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IN SEARCH OF AN INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE: TOWARDS A 'BILDUNG' UNDERSTANDING OF MBA LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates to what extent an international learning experience can help develop cross-cultural skills and prepare students for the challenges of the international workplace. It explores alternative approaches to cross-cultural pedagogy, specifically those which draw explicitly on the students' own learning journeys and course experiences. This is conceptualized through the idea of '*Bildung*', a journey of learning and self-discovery. Set within the context of rapid internationalization of management education, literature on the main pedagogical challenges and opportunities of such developments is reviewed. Then the chapter draws on the experience of 46 MBA students at five UK universities, posing the questions: 1) What can we learn from students' understandings of their lived experiences? 2) How can we conceptualize the findings and identify ways of developing alternative frameworks for international MBA education? Student stories illustrating different aspects of the learning journey are presented and discussed in terms of the skills and understandings gained and their relevance to the demands of the workplace. Suggestions for supporting such learning include ways of creating an inclusive environment through induction and social events, reflecting on the purpose and relevance of groupwork, improving communication skills and recording personal experience.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the professional and personal developmental aspects of internationalized management education by focusing on the whole student experience rather than on expected outcomes of taught programmes. Drawing on a study of 46 full-time MBA students at UK universities, it considers to what extent the overall learning experience can help students to prepare for the complexity of the international workplace. It presents stories demonstrating how cross-cultural encounters help students widen their own spheres of reference, question deeply-held assumptions about other cultures and nationalities, overcome conflict and the discomfort of the unfamiliar and find coping strategies for dealing with difficult interpersonal situations. This study uses *Bildung*, the idea of a journey or voyage as a shared learning experience (Prange, 2004), to reflect on what we can learn from students' understandings of their lived experiences as a means of developing student-informed approaches to cross-cultural learning. This chapter makes a distinctive contribution to the Companion firstly by bringing the study of cross-cultural management nearer the actual practice of international business through drawing on the experiences of students both with work experience and with ambitions to develop as international managers. Secondly, through using the *Bildung* metaphor, it aims to move beyond static models of complex cultural interactions to ways of encouraging and supporting students to develop through real-time cross-cultural interactions. It also suggests means for cross-cultural educators to learn from their students and develop practice-informed pedagogical frameworks for working with and learning from cross-cultural nuance and complexity.

THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF MANAGEMENT EDUCATION IN CONTEXT

The internationalization of education is becoming an international phenomenon as pursued by a variety of Higher Education (HE) systems and governments, including Australia, Malaysia and the UK (see Warwick & Moogan 2013). Although 'internationalization' is a hard concept to define (Callan 2000), Knight (2003: 2) provides a working definition of the internationalization of HE as 'the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education'. However, research on internationalization in HE has highlighted some lack of clarity in institutional agendas and how these relate to the practice of teaching and learning (Peelo & Luxon 2007; Turner & Robson 2007; Warwick & Moogan 2013).

Internationalization of management education faces specific challenges including how it can (a) support the professional development demands of an increasingly international workplace in the context of global socio-economic changes (Edwards et al. 2003); (b) accommodate the increasingly discerning international needs of students within well-embedded existing knowledge systems (Jaya 2001; Sturdy & Gabriel 2000); and (c) cater for growing student diversity and the desire for an international learning experience (Case & Selvester 2000; Robinson 2006).

Responding to imperatives to cater for the needs of 'aspiring international managers' (Case & Selvester 2000: 21) and develop an 'international literacy' (Edwards et al. 2003: 191), approaches have included standardized 'technicist' (Grey & Mitev 1995) approaches to 'dealing with' difference and otherness that border on cultural stereotyping (Richards 1997). There have also been issues about reproducing established assumptions and values about what 'international' is or should be (Case & Selvester 2000:12) and there remain questions around how to develop the ability to think comparatively and critically about difference (Reynolds & Trehan 2003; Robinson 2006). Additionally, there are questions of how to link generic management knowledge to specific contextual practice (Edwards et al. 2003: 185)

and questions as to what constitutes international content and curriculum. There has been a tendency a) to present western constructions as international (De Vita & Case 2003; Grey 2004) or b) to add to or ‘infuse’ existing culturally-situated curricula with cases and examples taken (and decontextualized) from wider cultural settings (De Vita & Case 2003), thus providing a ‘veneer of internationalisation’ (Edwards et al. 2003:186). Such knowledge may be out of date, biased and potentially offensive or embarrassing to students (Robinson 2005).

How then can approaches to pedagogy and course delivery respond to these challenges? Critical Management Education (CME) approaches (which highlight issues of power and possible forces of oppression leading to emancipatory understanding of roles and positions) have been helpful in informing the development of an international pedagogy. Here the knowledge background and experience of the students is actively drawn on and reflected on (Currie & Knights 2003; Elliott & Reynolds 2013) using ‘critical thought, self-analysis and reflection in international and inter-cultural settings’ (Edwards et al. 2003: 191). Such critical reflection, Case and Selvester (2000: 20) argue, is also required from the international educator, who should try ‘to pay due reflexive deference to the historical, social and geographical context of the knowledge and skills he or she brings to the learning area’. This chapter therefore links to practice by considering ways of preparing students for cross-cultural work contexts and by discussing changes to the practice of cross-cultural pedagogy with reference to empirical research presented in the following sections.

RESEARCHING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Studies of the international learning experience identify its commonly disorienting and uncomfortable nature and the identity challenges it presents for many students which might

make learning from this difficult (Currie 2007; Sliwa & Grandy 2007). Very rarely have the students been asked what they want or expect from the experience of studying in an internationalized environment and what they find useful and helpful either in terms of developing themselves as international managers or for an (imagined) international workplace (Elliott & Robinson 2012).

In responding to this gap, examining MBA students' experiences is pertinent because, as post-experience students with an immediate connection to the world of work, they have concrete ideas about what skills and behaviours they need to develop for their return to the workplace. This connection has been explored in several studies including Ituma, Simpson, Woods, Bo, Sturges and Weight's (2007) comparative study of former MBA students who had returned to work. They found differences in what students had taken from the experience, with Chinese participants especially valuing the technical skills they acquired, whereas UK-based participants placed emphasis on personal and interpersonal skill components (Ituma et al. 2007: 67). On the other hand, using the concept of liminality, Simpson, Sturges and Weights' (2009) study, drawing on semi-structured interviews with Chinese former MBA students who studied in the UK and returned to China, explores the transient nature of the MBA experience. These findings show a more developmental 'time out of time' experience, a time away from work and distanced from the demands of one's own immediate context, which can allow for reflection and an emphasis on skills development but also provides an opportunity for questioning and refocusing before embarking on the next stage of the career journey.

Developing this idea, Elliott and Robinson's study (2012) looks at expectations or 'imaginaries' of MBA students, regarding what they imagine the experience will bring them

in terms of their future careers and personal and professional development. Contrasting these with the schools' projections of the learning experience through their websites, Elliott and Robinson (2012) argue that the student experience is complex and nuanced, involving in particular informal and intercultural learning from each other. Gabriel and Griffiths' (2008) study of student experiences on one MBA programme of working in international learning groups found, however, mixed results: they argue that the ability of learning groups to see the relevance of the experience to the future work place depends to an extent on the success of the group in overcoming difficulties and building mutual respect within the group. Where this did not happen, unhappiness led to a questioning of the legitimacy of the exercise. Empirical work which further explores the benefits and issues raised by the complex and nuanced nature of this 'time out of time' experience is presented below.

THE MBA AS DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCE

This section draws on my study of five top-ranked UK MBA courses. Cohorts with large numbers of different nationalities were chosen and access was sought through the head of business school, with emails for request to interview circulated to students by the MBA director. The email outlined the project and emphasized a desire to discuss the development of cross-cultural skills and an international learning experience. From over 60 replies, 46 interviews were conducted, the emphasis being on achieving a cross-section of nationalities and gender balance. The research aimed to develop a student-informed model of international management education, so posed the questions: 1) What can we learn from our students' understandings of their lived experiences? 2) How can we conceptualize the findings and identify ways of developing alternative frameworks for international MBA education? Primary content analysis of interview transcripts revealed detailed and vivid descriptions of the whole MBA experience. Motivations for study abroad (or study within an international

class) revealed a quest for intercultural exchange and learning about different cultures: '*I hope to get opportunity to understand, how Western people think*' (U1R4ⁱ); and a desire to participate in the international learning environment '(I wanted) *A very global perspective*' (U1R8). End-of-course reflections focused on the personal and emotional challenge and life-changing elements of the experience: '*I felt very frustrated*' (U2R16), (it's) '*a kind of experience you can't forget – you will remember forever*' (U3R8) and also on the role of the programme in allowing such learning to take place: '*the context was created by the course*' (U3R10).

The study therefore looked at MBA learning as a holistic, individually-centred 'learning journey' which parallels much incidental workplace learning and gives insights into how such deep developmental learning can be encouraged and supported and linked to the world of practice. The study draws on of the concept of Bildung in developing the idea of management education as a shared learning experience (Prange 2004). Translated roughly as 'learning' the concept of Bildung may be best known with reference to the *Bildungsroman* (the novel of Bildung) as developed in particular by Goethe ⁱⁱ, which shows a young person on a journey of learning from other people and also of learning through the journey itself, where self-development comes through meeting and learning from others (Kerr & Robinson 2009). The *Bildungsroman* can be understood as the metaphorical journey of a young person, whose learning is sometimes embedded in a narrative journey. The concept of Bildung has been applied to foreign language learning as a means of exploring the cultural and emotional aspects of periods abroad (see Coffey & Street 2008). Within that field a new emphasis on related ideas such as 'Romanticism', or 'learning through the emotive self', are being employed in reaction to dominant instrumental paradigms of language learning (Ros i Solé & Fenoulhet 2013), suggesting instead a need to focus on the more emotive and developmental aspects of cultural learning (Coffey 2013; McNamara 2013).

Bildung is used here as a means of focusing on the various stages and features of the learning experience which are drawn out through substantial extracts from the MBA students' narrative journeysⁱⁱⁱ, where students are left to speak for themselves giving the reader a chance to reflect on the sense of movement and development narrated and to notice the importance and prevalence of emotions and creativity in the learning process so a (auto) biographical 'creative life writing' approach (see Phipps 2007; MacNamara 2013) is adopted.

Starting out: The moment of crisis

Typically the *Bildungsroman* begins with a crisis for the protagonist, something that acts as a spur to the journey, a turning point in life (Moretti 1987:175). In this extract a student from Sri Lanka outlines her motives for doing an MBA in the UK.

'I was working in my family firm in the last couple of years ...and then I realised it is not exactly what I want to do further on with the kind of commitment I didn't feel capable of making and we had I guess decided that I needed to move on. So I sorted out the family affairs and this is a great thing now. I needed a change I needed a break I've been working for eight years previously so a good time. And an MBA would sort of help to build on what I had learnt that was what I was expecting to build on all that work experience and also as a catalyst for changing direction that was a main I'd been working in finance and also running the family business more on the administration and finance grounds and I could say there was an element of I'm a bit stuck in the rut. I'm sick of this, this is not making me happy anymore so that was a major reason to go into an MBA.' ('Athula') (U4R1).

Here we see clear motivations, both personal and professional. 'Athula' shows that she has ideas and skills that need to be developed, but she also recognises a need for reflection and stock-taking, a consideration of what and where to go next. Here the importance of the 'time out of time' from every day routine and removed from everyday commitments seems to open up the desire for learning and a creative approach as to what to do next (not yet determined). Isolation and loneliness in her past role is also implicit, perhaps emphasising the importance of sharing experiences with peers in terms of considering and evaluating future avenues. Her experience starts with being clear on how her former role was stifling and acknowledging the reasons for this which provides a segue into examining her role within the existing social order and what she might want or need to do in order to challenge or break away from this.

Lost in translation: Transition and discomfort

Central to an understanding of the *Bildungsroman* is that it encodes an examination of the relationship between an individual and the social order. It presents the protagonist as an individual who is in 'conflict with the world', who cannot reconcile 'inner' ideals with the 'outer' demands of society (Moretti, 1987:227). This realisation may have been a trigger for enrolling, as in the previous example, or something which becomes apparent due to interactions with international peers within the confines of the classroom. In the following extract a Chinese student describes how he initially felt an outsider within the group work experience, even though he had considerable skills to offer.

...in the first term I felt very frustrated because of the group work. I was good at maths and I passed but when I was in our course work group work I found in the first term I didn't get respect from my colleagues... I think the British people they

are very proud they are British, sometimes they didn't listen other countries students, now in the second term I found out my problem and I've tried to improve my English, I've tried to speak a lot and to put more research for my course work for my group work and in the second term I found it better... if I want to do my part for example, for four pages just A4 pages I spend two days, I know I must do well to get their respect, now I think it's fine. ('Wong') (U2R16).

Striking aspects here are the acknowledgement of prejudice, the inequalities of language hierarchies and a strong desire to prove himself, leading to considerable personal skills development rather than directly challenging the group assumptions. However the feelings of discomfort which spurred the self-improvement are reflected by the final comment 'now I think its fine'; so a pertinent question might be to what extent the other students noticed and learned from the way the situation affected this student. Although the Bildung journey can often be quite solitary, learning from fellow travellers in a reciprocal relationship can also be an important part of the experience as illustrated by the next story.

Fellow travellers: Meeting and learning from others

This extract illustrates Bildung as a shared learning experience (Prange, 2004). Here a Nigerian student talks ^{iv}about forming close cross-cultural relationships through allocated groups which served to get the work done but also to challenge long-held prejudices.

'like my tutor group, we've got an Iranian, we have an Italian, we have a British, we've somebody from Taiwan, so, myself from Nigeria, it's you know it's something of a combination that probably if not for that tutor group, all of us

wouldn't have really gotten that close but then because all of us we do the assignments together, your group work is going to contribute to your final score, so you want to get it done as much as possible you have to help you know. So with time you see yourself actually discussing more with the other person trying to know more about the other person, you know like, I have to say it's not a small thing. Let me give you this example, I'm from Nigeria, happen to come from the southern part which is Christian dominated and a typical Nigerian from the south looks at Muslims as if the majority are out to make trouble all the time, but then having come to the class and really stayed with some Muslims and interacted with them I now see it's just a minority. So it's really helped a lot I mean getting to know people intimately, because it's not just class work, actually'. 'Femi' (U2R9)

Here we see evidence of some very deep reflection on, and questioning of, long standing beliefs. Being out of one's own social-cultural context and interacting with people with different cultural backgrounds and world views can be important in challenging cultural stereotypes (as above) and also in stimulating reflection on deeply held social mores, attitudes to formality and social interaction as illustrated by the next example.

Changing places: Experimentation and lifestyle change

In the *Bildungsroman*, the narrative can reflect an inner or outer journey which is sometimes combined with a movement geographically or socially. In this extract a Chinese student describes how the physical change of space (to shared student accommodation in London) led to communal experience resulting in questioning of cultural values and lifestyle changes.

'It is not only from study that I learn. From study we get to know some stuff ... but the knowledge is partly from the life, I've got to know different people and about different cultures. For example, I live in the university hall I've made some friends from Italy from Spain, from France so we often have dinner together at the weekend. The guy from Italy's a good cook he always cooks some Italian pasta. Actually from my point of view it's too simple food you know, the first time he invited me to the dinner I expected some kind of special dishes so he just cooked some pasta with sauce but he cooked it very carefully you know it tasted special. But you know from Chinese point of view if I invite you to have dinner we have to have a lot of dishes or you don't show respect. And the very serious learning you know from that event I understood that different people have different cultural background with different behaviour and I think dinner is for the class to get together to have fun, talking, have wine, have a coffee its not just for food ... its it changed me a lot...' ('Yong') (U2R7).

The social experiences shared during course down-time can play an important part in the whole experience and is rated here as *'very serious learning'*. The amount of reflection on what might seem a commonplace experience is quite striking and perhaps illustrates the student is engaging with a journey of experimentation and questioning leading to some revised attitudes towards eating and entertaining. Similar reflection and resulting changes to practice can be seen in the next extract.

Stocktaking and moving on: Acknowledging and using the learning

Returning to more formal elements of the experience a Chinese student is here working through how difficulties in group working brought her an intense and unforgettable

experience which resulted in lessons and understandings and skills development applicable beyond the course.

'It's quite interesting there were a lot of serious conflicts but at the same time you will find a kind of period of experience you can't forget – you will remember forever..... It comes from I think it comes from a lot of reasons I think cultural differences, and language yeah language. ... You feel the tension that comes from time pressure and also sometimes you also find communication is not easy and even for people who come from the same background. It's not easy to persuade or let the other people to buy into your idea and some people are not used to listening to other people so you should deal with all kinds of people. And some are quite demanding but some do not prioritise study or the specific course so there are different reasons why people have different behaviours in the group but at least you should have the assignment, get it done, finished! ('Yan Bin') (U3R8).

Such stocktaking on the experience, where they have got to, and what they still need to develop in terms of work-relevant skills typically occur when students are starting to look for jobs and thinking about how to present their learning over the year to potential employers at interviews. Indeed some of the research participants saw the research interview as an opportunity to prepare or practice their interview story about the distance travelled during the course, possibly implying that such links were not being developed within the programme structure.

SUPPORTING PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES

Many themes in the student stories, about give and take, cultural inequalities and language hierarchies, about the frustrations of self-expression, have direct relevance to the challenges faced in cross-cultural/international work environments. The research highlights that students have worked through these difficulties largely unsupported by formal course mechanisms. This raises the question of how such a process can be controlled and facilitated - or whether it is better to leave well alone and let these processes happen 'incidentally'. The international emphasis placed on such courses both in student expectations and in course publicity seem to suggest that such processes should not be left entirely to chance. A starting point might be to think about how each of the stages of the journey illustrated above can be supported through different aspects of the curriculum, course design, skills development and organised activities (see Table One).

INSERT TABLE ONE NEAR HERE

Firstly, induction and ongoing facilitation certainly play an important role in setting an international atmosphere and the establishment of 'the rules of the game'. Clear statements both in the course documentation (e.g., websites) and at faculty and university levels as to the fostering of international standards all help to set the tone (Robinson 2005). Induction programmes that focus on similarities and differences might prepare the ground for future discussion and debate (Gabriel & Griffiths 2008). But where cultural difference is largely ignored, the difficulties which occur later seem to be more difficult to cope with and go on festering rather than being openly debated (Robinson 2006). Consideration of the challenges

faced by students re-entering study (Griffiths, Gabriel, & Winstanley 2005) and their reasons and ambitions for doing this can help them to set their own personal development agendas.

The use of an advisor or mentor to keep the reflective process going, encouraging students to question and reflect on their experiences, in conjunction with good induction and prolonged group work where students can get to know each other well, can become effective for intercultural learning (Robinson 2005). In considering the role and purpose of group work, writers have highlighted the importance of preparation and reflection (Baker & Clarke 2010; see also Silwa & Grandy 2006), while others have suggested the use of action learning sets to actively reflect on the learning process (Sharan 2010). In terms of both dealing with, but also learning from, the inevitable conflict issues of facilitation and de-briefing, an inclusive pedagogy which allows student voices with different forms of contribution and participation is required. For example, the use of reflective essays and empirical research on the process as part of a course (e.g. HRM or Managing Diversity) or as a project topic (Elliott & Reynolds 2013); or other means of encouraging reflection e.g. use of novels (Sliwa, Sorensen & Cairns 2013).

Opportunities to network outside one's immediate circle can be afforded by the provision of social events and inclusive social spaces. Again a tutor or adviser to encourage students to engage in inclusive social activities could be helpful in spotting opportunities and facilitating the process.^v Capturing the learning along the way may include placing more emphasis on encouraging students to record and reflect on their understanding in order to present their learning. This may include discussing and debriefing on the groupwork experience (see Sweeney et al 2008 on using reflective diaries, learning sets or memory work).

CONCLUSION

This chapter has addressed the some of the stated aims of the Companion in the following ways. Firstly, by striving to bring cross-cultural management nearer to the actual practice of international business through learning from the experiences of students with both work experience and with ambitions to develop as international managers. Secondly, through using the Bildung metaphor, it has demonstrated a means of moving beyond static models of complex cultural interactions to ways of encouraging and supporting students to develop through real-time cross-cultural interactions. The concept of Bildung, in classifying and analysing student experiences in an international learning environment, helps to uncover powerful learning. The different stages of the Bildung journey demonstrate the role of emotion and personal ambitions in the wider experience, reflected through moments of discomfort or happiness which might be considered as paths to learning (Currie 2007). The concept of Bildung can help educators not to dismiss events in the wider learning journey as irrelevant to the formal curriculum but instead to understand them in the context of a journey or quest for wider personal and professional development, set within wider socio-political backgrounds.

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Table One: Summary of suggestions

Stage in journey	Suggested activities
Starting out	Preparing for study: stock-taking of motivations and ambitions, induction and creating an inclusive environment
Learning through group interaction	Setting ground rules, improving communication skills, including considering ways of 'giving voice' and turn taking, considering the role and purpose of group work and debriefing on the process.
Individual changes and questioning of assumptions	Recording and discussing cultural and personal learning (use of diaries and memory work).
Learning along the way	Recognising the role of social events in drawing out and sharing experience.
Acknowledging distance travelled	Helping students to repackage/present their learning as work-relevant.

ⁱ This labelling refers to the University business school studied (1-5) and the respondent number in order of interview. This has been left to illustrate the range of responses and also some of the similarities between research sites.

ⁱⁱ See *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre* (Goethe 1795-96).

ⁱⁱⁱ The students' oral narratives have been tidied up grammatically and lightly edited to make them more readable as written text.

^{iv} This extract first appeared in Robinson (2006)

^v An example from the research was given of the visit of a Russian ballet company to the city. The advisor allocated to the MBA group suggested that a trip be arranged and prior to the visit the Russian students were asked to give a talk about the development of Russian ballet.