

## **Utilization of Social Media for an Interdisciplinary Experiential Learning Study Abroad Program**

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### **Abstract**

The development of global awareness is essential for college students to compete in today's international workplace. Interdisciplinary courses in higher education provide an opportunity for faculty to enhance student learning regarding the global marketplace. This paper examined the creation and delivery of an International Business in France course. The course was developed in cooperation between three academic departments and encompassed the study of business, economy, and culture. The course also contained an off campus study trip to Paris, France. Information from the trip was shared through social media to enhance the college's marketing material.

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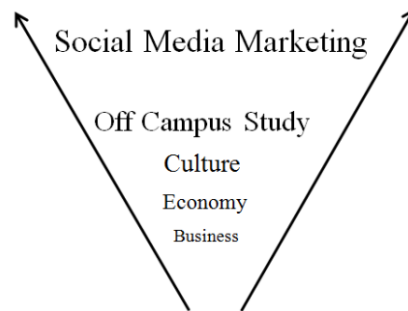
**Keywords:** case study, social media, economy, France, higher education, international business, marketing

### **1. Introduction**

The current global business environment requires that new and future employees develop awareness, sensitivity and a superior competence to succeed in the worldwide marketplace. A shift from isolated national economies to global interdependent economies is more evident (Hill, 2010). Institutions of higher learning, like businesses, are feeling the effects of a new global society. Educational institutions look for ways to provide courses to meet this need for global knowledge. One option available for students to gain exposure to a global business environment in higher education has been international business courses or study abroad/off campus programs. These courses and programs provide college students the opportunity to understand a global business environment.

This case study reviews an international business course offered with an off campus study component. Combining these two educational delivery methods provided college students an opportunity to enhance their educational experience, as well as gain an appreciation for another culture and their business practices. This paper explains the interdisciplinary course development, course delivery, and pedagogy of an international business course, International Business in France [IBF]. The IBF course content evolves from the micro concept of business operations, to the broader concept of economy, and expands finally to the larger macro understanding of the culture in which the economics and business transactions occur. The inaugural IBF course reached an even larger audience as the students' activities during the off campus study segment were shared through

the college's social media channels and then became part of a marketing communication effort. See Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Components of an interdisciplinary international business course

## 2. Interdisciplinary Course Development & Delivery

IBF was developed at a private liberal arts college in Idaho in partnership between three academic departments; Business and Accounting, Political Economy and Modern and Foreign Languages. The course was delivered over the span of two semesters; a fall semester and a winter four-week intersession. Three faculty members worked together to develop the curriculum, each bringing their personal expertise to the three foundational components of the course; business, economy, and culture. The blended content delivery provided a framework to enhance student learning from multiple disciplines for international business concepts.

The topics of business, economy, and culture are interconnected elements of international commerce. Offering multiple disciplines together in one course provided students a fuller understanding of these disciplines (Anderson, Hey, Peterson, Toops, & Stevens, 2008). Students had the opportunity to gain a greater appreciation for the content areas when the topics were presented together in a cohesive manner as part of one course. The interdisciplinary perspective provided an enhanced framework for understanding global issues (Anderson *et al.*, 2008).

The course pedagogy reflected multiple academic disciplines working together in the IBF course development to support student learning. Bruffee (1999) suggested collaborative learning and the construct of knowledge takes place through conversations among peers. In the IBF course conversations occurred between faculty members, between faculty and students, as well as between students. Student conversations included student-led learning through small group activities and presentations. Bruffee's (1999) learning through conversation theory focused on the cognitive outcome. The combination of classroom instruction and off campus study enhanced student learning through conversations in multiple settings.

Student involvement was utilized in the varied learning environments. According to Astin, the greater a student's involvement, the greater their level of personal development and learning on a subject (1999). Students in the IBF course helped create knowledge among fellow students through the presentations they made during the course. These presentations covered specific assigned topics related to the course and travel in Paris. Taking responsibility on various assigned topics increased student interest and maintained the excitement about learning (Astin, 1999).

Reflection of learning occurred through the use of journal entries, presentations, and discussion sessions (Ash & Clayton, 2009). Reflection was incorporated before, during, and after the off campus travel experience. These activities were graded by faculty and designed to link the students'

experiences directly to their learning through faculty feedback. “Each applied learning pedagogy provides students with opportunities to connect theory and practice, to learn in unfamiliar contexts, and to practice using knowledge and skills.” (Ash & Clayton, 2009, p. 25). The experiential element facilitated the principle “that learning is maximized when it is active, engaged and collaborative” (Ash & Clayton, 2009. p.25).

Information from the University of Phoenix (2011, April 14), Apollo Research Institute Report further affirmed the pedagogy of the IBF course development and delivery. The report identified the following ten critical skills that will be needed for success in the workforce. The IBF course utilized several of these components to enhance the educational experience.

Apollo Research Institute Report—ten critical skills for success:

- 1) Sense-making: Determining the deeper meaning or significance of what’s being expressed
- 2) Social intelligence: Connecting to others and sensing stimulating reactions
- 3) Novel and adaptive thinking: Thinking and coming up with creative solutions
- 4) Cross-cultural competency: Operating in different cultural settings
- 5) Computational thinking: Translating vast amounts of data into abstract concepts and understanding data-based reasoning
- 6) New media literacy: Leveraging, critically assessing, and developing content using new media forms
- 7) Transdisciplinarity: Understanding concepts across multiple disciplines
- 8) Design mindset: Representing and developing tasks and work processes for desired outcomes
- 9) Cognitive load management: Discriminating and filtering for important information and mastering new tools to manage it
- 10) Virtual collaboration: Working productively, driving engagement, and being present as a member of a virtual team (University of Phoenix, 2011)

## **2.1 Business**

The foundational element of the IBF course was to provide an analysis of business from the viewpoint of entering into multinational business activities. The business content was developed for students to become familiar with different ways in which a company can accomplish its global objectives. The following topics were included in the curriculum: Seven Revolutions from the Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS] (2012); types of international business ownership; consideration of international laws; reviewing a firm’s resources and capabilities; political realities governing international trade; foreign direct investment; and factors that determine foreign exchange rates. This content was reflective of educational elements found in traditional on campus international business courses.

Providing a fundamental understanding of business practices for students was the starting point from which the course was built. The international focus was relevant since business activities have expanded to encompass a global reach with the prevalence of international trade. Both large multinational organization and small businesses have the opportunity to engage in international trade (Griffin & Pustay, 2012). The skills and knowledge needed for success is more complex when engaging in international business activity (Griffin & Pustay, 2012). This interdisciplinary course addressed the complex knowledge demands by going beyond a business curriculum. Student learning was measured by the completion of a group research paper focused on international trade.

The IBF interdisciplinary business curriculum provided an overall business perspective. A perspective that would be fully demonstrated through business visits while in France. According to

Dlabay (1998), “organizations are realizing that international business opportunities are borne out of the ability to adapt to and capitalize on the geographic, historic, economic, cultural and political-legal elements that influence the exchange of business across different cultures and levels of economic development” (p. 159). This thought leads to the next component of the IBF course and the study of economy.

## **2.2 Economy**

Expanding on the students understanding of business operations, the IBF course explored the broader concept of French economic history and the evolution of the European Union. The economy component addressed the global issues that currently challenge the international community. Key information covered in the curriculum included: historical events in French economic history starting from 1789 through the present; components of the French economy; labor; competitive industries; the European Union; and the French economy in the twenty-first century. These principles were used to promote an understanding of how economic considerations constrain and influence business decisions and processes.

France is a free market economy and the world’s fourth largest economy (Chaney & Martin, 2011). However, French interventionism does occur in various industries; telephone, internet, and healthcare (Nadeau & Barlow, 2003). Related to interventionism the French created the formula of *Société d’Économie Mixte* (SEMs) (semi-public companies) (Nadeau & Barlow, 2003). In the economy these SEMs are joint ventures between the government and private industry. The French State plays a support role in economic development (Nadeau & Barlow, 2003).

It was necessary to understand key historical events such as the French Revolution and France’s colonial experience, labor riots, both World Wars, and the evolution of the European Union in order to explore the current institutions and rules that comprise the French economy today. As part of the French economic studies a review of competitive industries was presented, which included high technology, nuclear power, automobiles, fashion, food and beverages, transportation and health care (Nadeau & Barlow, 2003). The importance of government relations to the French economy was discussed and would be more fully demonstrated during the off campus segment. Student learning was measured by the completion of a research paper on the French economy.

## **2.3 Culture**

Study of the French culture, attitudes and customs provided the framework for understanding the vital connection between business and economy. The cultural component included analyzing culture and cultural differences between French and Americans. Students were given instruction on basic French language skills and social norms. “Culture is learned through formal, informal, and technical means.” (Rodrigues, 2009, p.6). The IBF course facilitated learning in a formal and informal setting, developing a level of cultural understanding prepared students for the off campus study segment and immersion in the French culture.

The French attitudes of “grandeur” and “French Exceptionalism,” the importance of the state (*l’Etat*), and labor relations—including protests were emphasized (Nadeau & Barlow, 2003). Additional differences discussed were aptly summarized by Nadeau and Barlow (2003), “Imagine a country where people work thirty-five hour weeks, take seven weeks of paid holidays per year, take an hour and half for lunch, have the longest life expectancy in the world, and eat the richest food on the planet.” (p.vii). Gaining an appreciation of the French cultural provided a framework of understanding for the differences in communication and business practices the students would encounter (Chaney & Martin, 2011). Communication is involved whether traveling in another country for leisure, education, or transacting business. By having a better understanding of cultural differences an individual can enhance diplomacy in their communication (Chaney & Martin, 2011).

Cultural literacy is a key element of international business (Griffin & Pustay, 2012). Regarding this literacy and navigating the global marketplace, “knowing something about how and where their countries and companies fit into the global economy can help you earn their respect and confidence as well as give you a competitive edge in dealing with them” (Griffin & Pustay, 2012, p.6). Students had the opportunity to understand what it meant to be the "outsider," and how to communicate effectively across barriers of all kinds. Enabling students to gain basic conversational French skills enhanced their cultural literacy and boosted their confidence for the off campus study.

## 2.4 Off Campus Study

The off campus study component was the capstone of the course that allowed all the classroom content, business, economy and culture, to be fully utilized in France. IBF included two weeks of study in Paris, France, as part of a four-week winter intersession term. A detailed daily schedule was developed to outline the activities for the stay. The two weeks were filled with walking tours, visits to museums, businesses, the United States Embassy and The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). These activities in Paris complemented the three core areas of business, economy, and culture.

Myles (1996) suggested, "Our role as international educators is becoming essentially that of managers of information or even technical apprentices" (p. 57). The off campus study program provided a chaperoned opportunity for the college students to experience another culture. Bruffee (1999) stated, "Knowledge is a conversation in progress among people who understand one another—people who speak the same language. Change in knowledge—what we call learning—takes place at the boundaries among these language communities." (p.118). Off-campus study helped students to cross these boundaries and experience learning in a new environment.

The first thirty hours upon arriving in Paris encompassed a whirlwind of cultural change and unique experiences that the students would encounter during the rest of their stay in France. The morning of day one started in an agricultural-based rural community in Idaho. The day ended 30 hours later after a walking tour through Paris culminating at the top of L'Arc de Triomphe. The course's educational objective of intertwining all the classroom instruction was now fully integrated, and the students were ready for the final phase of learning which would take place over the next two weeks.

## 2.5 Leveraging Social Media Marketing

The internet and information technology have dramatically changed today's marketing environment for all businesses and organizations. Social media is a growing part of marketing strategy for organizations today (eMarketer, 2013). This digital revolution has generated new technologies that make the field of marketing simultaneously faster, easier, different, and more complex (Pride & Ferrell, 2014). Digital media can be used as an effective marketing tool with little direct cost to an organization while increasing marketing research. The cost of staff's time should be taken into consideration. The IBF course faculty worked cooperatively with the college's marketing and communication department to provide content to be used as part of digital marketing. A marketing strategy was developed before leaving campus and implemented as part of the off campus study experience.

The IBF course used the social media platforms of the college's FaceBook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr accounts.

**Facebook** – Is the world's most popular social networking site, with a third of all Internet users having visited the site.

**Twitter** –Is a hybrid social networking and micro-blogging site.

**YouTube** – The most popular video sharing site that allows anyone who wishes to upload

videos to the Internet to do so.

**Flickr** – Is the most popular photo sharing website (Pride & Ferrell, 2014)

Social media sites provided a digital venue for sharing college information with current students, prospective students, parents, alumni of the college and the greater community at large. The combination of the college's social media sites, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr, reach thousands of fans or followers. Social networking has changed the dynamics of marketing and organizational communication. People spend more time on social networking sites than on e-mail (Pride & Ferrell, 2014).

The goal of including the social media marketing was to highlight an academic program at the college. This was accomplished by sending photos and narratives on a daily basis to the college. The marketing department then disseminated the information and photos through the various digital marketing channels. The students' off campus IBF study experience provided a way to enhance the college's marketing efforts by focusing on the delivery of an academic course. In addition to the photographs, a video recording containing the students' feedback on the trip was filmed on the last day of the off campus study experience. This video could be called a "digital course evaluation." After the trip, the video was edited by a student under the supervision of the marketing and communication office. The video was then placed on the college's web site on the page of the off campus study trips. The photos and video have the potential to reach a broad population with information about the educational enhancement of an off campus study trip.

### 3. Discussion

Business interactions are being conducted on an increasingly global stage (Peng, 2013). It is the responsibility of higher education institutions to prepare students to enter the job market as educated workers who can meet the demands of a global marketplace. When educational offerings are effective, the students will take away their new knowledge and skills and be able to apply this insight with a distinct competitive advantage.

The techniques presented in this case study can be considered for application at any college wanting to develop an interdisciplinary course with an off campus study component. Interdisciplinary courses can enhance student learning (Griffin & Pustay, 2012). Faculty also have the ability to contribute to their college's marketing efforts and should consider working cooperatively with their college's marketing and communication office to enhance the scholarly content in material presented to prospective students and the community. With the continuing trend of a global economy, it is important to provide educational courses incorporating multiple disciplines that will broaden students' perspectives and in turn expand students' future opportunities. Many students attend college in preparation to join the workforce. An interdisciplinary course, including an off campus study segment, can provide a cohesive framework for understanding global issues as well as help prepare future employees to meet the demands of a worldwide marketplace.

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