

An Innovative Way to Teach Comparative Cultural Theory: A Descriptive Study at a Peruvian University

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Abstract

One common problem Global Understanding (GU) instructors face is teaching students how to critically analyze the similarities and differences between cultures. Comparative cultural theorists like Geert Hofstede have provided frameworks that help students learn to process and categorize these similarities and differences, but their theories can often seem abstract and divorced from the practical life of 21st century students. However, Universidad ESAN in Lima, Peru has developed an experiential learning methodology to help students understand and apply comparative cultural theory, as well as use quantitative and qualitative research methods, experience data collection and analysis, and work together in international virtual teams. For the past three semesters, GU students at ESAN have been assigned the task of developing and applying an exploratory questionnaire based on one of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, teaching their GU partners in three other countries about their assigned dimension, helping those partners apply the questionnaire in their own countries and then comparatively analyzing the results together with their partners at an exploratory level. The result has been increased comprehension of comparative cultural theory, heightened interest in research and data collection and greater, more applicable experiences of mediated collaboration via virtual teams.

Introduction

Educators who desire to ensure their students' full comprehension of course subject matter must seek out ways to make that information interesting and relevant to the students in their classes. Especially in a 21st century context full of digital distractions, this often implies the use of technology and a practical, hands-on approach instead of the traditional reading-and-lecture-centered pedagogical paradigm so common in the past (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018; Stern, 2014; Cilliers, 2017; DuPlessis & Smit, 2014). According to Schweiger and Ladwig's 2018 meta-analysis on the most effective ways to attract and retain students in the contemporary classroom, teachers and professors who can successfully integrate a learning-by-doing methodology that includes digital aspects often find their Generation Z students are more engaged and interested in the class than they otherwise would be.

In 2017, Global Understanding professors at Universidad ESAN in Lima, Peru found themselves trying to teach students about comparative cultural theory, specifically about cultural dimensions, which are abstract, theoretical concepts, by using traditional methods. While these attempts met with mild success, the professors observed that deep comprehension of the subject matter was lacking: students were exhibiting only a superficial understanding of the theories being taught and did not display a deeper interest in those theories. In order to solve this problem, the professors decided to modify the way the theories were being taught in a way that would impact not only their students at ESAN but also students across the Global Partners in Education network.

Case Context

Global Partners in Education is an organization that exists, among other purposes, to facilitate multilateral cooperation between about 45 universities from around two dozen countries in all parts of the world (Global Partners in Education, n.d.; Global Partners in Education, 2018). GPE member universities take part in the Global Understanding (GU) Program, which matches member university GU classes with two or three other GU classes from different regions of the world per semester to participate in a series of videoconferencing “links” that last about three to four weeks each. During the links, students from the two countries have meaningful discussions regarding important aspects of culture and society: university life, family and cultural traditions, the meaning of life and religion, and stereotypes and prejudice (Global Partners in Education, n.d.; Global Partners in Education, 2017). In the last session of every link, pairs of students, one partner from each of the linking universities, present collaborative projects that they have developed regarding their cultural similarities and differences. According to the GPE website, the GU program is designed so that it *“helps students better understand both themselves and their place in the world as well as how to understand, respect and effectively collaborate with individuals from diverse cultures”* (Global Partners in Education, n.d.).

Universidad ESAN has been a part of the GPE network since 2009. As is common for universities participating in GU, the GU class sessions not spent in videoconferencing links with partner universities are usually focused on having students learn background information about their own culture and the cultures of the countries the partner universities for that semester are located in so that the students will be able to make a comparison of the cultures and understand their similarities and differences. One way for GU professors to help facilitate the comparison between cultures is through the teaching of comparative cultural theories, such as the cultural dimensions developed by Hofstede (1980), Hall (1976) and Trompenaars (1996). While the theoretical frameworks developed by these scholars definitely help students compare Peruvian culture to other cultures, many times students find the theories themselves very abstract and hard to understand. In order to solve this problem, GU professors at ESAN developed a methodology to help teach cultural dimensions through experiential learning and comparative research.

Review of the Literature

Social psychologist Geert Hofstede is well-known for developing a theoretical model for explaining the differences in national cultures that includes various “dimensions”

that purport to measure aspects of culture (2011). Cultural dimensions, according to Olivos (2016), are manifestations of culture that define “*the inner elements of culture composed of orientation patterns*” (p.). The dimensions Hofstede described include the following: Individualism versus Collectivism, which deals with the locus of human identity and people’s level of integration in social groups (Hofstede, 2011); Masculinity versus Femininity, which refers to whether gender roles are more differentiated and synthesized into society or they are the same for all people (Hofstede, G., Hofstede G. J., Minkov M. 2010); Long-Term Orientation vs. Short-Term Orientation, which refers to whether people are oriented to be more pragmatic or more normative (Hofstede, G., Hofstede G. J., Minkov M. 2010); Uncertainty Avoidance Index, which refers to the how stressed people feel when in uncertain situations (Hofstede, 2011); and Power Distance, which refers to how much society is willing to accept centralized and hierarchical power structures (Hofstede, G., Hofstede G. J., Minkov M. 2010).

Experiential learning, defined by the Association for Experiential Education (n.d.), “*is a teaching philosophy that informs many methodologies in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge [and] develop skills.*” Stern (2014) notes the importance of getting students outside the classroom and experimenting, reflecting on mistakes and turning to peers for suggestions on how to improve their ideas. Moreover, Wurdinger (2010) indicates that active learning and project-based learning can bring about enhanced results in the 21st century classroom, specifically. Schwieger & Ladwig (2018) indicate that classroom projects are especially attractive to the current generation of students and help them to “*gain hands-on experience, as well as develop [...] collaborative and group centered work skills, analytical [skills], problem solving, the ability to follow-through, coping, as well as oral and written communication skills*” (p. 51). Clearly from the literature, experiential learning is ideal for 21st century students.

Working in virtual teams is an increasingly common phenomenon, both in academia and in the professional world (Smith, 2014), related to the rise of experiential learning in the field of education (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018). Educational researchers are increasingly recommending more online elements that might even, in certain cases, draw from models used in social networking in order to maximize student learning in the 21st century (DuPlessis & Smit, 2014; Cilliers, 2017; Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018). Cilliers (2017) says that, because current students are already familiar with virtual environments, which many of them have participated since they were old enough to hold a cell phone or tablet, they “*expect a teaching environment in which they can interact in a similar way they do in their virtual worlds [which involves] replacing ‘communication’ with ‘interaction’*” (p. 195). This is because current college students are technically-oriented, pragmatic, experiential, and skill-focused, as well as avid social media users (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018), all traits which imply that an experiential learning approach utilizing virtual teams would be effective to teach them. Specifically, Bremser & Olivos (2017), who studied online interactions between German and Peruvian students, report that virtual teams, due to their low cost, efficiency and ease of use, are an ideal vehicle for allowing students to engage in cultural comparison.

Therefore, the theses of ESAN's GU professors when designing a new, experiential learning methodology to teach cultural dimensions were the following: First, teaching students about cultural dimensions through experiential learning would help them understand complex, abstract theories. Second, teaching students about cultural dimensions through experiential learning would help them understand quantitative and qualitative research methods. Third, teaching students about cultural dimensions through experiential learning would help them understand how to work in virtual teams at a more sophisticated level than working with the traditional collaborative project presentation topics would.

Research Method

To implement an experiential learning methodology in their classes, GU professors at ESAN in 2018 first introduced Hofstede's cultural dimensions on the first day of the semester. In the first or second week of class, students were asked to form pairs and choose one of the cultural dimensions they had been introduced to. The class was then given a practical lecture on questionnaire construction, and, after that lecture, each pair of students researched its selected cultural dimension in depth and composed an initial version of a questionnaire with three sections: a demographic information section with questions regarding subjects such as age and gender, a quantitative section composed of items measured on a five-point Likert scale designed to measure respondents' orientation regarding the dimension at hand and a qualitative section composed of open questions designed to help explain *why* people responded to the quantitative items the way they did.¹ The demographic questions were the same for all student pairs in each class. (See Table 1 for an example questionnaire from the second semester of 2018.)

After developing their initial questionnaires, each pair of students was asked to test its questionnaire in class with classmates in order to detect items that needed to be edited or modified in order to be clearer or to elicit a more relevant response. This process produced a second version of the questionnaires, which the students then posted to a forum in the virtual classroom on the university's digital platform. Students were asked to give specific and descriptive feedback and constructive criticism to one another regarding their questionnaires and then edit their questionnaires a second time based on their classmates' comments. After this step, they turned in a third version of their questionnaire to their professor, who made any remaining minor, necessary changes in order to ensure questionnaire clarity and focus.

Table 1

Example Student Questionnaire on Hofstede's Power Distance Dimension

¹ The exact demographic questions and the number of questions in the quantitative and qualitative sections varied based on the semester. For example, students in the first semester of 2018 were required to include 10 quantitative items and 10 qualitative questions, and their demographic questions focused on gender, age, education level, size of childhood city, race, and religion. Students in the second semester of 2018, in contrast, had to include 10 quantitative items and only 5 qualitative questions, and the demographic questions on race and religion were omitted.

Demographic Questions	
1. What is your gender?	2. What is your age?
Male	From 18 to 26 From 36 to 44
Female	From 27 to 35 45 or older
3. What is the highest level of education you have attained?	4. Where did you spend most of your years growing up?
Unfinished high school	A rural area A medium-sized city
Some university or technical school training	A small town A large urban metropolis
University or technical school graduate	
Postgraduate studies	
Likert-Scale Questions	
For the purpose of this research, please rate the following statements on the following scale of 1 to 5. You may explain your answers if you would like.	
5 Strongly agree	4 Agree 3 Neutral/Neither disagree or agree 2 Disagree 1 Strongly disagree
1. It is better for a group to have one clear leader as opposed to many people making decisions.	
2. When I have to make a decision, I usually ask for acceptance from my boss, teacher or parents.	
3. I would rather address my boss or teacher in a formal way as opposed to using his or her first name.	
4. Due to their position, managers and supervisors must receive more privileges than their subordinates.	
5. It is easier to fit into an organization when people precisely know everyone's place and role.	
6. We must follow the rules at the university or at work without questioning them.	
7. The best type of educational system does not encourage students to express their personal opinions through debates.	
8. Society's rules are good because they help maintain the social order.	
9. A company should not have different levels of autonomy depending on the department.	
10. I usually have a great deal of respect for my teachers or bosses due to the positions they hold.	
Open Questions	
1. How involved should everyday citizens be in the way our country is run? Can you give an example of ideal political participation? Why do you feel this way?	
2. Some companies are very hierarchical in the way decisions are made, and other companies ask all employees for a lot input in the decision-making process. What do you think the ideal decision-making model for a company is? Why do you feel this way? Can you give an example of how companies should make decisions?	
3. When elections take place, do you think that everyone should be required to vote, or should voting be optional? Why do you feel this way?	
4. How do you think the clothing that workers wear affects their performance at work? Would it be better to wear casual clothes or formal clothes at work? Why do you feel that way?	
5. Some people feel that from an early age, children should be encouraged to express their opinions and defend their positions. What do you think about this idea? Why do you have that opinion?	

(Students from Section S-003 of Global Understanding, Universidad ESAN, second semester of 2018).

Once the final questionnaires were ready, each pair of students was asked to use its questionnaire to interview ten Peruvian respondents: five women and five men of varying ages and backgrounds. Students were asked to record their respondents' answers in the way they saw fit: with a pencil in a notebook, in Excel on a laptop or with the voice recording application of a cell phone. Liberty was given regarding the recording method, but students were asked to accurately and faithfully record their respondents' ideas and opinions.

Once the solicited data had been gathered, students were asked to analyze their results in Excel or a similar computer program. They needed to look for patterns in the quantitative data: what was their respondents' overall "score" in their cultural

dimension? Also, did any item receive especially strong responses? Were there any patterns to be seen regarding gender, age, or other demographic factors? Students also needed to look for patterns in the qualitative data: what sorts of explanations did respondents give for their ideas? Were the same sort of explanations offered by all respondents, or did their explanations vary based on gender, age, or other demographic factors? How might these explanations also shed light on the quantitative data obtained?

After students had analyzed the Peruvian results of the questionnaires, ESAN's GU professors asked each of their two to three GU partner professors for the semester if, for the link's collaborative projects, their students could apply their ESAN partners' questionnaires in their own countries. If the partner professors were amenable to this idea, each pair of ESAN students was responsible for explaining their cultural dimension and questionnaire to their collaborative project partner(s) at the partnering institution. They also needed to answer any questions their partners had regarding how to select respondents and use the questionnaire to carry out interviews. Once their partners collected data for their own country, the ESAN students helped them analyze the results and look for patterns in the data.

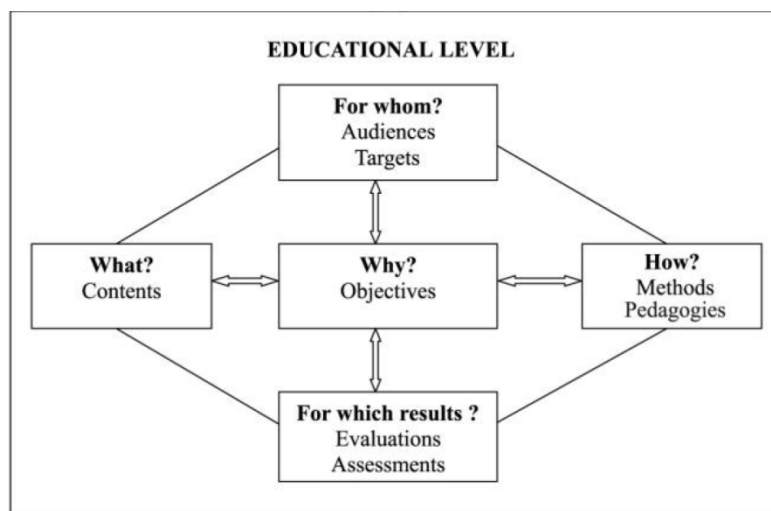
In each collaborative project presentation carried out in this way, student groups presented the data for their respective countries and compared the results of the questionnaire for Peru and for the partnering country, focusing on general patterns (i.e., which country had a higher level of the dimension than the other, according to the quantitative section of the questionnaire), on specific patterns (e.g., if there were similar relationships between gender or age and the ways respondents answered questions) and on explanations given in response to the qualitative questions in both countries. After comparing the results, an analysis was given and the research assessed: were findings similar to what Hofstede and his colleagues discovered decades ago, or were there significant differences in the two sets of data? If there were differences, students were encouraged to hypothesize regarding reasons for those differences: were they different most likely due to problems in questionnaire design, due to students' un-honed interviewing skills, due to differences in sample between countries² or differences between the 20th century researchers' and the 21st century students' sample³? Was there probable cause to believe that cultural change had occurred over time, making Hofstede's data outdated?

A teaching model framework created by Fayole & Gailly (2008) serves to explain the logic of teaching comparative cultural theory through the methodology explained above (Figure 1).

² As in some partner universities, students interviewed only their classmates or sometimes 9 men and 1 woman: samples which differed from their Peruvian partners' more diverse sample.

³ As Hofstede's sample consisted of mostly male IBM employees in 1970s, which is not necessarily comparable to the sample of 5 men and 5 women of diverse ages interviewed by the students in 2018.

Figure 1
Teaching Model Framework



(Fayole & Gailly, 2008)

In this case, the audience would be student participants in the GU program (“For whom?”), the content would be Hofstede’s cultural dimensions (“What?”), the goal would be to enhance and deepen student learning of the theoretical model (“Why?”) through the use of a questionnaire that inquires about the target culture in terms of behavior, values, customs and preferences (“How?”) that, in turn, reflect the cultural dimensions of the Hofstede model. The outcome (“For which results?”) is assessed and evaluated to confirm two facts: the students’ ability to grasp the essence of the theory and to confirm with the responses to their questionnaires and the comparison with other countries’ responses the characteristics of the cultures being studied.

Results

The results of this exploratory, descriptive study were obtained throughout each semester and at the end of each semester. Students’ behavior and informal feedback provided valuable insight into their learning progress and learning process with the experiential learning methodology used in their classes. First of all, students did report at the end of the semester via informal feedback that they felt they had learned a lot about cultural dimensions because of the research they had carried out. Out of necessity, each pair of students had become the classroom “experts” on its chosen dimension through reading about that dimension and through conducting firsthand research regarding it: writing and editing a questionnaire, applying the questionnaire, and analyzing the results for four different countries. Additionally, in the end, after watching one another present on their respective cultural dimensions on three separate occasions, it can be said that students were also secure that they understood one another’s assigned cultural dimensions and not only their own. Test results confirmed their enhanced comprehension of target material.

Second, constructing, editing, and applying their research questionnaires did teach students more about both qualitative and quantitative research methods. One indicator of students’ learning curve was how, within only one or two months of

creating their questionnaires, they were able to clearly and objectively identify their questionnaires' strengths and flaws and suggest practical and viable ways to improve the questionnaires in the hypothetical future. Several students each semester mentioned in the last class session or afterward that they would be interested in conducting similar interview-based research in the future for their undergraduate theses.

Third, due to the more complex nature of this style of collaborative project, ESAN students necessarily had to work more closely with their collaborative project partners in other countries. Instead of simply doing "their part" and expecting their partners to do the other half of the project, as many ESAN GU students in previous semesters had done, the students in 2018 honestly collaborated with their foreign partners on each and every step of the research project preparation. This is, in part, because ESAN students were responsible for explaining to their partners regarding the project concept and the project methodology, as well how to interview people using the questionnaire, how to interpret questionnaire results, and how to compare results across countries. In order to accomplish this goal, students reported that they engaged in far more synchronous chats and exchanged far more email messages with their foreign partners than they did when engaging in a traditional GU collaborative project, which they did when GU professors at partner universities refused to participate in the cultural dimensions research collaborative project. This means that the experiential learning methodology allowed students to be able to practice virtual team collaboration skills more intensively than otherwise.

Discussion

The experiential learning methodology implemented by the ESAN GU classes to teach cultural dimensions in 2018 had very positive results. Taking a hands-on approach with the material allowed for students to become engaged and invested in the cultural dimensions they worked with on an intellectual and an emotional level. This is precisely what the Association for Experiential Education predicts, stating that, in experiential learning, "*learners are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, soulfully and/or physically. This involvement produces a perception that the learning task is authentic*" (n.d.). It was only natural, then, that student comprehension of the heavy, theoretical models that in previous semesters had presented difficulties increased not just in volume but also in depth.

Students also gained deeper insight into the research process. It is only logical and intuitive that the ideal way to learn a methodology is through experiential learning in which that methodology is practiced. It is unsurprising that this turned out to be the case in the ESAN GU classes. As the Association for Experiential Education states, in experiential learning methodologies, "*experiences are structured to require the learner to take initiative, make decisions and be accountable for results*" (n.d.).

Finally, the experiential learning methodology fostered a greater depth of collaboration via students' virtual teams. As already mentioned, giving undergraduate students so much responsibility for a project that was truly complicated helped them, in most cases, to personally identify with the research they were carrying out and helped empower them to take charge of their projects and bring them to a successful conclusion. Effectively, it gave them an internal locus of control, which increased

their motivation to make sure the projects were done well (Sutton, Baum and Johnston, 2004). In the process, it was also more relevant and more closely resembled real-life virtual team collaboration that students might encounter in the professional world. As the Association for Experiential Education states, “*the results of the [experiential] learning are personal and form the basis for future experience and learning*” (n.d.).

Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be said that an experiential learning methodology applied through cultural dimension research projects met the stated objectives of the ESAN GU professors. Through this methodology’s implementation, students were able to understand cultural dimension theory at a much deeper level than before, grow in their understanding of both quantitative and qualitative research methods and gain more practical experience working in virtual teams than they otherwise would have. The intensive, experiential nature of the product encouraged students to become more invested in their own learning than when they used traditional GU collaborative project methodology.

It is necessary, however, to highlight the exploratory, descriptive nature of this case study. Because the population that used the methodology was small (four semester-long classes of 8-18 students each) and consisted entirely of undergraduate students at one Peruvian business university, results may not be entirely extrapolatable for all university student populations in all countries. However, it is important to mention that European exchange students also took part in the methodology both semesters, and both they and students in Malaysian and Chinese partner university GU classes reported the same highly positive results as the Peruvian students.

Future research of this or similar experiential learning methodologies used to collaborate with international partners should make sure to formally survey students regarding their perceived depth of knowledge of the theoretical framework to be learned, their comprehension of how to use quantitative and qualitative research methods, and their ability to successfully work in virtual teams with international partners. A control group using the standard GU collaborative project methodology should also be used.

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