Internet-based experiential learning in international marketing: the case of Globalview.org

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Internet, Learning, Education, Students, Marketing

Abstract

The paper discusses a unique Internet-based learning forum, Globalview.org (www.globalview. org), which involves the construction of international business plans for real companies seeking internationalisation. The purpose of global cases is to link student teams in international collaborative learning projects by empowering students to participate in setting learning goals and learning processes, and enabling instructors to be closer to the students in the learning process. This article reports on the experience of one college using Globalview.org, and discusses likely outcomes that may emerge from using Internet-based experiential projects in the classroom.

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Introduction

Universities and colleges are often criticised for being too theoretical and abstract, providing students with little information relevant to the "real" business world. This article discusses the processes and outcomes of a collaborative project to explore the internationalisation opportunities for local and global firms through a university-based World Wide Web (WWW) forum called Globalview.org (www.globalview.org). Globalview.org is unique because it is based on "live" or "real" cases of firms seeking internationalisation today, and it provides a forum for cross-communication among firms, universities, and students who may be based in different countries or regions. This article adds to the current body of knowledge on experiential education by describing the integration of an experience-based project that requires international cooperation, use of advanced communications technologies, and the utilisation of actual cases in a traditional classroom format.

We chose to focus on an international marketing class because the world is becoming one global business community. The rise in exports and imports, foreign direct investment, communications and transportation technologies, and international capital flows has increased the connectivity of people across space. Technology is making international communication and trade easier. The Internet, in particular, is increasing the rapid diffusion of information and exchange of ideas across borders. The use of the Internet to solve problems facing business across borders allows students to better understand globalisation and its implications for international business.

Learning information management skills and Internet-based technologies is extremely important for success in today's information-based society. Universities have the responsibility of providing students with information management skills relevant to the growing needs of society. In response to these needs, the SUNY Board of Trustees (Arenson, 1998) mandated the addition of an information management component into the curriculum. Key accrediting agencies, including the Middle States Commission on

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Higher Education (MSCHE), are also concerned with information literacy. The Association of College and Research Libraries (2000) has defined information literate students as those who "recognise when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information". The tremendous amount of information (and misinformation) now readily available via print sources, subscription databases, and the Internet highlights the need for students to learn how to find and evaluate information. Institutions of higher education have recognised this need and are adding information management (or literacy) components to their courses. The project described in this paper has helped students learn information management skills and Internet-based technologies.

Experiential learning framework

In recent years, the interest in experiential learning techniques in business education has grown because of the need to integrate the development of "real world" skills and abilities to the curriculum. Simply defined, experiential learning is "learning by doing". In this way students can integrate new skills by practising new behaviours and receiving feedback.

In response to the growing interest in this form of learning a number of associations were created and business schools across the world have started to adopt their curricula. For example, the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) and the Association for Experiential Education (AEE) are membership associations that embrace experiential learning in the classroom, workplace, or community; and promote experiential education in all settings and to support professional development, theoretical advancement, and evaluation in experiential education worldwide (AEE, 1999; NSEE, 2000).

The differentiating characteristics of experiential learning have been summarised by Burnard (1989), Joplin (1981) and Kolb (1984):

- active, rather than passive, learning;
- student-based, rather than teacher-based, learning;
- subjective experiences and personal growth;
- learning through evaluation and reflection;
- perception-based, rather than theory-based, learning;
- participative rather than memorisation (rote) learning;
- inductive, rather than deductive, learning;
- exploration, invention and application.

To make undergraduate education in business more effective, Bobbitt *et al.* (2000) proposed to integrate experiential learning exercises across the marketing curriculum. Working in teams, students in principles of marketing classes created products and promotional materials that were featured in a mock tradeshow; students in personal selling and sales management classes selected products from the tradeshow to complete a sales call. They proposed that the integration of experiential teaching methods across the curriculum enhances the learning outcomes of students. Gremler *et al.* (2000) proposed that experiential learning assignments in business are more likely to develop the students' interpersonal and communication skills, understanding of course concepts, teamwork and teambuilding, listening skills and critical thinking and problem solving skills.

Experiential learning divides into two types: field-based experiences (such as internships which involve working with practitioners); and experiential classroom-based learning (teaching methods that involve students learning by doing) (Quick, 1998). The literature on experiential learning in business has focused on both aspects. While internships provide excellent experiences to augment business education, internships have been slow to react to the growing need for the globalisation of the curriculum and are mostly domestic and local in nature (Toncar and Cudmore, 2000). The second problem with internships, which belong to outside-the-classroom experiential-learning activities, is that they cannot be easily integrated into the traditional classroom format.

Classroom-based experiential learning in international marketing seems to receive little attention despite the growing trend of globalisation, probably because it is more difficult to experience foreign events without travel. To some degree, the Internet has

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bridged the traditional distance barriers for experiential learning in international business. Experiential-based learning methods were proposed for other marketing courses, such as marketing research, marketing management, personal selling, sales management, principles of marketing, and promotional strategy (Toncar and Cudmore, 2000).

The project analysed in this paper falls into the category of loosely structured experiential-based classroom activities. In such activities:

- students are faced with an ambiguous situation;
- student learning occurs primarily outside class;
- students control the process and outcome of the assignment;
- students need a longer time period to learn the material and creatively apply the theoretical concepts (Hamer, 2000).

Loosely structured experiential activities have been shown to increase students' enthusiasm and satisfaction (Dabbour, 1997; Lawson, 1995), grades (Perry *et al.*, 1996), and the perceived value of education (Graeff, 1997).

The experience of SUNY Oneonta

International business students at SUNY-Oneonta needed to locate country-specific business information in order to develop an export marketing plan for a manufacturer of high-voltage capacitors located in Oneonta, NY, and an import marketing plan for a small art store located in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. The Appendix shows an example of the Custom Electronics case. International marketing teams (who worked independently) were located at SUNY – Oneonta, California State University – Chico, and the Amsterdam School of Business, The Netherlands.

Background of the project

In preparation for the project, the professors needed to look for companies who wanted to participate in the project. Despite the obvious advantages for the companies, the project had some potential drawbacks:

- it takes a great deal of company time to prepare the relevant information and communicate with professors and students;
- the resulting reports may be of little use to the company;
- information provided by the company may be sensitive in nature and leakage may be detrimental.

Despite these drawbacks the professors were able to recruit a number of firms that were willing to participate.

Globalview.org

Instructors used Globalview.org to facilitate cross-communication between student groups and faculty members. Globalview.org is an Internet-based programme managed by California State University – Chico. Linking universities around the globe, the association works with professors and students to conduct research for businesses going global. The programme had two sections that related to the students' assignments, a "global cases" section (consisting of live cases from across the world) and a WebCT section (a communication package). Live cases served as a component of a traditional classroom course. The format of the case analysis is very flexible and the cases can be used in a variety of ways, designed either by the students or their professors.

In the global cases section student teams needed to log on and enter a password that was provided by the instructor. Once the students logged on, they could view their assigned case and previous student or professor reports, upload their own reports, and update professors periodically of their status. The original intention was for student groups from the home country (export team) and the host country (import team) to collaborate on a combined project. It will be explained later why this did not work.

The second section of the programme was the WebCT communications package. In the WebCT section, students could read other groups' or professors' messages; post messages to all, or selected, student groups; compose or reply via e-mail to other student groups or any participating professors; and chat online in real time. The chatting provided students with a no-cost method of communicating with each other or other students across the world in real time.

International Business Web site

An International Business Web site was created to provide students with relevant

electronic resources (http://www.oneonta.edu/~libweb/subject/intbus.html). Both open access Web sites and subscription databases were included. The initial selection of Web sites was based on recommendations from books, journal articles, and other Web sites. Each Web site was then evaluated and categorised into separate modules:

- international companies, industries, competition;
- regional focus;
- country data sources;
- international marketing;
- international trade and economics;
- international finance;
- international law;
- international institutions;
- gateways to resources;
- consulting firms;
- international business employment;
- international business associations and societies;
- working papers.

The primary function of the International Business Web site was to provide relevant content in a condensed form. Therefore, the Web site was designed with a minimum of graphics in order to speed downloading time, and Javascripts (which can cause problems on some browsers) were avoided.

End products

The end products of the assignment were two typed reports of international business/marketing plans, which were submitted to the companies as well as to professors to grade. The students were so successful in achieving their stated objectives that the export company invited them to its headquarters to present their findings to its top management. The import team was contacted by the Dutch company a few months after the completion of the assignment. The company wanted to meet with students in New York to discuss their analyses.

Student outcomes

This assignment had several advantages over traditional class assignments, such as case studies, country analyses or textbook exercises. First, it utilised information technology to gather, analyse and interpret international business and economic data to generate information to solve practical business problems. Second, it used real firms both in the region where the students reside and in other areas of the world, leading to the development of analytical, communicative and interpersonal skills. Students saw that their work could actually have an impact on a company's decision-making processes and, thus, became engaged and interested in the results of their assignment.

Because experiential learning engages the students, its benefits to students include:

- increased understanding of the material and meaning of assignments;
- enhanced résumés (students can add the project to their personal portfolios);
- networking with industry, potentially helpful in the students' future endeavours;
- increased motivation because "real-world" experiences are learned;
- application of classroom knowledge leading to value-added skills for the company.

Students also develop relevant work-related skills and abilities. Four student outcomes are discussed in more detail.

Outcome 1: content knowledge of international marketing

A significant amount of information from a wide variety of sources was required to complete the assignment. In order to develop the international marketing plan, students needed to do a situation analysis (which included environmental, market, customer and competitor analyses) as well as develop marketing objectives, marketing strategy, and marketing programmes suitable to a foreign company or product. Knowing how to devise effective international marketing plans is critical to the success of a marketing manager in the emerging global marketplace.

Outcome 2: information management skills

Because teaching faculty are experts in their subject areas and librarians are experts at locating information, the librarian and the faculty member collaborated on the development of the International Business Web site and the teaching of information gathering and evaluation skills. The librarian and faculty member also provided individualised assistance in finding the information needed for the detailed international business/marketing plans. This approach was very successful as students

commented they had no idea there was such a wealth of information available, particularly on Web sites from foreign countries. The information gathering skills gained from this assignment should be very useful to students in their future business careers.

In addition, the librarian gave an instruction session on print resources, online subscription databases such as Lexis-Nexis, and Internet searching techniques. A library instruction session, in a classroom equipped with computers for each student, provided an overview of print reference books, subscription databases, and Internet resources. This two hour, hands-on session gave students the opportunity to search for information with the guidance of both the librarian and the business professor. Since projects dealt with international marketing for small businesses, print sources were used mostly for background information. Subscription databases, including *Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe* and the *National Trade Data Bank (NTDB)*, were used to locate items such as industry news, country-specific data, and journal articles on marketing.

Outcome 3: Internet skills

The Internet has revolutionised business and therefore also the paradigms of traditional business education. Related to information management skills, the effective use of Internet search techniques and tools can benefit the students in collecting and evaluating data from the Internet in many other settings.

Students were taught how to evaluate information found on the Internet using a Web site created by Susan Beck of New Mexico State University (Beck, 1997). In addition, the librarian demonstrated precision search techniques of the Internet using practices recommended by Danny Sullivan of Search Engine Watch (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000). The students developed fluency in using the Internet to locate relevant information.

In addition, the students used the Internet to interface with Globalview.org (www.globalview.org) to transmit, retrieve, upload and store project-specific information. From Globalview.org, students were required to download their assignments and view previously written documents. Then they were required to devise an international marketing research action plan with deadlines and post it in the global case section. Weekly status reports were used to engage students into action and monitor their progress unobtrusively on line. Finally, the completed reports were uploaded to the case for future generations of international marketing/ business students. The project, therefore, has continuity and succeeding cohorts of students can build on the collective knowledge of previous student reports.

Outcome 4: working on a team and communication skills

Several types of collaborations were required in the project. The first and easiest collaboration was among students within the team. They needed to meet regularly and report weekly on their progress. They also needed to write a joint paper and make a presentation to the class and to the client at the end of the semester. These exercises developed the students' communication, organisational and team-working skills required by today's business environment. Furthermore, students' presentations were used to enhance their ability to express themselves in public and to think on their feet, as the professor asked questions to test their understanding.

Students were also asked to collaborate with foreign student teams on the project. This cooperation never materialised properly. Among the explanations offered for this failure of cooperative efforts are: differing schedules and deadlines for participating students and professors; time differences among countries; and dependency, control and accountability issues. Student teams were pointing their fingers at each other for the lack of progress, rather than helping each other with parts of the assignment as was originally conceived. In a faculty meeting at the end of the semester, professors decided to use Globalview.org as a clearinghouse for international business cases across the world and as a communication hub for viewing and uploading documents, e-mailing and posting messages, and providing progress reports. Methods to ensure collaborative learning are being explored, but no solution has been reached to date.

Conclusions and implications

Recent advances in technology that make it possible to access resources in other countries

seamlessly through the Internet have created new opportunities for teaching courses with an international component. The global cases programme described in this article provides services to both the academic and business communities. Successful implementation of the proposed Internet-based experiential projects outlined in the paper can result in many positive outcomes for students, professors, companies, colleges and communities involved.

The assignment developed students' real world information management skills, integrated the latest information technology, helped with regional economic development, and provided companies with value-added services that will enhance their ability to penetrate international markets. Such assignments, therefore, benefit three major stakeholders: the students, the companies, and the local community.

Using global cases enables instructors to offer their students the opportunity to participate in global, experiential collaborative learning experiences. Professors can benefit from:

- a decrease in cheating behaviour due to the uniqueness of each project;
- enhanced student outcomes leading to success in promotion and tenure;
- increased interest in the material and its applications;
- variety in the classroom, which departs from textbook material.

Globalview.org provides services to both large and small businesses looking to broaden their markets. With connections to universities around the globe, Globalview.org makes finding the information companies need easier. Entrepreneurs have the advantage of an international perspective. Participating companies can benefit from:

- free consultation;
- increased knowledge;
- identification of potential future employees;
- links with local universities.

The university received recognition through the local newspapers, including *The Daily Star* (16 December 1999), which reported that SUNY Oneonta classes made international marketing plans for local firms. These articles increased public awareness of the degree of economic impact the college has on the local community. The college benefited from positive publicity and links with industry.

Finally, the community benefits from any economic development that comes from the potential expansion of local firms participating in the project. It also provides the community with a skilled, qualified, internationally-trained potential labour force upon graduation of the students involved in the project.

Future research

Future research can expand in a number of directions. One line of potential investigation could be how to ensure cross-country student collaboration. The association is working on solving this dilemma at the moment, but no solution has been found or mandated. One solution is to make part of the grade achieved in the class placed on efforts to collaborate. These efforts can be substantiated since an audit trail exists for all communications between groups.

A second problem, which was identified by students, is the loosely structured assignment style. Students are used to structured assignments that clearly describe what are the expectations and how to achieve them. A loosely defined outline of the final outcome of the assignment may clear the confusion among students.

In the fall 1999 semester four professors were involved in the alpha testing of the global case programme. The fall 2000 semester already has 83 professors from diverse countries such as the The Netherlands, Belgium, Israel, Kuwait, South Korea and Singapore. As the number of participants grows, a growing need exists to coordinate and administer the platform, and to monitor closely the quality of submitted cases. It was suggested that professors can join the association without submitting a case and more teams will work on each case. Also, lead professors and administrators should be identified on the site.

While to date the cases have been used to complement traditional classroom teaching, in the future they can be integrated into an Internet-based educational format. The Globalview programme is already on the Web, so including it as an element of an online course is a rather natural extension. More research can evaluate the usage feasibility in a virtual environment.

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Appendix

Custom Electronics, Inc.

1. Site location
87 Browne Street
Oneonta, New York 13820
Tel: (607) 432-3880
Fax: (607) 432-3913
www.customelec.com

2. Contact persons
John S. Bowers, PE
Engineering and Marketing Manager
ceieng@customelec.com

Ilan Alon, Ph.D.
State University of New York Brockport
Department of Business Administration
ialon@brockport.edu

3. Stage of development
Feasibility study

4. Areas of investigation
International marketing
International business
Business-to-business/Government marketing/Industrial marketing

5. Case difficulty
Medium to high

Objectives

- To seek out additional export opportunities in foreign markets;
- identify potential target markets for Custom Electronics in the import country;
- develop a list of potential customers and distributors in the import market; and
- determine the need to direct and adapt promotional materials.

Description of company
Custom Electronics is a "make-to-order" business (i.e. a job shop) for a very small niche in the electronics marketplace: high-voltage mica-paper capacitors and electronic modules (SIC Codes 3675, 3679). It has a low-volume, high-variety product mix. The main products are bespoke (i.e. custom-made) mica paper capacitors, Teflon film capacitors, polymer film capacitors, electronic modules, etc. For a fuller description of the product mix, please refer to the company's Web site (www.customelec.com).

The manufacturing cost per unit varies with each part. It depends on the content and type of materials and components, the type and amount of labour, the type and level of testing, etc. The company competes

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successfully in the market by offering high-quality, high-reliability, customised products, embodying high levels of technology.

Description of market

Custom Electronics customers include aerospace, satellites, oil and gas drilling companies as well as defence contractors and electronics distributors.

About 15 percent of the total sales are international. The company currently exports its products to the following countries: Australia, Austria, Canada, France, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Norway, Sweden, Taiwan, and the UK. The company has nine domestic and five international manufacturing representatives (i.e. Canada, Germany-Austria, Israel, Italy, and the UK).

Deliverables

This semester we will concentrate on the following countries:

MERCOSUR countries: Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay as well as associate members Chile and Bolivia.

East Asian Tigers: Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, Indonesia, and China.

Analyses should include:

Economic variables:

- GNP and multi-year trend;
- defence budgets and multi-year trend;
- inflation and growth rate;
- deficits and deficits as percentage of GNP;
- exchange rate and multi-year trend.

Political variables:

- system of government;
- conflict and/or cooperation with the USA;
- attitudes toward foreign business.

Demographic variables:

- population size and growth.

Social variables:

- similarity to the USA;
- language and English literacy;
- education level.

Competitive variables:

- relative labour costs (compared to the USA);
- size and strength of competitors;
- electronics industry trends.

Electronics-related sectors:

- Identify potential programmes/projects, customers, government information and cultural characteristics that impact the industries shown in Table AI.

Table AI Electronics segments and applications and applications of the electronic market

Market segments	Electronics applications
Alternative energy systems	Fuel cells (inverters)
	Solar (inverters)
	Wind (inverters, capacitors)
Commercial	HID lamps (igniter circuits)
	Motors (high temperature electronics)
	Power supplies
Communication	Cell tower systems
	Lightning management systems
	Radio transmitters
	TV transmitters
Electronic manufacturing services	Commercial
	Industrial
	Military/defence
Environmental	Corona discharge
	Fresh water treatment
	Pulse corona
	Triboelectrostatic separation
	Waste water cleaning
Food processing	Irradiation
	Ozonation
	Pulsed electric fields
	Ultraviolet (UV) light
Gas turbines	Aviation (ignition systems)
	Industrial (ignition systems)
	Maritime (ignition systems)
Industrial	Heating, ventilation, air conditioning
	IGBT modules
	Laser systems (marking, welding, etc.)
	Packaging systems (food, shrink wrap)
	Power quality control
	Power supplies (welding, etc.)
	Sensors
	X-ray systems
Medical	Defibrillators
	Laser systems
	X-ray equipment
Military/defence	Electronic safety and armaments
	Electronic warfare
	Lasers
	Power supplies
	Pulse forming networks
	Transmitters
Power generation, distribution and conditioning	Diesel engine generators
	Gas turbine generators
	Line traps
	Power factor correction
	Power conditioners/quality
	Uninterruptible power systems (UPS)
Satellites	Low temperature systems
	TWT power supplies
Scientific	Fusion research
	Particle accelerators
	Pulse power
Testing services	Electrical
	Environmental
	Physical
Transportation	Hybrid electric vehicles
	Large vehicles
	Locomotives