

# Lessons Learned From a PBL Experience: US EMBA in Macedonia

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## INTRODUCTION

The goals of teaching international business may be driven by environmental changes, constituent pressure, and/or accreditation mandates (Kaynak & Schermerhorn, 1999). The learning objectives of the institution might include bringing students to an understanding of strategic approaches to going international, socio-cultural differences in doing business, risks and rewards of conducting business internationally, management of ex-patriots versus locals, or to “global competence” (Sherman, 1999). Similarly, approaches to teaching international business fall along a continuum from traditional classroom instruction and exercises to country studies (cf. Keys, 1995) to international study projects (cf. von Eije, 1998) to extended overseas internships. Along this continuum from information-giving to immersion (Mendenhall, Dunbar, & Oddou, 1987), there are many options each involving trade-offs in time, effort, cost, and effectiveness. Many would argue strongly, however, that immersion in a different cultural setting adds something that classroom exercises cannot adequately reproduce, no matter how well designed and delivered. As a result, opportunities for such experiences have become commonplace at most universities through study abroad programs, exchange programs, and international tours.

It is more challenging to make the connections among cultural exposure, business theories and concepts, and practical application. Ohio University’s College of Business has more than 13 years experience using an international collaborative business consulting project with students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels as a means of making those desired connections. This project, called the Global Competitiveness Program/Joint Student Consulting Project, draws on the strengths of a problem-based pedagogy within an international setting to create rich learning opportunities. Our approach contextualizes learning about international business both in location and in practice. By having our students engage in business consulting projects in another country, working collaboratively with peers from the host country, we provide them with a learning opportunity that triggers the types of *situated cognition* (Brown, Collins, & Duguid; 1989) that are likely to result in both knowledge retention and ability to apply that knowledge. This paper highlights this unique university endeavor, describing the most recent Macedonian project utilizing 14 Executive MBA students.

The Ohio University College of Business (CoB) has been actively developing problem-based learning, a form of pedagogy in which students are challenged to develop solutions to real-world problems. In this process, the CoB has developed new learning around issues addressed in the problem-based format. This form of learning, commonly referred to as “action-learning” or “in-context learning,” is believed to result in an enriched learning experience because students are actually putting to use their newfound knowledge of its application to the problem at hand.

It was in this context that the JSCP (Joint Student Consulting Project) was originally conceived and implemented in 1990. The goal of the JSCP is to give students an authentic international and professional experience when it comes to doing business abroad. While students do learn from simple exposure to an international context, it is believed that such learning is deeply enriched in a context in which the students are required to work with and through their foreign counterparts to accomplish or achieve a specific end.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the challenge for universities is to provide their students the opportunity to develop global competence. Global competence has been defined as the ability to function effectively in an international business context. For this to happen, students must be exposed to different cultures as well as experience real differences in skills such as problem solving, negotiations, and response to authority. They must also learn to become sensitive to the interpersonal cues to ascertain the behavioral rules and norms which affect the way business is conducted in different cultures. These skills can only be learned effectively through practical application or personal experience. (Sherman, 1999)

Brown et al (1989) have discussed the critical connection between what is learned and how it is learned and used, drawing on earlier work by Vygotsky, Leontiev, and other activity theorists. As they state:

The activity in which knowledge is developed and deployed,...  
is not separable from or ancillary to learning and cognition. Nor  
is it neutral. Rather, it is an integral part of what is learned. Situations  
might be said to co-produce knowledge through activity. Learning and  
cognition,...are fundamentally situated. (p. 32)

We believe that, by embedding students both in the national and business cultures of another country while they work intensively on a business problem with salience to the managers and employees with whom they are interacting, we have found a highly effective approach to teaching international business concepts and skills. Further, we believe that this approach is a means to internationalize the student instead of the curriculum (Beck, Whiteley, & McFetridge; 1996) by building their competencies in operating in the global arena and adapting their behaviors to cross-cultural situations.

The goal of the JSCP is the development of global competence not just in its own student population, but also in the student population of its partnering institutions. For the JSCP to be successful, it is necessary for faculty members from both Ohio University and its partner institution to work together successfully in the delivery of the program. This typically does not present difficulties given that western educational practices have been widely adopted in many parts of the world. For the JSCP to run successfully, faculty must understand their roles as faculty mentors in the problem-based context. Problem-based learning requires faculty to avoid taking an authoritative role in the problem-solving exercise and to serve primarily to facilitate the decision-making process or learning cycle through which the student must pass in order to derive a solution to the problem. The faculty members at the Ohio University College of Business have undergone extensive training in problem-based pedagogy. The choice of partnering institution

always takes into consideration the adaptability of the partnering institutions faculty to engage in a pedagogical approach.

We rely on our hosts to work with their local contacts to develop appropriate projects for the student teams to work on, to provide local students to partner with our students, to provide the facilities, and to handle a number of logistical elements of the program. Moreover, the site selected needs to match with our learning objectives.

## **THE MACEDONIAN INITIATIVE**

Historically, Ohio University has sought JSCP locations which provide our students with a stark contrast to their normal living situation. Hence, since its inception, the program has functioned primarily in countries such as Hungary, Brazil and South Africa. Macedonia, too, was seen as an attractive site for a JSCP due to the cultural and language differences as well as the political and economic events in the region.

When Macedonia became a possible site, the decision was made to work with the University St. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje, Macedonia. This decision was made based on an established relationship between distinguished alum of the Ohio University College of Business and the Faculty of Economics of University St. Cyril and Methodius. Both parties indicated their respective desires to collaborate as a way to transfer the PBL pedagogy and to provide a unique learning platform for students and faculty from both institutions.

After a number of years of exploration and negotiation, alumni and faculty were able to gain the support of US Senator George Voinovich; Mr. Boris Trajkovski, President of the Republic of Macedonia; and, Mr. Lawrence Butler, the US Ambassador to Macedonia. It is to their credit that Macedonia was added to the list of host countries for the JSCP. The CoB received a one-time grant in the amount of \$90,797 from the Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. The grant supported faculty traveling from St. Cyril & Methodius University to Ohio University for training on PBL methodology, which included defining their role as faculty. The funds also supported Ohio University faculty to travel to Macedonia for the purpose of preliminary training, as well as for student and client selection. Finally, funds from the grant were used to support the actual JSCP project administration.

Once the funds were made available and operational details worked out, the project began in earnest. The plan involved a three-step process. First, Macedonian faculty were to be selected by their university based on qualifications approved by Ohio University (OU). The faculty team would then travel to Ohio where a team of OU faculty would train them in the concepts of PBL, in general, and the JSCP process, in particular. Second, a faculty member from Ohio would travel to Macedonia where they would select client companies for the projects as well as students to participate alongside of their American counterparts. Following the selection process, Ohio students and faculty would travel to Macedonia to engage the JSCP. Finally, the faculty would debrief the JSCP and plan for the next intervention. Although the first two steps were interchanged as a result of international events (Macedonian faculty postponed the trip to Ohio following the invasion of Iraq), all elements of this plan were followed.

Initial faculty development started with internet, email and phone communications between the two faculties. In April 2003, one Ohio faculty member traveled to Macedonia for a week to

confirm the beginning of the formal training of faculty. PBL and the application of the concepts that underlie the JSCP require a set of skills, competencies, and motivations on the part of faculty if the project is to be successful. In order to assure the requisite competencies, faculty from Macedonia were selected to participate by the Faculty of Economics at St Cyril and Methodius and tentatively approved by Ohio University. When the faculty from Ohio visited with the selected faculty in Macedonia their willingness to participate and basic competencies to deliver the methodology were confirmed. In addition, the Ohio faculty assessed the proclivity of the Macedonian faculty for the PBL pedagogy. The pedagogy is significantly different from that practiced by faculty in the Macedonian university system and would require significant behavioral shifts on their part. The faculty selected showed a willingness to experiment with their teaching styles and to try to implement a more learner-centered approach.

Also, the Ohio faculty member met with prospective student participants to brief them on the JSCP and to assess their readiness to participate. While English language skills were not mandatory for participating in the project, it was helpful to understand the competency level when briefing / preparing the Ohio students and in planning the project.

The final component of the visit involved a session with the faculty and prospective client organizations to brief the executives on the JSCP process and to select the most promising projects. Seven of the largest companies in Macedonia expressed willingness to participate and had the types of projects that were appropriate for the time frame the students were to work on them. In each case, the projects had clear salience to the company and a commitment from the management team to seek outside advice on how to proceed. Both characteristics are vital, as the students are unlikely to fully engage with a project unless they believe that their contribution has real implications for the company and that the company decision-makers value their input.

Nearly one week after the American professor's visit to Macedonia, a faculty team of six Macedonians traveled to Athens, Ohio. The purpose of the travel was to obtain intensive training in the PBL methodology in the context of JSCP. The team included faculty that had completed some, if not all, of their graduate studies in the US. Although most of the team involved academicians, one member of the team was foremost a businessman, with some experience teaching at the university level in Macedonia.

Upon arrival to the US, the Macedonian faculty members were provided a set of readings on the concept of PBL and a team of two Ohio faculty began a seminar approach to indoctrinate the pedagogy. The PBL approach is difficult to master, and old habits die hard. Normally, faculty members learn the PBL/JSCP process in an extended apprentice-like atmosphere. In this case, only two weeks were available, given that the holiday season took a serious toll on time. In order to bring our Macedonian partners to a full understanding of both the JSCP and the PBL methodology, we had them participate in a PBL consulting experience in the roles of students. The two week timeframe of the training project closely paralleled the timeframe of the JSCP itself.

The project was centered on a client organization that was concerned with a new, and somewhat radical, marketing approach. The client was a major retailer of women's clothing that targeted plus size women in a higher end market. The two Ohio faculty members played the role of JSCP

faculty, while the Macedonian faculty played the role of the student consultants. The project was scripted and carried out in the same manner that a JSCP project would be completed once the team returned to Macedonia in the role of faculty. After completing the project and making the presentation to the client, the OU faculty debriefed their Macedonian counterparts to complete the learning cycle.

In addition to the JSCP training, the Macedonian faculty members were introduced to the Ohio University EMBA students who would participate in the JSCP. One meeting was relatively formal and took place during a scheduled class period. Students and faculty interviewed each other in dyads or triads, and then introduced each other. This exercise not only broke the ice, but it also allowed the Macedonian faculty to view the relationship between the students and Ohio faculty members, which differs significantly from the student faculty relationship in their university. The students invited the OU and Macedonian faculty to join them at a picnic at the end of the visit which furthered the understanding and relationships.

## **THE STUDENTS**

Historically, Ohio University has required the JSCP as a component of the residential full-time MBA program. Students move through the MBA program in a lock-step curriculum, which ends with the JSCP. This year, Ohio made the decision to expand the JSCP to include other domestic MBA programs. The EMBA (Executive MBA) is designed for working individuals who are moving up in their organizations. Although the minimum managerial experience requirement is seven years, many students far exceed the minimum. For a number of logistical reasons, it was decided that the EMBA class should complete the JSCP in Macedonia. Macedonia was a “greenfield” location so there was no past history of undergraduate or MBA projects there that might have influenced expectations of the projects to be completed by the EMBA students. Moreover, while the full time MBA class is spread out over a number of sites for their projects, as are the undergraduate students participating in our Global Competitiveness Program, Macedonia provided a site where all of the EMBA participants could go to a single location and not be mixed with either undergraduates or members of the full time MBA program.

Because the Macedonian program was a new program, it involved levels of uncertainty due to political concerns as well as the normal problems associated with a first-time situation. The EMBA students were presented the opportunity to participate in the JSCP as an option to a standard summer consulting project. One-half of the EMBA class (i.e., 14 students) chose to participate in the JSCP. In preparation for the project, the EMBA students were assigned to teams and asked to complete a country briefing. The country briefing exercise assisted the student in preparing for the experience and the new culture. The country analysis that they prepare and present focuses on economic, social, and political issues and trends, business practice and etiquette, and a cultural overview. Students will typically gather information from library resources, internet research, country background notes from the State Department’s Bureau of Public Affairs (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/>), and interviews with faculty and students who are either native to, or have expertise about, the target country. The deliverables in this phase were reports prepared by teams of 3 that were subject to both formative and summative feedback as part of their overall grade for the projects.

Selection of students from St Cyril and Methodius faculty of Economics proved to be a small challenge. First, there is no EMBA type cohort in the faculty. Instead, there are MBA students who are engaged in a very traditional European master's program. The program is delivered exclusively by lecture, and assessed by written examinations. In order to increase the size of the student cohort, the Faculty of Economics proposed that some of the better fourth-year undergraduate students be included on the team. Finally, it was suggested that each team also contain a Teaching Assistant from the Faculty. Many concerns accompanied the composition of such diverse teams, and most of the concerns centered on roles. Would the US EMBA dominate the project because of their culture and experience? Would the fourth-year students be able to learn a significant amount, or would they take a subservient role? How would the Teaching Assistant be perceived by their younger colleagues?

## **THE CLIENTS**

The client organizations also presented some interesting questions. Seven organizations were identified and consented to participate in the JSCP. These seven, the largest companies in the country, represented the full spectrum of industries, from financial services to manufacturing to telecommunications and accounted for a significant portion of the country's economic activity. All the client organizations either had recently been privatized or were being impacted directly by the government policies on privatization (See Appendix A for list of the client companies). Based on the initial contact with the OU faculty member in the spring, the client companies had developed more detailed problem statements for the student consulting teams but many were too ill-structured, while others were so narrow and specific that students struggled to find solutions. If a second round of projects goes forward next summer, as we hope it will, we will need to engage more actively in assisting our faculty partners to guide the clients in the development of effective problem statements.

## **THE CONSULTING PROJECT**

The JSCP project has an underlying structure. Typically, the project lasts for ten days. To assure that there is a maximum level of productivity, the first intervention is a team-building exercise that is designed to clarify roles and expectations between team members. Teams were assigned prior to the trip, and preliminary exchanges were accomplished via a database. This database included postings of the country briefing, pictures and short vitae from some students. Still, significant cultural differences and role expectations vary widely within the teams. In this case, the normal cultural differences were there, but there were significant age and experience differences. Faculty from both Macedonia and Ohio had concerns regarding the potential for dysfunctional role behaviors. The team-building session was structured to limit the potential for such outcomes.

After the team-building exercises, a reception was scheduled for the students and the clients to allow them to meet and make preliminary plans. Arrangements were made for transport and meetings the following day. Some teams were invited to dinner by the clients following the reception.

The JSCP structure requires daily debriefings for all teams. Each team and each student is required to complete progress reports to be submitted at the end of each day. Faculty members conducted an oral debriefing with the all teams present. As a part of transferring the PBL pedagogy, it was necessary for the Macedonian faculty to participate actively in the faculty role for the debriefing. It was a challenge for the Ohio faculty to engage their counterparts in this activity. There was a tendency for the faculty to fall prey to the role set problems that were feared for the students, with the Ohio faculty being viewed as the experts and the Macedonian faculty becoming somewhat passive as a result. However, there was some progress, and the Macedonian faculty did participate when prompted.

Each project began to take a different route depending on various factors including the interest of clients, language skills, and geographical locations. Faculty in the JSCP visited each of the clients at least once during the project. It was better to make such visits after a few days rather than too late in the project. The purpose of the visit was to monitor the progress of the team and to determine the satisfaction of the client. It was also necessary to transfer **diagnostic** skills to the Macedonian faculty, so that they would be able to differentiate situations where the students need to find a solution themselves and those where faculty intervention may be needed to clear an obstacle to student learning. Thus, at least one Macedonian faculty would accompany the Ohio faculty to the clients. This strategy also facilitated the process because the Ohio faculty had no Macedonian language skills. In those situations where the clients were unable to speak English, the Macedonian faculty seemed more able to engage the desired behaviors of acting as diagnosticians and problem-solvers. In part, this was the case because the executives and faculty already knew each other (it is a very small country), and in some cases, the faculty had arranged the project.

It is typical to take at least one day over the intervening weekend for the host students to treat the Ohio students to some tour or introduction to their country and culture. This project was no different, and the students traveled together for two days while they worked on the projects in the evenings.

The JSCP concluded with an oral and written presentation. The skills necessary for faculty in this stage are more than evaluative. Students prepare their preliminary presentation and deliver it to the faculty the day preceding the “live” presentation. This arrangement allows the faculty to direct the student teams to information that may not have been considered. This session also provides an opportunity to help students hone the presentation in terms of cultural norms. In this case this was a skill that needed to be transferred to the Macedonian faculty. Thus, the preliminary presentations were observed by the faculty team, and effective behavior was modeled by the Ohio faculty. Here again, it was obvious that the Macedonian faculty had a tendency to be more directive than required in a PBL situation.

The oral presentation to the clients was scheduled to allow faculty to be present for evaluative purposes and, just as important, clarification and discussions with clients. In this situation the Macedonian faculty members were superior, perhaps for the same reasons cited for the client visits.

The JSCP ends with a banquet for all participants including clients, students, faculty, and invited guests. This banquet formally closes the project, and there is an exchange of gifts. The banquet

is staged to promote and cement the relationships that have been built, as well as to plan for the next collaboration. Perhaps this is both the easiest part and the most difficult, as it marks both a celebration of and an ending to an exhilarating and exhausting two weeks. We had a wonderful closing banquet and were honored with the President of Macedonia at the head table.

Upon return to the U.S. the EMBA students were asked to submit a final reflection paper discussing their learning during the project and their suggestions for improving the program. These reflection papers are important to our planning for future trips and provide important insights into how successful the projects have been in achieving the learning objectives we were hoping to garner.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on their reflection papers and feedback from alumni, our students, both undergraduates and graduates, often identify the GCP/JSCP experience as one of the peak experiences of their educations and the same was true for the EMBA students that participated in the Macedonian initiative. They pointed to the intense cultural exposure, the opportunity to make a difference in solving a company's problems, and the application of the skills they have learned in their studies during the projects. They also commented on the enhanced self-confidence that results from discovering they are capable of not only surviving in, but effectively working in, a different country and cultural setting. Many have developed what are likely to be lifelong friends and potential business contacts in Macedonia.

For the faculty there is similar enrichment. We, too, developed friendships with our peers that have the potential to open up new research and publication opportunities. The experiences we had interacting with the client organizations enhance our ability to teach about international business with real examples that we have observed closely first-hand. The cultural exposure similarly increases our understanding of, and sensitivity to, our international students and colleagues.

Each participant, whether EMBA student or OU faculty member, has come back with a greater understanding of international business, based on first-hand experience with the challenges and rewards of doing business in another country. Our Macedonian counterparts similarly have a new understanding of international business and their faculty has started to develop competence in an innovative pedagogical approach that can enrich their teaching. All of us have developed a new appreciation for cultural differences and, perhaps more importantly, similarities. Personal skills and professional competencies have been tested under fire and found to be successful, building self-confidence. We fully expect to continue and even to increase the opportunities for students to participate in these types of experiences in the future.

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