lessons are clearly relevant, a sense of responsibility for learning is fostered, and when the environment is flexible and responsive to the immediate needs of students. The objective of this paper is to describe a method of planning and implementing in experiential approach to international business that is a viable one in collegiate schools of business. This program attempts to move individuals toward a geocentric style of management.

Introduction

At the present time, the number of American business firms engaged in international commerce has increased dramatically. With this increase, there has been a corresponding increase in the demand for international business education. Unfortunately, traditional instructional methods may fall short in capturing the full flavor of the international business environment. American students tend to favor ethnocentric management styles even though more successful managers and organizations are geocentric in their structure (Inmate and Bracker, 19B8;). The international Business Seminar (IBS) program conducted by a consortium of American colleges and universities provides an excellent example of the type of experiential offering that can combat this problem.

Using some of the basic principles prescribed in experiential learning theory, this program has provided a real world international setting during the past twelve years for over 1,000 students to learn about international business. Instead of reading a traditional textbook, listening to a traditional

lecture, or preparing a traditional case, these students were given an opportunity to study international business with top level executives from some of the world's foremost multinational firms. Additionally, the students had a chance to explore international issues with highly qualified individuals from other economic and government institutions.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

While traditional classroom lecture fails to integrate concepts to behavior, the IBS program addresses the student as a total person and integrates the learner into the experience. The program attempts to instill geocentric behavior. Although the program includes a number of key ingredients, three components stand out as the most important. These are the specific seminar offerings, the host organizations, and the student and faculty participants.

Seminar Offerings

The International Business Seminar program has offered a tremendous amount of variety over the past 12 years. Europe, however, has proven to be the primary base of operations for the majority of the individual seminars, although the Orient has provided a second geographical sphere of activity. Both of these sectors of the world have been selected primarily for their high level of economic activity and the presence of relatively mature international business operations.

The most popular countries for the European Seminars are Great Britain, Germany, France, and Italy, along with Austria, Belgium, Greece, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. In the past couple of years, Hungary has been added to this list. The world class cities in these countries provide excellent seminar locations. London, Heidelberg, Munich, Budapest, Brussels, Amsterdam, Vienna, Geneva, Paris, Nice, Florence, Rome, and Athens are prime examples of the best in both popularity and economic activity.

In the Orient, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan are preferred seminar locations. The cities of Taipei and Tokyo along with Hong Kong give student and faculty participants an excellent insight into Far East business operations. The opportunity to visit Mainland China in recent years has added a most interesting cultural dimension to the Orient Seminar, although multinational firms in China are understandably unavailable as hosts at the present time. For both faculty and students, however, the three major cities in this seminar provide a lively and exciting base of operations for an outstanding and informative seminar program.

Regardless of the location in either Europe or the Orient, the seminar offerings are very similar in nature. During a period of roughly three to four weeks, approximately 16 to 20 visits with host organizations are scheduled. These "individual seminars" are led by top level executives who present lectures

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and discussions on significant topics of interest to the group. A question and answer session always follows the formal presentations. Language barriers, of course, are no problem since the seminars are always conducted in English. Each seminar visit normally lasts around three to four hours and may include a luncheon, dinner, or reception where host executives, students, and faculty interact in a more informal setting.

The number of individual seminars offered has varied somewhat from year to year. A few private seminars have been developed for specific universities and have been limited to students from those universities at the request of their faculties. The public offering of seminars within the consortium of colleges and universities has followed a cittern of it least five individual seminars per year over the past several years. A winter seminar in Europe offered during the Christmas vacation period has been followed by three additional European seminars and one Orient seminar during the summer months.

Initial planning for the new seminar year begins during the previous summer. A determination of the number of individual seminars for the new year is made, and a general plan is formulated. This plan establishes tentative data on faculty members, key cities, and host organizations for the upcoming year. From this preliminary planning, individual seminars are developed as logistical matters such as ground transportation, hotel accommodations, and reservations for special activities are finalized. When these matters are settled, commitments are then obtained from faculty members and host organizations.

Host Organizations

While many details involved in the development of the seminars are largely logistical in nature, the relationships with host organizations have always been the most critical factor in the overall success of the seminar program. Over the years, contact has been established and maintained with more than 300 host organizations. These contacts range from the proprietor of a small independent retailer of handmade clothing in Hong Kong to the president of one of Germany's most prestigious automobile manufacturers. It should be noted, however, that the host organizations are not limited to commercial enterprises. To the contrary, government agencies, universities, Chambers of Commerce, and labor unions regularly provide outstanding presentations for seminar participants.

The development of a list of visible host organizations requires a great deal of care and attention. Initial contact is secured in a number of different ways ranging from cold calls to personal referrals. Once a relationship is established, the host organizations become a valuable resource that must be carefully maintained. Like any resource, of course, the hosts must not be abused or overused. Regular correspondence is essential in this regard to show a strong sense of appreciation. The efforts of those representing the most organizations. Small gifts such as T-shirts, plaques, and certificates given at the time of the seminar presentations are also used to express thanks for a job well done.

In general, the host organizations present excellent seminars on lively and timely topics of interest to participants. Although English is not usually the native language of the presenters, most handle the language exceptionally well. Participants rarely have trouble understanding the presentations, and they always seem impressed by the fact that communication skills are consistently strong among the

representatives of host organizations. Their English proficiency should be understandable, however, since the majority of the seminar presenters are relatively high level executives who have been educated in an English speaking country or schooled in English in their own countries.

As noted above, the list of host organizations in the International Business Seminar program includes a wide variety of business, government, and other economic institutions. Variety of this nature is essential to good seminar presentations since it is important to have a number of different subject areas drawn upon. Fortunately, the host organizations are generally receptive to topic suggestions, and presenters are willing to frame their discussions to the interests of the seminar group. Two timely topics in recent years, for example, have been the issues of protectionism and co-determination.

In addition to their formal seminar presentations, host organizations have also provided a social dimension to the program. Many hosts extend breakfast, luncheon, dinner, or reception invitations to the seminar groups. These occasions provide an excellent opportunity for seminar presenters and participants to closely interact in an informal setting. As will be discussed in the following section, these interactions provide a learning experience that is a very positive addition for the participants in the seminar program and a central tenet to experiential learning.

Faculty and Students

The participants in the seminar are, of course, the difficulty and students from the consortium of colleges and universities located throughout the United States. In any one year, the number of faculty actively involved in the program is around 15 to 20. Student participation has been in the range of 200 - 250 per year. The majority of these students have been undergraduates at the junior and senior levels, although the program has attracted a number of graduate or prospective graduate students seeking an international travel experience.

Faculty members perform a number of duties related to the overall seminar program. In addition to their roles as faculty leaders on the individual seminars, the faculty are also responsible for making the seminar program known to students on their respective campuses. With the help of graduate assistants, faculty members publicize the program by placing posters, developing student newspaper announcements and press releases, and by making presentations to classes and student groups. Additionally, faculty members also work closely with students on the academic dimensions of the program. This includes advisement, registration, and evaluation of academic work.

All publicity and informational materials are furnished to individual faculty members by the Director of the International Business Seminar program. Funds are also provided through the program for graduate assistants. The publicity effort that is made possible is an on-going activity throughout the academic year. Faculty members are requested to give special attention to the program during the first couple of months of each new school term, but contacts between faculty and students are maintained through regular meetings over the entire year. For the most part, these meetings are devoted to informational sessions on topics related to the seminar program or to foreign travel in general.

In order to participate in the program, students are

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required to formally apply for admission. They must be at the junior level or higher and must be in good academic standing with their respective college or university. Once accepted as a participant in the program, students may enroll for college credit based on their own individual degree requirements. Most students, however, find that they can get approval to take at least three semester hours of credit. An additional three semester hours of credit is frequently approved for special independent study work in some aspect of international business.

Seminar participation is limited to a maximum of 45 students per seminar, although most individual seminars normally are between 35 to 45 students with two to four faculty leaders. For a group of this size, the logistics are quite manageable. Inter-city transfers are made by motor coaches that accommodate approximately 50 persons. At seminar locations, host organizations normally have facilities that can easily handle the groups, or arrangements can be made to divide the groups for such things as plant tours. Lodging accommodations are first class hotels which are reserved in advance, and students are assigned to twin rooms with private facilities.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE

For student participants, the International Business Seminar program presents a unique learning experience that is very difficult, if not impossible, to duplicate on the college or university campus. The interaction with top level executives, participation in discussion sessions, and review seminars with the faculty, all provide an excellent exposure to the international environment. Even though the informal group is not the central focus of the learning activity, the major portion of the experiential learning occurs in group settings. Thus, the dynamics of the seminar are fostered through the interaction of executive, student, and faculty in both individual and group settings.

Executive Interaction

The interaction with top level executives in a real world setting, of course, is probably the most significant aspect of the overall educational experience. As discussed above, each individual seminar consists of approximately 16 to 20 sessions with host organizations that are normally represented by several executives. During these sessions, lectures and discussions focus on key topic areas related to some phase of international business. When possible, the topic areas are arranged in advance to tie in with the larger seminar program. In other instances, the nature and scope of the presentations are slanted somewhat by the questions posed to the seminar presenters. This allows for the coverage of relevant material not specified in advance.

Because of their expertise in the field of international business, executives from the host organizations generally prove to be outstanding sources of information. One topic, for example, that is always of higher interest to seminar participants is the subject of foreign exchange and the problems of international pricing. Although this is usually a rather technical subject area for most students, the presentations have proven to be quite effective in unraveling the complexity of the issues involved. With this background, students are more adept in handling such matters as personal currency conversion and the day-to-day fluctuations in the value of their personal funds.

Beyond the formal presentations, student interactions with

host executives may also take place during social occasions. As indicated above, informal discussions over a meal or at a reception are a very valuable learning experience. During these occasions, students have an opportunity to isolate specific individuals from whom they may wish to secure additional information or receive clarification on some issue presented during the formal sessions. In many cases, the informal setting generates better discussions than those following the formal presentations.

Student Participation

In order to fully capitalize on the opportunity provided through interaction with host executives, students are encouraged to participate in seminar discussions. To insure high quality question and answer sessions, a portion of the student's seminar grade is based on participation. Experience has shown that this is a good navigator for most students and that their overall level of participation is very good. Sane advance preparation in question development on the part of the student, however, has proven to be quite effective in enhancing the discussions.

Central to the objective of the International Business Seminar program is group dynamics. Using the objectives of experiential learning as a guidepost, faculty members encourage students to learn through the observation and actions of others. This group development is fostered through active involvement of students in seminars and cultural activities. A climax of trust is built between faculty and student in order to effectively steer students toward the demonstration of practical knowledge and skills learned in the seminar. For example, students often present awards to host executives after the seminar presentations, while in other instances students are asked in formal or sometimes informal settings to illustrate the principals of international business under consideration at that time. Thus, the energy of the group is fostered by active participation, trust between student and faculty member, and a mutual commitment to learn.

Faculty Involvement

As part of the overall group dynamics, faculty members play an important role during the seminar. As leaders of the program, they are responsible for making local contact with the host organizations and arranging for the group to arrive and leave on time for each seminar session. Additionally, faculty members are there to prompt the group if and when the discussion sessions tend to lag due to a lack of student response. By asking questions of the presenters, the faculty can direct the flow of the sessions and provide some direction for student questions.

Outside of their responsibilities during the sessions, faculty leaders orchestrate one entire seminar program during the three to four week period that the group is traveling together. Most of the logistics pertaining to travel and accommodations are taken care of in advance, but details of the day-to-day activities of the group must be monitored closely to ensure a successful program.

On the academic side, faculty members work with students before, during, and after the seminar. As discussed above, the faculty counsel students in the advisement and registration process, and they evaluate student performance on assigned work. Additionally, they serve an important role in the instructional program by conducting both orientation and review seminars. Orientation sessions are held at the

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begriming of the seminar to familiarize students with the overall plan of the program. Host organization specifics are highlighted, and students are instructed in what to expect' and "how to respond under varying conditions. Review sessions are held throughout the seminar to summarize and evaluate concepts and ideas presented by host executives.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Given the relationships that are established with host organizations, students and faculty, it is possible to conduct a relatively objective evaluation of the International Business Seminar program. Reactions of host executives and their organizations are secured in an informal manner through discussions and correspondence. A more detailed evaluation procedure is implemented with students and faculty. At the conclusion of each seminar, faculty leaders submit a final report, part of which is devoted to an assessment of the program. Students are asked to rate each individual seminar session in their final reports, and they also receive an evaluation questionnaire along with a stamped return envelope in their final packets.

Over the years, evaluations from the host organizations, students, and faculty involved in the IBS program have been very positive. A large majority of the hosts continue to receive seminar groups year after year, and their executives seem genuinely interested in the program. Student participants report that their ability and willingness to learn are materially enhanced in a real world setting. Additionally, they state that they enjoy the opportunity to closely interact with both students and faculty from many different parts of the country. Although the faculty tend to be somewhat more critical in terms of presentations and some logistical dimensions of the seminars, they are generally strong on the program as a learning experience. Their reports indicate the motivation of students and their participation in discussions are significantly enhanced in a real world international environment.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion presented in this paper, it has been shown that the International Business Seminar program provides a unique experiential learning opportunity. The basic learning components are readily transferable to academic environments in which learning through doing is fostered. Furthermore, the IBS program has provided a solid methodological approach to experiential learning in the international environment.

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