

Lessons Learned

Training Faculty to Teach in an Asian MBA Program

Sharon Borowicz, Ph.D.*
College of Business, Benedictine University, Lisle, IL 60532
[*shborowicz@ben.edu](mailto:shborowicz@ben.edu)

Abstract

There is a general air of excitement when an organization decides to do business overseas. Benedictine University experienced the same initial excitement when it signed the contract to deliver an Executive MBA program overseas. Adjunct faculty, all seasoned instructors many of whom that had international business experience, clamored to teach in the program. Even faculty with experience teaching in multi-cultural classrooms felt up to the challenge of teaching in Asia. Too often these faculty are offered no preparation other than being given a Visa's, travel stipend, bi-lingual cards with the name of the hotel and school and a 1-2 page introduction to the cultural customs they may encounter in their classroom. Corporations offer expatriation to their employees going overseas, while many universities delivering programs overseas struggle in finding an adequate model of expatriation that covers classroom management and pedagogy to function successfully in an overseas classroom. This paper is a case study based on an Executive MBA program offered in Asia, identifies best practices that have evolved over six years reflecting faculty experience in the Asian classroom, and offers a model for preparing faculty to teach in Asia.

Keywords: MBA, multi-cultural classroom, China, education, culture

Introduction

In 1991, MBA programs were introduced to China (Johnstone, 1997). Since then the number of MBA programs in China has proliferated rapidly. With the globalization of business and the opportunity for an MBA graduate in China to make two and one-half times the salary of a non-degreed worker (Johnstone, 1997), the demand for the MBA degree continues to grow. Benedictine University sought and received permission in early 2004 from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of College and Schools to partner with Shenyang University of Technology to offer their MBA degree. Since 2004, the Benedictine China MBA program has extended its program throughout China and into Vietnam and now has agreements with six partner universities in China and two partner universities in Vietnam. This paper is a case study focusing on methodologies used in Benedictine University's MBA program to prepare faculty to teach in China, challenges faculty may encounter, and opportunities to further support and enhance the andragogical skills of these faculty members.

Benedictine's MBA program is conducted as a partnership with various Chinese mainland universities. There are currently over 500 active students in the program and approximately 200 graduates of the China MBA program. The MBA program curriculum is

identical to Benedictine's MBA program offered in the U.S., which is approved by the North Central Association of the Higher Learning Commission. Students in the Chinese MBA program are required to take a total of sixteen courses: six foundation courses (leadership, ethics, financial accounting macro economics, etc.), seven managerial progress courses (managerial accounting, micro economics, marketing, strategic management, etc.) and three prescribed elective courses. On average, thirty-two faculty members are deployed overseas annually. However, with the expansion of this program into Vietnam, this figure is growing. Benedictine faculty teach eight of the required courses. These eight courses are considered the "softer side" of the MBA: Organizational Behavior, Leadership and Ethics, Entrepreneurship, and Strategic Management. Classes taught by the Benedictine faculty are conducted in English. The partner university teaches the more quantitative courses in the MBA curriculum such as financial accounting, economics, and financial management. Each course requires 30-35 contact hours and is held either in a two-weekend (Friday, Saturday, Sunday) format or a seven-day evening format.

Benedictine's China MBA is structured as a cohort program with class size ranging from fifteen to thirty students. Students progress through the curriculum in "lock step" fashion which allows students to form and maintain learning teams that provide essential peer support throughout the program. Students accepted into the program are required to attain a TOEFL score of 500 and have a cumulative GPA the equivalent of 2.0. Students are generally middle-level managers with two or more years of working experience in the government sector or state operated enterprises. Students are expected to spend an additional four to six hours per day studying the material. Each cohort completes the entire course of study in 18-24 months. The goal of all MBA programs is to develop reflective, critical, and analytical skills (Debowski, 2005). The academic experience of Chinese students stresses finding the "correct" solution or the "right" answer. Consequently, reflective thinking tends to be a new concept for Chinese students, so a reflective learning strategy needs to be present in each course.

Discussion

Faculty best suited for the China MBA program are those who are not only passionate about their area of expertise but are comfortable in a dynamic environment and can be flexible in their instructional style. Faculty with prior overseas teaching experience are preferable but there are many outstanding academic/practitioners with limited multi-cultural classroom experience who have much to offer the China MBA students. Consequently, the China MBA program administration has established a robust support structure for faculty. All faculty entering the program are provided with pre-deployment support in the form of a mentor and orientation to the program. New faculty are paired with a "seasoned" faculty member who has taught the course that the new faculty member will be teaching. This enables faculty to share experiences and techniques that have been successful and identify challenges the new faculty member may encounter when teaching in China. Faculty are regularly debriefed upon their return, and feedback is provided by the faculty member regarding travel and dealing with partner administration. In addition, classroom logistics are captured and help provide insightful content for faculty orientation sessions. In addition to this pre-deployment support, faculty are offered three workshops annually. The workshops deal with program updates, training on classroom management tools (Blackboard and PeopleSoft), classroom management techniques and the use of Learning Kits. These workshops also provide a networking opportunity for faculty to share experiences with each other and pose questions regarding how best to handle situations

encountered in the classroom. An international teaching certificate to be offered in 2010 to faculty teaching in the China MBA program is currently in development. All faculty teaching in China will be required to successfully complete this certificate. The certificate is designed as a four-course program dealing with topics such as teaching philosophy-East vs. West, psychology of adult learning, effectively using instructional technology tools, and instructional practices in the multi-cultural classroom. It is felt that this certificate will establish a level of international classroom competency that will enhance the quality and rigor of the China MBA program.

Another tool provided to faculty is called Learning Kits, which were developed to ensure curricular consistency and quality. A Learning Kit is developed for each course and contains a syllabus (a separate syllabus is provided for the weekend format and the evening, weekday format), PowerPoint lecture slides, test banks, case studies and instructor notes. The Learning Kit is maintained on a faculty Blackboard site so it is accessible anywhere in the world, making it convenient for faculty to use. The syllabus, PowerPoint slides, exams, and case studies are translated into Mandarin. Faculty may choose from these materials based on the topics being covered and on the knowledge level and interests of the student in each particular course. The Learning Kit allows faculty "to get up and running" in a shorter period of time.

There was concern that the Learning Kit would impinge upon faculty's academic freedom. Because the MBA curriculum is approved by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, there is minimal ability to alter the course content and textbooks. Consequently, the very nature of this program limits faculty's academic freedom.

One of the challenges lies with the translated materials. The program is taught in English by Benedictine faculty. Due to the accelerated nature of the courses, faculty and administration realized that it was important for students understand the readings and lecture notes as quickly as possible to be better prepared for class and contribute meaningfully to the discussions. Initially, all the translations were handled in the U.S. by Mandarin speaking faculty and outside translators. Unfortunately, as a result of varying dialects throughout China, some of the translations were not as effective as administrators had hoped they would be. Consequently, it is important that the China partner handle the translations so that the materials will be in a dialect familiar to the students. Due to the cost of translating the materials, the Chinese partner is often reluctant to assist with the translations. Currently, more effective ways of handling the translations are being investigated.

Each class taught by Benedictine faculty is equipped with a translator provided by the partner university. This translator has an MBA or PhD in the area being taught. Benedictine faculty are encouraged to meet with the translator one to two days prior to the start of class to ensure clarity of the translations and to discuss the content being covered. The translator can often assist with developing case studies that employ real life examples from or state operated enterprises.

Faculty are encouraged to provide students with a glossary of terms prior to the start of the course so that definitions can be clarified if necessary at the onset of the class. Faculty are cautioned not to use slang or colloquial expressions. Too often students will try to emulate these colloquialisms and rarely apply them appropriately. Faculty are reminded that in global business one cannot always be certain of the audience's level in understanding idioms so it is preferable to eliminate such idioms when possible. Also the use of contractions is discouraged, particularly in written material, as contractions do not translate well.

Classroom management presents its own unique set of opportunities and challenges for faculty in the China MBA program. In each cohort there is a class leader or spokesperson,

generally the individual most fluent in English, who can be helpful in translating instructions or alerting faculty if there is confusion in communication. This team spokesperson can also assist faculty to ensure that the team stays “on topic” during team discussions. The administration of exams has also raised an interesting classroom management issue. Faculty has found that multiple-choice exams are useful to validate the students understanding of key concepts. Faculty discovered that one or two-word answers could often be misinterpreted by students, resulting in the selection of the incorrect answer. Initially faculty used the translators to translate the multiple answers; unfortunately, it was found that the translator would emphasize the correct answers. Faculty now allow students to provide a one to two sentences rational as to why they selected their specific answer. Faculty found that they could better assess student learning using this method since the student’s rational can demonstrate that they understand the concept but that the student simply failed to translate the multiple-choice answer correctly.

It is important for faculty to understand Chinese culture. This is a culture in which knowledge is something to be shared, and it is a culture that places a strong emphasis on excelling. Consequently, issues regarding academic honesty have come up occasionally. Some issues are similar to those found in U.S. classrooms regarding electronic devices brought into class and covertly used during exams. Simply requiring students to leave their device with the faculty member prior to the exam alleviates the problem. Occasionally, more unique issues arise. One of the more interesting issues is related to students sending a surrogate to take the course. These surrogates not only sit in on the class, but also participate in team activities and take the exams. Since faculty are not alerted, they are led to believe the surrogate is the enrolled student. This has occurred frequently and faculty are now provided with attendance sheets with photos of each student. Faculty are also encouraged to take attendance several times during the course to ensure students have not left during the breaks.

The Asian classroom traditionally uses the lecture method versus the Socratic method. The first time Chinese students are exposed to the Socratic method is often in the Benedictine MBA program. Based on the Chinese cultural learning style, faculty should realize that a lack of assertiveness on the part of individual students or on the part of the team does not necessarily convey understanding or agreement (Haight, 2001). Instead, acquiescence may simply reflect politeness. It is important for faculty to remember that there is deference to the authority of the instructor and a reluctance to openly challenge the opinion of others as it may result in a loss of face for the student being challenged (Flowerdew, 1998). It is also important to remember that faculty is in a communistic society and in encouraging one student to challenge another may result in a student challenging a high ranking party official. This action can have serious repercussions for the student’s personal and professional life. Faculty need to employ instructional techniques that foster critical thinking without causing students to lose face. Faculty may introduce a variety of contrarian perspectives to stimulate discussion, or offer alternative courses of action in case studies that allow students to debate the merits of each alternative. The focus is shifted from challenging one student against another to arguing the merits and weaknesses of a concept. Flowerdew (1998) suggests the use of group work to draw on the Confucian value of cooperation. Faculty is encouraged to allow students to present projects and findings as a team. This allows students to practice presenting in English in the supportive environment of the team.

Case analysis is another concept that is relatively new to Chinese students and a methodology generally not used in Chinese education. In the first course taught by Benedictine faculty, Leadership and Ethics, students are given an introduction into the case method.

Culturally sensitive textbooks that include case studies of Chinese firms initially were difficult to locate. Faculty worked with the academic translator to develop relevant case studies. Fortunately, case studies of Chinese firms are more prevalent today. Since many Chinese MBA students will work for a global organization, students must have an understanding and appreciation for Western, Asian and European business practices. It is the responsibility of faculty to find a good balance between cases focusing on both global and Chinese businesses.

The final challenge in conducting an overseas educational program relates to logistical constraints resulting from time, communication, and distance. In U.S. MBA classrooms, pre-class assignments are commonplace. Benedictine faculty encountered difficulties in having Chinese students complete the pre-class readings and assignments. Whether this is due to cultural issues, a delay in the issuance of syllabi and texts, or communication failure is unclear. In retrospect, the failure appears to relate to a combination of these factors. Consequently, faculty should not anticipate that the students would have read the text or the syllabus. Faculty should also be cognizant that access to the Internet in China is limited by the government. Often in the U.S. MBA classroom, we will refer students to various websites as a resource; however, in China these sites may be inaccessible. Blackboard or some type of course management system can be used to provide easier access to supplemental materials for students. Overall, flexibility on the part of faculty is key. For instructors that prefer to follow defined course content, differ little from the syllabus, and cover the exact quantity of material in the initial lesson plan, this environment may not be optimal. Benedictine faculty encountered situations in which the students were provided a different textbook. Instructors faced with this situation found it necessary to adjust and re-sequence their PowerPoint slides, discussion, and activities to flow better with the alternate text. Faculty had less than 24 hours to make these adjustments.

Students are very interested in U.S. culture. Faculty should anticipate questions regarding American culture, America's views of China, and typical activities of the American family. Students are also interested in high profile topics such as Enron, Madoff, the economy, the banking crisis, and political elections. Although faculty must keep in mind that they represent the University, we encourage them to address these issues factually and, when possible, relate the issues to the topics they are teaching.

There are many opportunities for collaboration and research between Benedictine faculty and the China partner faculty. It is felt that this collaboration will be of benefit to students as well as the faculty. There are plans to offer an opportunity to Benedictine and China partner faculty teaching in the program to meet virtually through video conferencing. Benedictine administration has also discussed connecting Benedictine faculty with faculty at the partner university teaching in the same discipline to see if any natural collaboration for research and publication exists. Benedictine faculty and administration are working to offer an opportunity for U.S. MBA students to take one of their required courses in China with their Chinese counterparts. This international experience will also include visiting state-operated enterprises to provide students with insight into multinational firms. Finally, there has been discussion about allowing those students planning to attend commencement in the U.S. to take the last course, Strategic Management, at Benedictine University. This again offers an opportunity for U.S. and China students to work together in a classroom offering both a broader international perspective.

Conclusion

The China MBA program has been a successful and well-received program. The Chinese MBA students demonstrate an eagerness for knowledge and commitment that is unsurpassed by their U.S. MBA counterparts. Many of the Chinese MBA students attend the May commencement ceremonies and their pride of accomplishment is evident. Benedictine faculty who have participated in the program found it rewarding. Indeed, 100% of the faculty expressed a desire to go back.

The mission of the M.B.A. Programs at Benedictine University is to provide men and women with a collaborative educational experience that imparts superior management skills and best practices while instilling a sense of responsible and personal commitment to continuously improving the leadership of organizations. Benedictine University is dedicated to the education of undergraduate and graduate students from diverse ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds. We feel that we offer an extensive level of training and support so that faculty can successfully provide the Benedictine students in the China MBA program with a collaborative educational experience which will help these students become successful global leaders. A program of this magnitude takes constant monitoring and refinement, but it has been a program with positive ramifications for faculty and students alike.

References

- Debowski, S. (2005). Across the divide: teaching a transnational MBA in a second language. *High education Research & Development*, 24 (3), 265-280.
- Flowerdew, L. (1998). A cultural perspective on group work. *ELT Journal*, 52, 323-329.
- Haight, G.T., & Kwong, K.K. (2001). Future of the MBA in China. *Business Forum*, 24 (1,2), 33-36.
- Johnstone, H. (1997). Lesson in supply and demand. *Asian Business*, 33 (6), 58-59.
- Parks, S. & Raymond, P.M. (2004). Strategy use by nonnative-English-speaking students in an MBA program: Not business as usual! *The Modern Language Journal*, 88 (iii), 374-389.