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International Teaching Early in an Academic Career

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During the last few years we have heard (and read about) the benefits and challenges of international teaching from a number of “senior” educators in business management disciplines. The purpose of our write-up is to present the ideas, opinions, and experiences of “new kids on the block” who have been involved in teaching internationally early in their academic careers.

Although time consuming and sometimes stressful, international teaching has been an extremely positive experience for all of us. It gave us the opportunity to interact with future business leaders from various parts of the world. It also allowed us to look at the world from multiple perspectives. The managerial issues faced by

Asian, Pacific, European, and North American managers are similar, yet uniquely different from the rest of the world. For example, the impact of the formation of Euro single currency zone, or NAFTA, or the Asian financial crisis has been quite different in various parts of the world.

Rather than discussing the pros and cons of international teaching (which have been discussed many times in the recent past) we have chosen to focus the theme of our write-up on what we have learned from our experiences. First, we briefly describe our individual international teaching experiences and then we offer six “lessons” regarding what we have learned in the process.

Rohit's Experience

I have taught the required operations management course in the digital technology management track of the International MBA program of the Helsinki School of Business and Economics (HSE), Finland, in December 1996 and December 1998. Faculty members from various parts of the world teach in the HSE MBA and BBA programs. Each course is conducted over a period of three weeks and is comprised of 15 three-hour class sessions. All students in this program are enrolled full-time and usually take only one course at a time. Because of the unique nature of the program, HSE has been able to attract students with excellent credentials from Europe, North America, and Asia.

I also had the opportunity to visit the University of Sydney, Australia, during the second half of 1998 and to teach an undergraduate course in New Product Development and a graduate course in Service Marketing/Operations. Both courses were taught during July-November 1998 with



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three contact hours per week. The students in the undergraduate course were primarily Australian, whereas students in the graduate course were mostly from Southeast Asia.

Ken's Experience

I had the opportunity to teach the survey operations course as part of DePaul's MBA program that is offered at the International Bank of Asia (IBA), Hong Kong. This program is a complete MBA program that is taught to bank employees at the bank's offices. The advantages of this arrangement include the ability to develop strong relationships with a cohesive group of students, a homogenous group of backgrounds (banking), and excellent administrative support—the bank's staff was incredibly efficient and helpful in making local arrangements/translating. The challenges associated with this arrangement are similar to those experienced in any part-time MBA program: the students work hard and are extremely pressed for time. The students in the program not only work full time for the bank (50+ hours per week), but also manage to attend 12 hours of class per week for three weeks!

Bill's Experience

My overseas teaching experiences differ in both type and duration from those of Rohit and Ken. Last December, I was asked to deliver eight sessions over a five-day period to senior-level General Motors Asia-Pacific executives in Bangkok. More recently, I delivered a three-day overview of operations management to local national managers from a variety of multinational and local companies in Shanghai.

Lesson 1: Carry it with you.

Bill: Make sure you have clean masters of everything. Even if someone has confirmed that the materials have arrived at their destination, carry your teaching materials, an extra change of clothes, and toiletries.

Ken: A laptop computer can be very helpful for transporting electronic, condensed versions of articles, cases, assignments etc. However, critical materials should also be carried in physical formats. I personally managed to mess up the grade-book for my class by accidentally saving the wrong version of a spreadsheet. Luckily, I had saved

a copy on the computer in Hong Kong and was able to have the secretary email a copy to me when I got back to Chicago.

Rohit: I agree 100% with Ken and Bill. In addition, I carry all my files on ZIP disks (250 MB/Disk) and CD-ROMs. I also backup critical files on the web (for emergency FTP). However, make sure that files are compatible with the computer system used. In addition, remember that you might need a voltage converter and/or electrical socket adapter for your ZIP drive. Laptops normally have built-in power converters, but you might still need the electrical socket adapter—a visit to Radio Shack might be worthwhile.

Lesson 2: Say yes to drugs.

Bill: There are many theories about jet lag. One practical realization was the benefit of pharmaceutically enhanced sleep to get on the right time zone. As assistant professors doing short programs overseas, we have two things going against us: adrenaline related to the program and fear with respect to the time we are taking away from writing journal articles. If you don't sleep, you can't perform. Some people swear by Melatonin. I've had better luck with prescription sleeping pills.

Ken: Melatonin worked wonders for me—I highly recommend it. It also helps to get some exercise—I was a regular in the hotel's weight room. The physical exercise helps reorient your body clock and helps keep you in a routine (unless you are a couch potato normally!) A corollary to this rule is that it helps to arrive a day or two early. Landing in a new country can be an overwhelming experience even without the pressure of immediately teaching a class. I arrived on a Thursday, which allowed me to orient myself a little on Friday and have a preliminary meeting with executives at the IBA. Getting a feel for your surroundings provides an invaluable edge in becoming more comfortable.

Rohit: All you have to do is to keep yourself awake long enough on the day of your arrival until it's your regular sleep hour in local time, get a headache, and then take Extra Strength TylenolPM. Then follow Ken and Bill's advice for the following days and you'll be OK.

Lesson 3: Avoid making cultural generalizations.

Bill: Standing in front of a diverse group talking about Asian behaviors is a recipe for disaster. The Thais are different from the Koreans who differ from the Chinese. Significant within-country differences exist as well. Finally, you might find yourself thinking someone behaves like a Singaporean when she is actually behaving like an engineer. Be sensitive to the many layers of culture, including regional, country, local, and functional.

Rohit: I agree with Bill and feel it's better to avoid making assumptions about local behavior. The tourism books are often full of generalizations which may or may not hold true for your situation. For example, Finns are supposed to be very quiet—but not the Finns in the HSE International MBA program. I found them to be ready to participate in a discussion sessions much more enthusiastically than my students in Chicago. On the other hand, it helps if you're aware of regional history, geography, and interests of local folks. These topics are good "ice-breakers," and locals are more than happy to talk about them.

Lesson 4: Relax and speak slowly. Back off from the expert role.

Bill: Youth and lack of experience tend to get in the way of credibility. I like to pick strong cases and play the role of facilitator. In general, lectures from junior faculty tend to fall on deaf ears with executives. This is especially true when we attempt to lecture to executives living in Shanghai about how to run their operations in Shanghai. As Clint Eastwood suggested, we need to understand our limitations. Leadership issues such as technology transfer play well and build from our foundation of operations knowledge. Action learning works well, too. Chinese managers learned more about lean production from setting up a paper airplane line than they would have from a lecture. A Chinese general manager from Eaton has since written to me about doing the airplane exercise with his direct reports. Finally, our verbal communication should be relatively slow and jargon-free when working with people who speak English as a second or third language.

Ken: My approach involved discussing global American companies, then asking stu-

dents to suggest local (Asian) companies that might be similar. We then could compare the companies to identify similarities and differences. The goal here is to show that general principles apply to all companies and attempt to highlight where local customs or practices might lead to some differences. For example, I opened class with a case on McDonald's—this allowed me a chance to be comfortable with an “American” institution that many (all?) of the Hong Kong students were relatively familiar with. In a similar vein, we also watched a video on operations at the First National Bank of Chicago, which allowed the students to bring their banking expertise to bear. I think it is important to allow students to be experts also, since they enjoy educating you on their experiences and culture. Remember, in many ways you are there to learn about another culture! Finally, I also used the airplane exercise with resounding success.

Rohit: Perhaps the most important aspect of being able to successfully teach internationally is the instructor's ability to *connect* with the students. In my opinion, it is hard to achieve the desired connection with the students without talking about the local/regional corporations and relevant business issues. For example, my European students were extremely eager to talk about operational implications of ISO9000, ISO14000, and single Euro currency than their North American counterparts. During my first Finland trip in 1996, I quickly learned that that not everyone was happy with the sudden fall of Soviet Union (several Finns lost jobs/businesses after the collapse of the Soviet Union). On the other hand, almost all students carried a *cool* Nokia mobile phone and were very excited to talk about the telecommunications industry. Similarly, when I taught in Australia, the Australian and southeast Asian students were eager to talk about Singapore, Thai, and Qantas airlines rather than United, Delta, or American. Knowledge about regional companies and business issues is extremely critical for successful execution of international courses. We don't have to be experts (in fact, it is better NOT to act like one, unless you really are)—but we definitely need to be aware of the regional business and political issues. I strongly recommend reading ahead about the local business environment before the trip. I have found web resources to be more

than enough in this respect. After all, we use similar approaches in our courses at home institutions.

Lesson 5: Do your homework, but be humble and open.

Bill: It's a great idea to read briefings on the cultures of the program participants. A little knowledge will demonstrate that you respect the program participants. Understanding issues such as the importance of preserving “face” keeps us from creating offensive blunders. However, don't attempt to parlay this knowledge into a perception of expertise. In the U.S., we tend to *give* respect. In most parts of Asia, respect is earned.

Ken: Ditto. I would also highly recommend taking advantage of opportunities to see students outside of class. For example, take the opportunity to go out for a meal with a group of students. This can be difficult, since one doesn't want students to feel pressured to “entertain the professor.” In my situation it was doubly difficult because the students just plain did not have any real free time. However, creating opportunities for more informal interaction outside of class helps provide a different perspective — which is the main reason for teaching abroad in the first place!

Rohit: Informal meetings with students are always great, but as Ken suggests, one should try not to make the students feel like they have to interact with you outside class. In this respect Bill's suggestion about reading ahead about the students' backgrounds is a very good one. It definitely made my life in Finland a bit easier in the beginning. In Australia, background information about the students was not available ahead of time, so I took a full hour of the first class for introductions. I think that the students do appreciate it if a visiting professor demonstrates an effort to know the students on a more informal level.

Lesson 6: Go with the flow.

Bill: During one of the sessions with the GM executives, I planned to conclude with six pages of debriefing notes. I realized that the time would be better spent discussing the tension between common processes and the need for localization. For an upcoming return trip to Bangkok, I have a session titled “Cultural Change Exercise.” To be honest, I don't know what will hap-

pen during that session, but the theme will be alignment of culture, operations strategy, and technology. Plan for some opportunities to be spontaneous when venturing into relatively uncharted territory.

Ken: My go-with-the-flow experience involved searching for a cab. I arrived in Hong Kong on Thursday and found out that the class I was to teach at 1:00 p.m. on Saturday had been moved to 9:00 a.m. No problem, I just had to prepare a little earlier! So, I got up at 6:00 a.m. on Saturday (my body, however, thought it was more like 10:00 p.m.), showered, and dressed. Then I went down to the hotel lobby to catch a cab to the bank. However, the first three cabs I tried to hail drove off with no one (including me) in them. There I was wondering if I was doing something “wrong”—was there a different way to catch a cab in Hong Kong? Did you need a special password? I finally got a cab, but not until I was thoroughly confused and worried! I later found out that the reason three cabs left me standing was that they didn't want my “puny” \$4 fare; they wanted a \$40 fare to the airport. They simply drove around the block to avoid having to take my fare. Apparently cabbies everywhere share similar characteristics! The short lesson is: go with the flow!

Conclusion

We hope that our discussion provides some ideas and encourages readers to venture into new countries. Our general experience has been that general operations principles translate well, but that it is the unique characteristics of each country/culture that make international teaching both enjoyable and rewarding. So, we would like to wish you good luck and happy traveling!

Good Luck (English)

Chok dee (Thai)

Shubh Kamna (Hindi)

Joke Lay Hole Wun (Cantonese)

Onnea (Finnish) ■

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