

A Graduate Study Abroad Course Involving Both MBA and Law Students

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ABSTRACT

Historically, MBA education has been attacked for being too detached from the business world. It has also been recommended that students learn the legal issues impacting so many business decisions today. Perhaps most importantly, MBA programs are being pushed to recognize the need for their graduates to become comfortable with the global dynamics that epitomizes business in the 21st century. This paper outlines one promising attempt, a co-taught study abroad course mixing MBAs with law students, to improve MBA students in terms of legal issues, global experiences, and teamwork. This experimental course encouragingly received high marks from both sets of participants. Specific implementation issues, procedures and recommendations are discussed in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

MBA programs are under increasing pressures to adjust their programs to provide an education for their students that support the current business environment. It is difficult to read an article on MBA education in business publications without seeing references to the poor state of current MBA curriculum and the missing skill sets of its graduates (Eberhardt and Moser, 1997; Richards-Wilson, 2002, The Economist, 2004). At the heart of the attack is the assertion that programs are too detached from the “real world” and, therefore, the students being produced are often lacking the ability to apply the concepts learned in the classroom. In today's globalized business world, legal issues are playing a more prominent role in the decision process. The advantages of going global can be compromised by a poor understanding of the legal elements associated with decision. Unfortunately, examples of a good business idea being undermined by legal issues litter the landscape of ambitious global initiatives. Experience with legal issues is becoming an increasingly more important part criterion for moving up in many organizations. However, MBA programs often seem to resist elevating legal experience within their crowded curriculum.

Calls for curriculum reform are being trumpeted from all corners – recruiters, faculty, the press, and even AACSB (Gosling and Mintzberg, 2004; Pearce, 1999). This is not the first time MBA programs have been accused of being out of step with the realities of the marketplace (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002). In the 1950's MBA programs were deemed to be lacking in analytical skills and needed academic rigor to underpin the education. Business schools responded by establishing disciplines and requiring a research focus for tenure and prestige. In the 1980's the accusation shifted 180 degrees, citing that programs were too research-based and had created little silos in each discipline which were sometimes irrelevant to the issues business face day-to-day. In the critics' minds, the focus on functional disciplines resulted in business schools losing

their ability to assist the student in integrating the critical aspects of an organization during their MBA education process (Porter and McKibbin, 1988). Many articles asserted that MBA programs became detached and pointed to the slow recognition of key trends such as TQM, supply chain, globalization, and innovation in many business school curriculums as supporting evidence for this claim (Mangan, 2003; Merritt, 2001; Business Week, August 1, 2005; Wall Street Journal, Sept 17, 2003).

At the heart of today's reform movement is the need for MBA programs to recognize the incredible changes undergoing in most, if not all, industries. The accusations of today echo many of the complaints of the past. It is generally accepted by industry leaders that the modern MBA needs to be more than just analytically skilled. She/he needs to be globally oriented, innovative, a willing and capable leader, intensely project-focused, and a collaborator across both traditional organizational barriers and geographic borders. A constant recommendation is for MBA students to be more actively engaged in real projects involving real situations where they can gain experience not only in analyzing the problem and creating recommendations, but also dealing with the uncertainty and anxiety of real decisions. Equally important is the need to develop teamwork skills by working with other professionals to achieve a common goal.

While there is agreement that MBA students need these skills, exactly how to develop them within a curriculum has been elusive. Most programs have added required courses in legal issues and globalization or, at least, attempt to integrate these issues "throughout the curriculum".

The course outlined below attempts to a novel initiative to integrate a study abroad experience with a strong legal component to elevate the role of legal issues in the course. To add more "real life" atmosphere, the course was designed to be team-taught with a law professor and have half the students in the course to be third year law students. An added element of the design was to have the students divided into teams with a mixture of students from both programs on each team.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The course is an outgrowth of the career of one of the professors. The law professor recently became a faculty member of the law school after a rather distinguished career in industry. He rose to the position of Chief Financial Officer (CFO) and Chief Legal Counsel for the world's largest textile firm. During his tenure with the company, he opened up many parts of the world for the company and saw the crucial linkage between legal issues and corporate strategy. A source of frustration for him was the inability for the legal staff to fully appreciate the business dynamics and the lack of legal knowledge, particularly global legal issues, possessed by the business side of the company. Once he took the law school faculty position, he decided to see if he could educate law students and MBA students to understand and appreciate the importance of the others' field. He approached the MBA program to explore a possible joint venture.

A similarly spirited MBA faculty member quickly saw the value being presented and signed on to co-design, co-develop, co-teach and co-lead this innovative course.

Novel Course? Indeed.

Not wanting to re-invent the wheel, it was decided that the top business schools and the top law schools in the country should be contacted to see if they had a similarly designed course and, if yes, if they might share their experience. Each school was contacted and to our

amazement not a single program had a course that contained students from both programs involved in a study abroad experience (see Exhibit 1 for a list of the contacted universities). Not knowing why these prestigious schools had not offered a mixed course, the decision was made to pursue the course initiative due to the promise if offered.

Exhibit 1
CONTACTED UNIVERSITIES

Top 25 Business Schools*

University of Chicago
Harvard University
Northwestern University
University of Pennsylvania
University of Michigan
Stanford University
Columbia University
Duke University
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
University of California -Berkeley
Cornell University
Dartmouth College
New York University
University of California - Los Angeles
Indiana University
University of Virginia
University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill
Southern Methodist University
Carnegie Mellon University
University of Notre Dame
University of Texas - Austin
Brigham Young University
Emory University
Yale University
University of Southern California

Top 25 Law Schools**

Yale University
Harvard University
Stanford University
Columbia University
University of Chicago
New York University
University of California - Berkeley
University of Pennsylvania
University of Michigan
University of Virginia
Duke University
Northwestern University
Cornell University
Georgetown University
University of California - LA
University of Texas - Austin
Vanderbilt University
University of Southern California
Washington University - St. Louis
George Washington University
University of Illinois
Boston University
Emory University
University of Minnesota
University of Notre Dame

Source:

* U.S. News (2010)

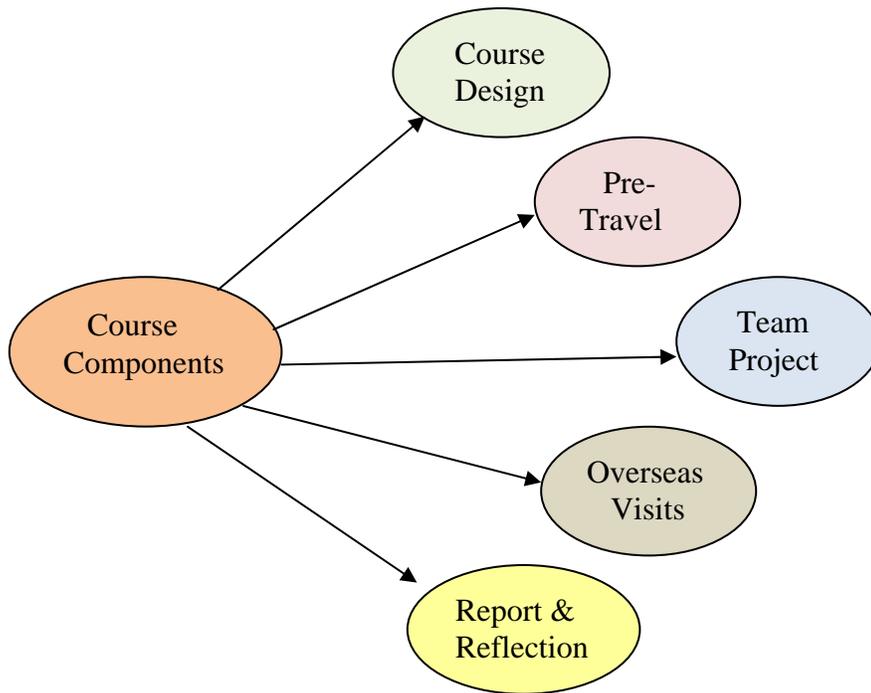
** Business Week (2010)

COURSE PHASES and ELEMENTS

The following discussion on the course and its key elements is divided into five comprehensive phases (Exhibit 2):

- 1) Course Administration and Course Design
- 2) Pre-Travel Set-up (student team formation, coursework)
- 3) Team Project (expectations, team dynamics)
- 4) Overseas Visits
- 5) Group Report Presentation / Individual Reflection Paper

Exhibit 2
COURSE COMPONENTS



Phase I: Course Administration and Course Design

It was quickly determined that the course would be housed within the MBA program as the program of record. MBA students would receive credit for a course in International Business and would receive a letter grade. ABA regulations made the crediting and grading of the course a little more complicated for the law students. In the end, they received a "pass/fail" credit for an elective course.

The overarching goals for the course were completely shared by the faculty. The primary goal would be to help students from both programs better understand the legal and business issues associated with global operations. A second equally important goal was for the two distinctly differently trained students would work together on a project. Not only would each student be expected to bring their particular expertise to the project, but they would also learn to work with someone that may come at a challenge from a very different perspective.

Once the course goals were established, the next step was to determine the course design. The key design elements requiring collective agreement between the faculty were the course content, who would deliver which content, when we could meet, the project, the overseas company visits, and the student requirements for their grade.

Phase II: Pre-Travel Set-up

In the months prior to travelling the class met for five sessions. Most of the sessions were held in the business school building but one of the sessions was held at the law school which was 20 miles away. It was felt that it was important that the law school hosted one of the sessions to have an ownership stake in the course and to show the MBAs what their program environment involved (e.g., moot court room, various technology applications, the downtown location).

Since both programs were part of the same university it was easy to set up a Blackboard site for the course that captured all students. This feature came in very helpful for updating agendas, sharing information and course content, and communication among students in their groups.

The first session not only set the ground rules for course and provided an overview of globalization, it also focused on developing relationships. An exercise was used to get the introductions started and groups were formed for the course project. Subsequent sessions covered the course material lead by faculty from both schools. In addition to faculty facilitation, outside experts and industry people were invited to contribute their perspectives on globalization. An Asian expert provided an excellent overview of the cultural and business climate to provide the students with some background information for their decisions.

One of the most interesting components of the course was the involvement by representatives of a couple of the companies we would be visiting in Vietnam and China. As these individuals expressed their perspectives on how to do business in Asia, as well as providing information on their company's involvement in Asia, you could see the level of interest rise dramatically in the classroom. These sessions were lively and the company representatives were peppered with questions in line with the requirements of the course. On a couple of occasions, the company representative did not know the answer, particularly if the question was of a legal nature, it provided a great opportunity for our faculty to step in and answer the question, as well as tie the issue to our course. If possible, we would recommend including representatives of the companies to be visited as it added substantially to the "real world" aspect of the course. In fact, one company representative realized he would be in Asia while we would be and offered to allow us to shadow him and his colleagues during a meeting with a client in Vietnam.

Finally, prior to our flight all students were required to submit a "Prelude" paper outlining their expectations for our experience. They addressed personal, cultural, and business expectation as well as their expectation for the course. The students were instructed to submit one copy to the faculty and keep another copy with them while traveling abroad with the expectation that they read their paper on a couple of occasions during our travels.

Phase III: Course Project

It was deemed crucial that there be a "hands-on" experience for the course. While reading content is important and a quality discussion ensued, the faculty believed strongly that the students needed to be immersed in a team project where they invested considerable time working together on a common goal.

Our first inclination was to find a company in the area that was either exploring entering Asia either to manufacture or as a market. However, given the uniqueness of this initiative we felt that trying to coordinate with an existing company would risk adding another level of complexity that may compromise the entire initiative. We then turned to developing a fictitious project. Student teams could either recommend a method of entering Vietnam or China to manufacturer their product or enter the country market to sell their product. We tried to place a level of constraint around the project to force students to delve deeper into the issues, particularly the legal issues. In the future, we would recommend partnering with an existing company on this project as it would add a significant, and exciting, dimension to the experience.

Groups were determined by self-selection. The primary criterion for the groups was they would contain an equal number of law students and MBAs. Once the groups were formed, we addressed the issue of organizational structure with the groups. Did the entire group want to share in all business decisions or should the law students focus on providing guidance on the potential legal issues confronting the business group? In the end, it was decided that the law students would serve as an engaged legal counsel "on the sixth floor." The determining factor for this decision was the difficulty in getting the group together and the fact that the two programs were on different semester calendars. As faculty, we were disappointed that this was the best direction to take given the circumstances as we would have liked to see the law students even further involved in making business decisions and the MBAs investigating the legal issues. However, it does approximate the "real world" and adjustments sometimes have to be made due to artificial constraints. It actually turned out well, but we would recommend future attempts at this course to create a way to get the students "out of their comfort zones."

Overall, the project went very well despite the challenges. Since the law school had more time at the beginning of the fall, they developed a series of legal briefs outlining the legal issues that might confront the business team. These legal briefs were overseen by the law professor who created an issue for each team. Once the legal team finished their brief it was uploaded to Blackboard for all teams to see. Our goal was for an in-depth analysis of an issue that was concisely written and written in a manner that business students would understand the legal implications of their decisions. We were not interested in injecting competition among the teams. In fact, we were interested in just the opposite. We wanted to create a culture within the class of cooperation, coordination, and enthusiasm. The law faculty member took time during sessions to expound on the implications of the briefs so the business students would have firm grounding on what legal issues they need to consider as they move forward on the project.

Phase IV: Overseas Visits

The overseas portion of the course was similar to most MBA study abroad experiences with meetings, tours, and discussions. We did include separate visits for law students with international law firms which was not only beneficial for the law students but added considerable value to the course projects as the students received in-country advise on specific related to the projects.

However, one visit bears noting as it was the quintessential study abroad visit. It was the visit organized by the representative that attended one of the pre-travel sessions. He arranged for us to meet with one of his clients that manufacture high-end outdoor furniture. While they were an existing client, it was a recent account. He traveled to Asia in an attempt to secure a larger percentage of the business. He met our group at our hotel and traveled to the manufacturing facility with us on our coach. In addition to our American friend, he asked his Pacific Rim market director, a Frenchman, and his Vietnam sales director, a Chinese individual. After arriving at the client's facility, we were greeted by the country manager, the regional sales vice-president, and the plant manager. The client was a Dutch company so the country manager was Dutch. The regional sales vice-president was a Chinese woman and the plant manager was Vietnamese. In effect, there were six different nationalities representing two companies meeting in Saigon, Vietnam to discuss supplying component material for a product to be sold globally. It was global business in a microcosm. If at all possible, we would encourage attempting to put together similar visits in all future study abroad programs.

Phase V: Report and Reflection

Upon returning from our overseas travel, the students had two final submissions. First, the course project needed to be written by the entire team of MBAs and law students. After the reports were written, each group gave a twenty minute presentation to the class on their recommendations and actions steps. We had hoped to have industry leaders available to listen to and critique the reports but, unfortunately, we had scheduling difficulties. However, we would recommend securing these individuals in future courses as it not only lends another level of "real world" but also will provide additional perspectives to the course.

The final submission was more personal. Each student wrote a "Reflection" paper as a companion to the "Prelude" paper they wrote and submitted prior to our travels. As indicated above, the students brought copies of their "Prelude" paper overseas with the suggestion that they re-read them at various points during the trip. The reflections contained in these papers are almost always the highlight of the course for faculty. The personal and professional growth expressed in the papers reveal with certainty that the course was a very worthwhile experience for the students.

ASSESSMENT

After the course the faculty wanted to receive feedback from the students regarding their thoughts about this experiential course. The internet survey instrument Zoomerang was employed to collect the responses. The questions embedded in the survey are shown in Appendix 1, along with the results.

The faculty was interested in five primary areas: the amount of experience the students had with international business; their expectation prior to signing up for the course; the value of the project as the unifying element for the course; whether the course substantially increased the students' appreciation for the other discipline; and, finally, whether they would recommend the course to fellow students.

The results were very gratifying. It would be fair to surmise that every student expressed that they benefited substantially from the course. While the project could use improvement in design, it was deemed a worthwhile pedagogical vehicle for this course. On the overall

assessment question, 75% of the students would "highly recommend" the course and another 19% would "recommend" the course to other students.

CONCLUSION

A significant revision in MBA education is called for by various interested parties. One consistently identified shortcoming is the limited exposure most MBA students have with real problems in actual setting, particularly issues associated with globalization and the legal aspects of business. MBA students need the opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills with as much "real world" experience as possible. Too often, it is claimed, MBA students study academic concepts and theories in a vacuum void of the tangible realities associated with real business situations. This course was designed with this criticism in mind.

According to the student assessments, the course proved to be quite successful in achieving the aims of the faculty. Students believe that are much more aware of legal issues facing organizations and how those issues need to be addressed during the decision process. Legal issues need to be part of the formulation process of determining strategy and not relegated to the implementation stage of a formulated strategy.

For whatever reason, it was disheartening to find out that the best business schools do not actively engage law schools in their curriculum and not one of them has a study abroad course with a law school. The faculty of the course described in this paper came away fully convinced of the benefits associated with this partnership.

In terms of recommendations, we have four. First, you cannot do enough preparation work with this course. The faculty from both schools need to be committed to the goals of the course and be willing to be flexible regarding how these goals are met. Second, overseas visits should encompass pre-travel involvement by representatives of those companies. The value of their participation leading up to the travel portion of the course cannot be overestimated. Third, a unifying component is necessary to develop teamwork and sense of "real world" in the course. This course utilized a team project. Other components might work equally as well or even better. Finally, the design should have a strong individual student focus to it. The use of pre- and post- personal papers appeared to add substantially to the experience for the students. It is quite important that student gauge, understand, and reflect on their growth as part of the course. This is particularly worthwhile when mixing students from distinctly different programs and injecting them into uncommon situation. The faculty from the two schools need to be very mindful of the stress this involvement may be for their students and should be highly aware of stress signals from students in their program. If managed well, the students will not focus on being uncomfortable and instead focus on learning about globalization, the discipline of the other set of students, how to work with lawyers or business people, and issues confronting decision makers in organizations.

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APPENDIX 1

Student Course Survey

STUDENT SURVEY

1. MBA 50% _____
 Law Student 50% _____

2. Have you participated in international business activities as part of your employment?
 Yes 12% _____
 No 88% _____

3. What was your expectation for the course at the time you signed up:
 75%_ Saw significant benefits of combining the two programs
 25%_ Ambivalent of the benefits of combining the two programs
 0%_ Questioned the benefits of combining the two programs
 0%_ Thought combining the two programs was a mistake

COMMENT:

4. The concept of the "Team Project" component as a unifying activity to provide context:
 25%_ Had significant merit and should be adopted in future courses
 69%_ Had significant merit but needs more design work
 6%_ Had benefits but not enough to justify the effort
 0%_ Detracted from the course and should not be included in future courses

COMMENT:

5. After completing the course your appreciation of the issues faced by "the other program" (MBAs of the legal issues / Law students of the business issues):
 25%_ Were greatly enhanced and I will be far more likely to consider those issues in the future.
 69%_ Increased and will influence my future decision making in this area
 6%_ Increased some but not substantially
 0%_ I did not feel the course covered the issues well enough to impact my appreciation of those issues

COMMENT:

6. Overall, combining law students and MBA students into one global course:
- 31%_ Added significantly to the experience
 - 50%_ Added an important dimension to the course
 - 19%_ Was beneficial to my learning
 - 0%_ Did not substantially add to my learning
 - 0%_ Took away from the course

COMMENT:

7. If a fellow student asked your opinion regarding whether they should take this type of course, you would:
- 75%_ Highly recommend
 - 19%_ Recommend
 - 6%_ Recommend with reservations
 - 0%_ Not recommend

COMMENT:

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS: