

Cultural Intelligence and Awareness in Maritime Education: A Case Study

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Abstract Cultural intelligence is the ability to accurately decipher seemingly ambiguous situations in cross cultural environments. In a world, where crossing geographical boundaries is routine, and more so in the context of maritime transportation, this happens to be a very relevant topic for discussion. As globalization has rendered the maritime business environment more complex, diverse and competitive, the ability to function effectively in different cultural contexts is now critically important. It is common knowledge that cross cultural skills are best developed through experiential learning e.g. by studying or working in a foreign culture where one learns by trial and error. This paper is based on a case study tracing US maritime college student learning experiences that take them to two locations in Asia, namely Singapore and Malaysia. This initiative was part of an experiential learning program. The International Maritime Business (IMB) program at Massachusetts Maritime Academy (MMA) undertook this initiative to enhance the knowledge base of its student body who typically work on the shore side of the shipping industry. This is also critical because, although the seafaring side of the shipping industry experiences a cultural immersion due to their job description, as they visit various ports around the world, the shore side maritime professionals are generally recruited from the corporate headquarters with little cultural cross pollination. In this initiative, students spent three weeks in these locations during the month of February, 2016 under faculty supervision. They learned about the port infrastructure and maritime activities in those locations and were required to write a paper on their observations. During their stay in the two locations, they also experienced complete cultural immersion. Many of these students had never stepped out of the US prior to this. Upon their return to the US, the students were surveyed on their experiences revealing some interesting findings about cultural intelligence and awareness. The paper discusses the design of the program leveraging existing partnerships, the preparatory phase, the actual experience and post experience cognition as expressed in the survey.

Keywords: Cultural intelligence, cross cultural communication, experiential learning

1. Introduction:

It is commonly understood that success in a globalized economy depends significantly on cultural awareness and adaptability. Cultural competence is commonly defined as the combination of knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to effectively interact with culturally and ethnically diverse populations. One should have knowledge of culture, history, traditions of these populations. As for attitudes, one should be aware of diverse values, beliefs, and behaviors, be accepting of cultural differences and should be able to reflect on one's own socio-cultural background and personal biases or tendency to stereotype. The skills element focuses on communication skills to interact with diverse populations and overcome language barriers and also the adaptability to adequately respond to culturally diverse situations. Research indicates that those kinds of awareness and abilities can be measured and evaluated. They are quantified as cultural intelligence quotient, or CQ. First introduced by two business researchers, Christopher Earley and Soon Ang^[1], in their 2003 book, '*Cultural intelligence: Individual interactions across cultures*', it measures the capability to function effectively in a variety of national, ethnic and organizational settings. This form of intelligence has been tested by academic researchers in more than 30 countries over a decade. In a world, where crossing geographical boundaries is routine, and in a profession like maritime business where the sun never sets, cultural intelligence is a vital aptitude and skill. In this paper, an attempt has been made to underscore the importance of cultural intelligence in maritime business education.

Section 2 provides a brief description of cultural intelligence and its relevance in maritime education. Section 3 presents the motivation behind the development of cultural intelligence through experiential learning in the International Maritime Business (IMB) curriculum at Massachusetts Maritime Academy (MMA). As a case study, Section 4 describes a student learning experience in two locations in Asia, namely Singapore and Malaysia. It outlines the survey findings used to test the impact of the study tour on the cultural intelligence of participating students. Section 5 provides conclusions.

2. The Relevance of Cultural Intelligence in Maritime Education:

Organization management textbooks have several anecdotes of expatriate managers facing severe professional problems due to lack of cultural intelligence. Ethnocentrism or the belief that one's native culture and ethnicity is superior to all others is considered to be a major roadblock in managerial and organizational contexts. This is linked to several personnel problems like recruitment difficulties, high turnover rates, low employee motivation and even expensive lawsuits. Current and future managers need to overcome this ethnocentric bias through greater cross cultural awareness, education and international experiences of cultural immersion. Given the number of cross-functional assignments, job transfers, virtual teams and distant postings, most managers are likely to experience in the course of a career, a low cultural intelligence quotient (CQ) can turn out to be a significant disadvantage.^[2] In fact, University of Michigan professor Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks'^[3] research on cultural barriers in business found that job candidates who adopted some of the mannerisms of recruiters with cultural backgrounds different from their own were more likely to be made an offer.

While general businesses continue to grapple with CQ issues, the matter is even more critical in the maritime context which is perhaps the most global sector in the world. Given the international and geographically dispersed nature of the maritime industry, the skills required are more complex than in regular domestic businesses. Not only are ships being operated by multinational crew members, the business of shipping on the shore-side is also truly global. Addressing issues of cultural competency is of utmost importance in this field and must be treated as a core component of the maritime curriculum.

Michael Ircha^[4] in his 2006 paper, '*Maritime education in cross cultural settings,*' explores several problems of misunderstandings and misinterpretations among people having different worldviews in a maritime context. His paper discusses cross-cultural dimensions including conflicting information, time/space issues and resulting emotional responses. This is followed by a review of the adjustment problems faced by international students and instructors studying or teaching in other countries. The paper concludes with a discussion of the facilitating factors that help instructors ensure effective learning in cross-cultural settings.

The importance of CQ in the maritime context was also recognized by Graham Benton and Timothy Lynch^[5] in their 2014 paper '*Globalization, cultural intelligence and maritime education.*' The authors discuss the initiatives taken by California Maritime Academy in assessing and improving student CQ in a maritime educational institution.

In 2015^[6], Momoko Kitada discusses the same issue in her paper '*Promoting cultural awareness through welfare in maritime education and training.*' Kitada emphasizes cultural awareness as becoming increasingly important, because it facilitates smoother communication and mutual understanding among the multinational crew, and thus, contributes to the safe operation of ships. It is commonly understood that better communication and mutual understanding among the crew members should help reducing human errors in marine accidents, which are known as the major causes of catastrophes at sea. Kitada's study also found that an early exposure to different cultures while cadets study in a MET institution helps to foster soft skills to negotiate and harmonize with other nationalities of the crew.

This paper underscores the importance of cultural intelligence not only for the seafaring students in a maritime institution but also those students who end up working on the shore-side of the maritime industry. It identifies three broad cultural competence domains:

1. General knowledge: This includes knowledge of culture, history, traditions, values, and family systems of culturally diverse populations.
2. Reflection ability: For culturally competent individuals, reflection is required for insight into one's own understanding of prejudice and cultural frames of reference
3. Culturally competent behavior: Communicate and work effectively with individuals from various cultural backgrounds and ethnicities.

Section 3 discusses the various international experiences that students at MMA are exposed to in order to enhance their CQ in the aforementioned domains. It focuses on a specific initiative undertaken in 2016 in Singapore and Malaysia and discusses its impact on participating students.

3. MMA Initiatives to Enhance CQ:

MMA engages in a number of international experiential learning initiatives for its students that are listed below:

- The sea going license track students of MMA complete their sea going experiential training aboard the training vessel T.S. Kennedy and other commercial shipping voyages. The cruises are accomplished in the following order on the following vessels: Academy training ship, training or commercial ship followed by Academy training ship. This experiential element is an integral part of the academic curriculum for the license track programs. This gives an opportunity to travel to international ports and work alongside multinational crew in commercial vessels.
- However, a non license track, shore based major like IMB also has a significant experiential learning component. The emphasis on curricular design is aligned to the educational philosophy of the Academy: Learn–Do–Learn. The original framework of the curriculum was based on the following model. Through academic coursework, students learn the concepts and principles of international maritime business. They then apply this learning in a professional context. In order to graduate, students need to complete a minimum of two internships and an international experiential learning program. Based upon that experience, students then improve and adapt their understanding of the concepts and theories of maritime business.^[7] Apart from these, there are semester long study abroad programs that allow for a deeper cultural immersion.

The following experiences help students in the IMB program at MMA develop their cross cultural and global awareness by visiting other countries, learning and observing international maritime business in practice at various ports and related maritime interests.

- i. Semester long study abroad programs at Shanghai Maritime University (SMU) and Dalian Maritime University (DMU).
- ii. An internship in Panama City, Panama, to learn about the operations of the Panama Canal.
- iii. International short term experiential learning programs:

In an increasingly global environment, it is critical that business professionals learn about globalization and international business practices. Similarly, it is important that maritime business professionals learn about shipping and maritime industries in a global context and develop their CQ. These experiential learning programs, designed specifically for upper division IMB students, provide a first-hand international experience. In the learn-do-learn tradition, the centerpiece of this course is a 3 week faculty-led field study in a selected country absorbing the practical and cultural implications of international business or maritime business. The course is designed to provide a series of preliminary sessions leading up to the experiential portion and will conclude with an integrative and reflective segment. Thus the three phases of the IMB experiential learning include preliminary pre departure instruction, travel logistics to an international location, and post-travel reflection. The IMB

international experiential learning course is geared towards enhancing cultural awareness and global business competencies. The various opportunities and destinations are listed below:

a) Liverpool (UK)

This program is being conducted in a partnership with Liverpool John Moore's University (LJMU) and the University College of Southeast Norway (HSN). Students from the three institutions will be part of this experiential learning project. The experience will provide the students with an industry insight into contemporary issues and trends and develop understanding of the different market segments in the maritime sector with special emphasis on port infrastructure. The maritime industry comprises of a high cultural disparity. This challenges the efficiency and safety performance aboard a vessel as well as port operations ashore. Enhancing both the future onshore and offshore crew's cultural competence will allow maritime operations to be carried out in a more efficient and safe manner. Making students from three different countries work on joint projects will enhance the ability to work on cross-cultural communication skills, teamwork skills and business culture skills.

b) Ol Pejeta Conservancy (Kenya)

The corporate partner in this initiative is the world famous Ol Pejeta conservancy. The students work hand in hand with the conservationists to provide new alternative office practices and refine and tweak daily operations. As they go about their daily work schedule, they quickly adapt to their new environment and gain cultural insight. This also provides a fantastic opportunity for several community outreach programs and enhance cross cultural awareness.

c) Guácimo (Costa Rica)

Our academic partner is Earth University. The program has an emphasis on maritime business, agri-business and sustainability. There are several hands on activities planned during the three week stay including visits to the ports of Puntarenas and Limon and local plantations that provide the ports with agricultural cargo. The program provides significant multicultural exposure to our students.

d) Singapore and Johor Bahru (Malaysia)

The Corporate partner in Singapore was NOL (Neptune Orient Lines), the parent organization of APL (American Presidents Lines) and the academic partner in Malaysia was NMIT (Netherlands Maritime Institute of Technology).

Education is a key pillar in developing talent for the long term sustainability of the maritime industry. Recognizing this, APL became our corporate partner and hosted IMB students at the NOL Corporate office in Singapore. For a week, APL staff from various fields share their insights, expertise and invaluable experiences on land and at sea with these aspiring maritime professionals. They cover topics ranging from liner operations, chartering, technical services, special cargo, to branding and LEAN application. APL also facilitates visits to Lloyd's Register Quality Assurance, PSA Singapore and Maritime Port Authority to deepen the learning experiences. Through these visits, students get to better understand the diverse roles each stakeholder plays in ensuring high levels of productivity, efficiency, sustainability and progress in the culturally diverse global maritime industry.

In Johor Bahru, Malaysia, the students learn about port infrastructure and the fierce competition between the regional ports. They visit several maritime businesses in this region as well. They learn about the cost advantage of Malaysian ports versus the tremendous efficiency of Singapore. Students write a paper and prepare a presentation on regional port infrastructure for the faculty and selected students of NMIT. As in the other initiatives, the scope for enhancing cultural quotient is significant.

These experiences are not just fantastic educational opportunities for students; they also pave the way for better trained and culturally sensitive prospective employees for maritime companies that have a global presence.

4. Experiential learning and cultural immersion in Singapore-Malaysia

As a case study, this paper focuses on the last one mentioned above; the trip to Singapore and Johor Bahru, Malaysia. In this initiative, students spent three weeks in these locations during the month of February, 2016 under faculty supervision. Students were given preparatory assignments to familiarize themselves with the port infrastructure in that region. ^[8]They learned about the port infrastructure and maritime activities in those locations and were required to write a paper on regional port competitiveness in Singapore and Malaysia. During their stay in the two locations, they also experienced complete cultural immersion. Some of these students had never stepped out of the US prior to this trip. Upon their return to the US, the students were surveyed on their experiences revealing some interesting findings about cultural intelligence and awareness.

There are several reasons why an international maritime business program may wish to conduct a survey of student cultural competence, particularly in cross cultural global initiatives. First, it may want to validate its understanding of the ethnic and cultural awareness of the student body. Further, it may seek to identify the unique attributes of a given cultural group to ensure effective communication. Additionally, the survey may reveal opportunities for improving cultural capabilities. Most important, the very act of conducting the self-assessment is a statement to the stakeholders that the IMB department values diversity and desires to increase its cultural competence. This survey will help us evaluate where we are in the spectrum of cultural competence and whether, these international initiatives enhance diversity awareness and cultural awareness of our students. The findings will suggest actions we may take to improve our cross-cultural competence.

The Cultural Competence Survey comprised of 10 questions that attempted to assess cultural intelligence in the aforementioned categories: general knowledge, reflection ability and culturally competent behavior. The objective was to see if the experiential learning opportunities had a positive impact on cultural intelligence.

- a) Although there was a preparatory phase prior to departure, all students agreed that their knowledge and understanding of the diverse cultural profiles of Singapore and Malaysia improved significantly as a result of the trip.
- b) Students were able to reflect on their prior understanding of the cultures of Singapore and Malaysia and how that perception altered (if any). Most students wrote about how their perception about Singapore altered after their visit. In spite of the very traditional Asian roots, students were quite surprised by the significant western influence in Singapore. They had renewed respect for the impact of regulations on the development of the nation. Students also wrote about how warm and welcoming the Malaysian hosts were although several of them had prior concerns about Americans being negatively viewed as rather arrogant. They wrote about how friendly their hosts were in both locations. Much of their prior trepidation and concern disappeared as a result of the visit.

Students wrote at length about their experience and two excerpts are given below:

‘I do believe I have a better understanding of cultural and ethnic diversity. This is because I have visited an area of the world that is very different from mine. Growing up and staying in one country of the world may make a person complacent with their beliefs and living standards. Traveling to Singapore and Malaysia allowed me to see similarities and differences for myself, and not just in a book or on TV.’

‘Yes, I found that many Muslims and Chinese were the most kind and generous people that I have ever met. I believe that this is a common problem back in the US, and people should be more

knowledgeable and respectful of other cultures and religions. Additionally, I now understand the subtle social and culture differences in Asian countries that differ greatly from those in the US. I learned many things that I would not have learned in a classroom or in a textbook. I am now a much more humble and appreciative person because of my experiences. I also found that the hospitality in Singapore and Malaysia was unmatched by anywhere in the world. The local people were extremely respectful and polite to everyone in the group at every place that we visited during our trip.'

- c) In their response to survey questions, students provided examples of how such an exposure enhances their communication skills and prepared them better for the global workplace. One of them mentioned 'I think this trip will be beneficial for me in future career prospects. This is because I have experienced the culture in this area of the world. If I were to apply for a job that required spending time in Singapore or Malaysia, I think I would look like a better candidate than someone who hasn't. There are many ports in Malaysia, and Singapore's main business is the maritime industry. These areas are great spots for potential job opportunities.'

In all these categories, a higher level of cultural intelligence was acknowledged by students after participating in the international experience. In a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being best, all students gave a score of 7 or higher when asked to rate the importance of the Singapore Malaysia trip as a tool to improve their cultural competence. The students commented that the program could be further improved with greater interaction with local students.

The outcome of the survey provides some guidance for curriculum development, as it allows us to understand what curriculum elements need to be improved and what are didactically the most natural places to address the missing issues. For example, this could provide insight if there is training which explicitly addresses reflection around one's own prejudices or cultural values. If such training is non-existent, it should be added to the existing reflection piece. The assessment outcomes could serve as a baseline score that can be used as a benchmark in a subsequent assessment later on, after curriculum improvements have been realized. However, this was only a rudimentary first step in outcome assessment. Greater resources should be directed toward a more sophisticated collection and interpretation of data. Several tools are available in the market today such as the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) which provides an individual profile report for each student and a customized development plan for improving cultural competence.^[9] This will need to have a qualified administrator who will need to be certified. This cultural competence assessment will be a valuable addition to existing curriculum assessments and measures of cultural competence.

5. Conclusion

Today's maritime students are exposed to a world that require considerable cross cultural understanding and recognition that education is far more than learning facts about specific disciplines while sitting in a classroom. Based on the generally accepted premise that learning occurs through experience, international experiential learning can be a critical component of education in maritime institutions. However, we need to integrate this carefully into our curriculum. As Montrose (2008) wrote, 'The importance of an international experience for the purpose of language development, cultural immersion, service projects, discipline-specific studies, or enhancement of a student's world view cannot be underestimated. Although there is little doubt about the benefits and importance of encouraging students to participate in study abroad, in many cases there is a lack of integration between the experience and the learning or educational value that can be derived from it.'^[10]

In the present era, the importance of an international experience for the purpose of cultural immersion, discipline-specific studies and enhancement of a maritime student's world view cannot be underestimated. The purpose of this paper was to demonstrate that with the help of strategic partners, it is possible to identify opportunities that will strengthen the cultural competence of maritime students.

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