

Integrating Critical Inquiry & Global Challenges With International Business, Honors Study Abroad

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ABSTRACT

In an effort to find a program of study that would engage students, leave the confines and drawbacks of lecture formats, reach across disciplines, and challenge honor students, we had the good fortune to discover a most suitable structured program of inquiry. This program had the added advantage of using active discovery methods to explore issues

The president of the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) recently reported that this trend has “brought an accounting rather than an educational vision... The current Department of Education and policy leaders in many states are focusing relentlessly on things that can be counted, such as graduation rates, job placement rates, and pass rates on standardized tests that rely on multiple choice, one-right answer metrics.” (Schneider, 2013) In her words this trivializes higher education programs – simply so it can be measured. Performance is principally defined through retention, graduation rates and tuition costs. Words like accountability seem interchangeable with educational performance as these trends continue – performance in terms of learning, absent. Testing, assessment, should be used to deepen and strengthen student learning, not simply to be able to document certain, easy to measure parameters [e.g. graduation rates] that lend themselves to cross-institutional comparison.

In the meantime, as reported by the AAC&U, “state and federal governments have launched an ambitious, unprecedented attempt to specify and measure student learning in the public schools. To do so, essentially every state has developed content standards that specify what students should know and be able to do in a broad range of subject areas.” (Schneider, 2013) Note that learning is defined specifically within “subject areas.” Although most visible in K-12, performance reporting momentum, standardization, and testing is not without presence in higher education. Higher education administrators are using national tests more and more to shape and reshape pedagogical visions, goals, and curricula. With the obvious exception of reading and general reasoning skills, the tests are content-driven, and the content remains decisively focused on objectively quantifiable subject areas. So we’re back to building up those silos, not bridging them.

The balance between the value of achieving depth of knowledge within discipline, and breadth of skilled learning abilities is often as elusive as Alice’s Cheshire Cat, all knowing, yet invisible, impossible to reach. Is the balance between developing cognitive skills and depth of discipline knowledge a zero sum trade-off, more of one means less of the other? Is the need for quantifiable performance statistics driving higher education toward ease of subject content testing, and away from the far more challenging task of measuring “learning?” As we are driven toward a funding data reward system, success being measured through objective test results, all subject and content oriented [it’s measurable], we move further and further from active and integrative educational programs. This, despite the many pedagogical messages to the contrary,

The truth: It is difficult to integrate course learning outcomes across disciplines. Building a productive learning experience that ties, for example, history with chemistry, or art with geology presents challenging obstacles if it is to have any meaningful and lasting depth. It can be approached, with a little creative exploration, but the results are not so readily matched to standardized assessment measures. This brings yet other issues into the mix. In Business Education we enjoy closer linkages; the disciplines are all tied to business. Still, the silos remain – as is evident in programs across the nation, including ours.

Many years ago one of the authors took a course in economic history. That was way before the silo image entered our academic vernacular. It linked economic theory with historic events, giving a societal rationale for emerging theories, as they actually developed, showed the

application of economic approaches as they had occurred, and brought in relevant other topics, including ethics, political science, sociology, and math: truly cross disciplinary. It was wonderful. It can be done, and it is, often perhaps, but seemingly in isolation, without meaningful evident traction. There are the obvious discipline cross-dependencies, accounting and finance draw on math, marketing and management, psychology, and more. But there's a difference between relying on something fundamental for foundation, such as math for finance, or insisting on proper grammar in papers, and truly integrating courses. A big difference.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Active learning approaches are seen as fundamental for optimal learning. In addressing the lack of active learning approaches in higher education, Ken Bain points out that (2004) "A lot of traditional education does in fact foster a very strategic or surface approach to learning rather than that deep approach." Appreciation for value of active and deep learning is not new. In 1899 William James, (credited by some with shaping American higher education methods), delivered a now famous treatise on effective teaching to the Harvard faculty. He ended with the following, strong imploring more active-based university instruction: "Teachers must employ flexible and creative techniques if they are to stimulate those flexible and creative responses in the student that are essential for genuine education. Active learning --- [as the] vital connection of expression and impression"

In the context of First Year University programs, Bain [2004] cites engaged learning as key to any effective program of instruction. While Business School programs frequently call for group learning projects, often the faculty are not engaged in the process, and the exercise often becomes nothing more than splitting an assignment into pieces to be separately completed, with about the only group interaction involving a "cut-and-paste" undertaking as the project discouraged in the classroom, considered an academic offense. Talk about cross methods!

As discussed in the introduction, the lack of direct program attention to developing critical thinking skills remains a significant higher education weakness. Armunc and Roksa [2011] showed that higher educa and memory-based skills, rather than analytic rea skills. In recducayears, however, there has beensome progress in developing critical thinking

technical skills in passive learning environments, to active, critical thinking models of education, focused on deeper conceptual understanding, communication skills, and interactive exercises. In spite of a history of consensual and supportive rhetoric, however, Baker and Prenshaw (2007) cite, at best, mixed messaged results, noting that “There is little integration of courses, with most general education courses taken during the first half of a students’ career, and most business courses taken during the second half.” This approach may ‘check the box’ for including ample liberal education and integrative, cross-discipline curricula, but fails to use truly integrative approaches. They further conclude that “Business faculty and administrators do their students a disservice if the vast majority of the courses they offer are narrow and technical in focus...” noting also a Business Week special report (2005) suggesting that the most significant business skill needed today was creativity; not necessarily the haven of skills acquisition, content driven discipline courses.

Funding is another obstacle in moving toward integrative, active, thinking skills based programs. Funding trends for primary and secondary education are defined by test outcomes, largely discipline-based tests. While higher education generally enjoys independence from national or state mandated testing, this safe haven may be short lived. Programs for higher education testing/standards/funding have gained momentum [Resmovitz, 2012]. President Obama is now personally leading a new, major initiative to have higher education funding (grants & student loans) tied to performance standards. This is in the name of “affordable education,” with little emphasis placed on the quality of education.

The key to lasting integrative education that fosters a true understanding of challenging theories and concepts, and derives enjoyment in the learning process, is active engagement and interaction [Lambert, 2012]. Umble et al. [2008] found that active group learning experiences, when guided and monitored effectively, are effective in improving critical thinking skills and encourage students toward further study. They become interested and engaged. Cox, et al. [2005] found that collaborative learning itself promulgates increased social and academic student interchange and networks, which itself furthers the learning process. Johnson et al. [1991] reported that collaborative group learning not only moves those involved to higher levels of critical thinking and analytic reasoning, but attributes higher overall academic achievement and psychological adjustment to success collaborative, active experiences.

Furthering that notion, Armunc and Roksa [2011] report that higher education has focused on content and areas of concentration, technical and memory-based skills, rather than analytic reasoning, disciplined exploration, and thinking skills. In recent years, however, there has been some progress in developing critical thinking skills at the university level [Mulnix, 2012]. Contrary to these small, but positive developments, educational funding heads evermore toward data-driven, quantifiable directions. The data and testing outcomes, (largely demographics tied to standardized content-driven, multiple choice tests), are distancing programs yet further from integrative, and analytic pedagogical approaches, and just when some progress was surfacing.

As educators we recognize the [severe] limitations of lecture as a primary form of transmitting knowledge and understanding. This is supported by many studies, including Kolikant, et al. [2010], showing the limitations of one-way, non-engaged student learning.

Adding reflective learning, through collaborative processes, moves the learning frontiers further, [Asselin and Cullen, 2011; Bolton, 2010; Linden, 2010]. With this in mind, and following our university's and our own desire to move our critical inquiry, honors, active learning methods, and study abroad programs forward, we found our way to what we feel will result in valuable and lasting learning experiences. The following sections describe the design of our program.

OVERVIEW OF OUR PROGRAM

My colleagues and I, with the [initially reluctant] support of our schools wanted to find a program of courses that could balance business, and outside disciplines in a meaningful, integrative, successive series of courses. We began with identifying foundation skills, such as critical thinking, communication, and writing. Of course, that didn't represent much in the way of innovative integrated course design. Our approach, however, was not to rely on these as foundation or support areas, but to bring these forward as the program focus. The idea was to reverse their typical supporting roles, to being the "main events." Business disciplines were the support areas linking with selected global issues as common themes; critical thinking methods were the drivers. Communications and writing remained as support areas, with critical thinking going to the top of the pyramid as the primary, integrating tool and focus. We wanted to build the pyramid using the rigor of directed critical thinking, linking the various business areas to one another around a chosen theme. International Business, cross-disciplinary in itself, was a natural choice for linkage. Study abroad allowed the program to move from a passive classroom exploration to real observations and immersion. Students were to run the program, with professors as mentors and perhaps philosophers. Over the course of some months the program evolved to be a "Critical Inquiry Exploration of Global Challenges," within our Honors Program, all working toward a culminating study abroad, on-site, applied experience. An ambitious mouthful, yes, but then, we never thought it would be easy, or without missteps. We wanted it to be fun. We wanted it to be valuable, lasting.

Critical Inquiry is the process of gathering and evaluating information, ideas, and assumptions from multiple perspectives to produce well-reasoned analysis and understanding, and leading to new ideas, applications and questions. Global Challenges / Seven Revolutions is a structured program of study designed to investigate important, challenging global trends and issues likely to impact the world over the next 30 years. This embodies both opportunities and risks in working to transform the way the global community will live and impact others. More simply, the goal is to educate globally competent citizens. The process: inquiry, discovery, research >> thinking, underlies the goal.

The Global Challenges / Seven Revolutions movement is a partnership between the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC, the New York Times Knowledge Network, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities American Democracy Project, and participating AASCU Global Challenges Scholars. The Global Challenges curriculum has been offered with wide-ranging approaches across leading global universities for several years.

In this series of courses students apply critical inquiry skills to explore evocative global issues from multiple perspectives, culminating in on-site, international, active-based

learning experiences. Learning “how to learn,” in pursuit of “answers” to the broad global issues facing the world community, students plan an analytic investigation centered on a common theme of global issues, work toward their research objectives, and present their findings on-location, internationally. Although the course is designed to allow for creative exploration and discovery, the learning process is [very] purposefully directed.

The program has three consecutive segments, (spring semester > maymester > summer), comprising six credits of electives, offered every other year. It is a business honors course, open to other aspiring students by application, team taught by two business professors. All segments are seminar-based, relying on active student intercourse. Spring semester begins with an intensive critical thinking skill building segment, forming the course keystone. Subsequently each of seven global issues are introduced, weekly, critically examined and explored, by the entire class. From this process the class selects a common research theme, with student groups choosing sub-projects within the common theme. The spring class concludes with formal, group Critical Inquiry project proposal presentations, including the on-site international linkage plan. Students critique their colleagues’ proposals, providing enrichment opportunities. During Maymester students finalize their research plan, complete their study, and prepare written reports for their on-site, international presentations. In Summer One the class travels to the selected international sites, using the on-location sites to present and demonstrate their findings to their peers. The class culminates with formal presentations at an academic, international conference.

Program Outcomes: The program sharpens critical thinking and analytic reasoning skills, improves oral and written communications, develops interactive group skills, provides an introduction to the academic research community, strengthens leadership abilities, forces recognition of practical limitations, inspires curiosity, seeks to further a delight in learning, and, of course, provides extraordinary, first-hand, international, cultural and academic experiences. Business specialties will be linked through the common theme (global issues), grounded in the discipline of critical inquiry.

We chose critical inquiry as the structural link in the program for several reasons. First faculty members are naturally aware of the importance of critical thinking. Most, across all disciplines, from art to zoology, and certainly within Business Schools, feel critical thinking is of paramount importance, embedded in their area, and requisite for success. Thinking, however, is seldom directly addressed and taught using purposeful, planned methods. Critical thinking is generally assumed to be a byproduct of education, rather than an end in itself. While critical thinking skills, exploratory learning methods, and cognitive abilities are considered essential to higher education success, and prerequisite to satisfactory Business School course progression, these skills are often not directly addressed before or during college. Even in the more objective and quantitative disciplines, such as math, science, finance, and operations management the inquiry, exploration, questioning, and decision processes (critical inquiry) are ordinarily secondary to achieving the “correct” answers. (Sadly, with the recent, absolute prioritization of K-12 test scores, learning to think may well be even more sidelined in favor of “answer-driven test outcomes.”) We are no better in higher education. Students learn, all too frequently, what to do, rather than why they are doing it. We feed the “is that going to be on the test mentality.” In spite of all the pedagogical discourse to the contrary, students continue to learn their outcomes,

learning them in the traditional, non-integrated “silos” of teaching disciplines, seeking the test answers -- rather than the questions. Change is difficult.

We start the series of courses with a three credit, spring semester course that initiates the program and is its foundation. The class begins with a formal, in-depth study of the process of critical thinking. The class uses a lecture / discussion format exploring the process of thinking. A text on critical thinking guides the formal part of the process, with active learning exercises to hone the explorative thinking skills as they are covered. Writing and presentation skills are refreshed during a one-week segment, led by USCA English and Communications faculty. Next is the “Global Challenges” course segment. Using a seminar format the class critically examines each of the global trends and issues, one per week. As the semester nears completion an overall global theme is selected, designed to bind student group projects with a common research thread. Concurrently students form groups choosing individual research projects and begin working on project objectives, a research plan, proposed methodologies, and ideas for their culminating international, on-site presentation day. Class concludes with formal project proposals, critiqued by the class to incorporate feedback into the next phase of the class. Project review includes emphasis on inclusion of the critical thinking process steps.

Immediately following the spring semester foundation course, student research projects are completed in Maymester. Working from the class-critiqued proposals, groups work intensely to finalize their research plan, ensure critical thinking steps are fully developed, delve into the research, unlock more questions, more issues. Progress is reported to the class. The class responds with more critical dialogue, creative suggestions, additional approaches: more feedback, more work. Concurrently, the class monitors progress on the central CI plan, making improvements and adaptations, jointly evaluating deviations from their planned CI path; have they strayed too far from the central topic? Group reports are finalized, with detailed on-site, presentation day plans solidified.

The on-site presentations are major undertakings themselves: challenging, time consuming, ideally fun. Each group will take a full day, finding resourceful, creative, entertaining, and meaningful ways to package and present their project to their colleagues. The goal is to use the resources and elements of their location to underscore, dramatize, and to “teach” their findings and conclusions. This will include preparing: (1) on-site learning goals, (2) detailed lesson plans, annotated scripts, (3) plans to integrate tours, speakers, and events relevant to their research conclusions into their presentation day, and (4) engaging presentation vehicles. The goal is for enlightening, active presentations, using creatively planned medium. The goal is engaged learning for all; standup lectures, not desired. During the process, research logistics, practical limitations, and academic goals meld; students wrestle with issues of academic compromise as their plans develop. Meaningful on-site visitations and presentations, supporting the basic research questions, inquiry goals, and findings, are the desired result.

After Maymester project completion, it’s time to go on location. Student groups each have their “day” on site, their time to report, on-site, demonstratively. Other students learn from what becomes the featured group’s performance – next day, the next group is on. Groups take advantage of location resources as they apply. Creative, resourceful, engaging, and enlightening performances: that’s the goal. This might include on-site talks, events, tours, speakers, hands-on

observations, thoughtful activities, amusements, creative applications >> it's up to the students. Everything culminates with an academic conference attendance and presentations.

Other Course Elements include an On-Campus International Preparations. Groups will present reports covering location demographics, histories, issues, culture, politics, and language studies during spring and Maymester, supplementing the main, global issue related project work. The student side of trip organization, scheduling, touring, and daily event planning will be finalized in Maymester. Students may decide to supplement class preparations by providing speakers, films, or other outside resources relevant to their topic to the class prior to departure. This will primarily be done during Maymester, but may include spring semester as well. Foreign films, providing cultural, political, and historical background are encouraged. Weekly Friday afternoon movies, selected by students will be shown and discussed during April and May.

Students will arrange to have guest speakers present relevant areas of their expertise. This includes on-campus Aiken speakers, virtual appearances utilizing state-of-the-art telepresencing equipment, and on-site location speakers in Europe. The professor will handle some logistics, but selections and initial arrangements are student-driven. The professor's role is to guide the class, ideally just subtle touches, keeping the class on target, focused, working within the critical inquiry framework, and productively working toward their goals. The professor will be responsible for travel logistics, accommodations, meals, and extraneous trip items, and will support the students on the academic and cultural visitations, the on-site presentation logistics, guest speakers, and other academic factors integral to successful completion of the research topics. The more the students accomplish on their own, the more successful the course. The professor has ultimate responsibility for accomplishing the learning objectives, and for the safety of the students during the travel portion of the course.

A Global Challenges blended learning course is available as a core program model, as desired. It offers a formal structure that leads students through seven identified major global trends and issues, issues likely to be of major significance during coming decades. Of course more, or less, than these seven issues may be tagged, with which the Institute readily agrees. It is not the number or even the issue itself that drives the work, but the work itself. The goal is productive thought on important issues, educating globally competent citizens.

The Global Challenges Institute is made up of faculty and other scholars that have taught the course at their universities, commencing in 2003. The New York Times Knowledge Network supports the initiative, with general oversight and other support provided by the Center for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities American Democracy Project. Seven Revolution scholars hold periodic meetings, and offer a selection of program resources. This includes a learning community, alternative syllabi, lesson modules, exams, assignments, learning activities, assessment tools, teaching toolkits, student guides, archived *New York Times* resources, videos relevant to each revolution area, bibliographies, and an extensive resource guide with web links and other resources. The Epsilon Course Management System has been tailored to provide Global Challenges course materials as well. A program synthesizing varied approaches to running course alternatives commenced spring 2013. These results will be available at the next Institute meeting (fall 2013).

We provide an “Outline & Overview” in our appendix that delineates more specifically some of the logistics, planning, and course content (3 semesters) in a week by week overview. It concludes with an estimate of program (& student) costs for the study abroad segment. We have ambitious plans for outside fund raising, but have not included that other than to say that significant outside funding would greatly enhance the availability of the program across our student body, and add to the options available for study, and program permanence. Our plan was to have short-term, community-based fund raising efforts, including the students, to raise money in the short-term to get the program off the ground in the first year or two. Longer term we hoped to raise sufficient funds (about \$2,000,000) for two endowments: (1) to support and subsidize student program costs, and (2) to fund a Global Challenges Chair for the faculty member running the program. Ambitious perhaps, but we consider them both realistic and necessary, in the end.

CONCLUSION

At our university timing smoothed the reception of our program, as it was grounded in critical inquiry, and our university had recently chosen critical inquiry as the cornerstone of our Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). This was undertaken in preparation for our university-wide accreditation review. As we noted, time was on our side. Finding the well-developed, and resource abundant Global Challenges Program to ground our approach to critical inquiry skill development was our good fortune. Bundling all of this within International Business, a program of critical inquiry skill application, and an honors study abroad experience seemed a natural. We were very excited to move the program forward, receiving university approval to run the course starting spring 2014. Unfortunately several unexpected constraints have worked to delay implementation until the following spring semester, 2015. Our disappointment in delaying the start-up is in a small way balanced by the progress the Global Challenges program is making as it progresses even further in developing and expanding its offerings and resources. The additional time will allow us to refine our plans and develop more specific program segments and approaches.

Given the strong evidence and research supporting collaborative, cross-disciplinary, reflective, active directed education, we are very pleased with how our Global Challenges, Critical Inquiry, Honors, Study Abroad Program of Study has developed. Our title alone, awkwardly long as it may be, implies the interaction of these areas, hopefully all directed, effectively, toward achieving that ultimate goal of all education: Learning – as elusive, undefinable, and “un-measurable” as it may be. Perhaps in the end learning is like some other things that are simply hard to define. You can’t describe it, but you know it when you’ve got it. A piece of art, an opus, love, a lecture – (one that actually worked), or simply the feel of the bat as that home run makes its way toward the stands – hard to define explicitly, easy to know when it’s right. We feel our program is somewhat like that. The learning may be hard to quantify, all the program specifics may be hard to objectively support, but the ball is on its way out of the park – we just know it.

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