

Expanding Experiential Learning Opportunities to Alumni for the Development of Job-Search Skills: A Case in a Peruvian University

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Abstract

At Universidad ESAN in Lima, Peru, a blended workshop using videoconferencing technology, online forums and minimal local class discussions was carried out through the Global Partners in Education (GPE) network from August to November 2017. The workshop was voluntary and facilitated interaction between Peruvian students and students from the US, Mexico, and China over the course of three modules. The participants from Peru were a heterogeneous group consisting of undergraduates and recent graduates, some pre-professional participants and some who were already working. Upon completion of each module, they were surveyed regarding their perspectives on this international virtual experience and how it could positively impact their professional lives. The students' diverse perspectives shed light on the ways in which intercultural interaction via information and communications technology (ICT) can be used to increase participants' future professional success due to the principles of acquiring new skills and improving employability.

Introduction

Educators and organizational leaders at institutions of higher education are concerned with the professional profile of their graduates and how well it matches the skills that companies and organizations are currently demanding in the labor market, as this has important implications for graduates' employability. However, in order to make sure students acquire these employability skills at the highest levels possible, it must be taken into account what pedagogical methodologies and learning experiences should be employed and at what point they should be offered to students.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has stressed that higher education should do more to emphasize student engagement in interdisciplinary activities and immersive interactive real-time learning experiences (Linkyou, 2017). The aim of these activities, according to the OECD, is to support students' learning of communication in an intercultural context and to prepare them for the requirements of the current globalized job market.

This exploratory case study discusses the results of a voluntary intercultural skills workshop in which both undergraduate students and recent alumni, some already working and some not, participated in videoconferencing sessions with students from universities in three other countries. First, the situational and institutional context is explained, followed by a review of the relevant literature. Next, the results of a post-module workshop survey are analyzed for relevant and applicable findings. These findings are then discussed and connected to a broader context, and recommendations for future educational application are provided.

Case Context

Ever since 2009, Universidad ESAN in Lima, Peru has been a part of the Global Partners in Education (GPE) network. GPE is an organization that includes around 45 member universities from 25 nations around the world (Global Partners in Education, n.d.; Global Partners in Education, 2018). These universities participate in the Global Understanding (GU) Program, in which students participate in a semester-long course in which they videoconference with students from other nations about cultural differences so that, according to the GPE website, they can “develop intercultural communication skills, learn to value others’ perspectives and acquire strategies for effectively working together to complete projects” (Global Partners in Education, n.d.).

A typical GU semester consists of three videoconferencing “links” with three different partner universities. Each link typically lasts three to four weeks, during which students discuss various aspects of their respective cultures: 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). A link culminates with the presentation of collaborative projects carried out in student groups with members from both universities. In the weeks that the GU class is not linking with another university, there are discussions about theoretical frameworks related to intercultural communication and interaction, international business, and the culture of the university’s home country.

By August of 2017, ESAN had been participating in the GPE program for eight years, and it was decided that the GU experience, called “Global Environment for Business” at ESAN, should be offered on an experimental basis to recent alumni as well as traditional undergraduates. With this end, the Monday-Wednesday evening section of Global Environment for Business was opened as a voluntary workshop instead of a traditional course. The workshop consisted of three “modules,” which corresponded exactly to the three scheduled GU links. In other words, workshop participants did not take part in local, theory-based class sessions between the three links; they only participated in the scheduled videoconferencing sessions and worked with their international partners on their collaborative projects, along with fulfilling other minimal academic requirements: reading support articles about the country of the partner university, posting in online forums regarding lessons learned, and writing a short reflection paper after the link had concluded. In addition, participants could choose only one, two, or all three of the modules offered. The workshop was offered to both current undergraduate students and recent graduates of ESAN’s undergraduate and graduate programs.

One of the interesting aspects of the heterogeneous population of this study is that it offered the opportunity to glean insights into the ways that recent graduates and working professionals can learn employability skills from the intercultural interactions facilitated through information and communications technology (ICT). It also allowed for a comparison of the impressions of both employed and non-employed recent graduates with those of undergraduate students.

Review of the Literature

In the current global economy, it is critical for recent graduates entering the job market to possess basic employability skills, abilities that employers deem necessary for them to operate as successful professionals. “Employability” is defined by Jeswani (2016) as “being ready to work” and includes knowledge, attitudes, and business skills to meet organizational goals (p. 8). According to the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), there are 16 basic employability skills that can be divided into six basic categories: Basic Competency Skills (reading, writing, and computation), Communication Skills (speaking and listening), Adaptability Skills (problem-solving, creative thinking), Developmental Skills (self-esteem, motivation and goal-setting, and career planning), Group Effectiveness Skills (interpersonal skills, teamwork, and negotiation skills), and Influencing Skills (understanding of organizational culture and the ability to share leadership) (Carnevale, Gainer & Meltzer, 1990).

However, according to Rosenberg, Heimler, & Morote (2012), recent graduates, university faculty, and company recruiters do not always see eye to eye about which of these basic skills are most important or what skill level recent graduates have actually obtained in their time studying at institutions of higher education. Indeed, it could be said that there is a lack of clear communication of expectations and perceptions between graduates, companies, and educational institutions.

The US Department of Labor, together with the Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), carried out research regarding the basic skills required for workers to help US industries to be competitive and reported in 1991 that “students believed that employment skills were learned on the job, through participation in extracurricular activities or simply by osmosis” (p. 9); according to the results of the 2005 edition of the study, inadequacies regarding employability skills were related to work ethic and accounted for negative business performance.

Additionally, the 2009 Job Outlook report from the US National Association of Colleges and Employers stated that employers consider communication skills to be the most important asset for employability and, at the same time, the one which recent university graduates in the United States lacked the most. It was proven by a recent study into supply and demand for higher-level skills conducted by Universities UK (2015) to be an international phenomenon, not just a North American one. It was claimed that “most employer surveys indicate a demand for technical and job-specific skills while also demanding a wide array of general employability skills, such as communication team work

and commercial awareness, entrepreneurial and data analysis skills.” It can definitely be said, as Rosenberg, Heimler, & Morote put it, "The need for additional training of recent graduates appears to be a major concern" (2012, p. 15).

Research Method

The population of participants in the Global Environment for Business workshop at ESAN included current undergraduates who were not employed yet (NEU), one employed undergraduate (EU), recent alumni who were not employed (NEA), and recent alumni who were employed (EA). The result was a heterogeneous mix of perspectives and life experiences through which the videoconferencing experience was filtered.

Four EA, two NEA, and three NEU took part in the module on the United States. Two NEA and two NEU took part in the module on Mexico. Two EA, four NEU, and one EU took part in the module on China.

After each link, a survey was conducted in order to assess the perceived effect of the workshop on the participants' employability skills (see Appendix 1). The survey consisted of questions regarding both the content of the workshop and the technology used in the workshop. Once the results from all three modules were collected, qualitative content analysis was used to identify the major themes the students identified regarding the usefulness of the workshop experience.

Results

One of the most noteworthy results highlighted in the surveys was the recognition of the usefulness of the workshops in increasing employability skills by the alumni and employed undergraduates. As one EA who participated in the China module explained, "Understanding a different culture can help us in new business activities as well as in making new friends in other countries." One NEA said of the United States module, "In the case of careers, it is essential to take cultural awareness courses. In all the jobs that I have had in English, it was very important to know how to interact with foreigners. In marketing we work with all types of people so learning their customs and how to relate to them seems to me the most interesting part of the course."

In contrast, NEA mentioned occasionally that the workshop would help them professionally in the future, but they put much more emphasis on the social benefits and the increase in general knowledge that the workshop offered. One NEU who participated in the Mexico module stated, "[The workshop] helped me a lot, 'cause [sic] I think I have learned about another Latin America country and realized that even though we are from the same continent we do have some differences in different terms, such as traditions, habits, etc."

More specifically, the results of the survey show that there were five general ways in which participants identified that the workshop would help them grow professionally. First of all,

four participants, all of whom were either employed and/or graduated, mentioned that it had helped them learn how to manage intercultural or international business relationships better. One NEA said of the US module, “I learned how to handle different people from around the world.” Similarly, an EA who participated in the US module said, “The importance of the workshop is to understand the difference between American society and Peruvian [society], in order to manage relations. In my professional life I work in international banks.”

Another benefit that some participants mentioned was that the workshop would improve their intercultural communication skills at work. One EA who participated in the US module stated, “Understanding the culture helps me to know new ways of communicating with people from the USA. At the moment, I work with the USA [sic] office, and now I can understand more insights that are a difficult matter at work.” In the same vein, a NEA and a NEU (both in the US module) said the workshop specifically helped them to know how to negotiate better with foreigners and that this could help them professionally in the future.

Yet another way several participants said the workshop had improved their professional outlook was by giving them an opportunity to practice their English language skills. Peru is a Spanish-speaking country, and some Peruvians might not have many opportunities to practice English beyond educational settings. One EA commented on the China module, “I believe this workshop helped me to develop my skills to not only practice English but also learn how to communicate with foreign students, with different cultures, schedules and thoughts.”

Next, one EA who was applying to masters degree programs stated that her participation in the workshop would help her present herself to others as a more capable professional due to the credentials the workshop gave her: “[I can adapt] a great workshop to my CV ... [this] says that I was interested in other countries and perspectives [and] would look good on my job application [and applications] for my postgraduate [studies,] and the best part [is that] I can take some parts [of the workshop experience] for my thesis work.” In a similar but much more general way, a NEU who participated in the Mexico module identified a way in which the workshop helped her identify more professional opportunities for herself: “[Mexico and Peru] are very similar, particularly in culture and values. I think that I wouldn't have problems if I worked there.”

Furthermore, a few participants identified that the workshop would help them professionally but in general terms of “sharing culture” and “increasing intercultural understanding.” For example, a NEA who participated in the US module said of the workshop, “I consider that it taught me to have a more open idea about the intercultural context in the USA. The developed skills such as sharing of ideas and getting to know another culture [will allow] me to develop a more successful professional life.” The only EU who participated in the workshop, specifically the China module, stated, “This workshop was very important for me, both for my job and for my university degree program, since although I already had knowledge gained while working in China for six years, the workshop served to help me understand the culture of this country more in

depth, to understand other aspects than those I already knew, which will serve me in my professional life.” Although the observations about how the workshop will help the participants professionally are general, they are grounded in careful thought and focus on its value for their future professional life.

One final pattern worth mentioning is that every single one of the participants surveyed in all three modules stated that they would recommend this workshop to friends because they found it interesting and useful. One EA who participated in the US module even went so far as to say, “Honestly, I believe it is an excellent idea to offer [this workshop] to graduate[d] students because we have been studying for so long, but this shows us how [intercultural communication] actually is at work. You learn more specific stuff about your career and what you are specifically doing at the moment.”

Discussion

Indeed, the participants of the Global Environment for Business workshop were able to identify key ways in which the intercultural interactive experience mediated by ICT was useful to them. More specifically, alumni and employed participants were much more mindful of the ways the workshop would help professionally, perhaps due to the fact that they were more focused on the practical applications of the intercultural experience as opposed to the social and theoretical aspects. As alumni are more aware of the skills they need to learn in order to advance professionally, these findings line up with Rosenberg, Heimler, & Morote (2012) in their emphasis on the need for recent graduates to reconcile their lack of employability skills with the requirements of the labor market. It also corroborates the findings of Olivos (2016), who states that videoconferencing or synchronous interaction through international, interactive sessions conducted by expert faculty provides intercultural knowledge acquisition in students and also facilitates the development of social values, cultural values, and the appreciation of diverse cultures.

Regarding the skills that the participants believed the workshop experience would help them develop, one of the most prominent was the ability to effectively manage intercultural business relations. According to the ASTD categorization of employability skills, it would fall under the category of “Group Effectiveness Skills” (Carnevale, Gainer, & Metzler, 1990). The fact that so many participants mentioned it as an important skill they learned from the workshop resonates with the recommendations of Boni & Calabuig (2017), who say that universities should provide both formal and informal spaces to promote global citizenship and group work within the university community.

The second important skill the workshop increased, according to participants, was intercultural workplace communication skills, including the ability to negotiate, as negotiation styles are culturally dependent (Weiss & Stripp, 1998). The third aspect the participants identified as improved was their English language abilities. Both of these skills would fall under the category of “Communication Skills” in the ASTD categorization (Carnevale, Gainer, & Metzler, 1990). As the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2009) point out, this category of employability skills is ironically the most necessary and the most lacking in recent graduates, and, therefore, it is one of the

categories of employability skills that most needs to be reinforced among recent university graduates by experiences like this Global Environment for Business workshop.

The fourth aspect reported to be beneficial them was the increased professional credentials the experience provided, which could be categorized under Developmental Skills in the ASTD categorization (Carnevale, Gainer, & Metzler, 1990). The fifth value of the experience was increasing their overall cultural knowledge for business. It is worth mentioning that cross-cultural competencies are skills highlighted by Adler and Bartholomew (1992).

Finally, it is important to highlight that all the participants unanimously stated that they would recommend the workshop, with its brief theoretical overview, its videoconferencing, and its international collaborative projects, to their peers. This indicates, in addition to being beneficial for the undergraduates to whom the normal Global Environment for Business course is usually offered for academic credit, that such an experimental kind of informal experience could still be quite valuable to those who are no longer studying toward a traditional undergraduate degree (such as graduate students and working professionals) and that it could help fill in the gap in recent graduates' employability skills that many researchers indicate needs to be filled (Rosenberg, Heimler, & Morote, 2012; US Department of Labor, 1991; US National Association of Colleges & Employers, 2009; Universities UK, 2015).

Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be said that universities can provide students and alumni with internationally-focused academic activities through the use of ICT in order to promote the acquisition of employability skills, especially skills related to communication and intercultural competence. A virtual workshop such as the one described is an example of the way this can be done, and it results in the acquisition of a set of skills related to communications, teamwork, cultural awareness and experiential learning opportunities. In turn, these skills could help students and, notably, alumni improve their employability.

An especially important finding of the current study is that recent graduates might benefit more readily from such experiences than current undergraduates as recent graduates are probably becoming aware of the gaps in their employability skills and are more likely to be actively looking to fill the gaps. As such, it is the tentative recommendation of this study for universities to offer more interactive, intercultural experiences like the Global Environment for Business workshop to recent graduates of their academic programs.

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Appendix 1

Global Environment for Business Post-Module Survey

1. Please mark the appropriate option: I am a ___ student ___ graduate.
Are you currently working? ___ Yes ___ No
2. About the content of the workshop: please explain how you think what you have learned can positively impact your professional life.
3. About the methodology and the use of the technology in the workshop:
Do you feel comfortable with communicating via the different media? ___ Yes ___ No
Which one is your preferred medium for the workshop?
___ VC ___ Social Media ___ Chat ___ Forum
Comment on your choice.
4. Would you recommend this workshop for others? Why or why not?

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