

DOS AND DON'TS OF TEACHING COURSES OVERSEAS

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ABSTRACT

Most students cannot afford to spend a semester, or a whole academic year, getting study abroad experience. Therefore, faculty and universities are offering short term, faculty led courses in other countries. Many universities around the world are requiring their students to get this international experience but, at the same time, there are many misconceptions about what these short study abroad courses should accomplish from academic, pedagogical and educational perspective. There isn't a lot of literature on how to structure, organize and conduct these courses at different international locations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nationwide, faculty-led study courses abroad are increasing in number, a response to their popularity with nontraditional and working students unable to leave home for a semester or year abroad. The courses are typically offered in the summer, however winter or interim programs are also possible. Course length and credit load varies, although most courses are designed to spend 2 to 3 weeks abroad and carry 3 or 6 credit hours. Surprisingly little to no literature exists on how to structure courses which are to be taught overseas. When we first hear about teaching courses in far away places we immediately conjure pictures of exotic places, friendly locals, beautiful landmarks, great food, etc. We believe that both, instructors and students, share the same initial assumptions about teaching overseas as being fun, great way to visit other countries, and meet new friends. We also had a similar perception of what teaching a course overseas may include when the possibility to do that came. As academics, the first thing that we do is to research the literature on how to structure a course in another country. It was a big surprise to find out that there was very little practical information on how to teach a class overseas; Though, there are many web sites, information and tips on how to teach English language overseas. However, the major premise of this paper is to point out the differences, challenges, benefits between teaching an academic course at a home country university and teaching the same course in a different country and in a completely different setting.

2. CHALLENGES OF TEACHING CLASSES OVERSEAS

When we first offered a business class overseas we had a very little practical information and it was a leap of faith into something that was completely unknown to us as instructors. However, there are universities that have a tradition of offering classes overseas and they usually have classes at different international sites and it is a part of their mission. As a result, a significant percentage of students and faculty take part in these study abroad courses. Offices of international programs are established and their main goal is to facilitate study abroad for students and faculty. These offices work full time on facilitating teaching courses at different international sites. In reviewing some major web sites for universities with strong study abroad programs we found that these programs mainly help instructors to plan how to teach a course internationally and thus provide logistical support. They usually have a time table of things that have to be done at certain time frames, from when to turn in the course proposal to when to purchase the airfare or reserve the lodging. Although it is a big help to new faculty exploring ways to offer a course in different setting there are some disadvantages, primarily these timetables can be very rigid. How many students can plan so much in advance, how likely is to be able to estimate the best airfare a year in advance? Even if you are lucky enough to work at the university with a strong support office, instructors still invest significant amount of time and effort to prepare an international course and to meet academic objectives, students' expectations and university expectations.

2. 1. HIGHER LEVEL OF RISK, COMPLEXITY AND COST

Whenever you move your class from the university setting to another country the level of risk to instructor and to students goes up exponentially. We live in a post September 11th world where terrorism plays a major role and the difference between a military targets and civilian targets is getting increasingly blurred. The recent terrorist events in India illustrate clearly that the major targets were citizens of some Western countries, primarily American and British citizens.

When instructors decide to offer a course overseas, then teaching a class is just one of many new responsibilities. Based on our experience, the instructors will most likely assume many additional responsibilities, including but not limited to researching the best possible route to that international destination, most affordable airfares, lodging possibilities, cultural sites to visit, companies to visit, inviting guest speakers, local transportation and food, and how to communicate with parents and back with home campus. If just one of these things are not done well it can affect the whole experience adversely.

Teaching classes at overseas locations is becoming increasingly costly. There are number of reasons why overseas classes are expensive for students and the major reasons are: cost of airfare, cost of lodging, cost of food, cost of transportation once when you are inside the foreign country, the weak dollar, and overhead cost.

The instructors who decide to offer a class overseas usually have very little control over these costs. It is very difficult to anticipate cost of airfare, lodging, food, and the exchange rate for the dollar six months in advance. The cost of the trip is usually the first question students ask and base their decision. Based on this information, our opinion is usually better to start with a high price and then lower it rather than start with a low price and correct it upward. However, if the costs go up a lot it can make a trip unaffordable to students and countless hours of preparing the course may be wasted. Based on our experience we believe it is very important to monitor cost at all times.

2. 2. LESS SUPPORT THAN TEACHING ON CAMPUS

When an instructor teaches a class overseas there is no typical support that one is used at his/her campus of employment. There is no secretary to help out, no student worker to make copies, no tech specialist to check what is wrong with the computer, no telephone and in many instances no personal computer to even check email or stay in touch with others.

Travelling to overseas locations is physically and emotionally exhausting for students and faculty as well. Even the most exciting locations are not so exciting when you come very tired, jet lagged, especially going to places where language, food, money, customs, traffic, directions are all new. However, this is also a great natural lab for students to examine their tolerance for stress and ability to work under very difficult conditions. The first few days are the most important days and there are two approaches on how to handle the toll of long journeys. One is to get a rest as soon as you arrive. We tend to subscribe to another approach and it is to hit the ground running and act like you are a local and continue the day with normal activities. Then we get the good night of sleep and the next day everybody seems to be ready to go on with our regular schedule.

3. BENEFITS OF TEACHING CLASSES OVERSEAS

However, there are numerous benefits when classes are taught overseas. We can ask the question who benefits when classes are offered overseas. In our opinion, both faculty and students benefit immensely when they have this experience.

3. 1. BENEFITS TO FACULTY

How do faculty benefit from teaching classes overseas? Teaching classes overseas almost forces instructors to evaluate their teaching methods, goals and outcome. These classes overseas are the same as teaching the same class in a regular university setting. I taught my first overseas class pretty much the same as I used at my home

university but half way through the course I realized that I have this great opportunity to take students outside the class and engage them in different ways of learning. Students made sure to point out that it was a great idea to move out of the building and do much more experiential learning such as visiting business companies, international institutions, museum, concerts, etc. Teaching classes overseas almost forces instructors to expand their teaching skills. The instructors need to evaluate the way they convey information to their students and use as many as possible different skills to keep students involved.

Teaching classes overseas provides a unique learning experience to instructors to learn much more about particular country, culture, economy, political and regulatory system, language and in sense become role model to students. Instructors who invest their time and effort to teach classes overseas are also bringing a unique perspective and knowledge when they teach their regular classes in the regular university setting. This is an additional benefit to instructor and also to students.

The possibility to take classes at different international locations is becoming very important to many universities since it is one of the things that make a university unique. We have noticed more and more students and their parents are asking now if students have options of taking a course(s) at other locations in the world. Universities which offer courses in other countries are often perceived as being able to add value and prestige to their programs. Taking a business class overseas improves students' understanding of the discipline, but it also improves students' understanding of many other disciplines and enhances the overall experience with college education. It is also in line with global trends of preparing business leaders to compete not only in domestic markets but to have much more global view. It is no wonder that many liberal arts universities emphasize these study abroad programs as a part of their overall positioning in the educational world.

3. 2. BENEFITS TO STUDENTS

Student who take classes at international locations evaluate their experiences in two ways. One is with anonymous course evaluations and another one is in un-solicited statements either with other faculty members, students or administrators. Based on these course evaluations and other comments students overwhelmingly believe that taking a course in another country was very valuable to them. Here is the typical list of benefits that students mention either in their course evaluations or, what is even more important, after they graduate and they provide it in their e-mails or thank you notes:

- It was a chance of a life time
- It changed my life
- It was a huge career benefit
- It gave me more confidence
- It opened my horizons

4. TIPS FOR FACULTY AND STUDENTS WHEN CLASSES ARE TAUGHT OVERSEAS

4. 1. TAKE PREPARATION STAGE VERY SERIOUSLY

We have found that pre-departure orientation meeting to be very useful. During these meeting we explain the course structure, instructional methodology, course requirements and goals. We also provide time for students to get involved in the course and to ask questions on different topics that relate to the course. We explain course components and grading procedure, explain assignments, readings for the course, term paper, etc. Pre-departure meetings are also very useful to provide very important information such as: the need to get a passport, air tickets, any necessary documents and credit cards/travel checks, local maps and local sites, travel itinerary, lodging information, contacts information for parents if they need to get in touch, etc. We also provide syllabi to students in advance so they can prepare themselves for the course. We also talk about the need to do your own research and preparation for the course in other country.

Traveling with students to another campus that is far away from your own University is tiring and it could easily take from twenty to thirty hours. An instructor and students may be very tired when they arrive at their destination, but it is usually not a good start of the course if they all look totally lost and exhausted upon arrival. Therefore, it is important to prepare and research your destination before you arrive. If your university has a strong and effective office of international programs it can be a very helpful source of information about your new city, transportation options, packing suggestions, structuring classes, etc. In addition, many overseas newspapers are online, enabling you to see the daily happenings right where you'll be teaching a course. It is good to check these local newspapers four weeks prior to departure to know in advance if some interesting events are taking place and to plan and budget for that. For a list of local papers in your destination these sources are useful: www.pressdisplay.com and www.onlinenewspapers.com.

Another form of excellent preparation before travelling overseas is to take a virtual stroll in your new destination. There are interactive maps of France and Spain, and you can stroll through the streets of Paris, Nice, Madrid, Barcelona and more. Simply choose a starting point and "stroll" down the city streets, choosing the direction you'd like to go. Those websites are: France: <http://photos.pagesjaunes.fr> and Spain: <http://fotos.qdq.com>.

During preparation classes students are advised of how to reduce the risk involved when traveling abroad. Four principles of personal risk preparedness are explained to students. These four principles are awareness, communication, understanding local culture and cross-cultural learning.

We also point out that students should be involved in their own personal safety. Personal safety and security begins with the multitude of decisions each student makes on a daily basis; which includes to be aware of local hotspots and events, the transportation methods you choose, whom you associate with, when and where you go

out, etc. By being aware, employing cultural common sense and making responsible, intelligent choices, students can greatly reduce the risks to their own safety. By far, the greatest threat to student safety involves alcohol; In that alcohol impairs one's judgment is well known, but too often ignored.

4. 2. FOCUS ON ACADEMIC GOALS

It is very important to describe the course properly and to define learning objectives? We found out that combination of clear academic goals and experiential learning is the best for short study abroad courses. Academic goals can be accomplished by assigning students to write papers about relevant topics that they have studied and the experiential goals relate to gaining professional experience and participation in different activities (visiting international companies, guest speakers, and international case studies) that take place outside of the classroom. If high standards are set early and clearly communicated to students it is much easier later on to adhere to these standards. Students like courses that are structured well in advance and they can prepare themselves for that. We found out that the preparation meetings are very useful to communicate these expectations to students.

4. 3. DO CONTROL COSTS AT ALL TIMES

Faculty members leading these study abroad courses have to watch over the cost and to control it all the time. It is one activity that is difficult to simply delegate unless you are working with the best travel agent in the area. The need to control costs doesn't stop when you arrive to your destinations. It is important to control costs in your destinations since excessive price increases are not something uncommon. These price increases usually affects cost of food, cost of local travel and entrance fees. These costs often represent 20-30% of the total cost of taking the course overseas.

DLEARN THE TABOOS BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE.

Many American visitors to overseas locations get in trouble by using gestures and expressions that are quite acceptable in our own culture, but no so in other cultures. However, not knowing some local habits is not an excuse for offending other cultures. When waving your hand in Greece, as the American gesture of "hello" may get you in serious trouble? Similarly, a wink, thumb's up, point of a finger or even an eyebrow raise could mean a symbol of good luck in one place, yet an obscene gesture in another. The best way to prevent such a mistake is to read up on various do's and don'ts around the world in one of these books: Do's and Taboos Around the World by Robert E. Axtell Do's and Don'ts Around the World by Gladson I. Nwanna, Ph.D.

5.1. EXPECT SURPRISES

No matter how much planning we do we can expect surprises. It is almost impossible to avoid it and it is important to learn how to handle it. Something will not go as planned, the bus will be cancelled, the guest speaker may not show up and the list goes on. The most important thing to remember is that it is not immediately your fault and to be able to overcome it with some humor.

5.2. PAY ATTENTION TO GROUP DYNAMICS

The instructors need to pay attention to group dynamics. When you lead groups with 12-20 students there is a possibility of groups splintering in small cliques that may not be always on the same page. It can create unnecessary friction and it is important to handle that sooner rather than later. One great way to improve group dynamics is to have students meet each other before they leave. It is a bit awkward to take a group of strangers to a study abroad destination and ask them to talk to each other and to depend on each other for the next two or three weeks. Having preparatory meetings where students get to know each other, exchange ideas and talk to each other reduces possible conflict and increases group cohesiveness.

6. SUMMARY

We presented and discussed challenges that the instructors have to overcome in order to have a success with these study abroad courses. We believe it is better for instructors to know potentially difficult challenges for them or their students well in advance, so they can plan on how to overcome it. We also presented how we, or other professors, handled some of these difficult challenges and gave practical solutions.

However, study abroad courses are not only about challenges. There are also benefits for both professors and students, who get involved in teaching courses overseas. We discussed benefits to faculty, academic programs, learning experience, how it adds value to the university, and how it benefits students in more than one way.

At the end, based on our experience and interviewing some other professors who conducted these study abroad courses, we present some useful tips for instructors and students to ensure that they get the best possible reward if they decide to take part in these short term study abroad courses. We also tried to identify what worked well in some situations and what did not worked well in other situations. We believe that we can also learn if we do not repeat the same mistakes again.

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