

From Abstract to Concrete:

Decision Making, Cultural Understanding, and the Global Partners Program

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Abstract

Teaching decision analysis helps countries improve national processes, yet successful application requires managing cultural differences. To help ensure student success, the Global Partners in Education's Global Understanding courses improve the ability of students to manage varying cultural contexts, encouraging cross-fertilization of ideas. Having said that, how does the GPE alter instruction in cross-cultural understanding and in decision-making to provide this success? To answer this question, I evaluate concepts of three areas of instruction: decision analysis, cross-cultural analysis, and the GPE. First, how does each of the three approach their subject? Second, what insights do they provide about each other? Finally, how does interaction among the three areas affect student performance? Combining decision and cultural models with the Global Understanding approach allows students to address these issues both directly and indirectly, ensuring ecological validity, that is, ensuring that they provide 'real world' insights. As with any models, repeated application of core principles allows students to move from the abstract to the concrete more readily. The Global Understanding approach addresses this challenge by repeatedly taking students in and out of their experiential and substantive backgrounds, making contact with the rich complexity of human understanding more routine.

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A few years ago, a Russian public administration professor described managing decision-making in his country to my seminar on cross-cultural decision making. My students were surprised at the similarities, despite the different cultural contexts of our two countries. I resisted the urge to say, “See, I’m not making this stuff up.” Digging deeper, important cultural differences emerged and it was not so much in how to structure alternatives, but in the roles and objectives of participants.

Sharing decision techniques internationally improves processes, yet managing cultural differences remains critical to successful application. The similarities and constraints we encountered appear in virtually all fields of study. How can faculty ensure student success? A refined knowledge of a culture is a beginning, but students may interact with many cultures during their careers. Understanding cross-cultural interactions is typically addressed through one or more cultural models. However, until students place the cross-cultural and decision models into the real-world context, thus moving from the abstract to the concrete, the models are only academic exercises.

The Global Partners in Education (GPE) program, managed through East Carolina University’s Global Academic Initiatives office, uses Global Understanding (GU) courses to enhance cultural awareness and adaptation as one solution. Just as medical students practice by seeing patients with similar symptoms arising from different causes, students learn to operate in a cross-cultural environment by actively applying the models in a wide range of cultural contexts.

Students at approximately 60 universities world-wide engage in video conference discussions and prepare joint projects. How does the GPE enhance conventional decision-making and cultural awareness instruction? To answer this question, this study evaluates the conceptual underpinnings and interrelatedness of the decision analysis, cultural modeling, and GPE approaches. Specific models represent each form of instruction. The ‘Smart Choices’ approach of Hammond, Keeney, and Raiffa (2015) represents the decision-analysis section. Two models present the complexity of cultural analysis: Grid-Group Theory (Wildavsky, 1985, 1987; Douglas, 1992a, 1992b; Spalding, 2000), and the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1986, 1993). Discussion on the GPE approach follows. Review of each approach addresses several questions. First, how does it see its subject, and how does it work? Second, what refinements do the specific versions described here bring to understanding the subject? Third, what qualities and challenges emerge?

Modeling Decision-Making

The structure for successful decision-making which is based on evaluating the relationship between objectives and alternatives is used world-wide (See Hammond, Keeney, & Raiffa, 2015; Brusman, n.d). The approach supports negotiation skills, as each side prepares by evaluating its own circumstances and those of the other side. It thereby establishes the overlap between mutually acceptable outcomes and the chance of success.

In the decision analysis literature, scholars focus on one or more of three areas: structure – arenas, voting rules, etc.; process – the analysis of interactions; and issue definition – norms and values that color actor goals and strategies (Steiner, in Williams, 1988). Modeling decisions as presented below falls under ‘process.’ Refining the model typically focuses on technical

issues, such as assessing consequences or calculating risk (Starkey, Boyer, and Wilkenfeld, 2015; Zeager, Ericson, & Williams, 2013).

Organizing Improved Decisions

Hammond, Keeney, and Raiffa (2015) provide the following steps for making more effective choices with the core principle being to first decide what you hope to achieve based on its constituent desiderata. For example, objectives surrounding technical equipment might include price, performance, reliability, etc., to establish what you actually would like and for rating alternative solutions:

- Identify Objectives.
- Develop an array of Alternatives which can achieve some or all of the objectives given the constraints of the environment. Note that value of alternatives will vary with their ability to fulfill the various objectives. Further, it is critical to avoid confusing alternatives and objectives: the path should not be turned into the goal.
- Consequences and risks: Assess individual alternatives based on which objectives they fulfill – some being more important than others - and the likelihood of success.
- Decide which alternative best fulfills the set of objectives. This step is complex as some alternatives may fulfill different concerns among the objectives.

As an example of this process, Table 1 presents a concern which originated within a Global Understanding class. Faculty must choose a collaborative project for students from the partner institutions to work on together.

Table 1 Choosing Collaborative Project Topics			
	<i>Alternative 1</i>	<i>Alternative 2</i>	<i>Alternative 3</i>
<i>Objectives</i>	Arts/Literature	Family/ Relationships	Regional Development
Training in general English conversation	Moderate-High	Moderate-High	Moderate
Training in cultural awareness	High	High	High
Training in professional language application	Moderate	Moderate	High
Training in pedagogy	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
General knowledge exchange	High	High	Moderate
Technical expertise exchange*	Low	Low	High
<i>Risks</i>			
Impact of mismatched specialties	Low	Low	Moderate
Risk of mismatched specialties**	High	High	High
Chance of special request topic	Low	Low	Low
Chance of special request students	High	High	Moderate

*ECU's Construction Management Program currently has such projects with a Dutch university.

**As an example, a program specializing in English might link with one in political science. The course structures and cultural questions are the same, but the field content may differ significantly.

Objectives in the chart reflect various goals that university programs might achieve through participation, with some programs pursuing language acquisition and others focused on

improving substantive expertise. The weight of an objective reflects its role in a class or field (e.g., English language students gain more from general conversation while students preparing for professional practice as with law, business, or science, might gain more from professional language applications).

The three alternatives pursue different expertise though all are grounded in expanded cultural awareness. An arts topic, for example, considers humanistic aspects of culture while a family topic may reflect more social-science considerations. Regional development issues involve STEM fields. Thus, the consequences of each alternative vary according to university program goals.

In this example, risk reflects whether students can collaborate by operating from different subject expertise. Partners are typically assigned randomly, so there is a chance of topic mismatch. However, the consequences of a mismatch are usually modest except with STEM fields where differences in expertise can hamper higher-order cooperation. STEM classes have been successfully matched online as with courses in construction management and cardiac medicine. However, these require careful organization.

Refinements

In assessing alternatives, people can make errors because of their personal psychological predispositions. Hammond, Keeney, and Raiffa (2015, pp.189-215) identify eight such errors or ‘traps’ associated with decision making and how to avoid them. Avoiding the traps is essential in developing a useful list of alternatives and also ensuring a fair assessment of them.

Psychological traps.

- Anchoring: The mind gives excess weight to the first information it receives.
- Status-quo: Preferring ‘the way things are’ makes many people risk-averse.

- Sunk costs: Making choices based on existing patterns from past decisions.
- Confirming evidence: Seek evidence that supports our views and ignore others.
- Framing: How you frame the issue affects the choices that you will consider.

Estimation and forecasting traps.

- Overconfidence: Memory of past successes causes us to ignore risks.
- Prudence: Opposite of Overconfidence, as a fear of risks limits possibilities the other way.
- Recallability: Relying on memory rather than actual information in assessing problems.

Qualities

The Decision Making approach brings a number of valuable characteristics to the evaluation process.

- Provides a systematic organizational structure for identifying and ranking options.
- Encourages careful review of issues, constraints, and resources.
- Helps avoid pitfalls of hasty or inadequate preparation.
- Strengthens awareness of the concerns of others.

Challenges

Despite the benefits, success with the Decision-Making approach – as with most academic disciplines – requires that students have a sufficiently broad experience base to be able to assess the feasibility of the alternatives. The students must develop a clear understanding of constraints:

Who can make a decision? What is the impact of status? Consider the following:

- Do students understand the difference between a socio-cultural and an institutional hierarchy?

- What constitutes winning? That is, does everyone see objectives the same way? Is any agreement better than no agreement?
- Do parties see consequences the same, e.g. are principles negotiable or fixed?
- Is uncertainty about the other party's values creating poor choices, e.g. making concessions before negotiations to get people to the table (Cohen, 1997)?

In summary, the Decision-Making model provides a solid mechanism for evaluation, but success requires acclimation to ranges of issues. The challenges to the approach reflect the competing directions in the decision literature mentioned above. Hammond, Keeney, and Raiffa (2015) intend to refine 'process' but success also depends on managing structure and issue definition. Globalization makes issue definition loom in importance as it changes the way conventional structures and processes function. The presumed solution is cultural training but given the breadth and depth of culture, we must consider how to make it effective as well.

Modeling Cultures

At first glance, moving from evaluating decisions to cultural modeling represents a dramatic shift. However, the larger framework of decision research creates a close relation between the two. Cultural modeling seeks to manage the rich array of substantive material associated with different cultures.¹ Models will vary based on which aspects of culture scholars choose to focus on (Matsumoto and Hwang, 2013).

In evaluating decisions, we are less interested in why a culture emerged a particular way but instead ask how the culture's traits will affect interactions. To answer this question, we must

¹ "Culture is defined as the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization. These shared patterns identify the members of a culture group while also distinguishing those of another group." CARLA Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, University of Minnesota. <http://carla.umn.edu/culture/definitions.html> The site provides numerous other definitions, varying by views on significant aspects of cultural organization, effects, and transmission.

first distinguish and categorize different cultural types based on relevant characteristics. Second, we must understand attitudes about cultural differences i.e., how might people feel when contacting a different society? These questions pursue the broader pedagogical issue of how to make students sufficiently familiar with other cultures that they can reliably distinguish among them. The two models presented below, Grid-Group Theory (Douglas, 1992a, 1992b; Spalding, 2000; Wildavsky, 1985, 1987), and the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1986, 1993) provide examples of efforts to address these questions and reflect the strengths and pitfalls of such efforts.

Grid-Group Theory

Cultural typologies usually distinguish communal and individualistic societies and note parallel distinctions (Cohen, 1997). For example, a communal society, one with strong social awareness, is often also classed as a shame culture where someone violating social norms demeans everyone in the group. Alternatively, misbehavior in an individualistic society brings opprobrium to the perpetrator alone.

Grid-Group Theory explores how societies build and sustain moral commitments or community. ‘Grid’ (i.e., prescription) refers to social rules that affect choices: high grid indicates a numerous binding rules the people follow in managing interpersonal relations (i.e., deference, etc.), while low grid indicates greater individual discretion. ‘Group’ reflects how people identify with bounded groups with high group actors selecting choices based on a stable group association and low group actors having weak social identification, negotiated relationships, etc. (Spalding, 2000).

Table 2

The Grid-Group Matrix.

Grid-Group Theory	<i>High Group</i>	<i>Low Group</i>
<i>High Grid</i>	Hierarchical	Fatalistic/Despotic
<i>Low Grid</i>	Egalitarian	Individualistic

Combining the grid and group features produces the four categories in Table 2. Hierarchy groups involve strong social identity with extensive social rules that people use to make judgements. ‘Individualistic’ groups involve weaker family and social ties, and greater likelihood that people will challenge or ignore established norms. Egalitarian groups involve strong group identity but the importance of the group itself outweighs other norms. Fatalistic/despotic groups have norms imposed by whoever is in power and change on a whim. Some examples of different groups include: Hierarchical – Japan, India; Egalitarian – Cuba, Venezuela, Denmark; Fatalistic – North Korea, Somalia; Individualistic – Netherlands, Australia

Refinements

In relating culture to decision making, the typical approach is to focus on a specific culture or national style as with Schechter (1998), Cogan (2003) and Smyser (2003). More comparative representations of culture and decision making (e.g., see Cohen, 1997) emphasize a dichotomy reflecting high-group (communal/social) and low-group (individualistic) traits. The Grid-Group model improves comparisons by adding the second ‘Grid’ axis, refining the set of observable categories. Reviewing the conceptual underpinnings identifies the following:

Qualities

- Provides students with a systematic basis for differentiation.
- Adds important categories (egalitarian and fatalistic/despotic) to cultural discussion.
- Provides foundation for deeper analysis of specific cultural traits.
- Allows deeper comparisons within and across similar and different cultural categories, e.g. Hierarchical-Hierarchical comparison or Hierarchical-Egalitarian comparison.

Challenges

- Does not include parallel axes found in dichotomous models, e.g. monochronic-polychronic time, guilt-shame cultures (Cohen, 1997).
- Observers must distinguish organizational hierarchy from social hierarchy.
- Conceptual validity - What are appropriate categories for identifying aspects of culture, and what are the boundaries between them?
- Ecological validity – testing the model’s application to the ‘real world’?

The Grid-Group model allows refined identification and evaluation of cultural categories. The greatest challenges with Grid-Group are first, whether the categories fit the analytical goals of a given project, and second, whether students can easily distinguish between organizational and social hierarchy. For example, all bureaucracies tend to be hierarchically structured but they exist in all four model categories. Students must be able to operationalize the categories successfully if the model is to work.

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity

This second cultural model asks how people feel about other cultures. Here, researchers can assess both how people perceive their own attitudes and how an outside observer would assess them. Hammer et al. (2003), Matsumoto and Hwang (2013), and Takai (2015) include it in their

reviews of cultural awareness tests noting both its wide-spread use and some issues associated with its application. Takai (2015) notes that there are more than 100 assessment self-report instruments available.

Table 3

Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

Ethnocentric	→	Ethnorelative
Denial → Defense/ → Minimization →		→ Acceptance → Adaptation → Integration

The following terms capture how people feel about different groups:

- Denial – Other groups are irrelevant.
- Defense/Reversal – Other groups are a threat (Reversal – view home culture as a threat).
- Minimization – Differences exist but are trivial.
- Acceptance – Respect for differences.
- Adaptation – Can participate in different cultural contexts.
- Integration – Can apply a wide range of cultural alternatives to a problem.

As people interact with cultures, researchers can assess how they react to the new context.

Minimization, for example, expresses openness to other cultures, but actually masks a lack of cultural awareness, treating important differences as unimportant. As with the other models, conceptual review provides some insights.

Refinement and quality

The DMIS divides general attitudes based on important psychological responses to cultural differences. Further, it permits distinction between perceived and objective attitudes.

Challenges

A number of problems also emerge from the review: Should the categories be seen as neutral conditions or as achievements? Conceptual validity - What are appropriate categories for identifying aspects of culture, and what are the boundaries between them? For example,

- Can we distinguish between integration as synergistic thinking, and integration as masked minimization, that is, 'I will draw on collective wisdom' vs. 'I am smarter than everyone else, so I can do what I think best.'
- Can we distinguish between learned cultural attitudes and personality traits?

Ecological validity – testing the model's application to the 'real world'? (Matsumoto and Hwang, 2013);

Do these categories merge to create different cultures? That is, do my attitudes about culture reflect my interactions with people who share those views? Does a given category reflect a person's attitudes toward *all* other cultures, or only *specific* cultures, or only specific cultural traits?

These problems with DMIS reflect a general problem with teaching about culture. In the abstract, many people might agree that toleration and respect are good ideas but that does not mean that people understand the implications of dealing with other cultures. Routine actions in one country might be considered disrespectful in another. Developing a deeper appreciation for other cultures requires an appreciation for the specific and concrete as opposed to the general and

abstract. This change comes from experience rather than instruction alone and hence the need for the Global Understanding approach.

The Global Understanding Approach

The Global Understanding (GU) approach is a systematic structure for providing students with concrete experience dealing with other cultures and countries. By engaging students from other countries regarding progressively complex material, course participants gain direct experience dealing with an array of cultural differences thereby developing awareness and insights about other cultures as well as their own.

The GU classes provide structured interactions between sets of university students from countries involved in the Global Partners in Education Program. Using video-conferencing and online chats, students discuss a series of pre-arranged topics intended to introduce cultural characteristics and attitudes to participating students. The discussion is supplemented by having teams of students from each institution develop collaborative projects where they delve more deeply into a specific topic of interest.

The Course Process

GU courses present introductory material on one of several major fields with about half of the time spent on field content and the other half conferencing with Global Partners in Education universities overseas. Typically, each course will link with three universities from different countries for 5-6 sessions each although this may vary. Because the students at partner schools may not be studying the same major field, interactive topics reflect GU Program guidelines: College Life, Family and Cultural Traditions, Meaning of Life and Religion, Stereotypes and Prejudices, and a mutually agreed upon Free Topic. These topics gradually

increase in abstraction and cultural sensitivity, allowing students to become accustomed to working with people from different backgrounds and to discuss complex issues.

During linkings, faculty act as facilitators rather than instructors, allowing students to take the lead in the interactions. Students will spend time in video or chat, thereby varying the intensity of participation as they move through topics. Discussions are supplemented by collaborative projects where teams made up of students from each school develop a joint presentation on a topic of interest. Finally, students are required to assess their experience by submitting a journal.

Refinements

GU classes fulfill key functions of education. Substantively, the program does not impose a particular point of view on students but allows students to gain experience explaining their own views and comparing them with the experiences and beliefs of others. Analytically, reflective journals ask students to assess how they and their partners see issues. Further, if partners have not addressed certain topics, students must infer information from group interactions. Thus, they derive meaning from integrating ideas.

Qualities

GU classes provide a broad range of enhancements to teaching:

- Direct contact with multiple cross-cultural environments.
- Changing focal point of analysis – moves in and out of individual expertise.
- Structured environment.
- Student-centered interactions.
- Moves through multiple environments, country by country.

- Variety within the approach supports the different ways students learn: listening, discussion, reading.

Challenges

As with any educational model, the biggest challenge is usually working with varied student backgrounds. This can be subdivided into a number of important issues:

- Substantive – varying degrees of student preparation, e.g. the importance/role of meaning of life questions in various countries.
- Awareness of and familiarity with the topics.
- Personality and preparation, e.g., the relative extrovertedness of the students.
- Language – typically links are in English but language skills vary.
- Technical: Availability of equipment and facilities; varying technical standards; available financial resources.

The challenges associated with managing GU would be found in any learning environment. It falls to the faculty facilitators to prepare and guide students through this challenging environment.

Linking the Approaches: Moving from the Abstract to the Concrete

The discussion above leaves us with a wide range of questions, each of which is grounded in the implications of dealing with cultures. Sorting through each section's challenges provides important insights about the problems. For example, the intent of cultural modeling is to build understanding of how to approach other cultures. Blending the cultural model with the traps identified by the decision model refines our perspective on the challenges. The following questions reflect this refinement.

- Are we really integrated, or do we just think we are? Traps listed with the decision model indicate that we must be cautious when assessing a cultural situation. We can easily assume that we have some special insights which cause us to overlook the significance of some culturally grounded opportunities. Instead of being integrated, we are minimizing the value of cultural traits and perspectives.
- If we are having a psychological rather than a cultural shift (e.g. reversal), are we actually getting anywhere, or are we just confused?
- How do we make our own choice without losing respect for others? This is a culturally charged question, to put it mildly. How much respect are we talking about?
- What does knowing about hierarchy tell us to do when working with one?
There is always more information – all hierarchies have similar qualities under the models, yet they do not match. Why is this, and how do we decide what to do next?

Alternatively, the cultural modeling also informs decision making.

- How does changing cultures change decision traps? For example, is a hierarchical society more likely to encourage a status-quo trap?
- Does understanding the role of stereotypes reduce the influence of an anchoring trap?
- What can knowing about a country's culture tell us about their risk profile?
- Will different countries weight the consequences of a given alternative the same way?

Combining decision and cultural models with the Global Understanding approach allows students to address these issues both directly and indirectly, ensuring ecological validity for the other approaches, that is, ensuring that they provide 'real world insights. As with any models, repeated application of core principles allows students to move from the abstract to the concrete more readily. The Global Understanding approach addresses this challenge by repeatedly taking

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