

Into the unknown: A critical reflection on a truly global learning experience

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Over the past decade, industry relevance and connectedness have evolved into a key requirement for students and their parents, who increasingly perceive employability upon graduation as a critical factor in the degree selection process. Simultaneously, professional bodies emphasise the need for high levels of industry engagement as a condition for accreditation, which in turn further impacts on the 'marketability' of a specific degree. However, many of the skills emphasised by potential employers and industry reference groups are more closely aligned with generic graduate attributes, rather than discipline specific knowledge and skills. This increasingly includes an emphasis on cultural awareness, excellent communication skills and the ability to work in dispersed, often even virtual teams. This observation is arguably particularly relevant within the business (degree) context, where workforces become increasingly multicultural, as traditional borders and limitations make way for transnational opportunities.

This paper discusses the benefits and challenges associated with a third year student project that set out to combine the need for discipline specific knowledge, with the acquisition of versatile, culturally sensitive business skills. Students participating in the aptly titled 'communications challenge' competed against their peers as part of multicultural teams, representing twelve countries, across five continents. The authors conclude that experiential learning opportunities like this global, real life client project may not necessarily be popular amongst the wider student cohort. Furthermore, the acquisition of discipline specific knowledge may be limited when compared to 'traditional' teaching deliveries. However, projects like this provide a number of benefits, in particular in the context of capstone units that set out to prepare students for a diverse career in an increasingly global, multicultural and complex environment.

Introduction

This study took place within the context of a third year, compulsory public relations unit, taught as part of Curtin University's Bachelor of Commerce. The focus of the public relations curriculum, and consequently this paper, is therefore on business education and the skills required to succeed in an increasingly global and versatile environment.

Almost four decades ago internationally renowned academic and author on business and management Henry Mintzberg (1976) argued that the ability to manage – or even to embrace – 'ambiguity' and complex environments is a key to a successful career in business. This level of complexity has not decreased in today's business environments. Instead, as professionals operate in an increasingly global, interconnected environment, it may be argued that both the level of complexity and ambiguity have increased, thereby placing additional emphasis on traditional management traits such as adaptability, flexibility and problem solving skills. In order to prepare students for a career in a dynamic, ever changing business environment, the public relations program at Curtin

University has embraced work integrated across all units, placing a particular emphasis on its industry closeness and on the development of so-called soft skills. However, the classroom environment is essentially an artificial setting, which has its limits when it comes to equipping students with transferable skills and a real sense for the complexities that await them upon graduation, which future employers expect them to be prepared for (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick & Cragnolini, 2004; Mason, Williams & Cranmer, 2009). Furthermore, 'uncertainty' and 'obscurity' are not particularly popular with students (Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2009; Wolf, 2010). In reality, students frequently request guidelines and templates, which remove the perceived 'risk' from the learning experience.

This paper details the challenges and benefits associated with an international communications challenge project which forced students to abandon the relative safety of the classroom and the familiarity of the local study environment. Whilst not all students felt comfortable with the increased levels of uncertainty and 'risk', we argue that those who embraced the global learning opportunity gained skills and insights that extended well beyond the scope provided in the traditional classroom environment. They were thereby able to better prepare themselves for a career in an increasingly versatile, global and multicultural industry.

Experiential learning in business education

As early as in 1976, Mintzberg encouraged educators to make greater use of experimental and creative skill-development techniques, which allow students to not only practise their interpersonal, but also informational and decisional management skills. Mintzberg (1976) called for a balance between analytical and intuitive skills, recognising the value of both right and left brain thinking and thereby ultimately improving students' career opportunities. These recommendations were largely based on his argument that "effective managers seem to revel in ambiguity; in complex, mysterious systems with relatively little order" (p. 53). Despite an increased emphasis on work integrated and experiential learning, the authors argue that nearly four decades later traditional classrooms continue to frequently fail in providing students with the necessary level of appreciation for the complexities of the business environments they are to enter upon graduation.

In Australia, work integrated learning is now being recognised as integral to the curriculum as Australian universities come under increased pressure to produce work-ready graduates (Green, Quin & Luca, 2005). Work integrated learning has been defined as

[l]earning which is embedded in the experience of work: which may [be] work which is paid or unpaid; or full-time or part-time; or formally endorsed as part of a university course; or extra-curricular and complementary of studies; or totally independent of studies; in the past, present, or future; and which is made meaningful for a student when reflected upon in terms of personal learning and development occurring as part of a career development learning experience or course-related process. (Smith, Brooks, Lichtenberg, McIlveen, Torjul & Tyler, 2009, p. 8)

Moreover, employability upon graduation is a critical factor for students - and their parents - when selecting where to study (Green, Quin & Luca, 2005). In dynamic environments, employability depends on the ability to adapt. Consequently, industry, parents, students, governments and industry bodies are demanding that universities produce students with generic, versatile workplace skills, as well as traditional discipline specific skills (Bates, 2004; Green, et al., 2005; Kerr & Proud, 2005). Such versatility is necessary for today's graduates as research predicts that they will change their jobs 8-12 times during their working lives, in addition to 3-4 complete career changes (Khare, 2007). Furthermore, the fast changing nature of jobs and technology means many of today's students may work in jobs that do not yet exist (Jukes & McCain, 2001), further emphasising the need for versatile, transferable skills. Accordingly, Rundle-Thiele, Bennett and Dann (2005) argue that higher education institutions should focus on students' acquisition of lifelong skills rather than demonstration of knowledge. Hence, the inclusion of work integrated learning into university courses improves graduate employability because it enhances the acquisition of industry relevant skills (Reeders, 2000).

The ability to work in teams has been particularly emphasised by potential employers, especially within a business context (Gray, Ottesen, Bell, Chapman & Whiten, 2007; Hodges & Burchell, 2003; Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008). For example, public relations graduates will be expected to work as part of multi-disciplinary teams and are expected to communicate effectively with staff across all levels of seniority and specialisation. Crebert et al. (2004) further suggest that students' ability to work collaboratively is the single most important factor in ensuring the development of other, associated skills and abilities.

As businesses operate increasingly across traditional cultural boundaries and borders, teamwork has progressively shifted from traditional, face to face collaboration to virtual teams. The 'virtuality' factor presents a number of additional challenges (Lipnack & Stamps, 2008), including the need to work across different time zones, to overcome cultural and language differences and to establish a sense of trust (Greenberg, Greenberg & Antonucci, 2007), despite the absence of face to face contact. Despite the growing availability and popularity of online courses, undergraduate students have only limited exposure to the virtual team learning experiences. In fact, Hertel, Geister and Konradt (2005) argued that even business team managers and leaders are often insufficiently prepared for the virtual team leader (VTL) role and associated challenges. Consequently, there is increased pressure on educators to teach effective virtual leadership. The GlobCom communications challenge, the project at the centre of this paper, has the potential to address this gap in the current curriculum.

The central role of work integrated learning in public relations

Work integrated learning is now seen as an imperative part of the university experience (see for example Patrick et al., 2008; Smith, et al., 2009). Course accreditation by industry bodies often requires universities to have some form of work integrated learning in the curriculum. For example, within the context of this study, the Public Relations Institute of Australia's (PRIA) course accreditation process particularly emphasises the importance of

work integrated learning and industry integration throughout the public relations curriculum. In its guidelines for universities the PRIA states:

The PRIA encourages the use of experiential learning strategies and recommends engagement with industry professionals throughout the public relations degree. This could include opportunities for guest lectures from industry professionals, real world assessment tasks sourced from industry, case studies, work experience and internships to name a few. Applicants for accreditation are required to outline how engagement is represented in their degrees (Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2009).

The pedagogy around work integrated learning is based on experiential learning theory and can be best described by Kolb's (1984) learning cycle (Weisz & Smith, 2005), which in particular emphasises the value of observation and reflection as part of the learning experience. Experiential learning theory defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). Kolb and Kolb (2005) describe the creation of learning spaces for the enhancement of experiential learning including: respect for learners and their experience; starting learning with the learner's experience of the subject matter; creating and holding a hospitable place for learning; making space for conversational learning; making space for development and expertise; making space for acting and reflecting; making space for feeling and thinking and making space for learners to take charge of their own learning. Experiential learning, when done well, leads to deep learning. Deep learning involves paying attention to underlying meaning and is focused on the use of analytic skills, cross-referencing, imaginative reconstruction and independent thinking. Surface learning, in contrast, is associated with rote-learning and simple description (Warburton, 2003).

By positioning the learner as an active participant in the learning process, the 'teacher' acts increasingly in a facilitator role, encouraging students to build on prior knowledge and to explore the learning context and associated challenges. Hence, the key to learning, particularly to deep level learning, rests on the students' ability to reflect on the learning experience, to integrate this experience with their academic knowledge and to conceptualise their learning so that they ultimately bring together their work and their academic experiences to solve problems in unfamiliar environments. However, the environments students are traditionally exposed to do not tend to be 'radically' unfamiliar. Guest speakers, industry case studies and real life client scenarios are all highly valuable learning tools that are deeply embedded in the public relations program; however, they tend to occur in the relative safety and familiarity of the classroom. Industry placements may force students to explore a different setting and company culture; yet, the assessment criteria tends to be set by university staff, hence resembles a marking system and expectations students are already familiar with.

This paper provides insight into an international learning project that forced students to not only leave the relative safety of the classroom, but also the familiarity of their cultural environment. By working in truly international, cross cultural teams, students could no longer rely on the cultural and learning context they had become well acquainted with.

Such a high level of unfamiliarity was not popular with all students and required time to adjust. This paper provides insight into first hand feedback from students who embraced the ambiguity, complexity and unfamiliar nature of the international communications challenge, ultimately emphasising the project's benefits in terms of increasing cultural awareness and management skills, over subject specific content.

About the *Global Communications Challenge (GlobCom)*

This paper provides in-depth insight into the associated challenges and benefits of an international learning experience. Public relations students were invited to participate in the 2012 Global Communications Challenge (GlobCom, 2013) as part of the third year International Public Relations unit. GlobCom runs across five continents, encompassing students from twelve different universities, in twelve countries. Participating universities in the 2012 challenge represented (in alphabetical order) Australia, Germany, India, Italy, New Zealand, Portugal, Russia, South Africa, Spain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA) [1]. Curtin University has been the dedicated Australian representative in the challenge for the past five years.

The GlobCom Project is run and coordinated via the GlobCom Foundation, an initiative by Germany-based Dr Volker Stoltz. Its aim is to create a platform for intercultural cooperation amongst students and lecturers in the fields of communications, or public relations. Dr Stoltz, a former Chief Executive for the global communications agency Weber Shandwick, initiated the GlobCom project due to the dearth of relevant skills he observed in practitioners working in an international context and the increasing demand by global organisations for graduates with international and intercultural experience. Consequently, the GlobCom project was designed to train students as part of multicultural teams in realistic, client-centred transnational situations.

GlobCom sees students compete in global virtual teams, each of which represents all twelve participating universities. In these cross-cultural teams they produce a public relations 'pitch' document in response to a client brief, prepared in one of the participating countries. Previous clients have included Zeiss and Airbus. The 2012 GlobCom client was AGEDI, the Abu Dhabi Global Environmental Data Initiative. Perth-based International PR students had the option to actively participate in the GlobCom Project as part of one of the eight global teams. However, those students who felt uncomfortable about the risks and challenges associated with working in a virtual team had the opportunity to work exclusively with their local peers. The decision to only work locally made them ineligible to travel to the GlobCom final and symposium at the end of the semester.

Local and international teams received the same client brief and had to develop and submit a PR solution as a *PowerPoint* presentation, like in a real life pitch situation. How the final pitch document was developed and which tools team members would use to effectively collaborate was left to each global team, although support and mentoring was provided by the group of international academics. Each team was expected to elect a global team leader, in addition to the local team leader at the country level. Each university

incorporated GlobCom slightly differently into the existing curriculum. For Curtin University students the GlobCom project formed the major assessment for the undergraduate International PR unit (30%), which focuses extensively on cross-cultural communication. However, academic staff had no control or knowledge of the content of other university participants' courses. Global team participants, who had the time and resources, were invited to travel to Abu Dhabi to deliver a live 'pitch' to the client as part of a two day conference. A total of twelve Australian students travelled to the UAE in June 2012, where they met their global team members and networked with over one hundred GlobCom participants from ten of the twelve participating universities [1].

GlobCom offers students an authentic, truly global, experiential learning experience. It encourages participants to draw on their existing knowledge, whilst remaining open to new ideas, concepts and approaches to public relations from their international team members. Consequently, GlobCom enables the International PR unit to move beyond the relative safety provided in earlier public relations units, by encouraging students to embrace the complexities associated with working in multicultural teams across a wide range of time zones. It challenges students to address a client brief that originates in an unfamiliar cultural context; not written by local teaching staff, but a real life international client. This arguably further increases the usual level of ambiguity associated with real life cases, which are recognised to develop students as self-directed learners and problem solvers; adding a level of 'realism' (Razzouk, Seitz & Rizkallah, 2003). Finally, the experience forces students to solve technological challenges in a timely and effective manner, with minimal interference by teaching staff.

As part of this learning cycle, Australian students were asked to reflect and provide feedback on their participation in GlobCom 2012. Throughout the semester students were assessed based on the level of critical reflection in video diaries, which were uploaded to the unit's learning portal. A number of students indicated that the major learning outcome was not subject specific knowledge, but instead a new appreciation for the challenges and opportunities associated with working in multicultural teams. Their feedback will be explored in more detail in the following section.

The research questions posed in this paper are:

1. What are the major learning outcomes of a truly global student project based on experiential learning?
2. Do global learning experiences, such as GlobCom, prepare students for the challenges presented by the increasingly multicultural, global business environment?

Methodology

This paper explores qualitative and quantitative data gathered shortly after the culmination of the 2012 GlobCom Project in Abu Dhabi. Participants across all twelve universities were invited to participate in an 18 question online survey that was designed with the aid of *Qualtrics Online Survey Software* (<http://www.qualtrics.com/>). Questions explored demographics, technologies used and the virtual team experience from a public relations

learning experience. While some quantitative data was collected, the aim of the survey was to uncover the ‘deep learning’ of respondents. For the purpose of this paper we were particularly interested in the open ended sections that encouraged students to reflect on the learning outcomes and perceived challenges associated with the GlobCom experience. Responses were analysed by both authors independently for key themes.

Results and findings

The data collection was slightly hindered by the fact that for most students the teaching term had finished prior to the 2012 GlobCom symposium. Some students had already graduated, and their university email account disabled. A total of 62 valid responses were received from eleven of the twelve participating countries. This represents a 34.8% response rate, based on the number of students at the start of the challenge. USA-based participants had to unfortunately withdraw their support towards the end of the project due to timetabling issues. Individual students from other locations may have also decided during the course of the project to withdraw from the unit and/or the challenge itself. Figure 1 shows the number of responses by country.

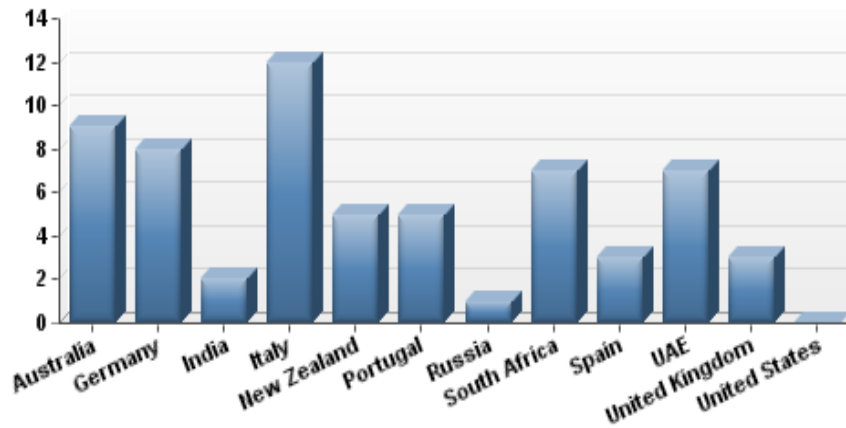


Figure 1: Survey respondents by country

74% of respondents had attended the 2012 GlobCom symposium in Abu Dhabi (the response rate hence representing 45% of total attendees). Therefore, the assumption can be made that as they invested time and money to travel to the UAE, these students were arguably highly involved and active. This high level of engagement may have influenced the survey results.

Student reflections on learning outcomes

A total of 91% of survey respondents were somewhat to very satisfied with the GlobCom experience, despite 94% stating that they perceived the project to be somewhat to extremely challenging. However, only 66% of the same sample group believed that the experience had increased their understanding of international public relations. This

relatively disappointing result indicated that students did not necessarily gain the international PR skills teaching staff had traditionally focused on. The main learning outcomes were cultural awareness and in particular the accumulation of generic business and 'life skills'. As two participants explain:

GlobCom was a very hard project; it was rewarding but it was definitely difficult working within a cross cultural team of such magnitude. GlobCom helped me socially, not academically (female, aged 20, Australia).

I have learned so much while participating in GlobCom 2012, everything wouldn't fit in one page. I have learned to work with people from different cultures, improved my diplomatic skills, enhanced my time management skills, and grasped the key approaches to developing a PR campaign (female, aged 24, UK).

As indicated earlier, each of the twelve participating universities integrated the GlobCom communications challenge into the existing curriculum. As a result, each institution's involvement has been largely dependent on the initiative taken by the country-based, coordinating academic staff member, which in turn determined the unit into which GlobCom was embedded. Hence, the level of public relations knowledge and advancement of the degree varied from country to country. Students from one university came predominantly from a marketing background and consequently commented on how much they had learned from their peers about public relations. However, teams equally included postgraduate students and final year public relations majors, who in turn expressed their frustration about the perceived lack of 'previously assumed' knowledge amongst some of the participants. Furthermore, public relations is a relatively young discipline and highly dependent on the cultural context in which it is practised. Similarly, the physical location of the public relations degree may influence how it is taught and interpreted. For example, Curtin University's public relations degree is one of only two degrees in the country that is based in the business school. More commonly, the subject tends to be located within humanities or the arts. Therefore, the way PR is positioned and taught may vary from one institution to another, adding an additional level of complexity for participants:

It was confusing doing this project in the international pr [sic] unit (not for me but for other students across the world), their input was confusing because it came from a completely different background. I do understand that is the whole point ... (female, aged 19, Australia).

Despite adding a level of frustration for some participants, the need to work with students who possess different skill sets reflects the 'real world' of communications practice. Practitioners are recognising the need for integration and cooperation across the previously often separate but related disciplines of public relations, marketing and advertising. For example, in a recent Public Relations Institute of Australia column, a senior practitioner acknowledged that his "successes (and mistakes) in dealing with the

digital age have helped [him] to conclude that the future of PR lies in full integration of the communication disciplines of PR, Marketing, and Advertising” (Mercer, 2012).

The feedback survey was deliberately constructed as to not prompt students’ responses regarding expected learning outcomes. We were particularly interested in their personal observations and reflections. With exception of students from the previously mentioned marketing course, survey respondents highlighted management and business skills as the key learning outcomes of the GlobCom experience, including team work and time management.

I learnt the most about team dynamics and the importance of good communication and organisation (female, aged 18, Spain).

How to manage time zones and conduct meeting. Working in team with whom you never even seen before was tough but thanks to social network and advanced technology it made our lives easy (male, aged 20, Italy).

I learned to work in a team and to accommodate [sic] various people from different countries and time zones. I also learned new tools or communication programs to communicate with (female, aged 21, New Zealand).

Due to the geographically dispersed nature of team members, Australian participants commonly attended meetings between 2 and 3am, which ensured minimum disruption for the majority of participants, but was not popular with all students. Different time zones also meant being mindful of other team members’ schedules, planning ahead and anticipating issues or potential follow up questions. However, respondents recognised that geographical and time differences perform an increasingly prominent role in today’s public relations industry and that the exposure and ‘management’ of such a global challenge would add valuable experience to their curriculum vitae.

Technology played a particularly prominent role in this context, encouraging students to try out new tools and platforms to overcome the difficulty of organising a face to face meeting or phone conference that suited all team members:

How technology and working in global virtual teams can assist in breaking cultural barriers! How, even though we come from different parts of the world, we all share in common goals and similar academic challenges and successes! (female, aged 24, UK).

Although students were introduced to a number of tools such as wikis, the GlobCom portal and associated team sites, as well as chat software, most teams tried out a range of communication tools before finalising a ‘tool box’ that best suited the preferences, existing tool familiarity and most importantly access of their team members. Typically, teams would use real time chat software, such as *Skype*, plus emails and regular communication via social media platforms, such as *Facebook*, which emerged as the common denominator amongst students from all countries.

Listening skills and conflict resolution played a very prominent role in the GlobCom challenge:

I learn a new way to work with other people that although they study almost the same as you, you have some different [sic] way to do the things and you have to get an agreement of wich [sic] way to develop the things (male, aged 19, Germany).

It was nice to learn that though people from different countries, coming from different cultures differ on a lot of aspects, can come to a consenses [sic] when the matter is discussed and explained to everyone (female, aged 21, South Africa).

However, cultural awareness, tolerance and sensitivity were emphasised the most, as expected (or at least desired) by participating universities:

I learnt that PR is very much a global industry/function and I witnessed first-hand the importance of being culturally aware for the successful implementation of any PR plan. I also learnt how to interact with people from entirely different backgrounds and I had a lot of fun while doing so (female, aged 23, UK).

Its [sic] one thing to read about international PR but to see it in action is another thing all together. Symposium as highlights, in teams coming together (female, aged 24, Australia).

Comments like these emphasise the value of an international communications challenge in particular as part of an international public relations unit. As business environments become increasingly multicultural and globalised, so do public relations. As 'intermediaries' and advisors, PR consultants will be expected to prepare clients and businesses for potential challenges and provide guidance in regards to cultural differences, expectations and etiquette.

Most importantly, the GlobCom experience exposed students to the realities of cross cultural, international communication in a real life context and exposed them to working as part of global virtual teams which is an opportunity that cannot be replicated in the classroom environment. PR students are traditionally well adapted to working across teams. However, respondents recognised that the virtual team experience differed from the traditional collaborative experience. They highlighted three key sets of characteristics and skills that are instrumental to the virtual team leader (VTL) role. First, the leader needs to be able to provide a clear direction, even more so than as part of face to face team projects. Decision making, the ability to delegate, time and project management skills and most importantly excellent, clear communication skills were emphasised within this context. Second, the VTL needs to facilitate bonding across the team, to ensure continued motivation and productivity. Tolerance, patience, listening skills and most importantly participatory leadership were highlighted as key characteristics.

I think that a lot of the characteristics needed in a global team leader cross over with those needed in a face-to-face team leader. The big difference however would be forming a sense of community and a common goal as it is easy to do that when you are face-to-face but when you do not meet each other it is hard to form that sense of camaraderie (female, UK, 26).

Finally, the VTL needs to possess the appropriate personal attributes, including patience, positive attitude and – arguably specific to the GlobCom context – creativity. Interestingly, the vital role of charisma was particularly emphasised.

The improvement of language skills was emphasised as an associated benefit of the GlobCom Project by participants from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Associated challenges

Despite its benefits, particularly in terms of experiential education and the creation of a real life learning environment, projects like GlobCom equally provide a number of challenges, both for students, but also teaching staff. Following students' first hand insight into the project's benefits in the section above, the next paragraphs will provide an overview of the challenges as perceived and described by students, as well as reflections by the Australian-based teaching team on the experience from an administrative and educational perspective.

As rewarding as students may have found the collaboration with team members from different cultures, the need to accommodate different time zones, language issues and cultural barriers were listed as the main challenge associated with the project. Another issue was the physical size (up to 16 members) of the global project teams. In an effort to incorporate representatives from all participating universities in each team, the actual group sizes increased dramatically, which resulted in a number of logistical difficulties.

However, every single one of these challenges was also covered under perceived benefits. 'Attitude' emerged as a key ingredient to turn competition challenges into real life learning outcomes and competitive advantages:

My team mates were very easy to get along with and as such we worked together to ensure tasks were completed as effectively and efficiently as possible. This positive team ethos overcame cultural, time and any work issues (female, aged 21, South Africa).

Working across cultures can be very hard or it can be very easy. It depends on your mind set (male, aged 20, Spain).

As common in most Australian universities, Curtin University is utilising end of semester teaching feedback as a key performance indicator for teaching staff. Students are continuously prompted to comment on their learning experience in each unit, including recommendations on how the unit design, content and teaching quality could be further

improved. Both authors have observed that initiatives like GlobCom are likely to have a negative impact on the end of semester feedback. This can be noted on an annual basis by comparing semester one results, with those of the second semester, which does not contain a GlobCom component. Furthermore, GlobCom is run on a voluntary basis, which means associated project work adds to each academic's personal workload. Consequently, there may be slight delays in signing students up, clarifying information or even in getting the final client proposal approved. As students experienced themselves, working across different time zones adds another layer of complexity and potentially results in delays. Hence, GlobCom does put pressure on local teaching staff and demands a large amount of attention and resources.

Students who are solely focused on their end result in the form of a mark (as opposed to the learning experience and mark-independent acquisition of skills) dislike the ambiguity and perceived level of 'risk' associated with learning opportunities such as GlobCom. Having to adapt to a briefing document that was written in the United Arab Emirates and not by their local lecturer, having to rely on team members they were not able to physically meet and having to rely on overseas based IT support to provide them with access to the GlobCom portal, were all factors that added additional layers of stress, particularly in the form of having to risk a lower assignment mark than originally anticipated. This concern and dissatisfaction is commonly reflected in the end of semester unit assessment, which is usually sought before students had sufficient time to critically reflect on the actual learning outcomes and how the newly acquired skills may improve their future career chances and abilities. However, the authors argue that the 'risk' of a low evaluation score is counteracted by the quality of the learning experience gained.

The power of reflection

The tight timing of the end of semester unit feedback usually does not allow sufficient time for students to reflect on their study experience. With a focus on exams and end of semester results, lifelong learning skills and an improved aptitude for success in business and management are often not at the forefront of students' minds when they complete their evaluation. However, the post-semester GlobCom symposium experience provided participating students with an opportunity to evaluate and reflect together with their international peers, which was highlighted in the comments provided as part of this study:

I learnt that while some times working in such a large, diverse and geographically dispersed group was challenging (attending meetings at early hours of the morning – getting your ideas through and heard) overall the mix of different [sic] people and their ideas and skills made the end result of our report better than it ever could have been if done alone. So while at times difficult I learnt that the end result is definitely worth working through those hard times for (female, aged 21, Australia).

The opportunity to go to Abu Dhabi was amazing. I learnt so much at the summit and throughout the assignment. I learnt about the differences between cultures and how they action PR practices, as well as how to communicate

effectively over a large distance and through only online forums. Its [sic] one thing to read about international PR but to see it in action is another thing all together (male, aged 20, Germany).

From a facilitator perspective it was highly rewarding to observe how international project teams bonded during their face to face meeting in Abu Dhabi. However, even those students who did not have the time or financial means to travel to the finals reported on how the GlobCom experience had aided them in establishing a range of valuable contacts. For example, one Australian student had already organised to meet her Italian and German counterparts during a post-graduation trip planned for later in the year. As in business, contacts are everything in public relations. Those students who approached GlobCom, including its associated challenges, with the right attitude were able to use the experience to their strategic advantage.

Conclusion

The GlobCom communications challenge has enabled teaching staff to take the learning beyond the classroom and to expose future public relations professional skills to levels of ambiguity and uncertainty that are similar to those that await them in their future workplaces. Hence, learning experiences like this equip students with the skills and attitudes emphasised by future employers as essential for success in an increasingly multicultural, transnational business environment. Yet, these types of projects come not without their challenges. International real life client projects are not a safe option. They result in an increase in workload and are not always popular with students, as they are forced outside the relative comfort of the traditional learning environment. However, those students who embraced the ambiguity of the GlobCom experience were rewarded with major benefits. Facilitated via their international peers, they developed much sought after graduate attributes and life skills that are difficult to teach – and assess – in the traditional classroom environment.

From an academic perspective, real life client projects are not a ‘safe’ option, both from a logistical and from a career perspective, particularly if future promotions rely on quantitative student feedback. An international client experience, such as GlobCom, adds an additional level of complexity. However, driven by a passion for teaching, the authors believe that the quality of the students’ learning experience, as outlined in students’ own words above, outweighs the associated risks, including a potential negative impact on the assessment of the unit. It furthermore enables staff to benchmark their degree program against international standards and to explore research opportunities with international colleagues. We feel that sometimes it is not the most popular teaching and learning choices that provide the greatest long-term benefit to students and staff.

Further research

Based on overwhelming positive feedback by Curtin’s GlobCom alumni, we are keen to continue our involvement in the GlobCom Project. However, recognising that the success of the communications challenge depends on individual coordinators at each university,

we perceive the need to expand our research to teaching staff, thereby enabling the facilitation team to critically reflect on the international learning experience from an academic perspective. We anticipate that their insight will provide useful advice for colleagues interested in and passionate about similar projects, as well as provide insight into the experiential learning experience from an academic perspective.

Endnote

[1] Unfortunately, the Indian delegation had to cancel their travel plans. American GlobCom participants had to withdraw from the project before the final client document was due to be submitted.

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The articles in this Special issue, *Teaching and learning in higher education: Western Australia's TL Forum*, were invited from the peer-reviewed full papers accepted for the Forum, and were subjected to a further peer review process conducted by the Editorial Subcommittee for the Special issue. Authors accepted for the Special issue were given options to make minor or major additions (minor changes in the case of Wolf and Archer). The reference for the Forum version of their article is:

Wolf, K. & Archer, C. (2013). Managing ambiguity: A critical reflection on a truly global learning experience. In *Design, develop, evaluate: The core of the learning environment. Proceedings of the 22nd Annual Teaching Learning Forum*, 7-8 February 2013. Perth: Murdoch University. http://otl.curtin.edu.au/professional_development/conferences/tlf/tlf2013/refereed/wolf.html

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