

Cross Cultural Training To Develop Cultural Intelligence Within A Group Of MBA Students: A Qualitative Evaluation

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Abstract

Cross Cultural Groups (CCG's) are now well established in many Master of Business Administration (MBA) classes around the world as there is an increasing amount of students who can afford to study abroad. That has created many unique challenges for educators who face now more and more students from a wide variety of countries in their MBA programs. Particularly as many of those students now come to study abroad for the first time, cross-cultural related issues are experienced in the classroom. Cross-cultural training (CCT) might have the capability to create a higher degree of Cultural Intelligence (CQ), as those CCT's can form a greater awareness of the impact of culture. This research adopts an interpretive approach that investigates the experience of International MBA students during their program of study and investigates the potential change in behavior and the development of CQ. In particular the changes students have experienced before, during and after applying a CCT. This research is based on various qualitative data collection methods based on qualitative open ended surveys, collected before and after the CCT as well as observations before during and after the CCT took place. Even so the results of that evaluation research are not representative they suggest that a greater CQ among the CCG can be achieved with a CCT, which also correlates with the findings of similar research. In addition, a better understanding and happiness among fellow MBA students after the CCT have been observed and also reported by the students. Overall the research contributes to a more professional approach to Education within the international MBA environment.

Keywords: Teaching; Cross-Cultural Groups; Cross-Cultural Training; Cultural Intelligence

1. Introduction

The performances of graduate students after they entered the job market play an important, perhaps even significant role in shaping the future of societies, regions and prosperity of entire countries (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). In particular the Master of Business Administration (MBA) has long been recognized to be an essential forerunner in educating students around the world about the 21st century required skills and knowledge for today's demanding jobs (Kuratko, 2003). As stated by Vallaster, the understanding of 'cultural diversity' is now largely accepted within organizations and universities alike as a major source of potentials and challenges that are culture related (Vallaster, 2005). Within the literature, it is widely argued that 'culture' might create vast benefits for Cross Cultural Group's (CCG's) compared to mono cultural or homogenous groups (Bergh & Lehmann, 2006; Distefano & Maznevski, 2000; Lehmann & van den Bergh, 2004). At the same time does research suggest the downside of 'culture' on CCG's as reported in various studies as culture strongly influence the behavior of its members (Cho & Greenlee, 1995; Hofielen & Broome, 2000; Segalla, 1998). According to (Richards, 1997) the notion that an MBA program should include a Cross Cultural Training (CCT) when it is an international program wasn't well researched nor understood.

The debate started with the need to better understand the requirements for such training. For example, should a CCT to be considered useful by more focusing on culture specific or more on culture general aspects? As a result of their research findings, the idea that the design of such training has a tremendous impact on the benefits of such international MBA programs needs to be taking into consideration. The two stage study of (Young & Schartner, 2014) indicated that a group of graduate students who studied cross cultural communication (CCC) performed ‘significant’ better in academic achievements over a wide range of accomplishments and measurements as a ‘peer’ group studying a comparable course but without any focus on CCC during their studies. Further, their study outlined that many students have been able to adjust and adapt much better as the group without the CCC background. According to (Ramsey & Lorenz, 2016) and their study, Cultural Intelligence (CQ) might be the missing link to better understand if an academic course that includes any ‘Cross-Cultural Management (CCM) elements, such as a CCT can help students to better perform during their course and thereafter in their career. It is argued in their research that CQ can actually be learned in the classroom and that it might have a significant impact on the happiness and overall fulfilment of their chosen program (Ramsey & Lorenz, 2016). (Levitt, 2016), point out that there is a greater than before need for intercultural competency within higher education and practitioners in industry. It is argued that the increased demand of CCG’s within the workforce asked for such skills to be developed early in education.

Even so, as (Volet & Ang, 1998) describe, the increase of CCG’s within Universities has made is necessary to study about their needs and their requirements as well as the challenges CCG’s face and search for potential solutions how such CCG’s can be helped to perform better. As there are so many terms given in the literature that can be subsumed as CCG’s, for example the statement “all teams are groups but not all groups are teams” (Hingst, 2006, p. 3) required to include multinational teams (MNT’s) research into this paper to make it more coherent with the wide body of theory within the literature. CCG’s therefore can be described as a group of members that varies in their gender, the age array, their occupational experience and functions and that they all have a wide range of cultural backgrounds. Further, they can be classified in having positive and negative aspects. On the positive aspects are an increased resourcefulness and that well working CCG’s can solve more complex problems, creating ‘value’ to the CCG’s work performance (Distefano & Maznevski, 2000). To sum up, students studying in MBA programs are now more and more to be found being in a CCG. In addition, those groups face culture related challenges and might benefit of the development of a greater CQ as a skill.

2. Literature review and development of research questions

According to Ingols and Shapiro, the MBA is an advanced business degree, which is taught at universities at postgraduate level. Further they point out that the MBA degree teaches and aims to develop both, ‘hard skills’ as found for example as ‘tangible’ knowledge in Accounting or in Finance or other essential business functions and knowledge and ‘soft skills’ that are ‘intangible’ such as team work or business ethics (Ingols & Shapiro, 2014). The notion of what makes a group of people multicultural or cross-cultural can be defined according to (Adler, 2001) if a significant amount of the members differentiate them self in the group by “represent three or more ethnic backgrounds” (Adler, 2001, p. 140). Marquardt and Horvath offer a similar view on what makes a cross-cultural group (CCG) when they outline that a group is surrounded by members from various cultural backgrounds (Marquardt & Horvath, 2001). In that regard an MBA class with various members coming from different cultural backgrounds can be considered a CCG.

The Challenges of Cross Cultural Groups and the need for CQ

As discussed in (Goerlich, Wu, & Pemberton, 2008), previous research on CCG's indicate the different needs of CCG, for example how decisions are made between their members, e.g. do members need to study their facts first before decisions can be made or can decisions be made immediately without much previous considerations (P. C. Earley, 1999; Fisher, Hunter, & Macrosson, 2002; Marquardt & Horvath, 2001). CCG's also show variations of expectations, as for example, what type of leadership style is expected. The need for hierarchy, vs. equality, or how group members have different needs to make success visible vs. respecting leaders without any need for achievement (Adler, 2001; Huijser, 2006; Trompenaars & Hampden Turner, 1997; Trompenaars & Woolliams, 2003). Even how CCG's members want to be rewarded, separately based on performance or collectively based on group efforts differs tremendously as reported in (Berry & Ward, 2006; Kippenberger, 2000; Rohn, 2006). Based on research conducted by (Adler, 2001; Jinsoo, 2007; Oertig & Buergi, 2006) there is some clear indication that CCG's will face trust building issues not only between virtual but also between face-to-face CCG's.

That is significant as 'trust' is considered the 'glue' that keeps groups together, enabling them to achieve their desired tasks (Stahl, Mayrhofer, & Kuehlmann, 2005). Another known and well researched issues CCG's commonly face are due to possible miscommunication between their members and variations of English speaking capabilities (Appelbaum, Shapiro, & Elbaz, 1998; Schneider & Barsoux, 2002). According to (Dight, 2004), in recent years a new concept emerged. Because it is not enough to just understand the do's and don'ts of cultural differences if someone wants or needs to interact effectively across cultures but instead to possess a sort of intelligence, that is labeled CQ.

As argued in their book, (P. Christopher Earley, Ang, & Tan, 2006) believe that Cultural Intelligence (CQ) is a kind of 'natural ability' to understand and react appropriately to new and unfamiliar situations that are rooted in cultural differences. Whereby, according to their definition CQ possesses three main features: First, 'the head' that can be best explained as the rational mind that is able to explore and process new information and knowledge about cultural differences. Second, 'the heart' that means someone has the right amount of enthusiasm and willingness to interact with a new culture or cultural setting. Third 'the body', that someone is able to adjust own actions and manners as deemed appropriately in the given cultural environment. As a consequence, an individual that possesses a higher CQ will have it much easier to detect behaviour of others that are culture related, be able to better decode the possible meaning and significance of such culture related behaviour and to adapt their own actions accordingly (P. Christopher Earley, et al., 2006).

As Janssen and Brett argue, it can be concluded that as higher someone's CQ, as higher the chances that this person is able to comfortably, in a natural kind of way, is able to interpret and adjust their own behaviour to new culture related situations and to therefore work together more effectively across cultures (Janssens & Brett, 2006). Landis, Bennett and Bennett defines Cross Cultural Training with the "interdisciplinary focus between cultural anthropology, cross-cultural psychology, sociolinguistics, multicultural education, intercultural communications and international business management" (Daniel Landis, Bennett, & Bennett, 2004, p. 1). As pointed out by (D. Landis & Bhagat, 1996; Morris & Robie, 2001) CCT can be described as a process and learning about, first, to understand others behaviour, like how others do things. Second, cognitive actions as to why someone is doing what they are doing. And third, competencies, like to be able to adopt behaviour in the right manner given the circumstances or situation in another culture setting.

According to (Littrell & Salas, 2005), Cross Cultural Training (CCT) and research on such specific kind of trainings require a deep understanding on the training dynamics and measurements if a training can be considered successful. As outlined in (Goerlich, 2014) CCG's need to find a way to overcome the issues they face that can be traced back to cultural differences. It is therefore necessary to find the right measures when it comes to the appropriate CCT methods and when and how such training to be conducted.

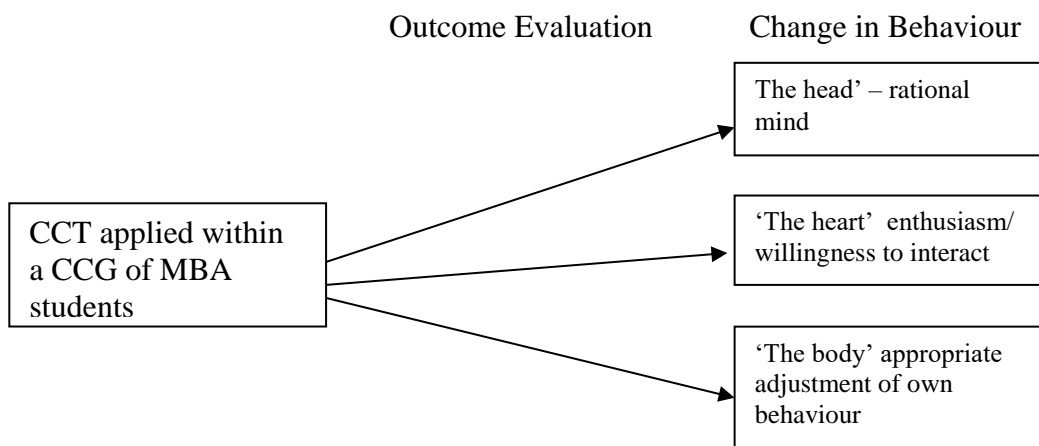
Research Objectives

The question that emerged from the literature review is to what extend is a CCT able to develop a higher degree of CQ? Moreover, if so and a higher degree of CQ can be developed, how do the students benefit from such skill?

The objectives of this research are:

1. To evaluate, based on Kirkpatrick's 4 level of evaluation the outcome of the CCT and impact of the CCG of MBA students?
2. Can the possible change in behaviour be linked to an increase in CQ by using the theory of CQ by (P.Christopher Earley, et al., 2006), as what has changed in terms of the behaviour at
 - a. 'the head' – rational mind
 - b. 'the heart' – enthusiasm/willingness to interact
 - c. 'the body' – appropriate adjustment of own behaviour

Conceptual Framework



3. Methodology

The aim of the research is to investigate the possible change in behaviour of a cross-cultural group of MBA students after a CCT was conducted. The study was therefore conducted at an International Business course that lasted several weeks with meeting the student weekly as part of an MBA program within an International University.

Data collection

In a first step of collecting the data, a questionnaire with only qualitative elements was administered to a group of 37 students. The group of students had been comprised in total 13 nations with students from Pakistan, Sweden, Germany, Nepal, India, China, Myanmar, USA, Vietnam, France, Austria, Thailand and Nigeria. The qualitative questionnaire was distributed before the CCT and asked the students based on open-ended questions about their relationship, how they understand others behaviour, emotions when working with others and a reflection on their own behaviour when working with others to fellow students and their attitude towards them. Moreover, if they believe they are able to interpret the behaviour of their fellow students correctly? In addition, if they think they are able to adjust their own behaviour when interacting with different students? Those questions derived from the theory of CQ.

Table 1: Sample questions of qualitative open-ended questionnaire:

Relationship <i>'head'</i>	Please describe in your own words your relationship to your class members during your MBA so far? Describe a situation that you remember during your MBA that explains the relationship to your classmates?
Understanding others <i>'head'</i>	Do you think you understand fellow student's actions when working in groups? Has there been situations that you recall that you found challenging when working with others? Please explain?
Emotions when working with others <i>'heart'</i>	How would you describe your emotions when working with your group members?
Own behaviour <i>'body'</i>	Do you adapt your own behaviour when working in a group? Please explain?

Source: The researcher

As a second stage, a 6-hour lasting CCT was conducted with that same group of student that comprised a theory part, a role play part with elements in which students together as part of group work needed to find solutions to culture related issues. The final aspect of the CCT was to reflect on experiences on own and other understandings (critical incident). Three weeks after the CCT was conducted a second questionnaire was administered that asked the same questions as the first questionnaire. It also included a qualitative section in which students have been asked for their specific reflections and experiences of behaviour after the training.

Table 2: Sample questions of follow up questionnaire:

Relationship <i>'head'</i>	Please describe in your own words your relationship to your class members after attending the Cross-cultural Training
Understanding others <i>'head'</i>	Do you think you now had better understand fellow student's actions when working in groups? Please explain:
Emotions when working with others <i>'heart'</i>	After attending the Cross-cultural training, how would you describe your emotions when working with your group members?
Own behaviour <i>'body'</i>	After the Cross-cultural training, how did you adapt your own behaviour when working in a group? Please explain:
Change in behaviour <i>'head, heart and body'</i>	Did you notice any change in your own behaviour after attending the Cross-cultural training when working with others? Please explain:

Source: The researcher

Lastly, the class has been observed before, during and after a CCT took place, specifically on the group working dynamics of the students by the researcher. For that purpose an observation journal was kept. As the researcher is a foreigner from Europe, working in Asia and due to the fact that the researcher also has extensive work experience abroad, coupled with many research experiences in and around the topic of cross-culture makes him an expert in theory and practice about cross-cultural work relevant for that research.

Since the aim of the research is not to proof or disprove theory, nor to develop theory but to investigate what is happening and why something is happening, the research applied evaluation as its main research method. According to (Hall & Hall, 2004), the focus of evaluation research is a more applied and practical approach to research rather than on developing theory. It can be summarised, as Patton (2002) mentioned, that the two main directions of evaluation research can be ‘summative’ based on outcomes and or ‘formative’ evaluating the processes of something (Patton, 2002). The underlying research philosophy is based on interpretivism, using qualitative data collection methods (qualitative observations and qualitative open ended questionnaires) (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2006).

Data analysis

The four stage evaluation framework as described in (D. L. Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006; J. D. Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2005) has been applied in this research.

Table 3: Kirkpatrick’s Four Level of Evaluation

Level	Basic Questions	Assessment Method
Reaction	What was the reaction to the CCT?	Observation and Qualitative Questionnaire
Learning	Did learning occur during and as a result of the CCT?	Observation and Qualitative Questionnaire
Behavior	Has a change in behavior occurred as a result of the CCT?	Observation and Qualitative Questionnaire
Results	Can the learning/results linked to an increase of CQ?	Observation and Qualitative Questionnaire

Source: The author, inspired by Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2006)

Further the Miles and Huberman approach to qualitative research, based on data collection, data display, data reduction, conclusion/drawing/verifying and using the steps backward and forward as necessary has been applied by the researcher (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A ‘template analyses’ as described by King (2004) as an approach to “thematically organizing and analyzing textual data” (King, 2004) was further used. In the first step of the template analysis, the answers of the questionnaires have been transcribed, after that grouped into categories and subcategories in a template. Further, the answers have also been scanned for key words and those key words counted. In the final step, the emerging categories have been further grouped and the data have been reduced to be able to draw and verify the conclusions.

Findings

Objective one, what was the outcome of the CCT and impact of the CCG of MBA students? The first questionnaire indicated that many students had issues when it came to building relationships with other students during their MBA. Particularly building friendships among students seemed to be difficult. There have been some students who mentioned that they have

developed friendships with other students but only with some individuals and not the whole group. Most of the class members had some distance to each other. As one student mentioned:

“Even so I like most of my classmates I found it very difficult to connect to them, particularly after class. Also there are many small groups, like the Chinese, and the Westerners, they like to hang out most of the time together”

Further understanding others behaviour/action seemed to be mixed among the students. Some students indicated that they ‘believe’ or ‘think’ they understand fellow students. Many reported that they not often, some even said that they ‘never understand’ what people do or way?

“I don’t get it, so many times have I been disappointed by (country) students. I do not understand what they do. That is quite frustrating”

In total it was mentioned 6 times curiosity/interest, 5 times confusion/chaos, 4 times disappointment and others emotions when working with others. Interestingly ‘anger’ and ‘frustration’ ranked with 16 mentioned highest, which can be translated into a high degree of interest to work together among the students as only very few mention ‘that they don’t care’. Perhaps the high mentioning of the frustration/disappointment is also related in slowing down students own performance, and even own grades that might be lower due to lower group work efficiency?

In the beginning of their MBA was the most reported response, students tried sometimes to adapt their behaviour to others but that they are now mostly themselves and do not adapt to others anymore. As one student reported:

“...to be honest, I don’t care much anymore. I think it is pointless to be different, yes sometimes I’m more of a kind person, like in the beginning but I ended up that others just used me. Now I’m just me, trying to get the project done”

Objective two, can the possible change in behaviour be linked to an increase in CQ? After the CCT, there have been some fundamental changes reported by the students in the second questionnaire. At the relationship level, most not all students reported that they find it now easier to connect with the fellow students. There seem to be a better relationship among the students as one student point out:

“I can’t help myself but it looks like that the last exercise we had to act as the other culture has helped to break the ice”

And like another student wrote *“...the (country) students behaviour is still weird but actually they are not so unfriendly as I thought they are, now we can work together easier”*

At the understanding others level, there have also been many reports from the CCG that they think they can now better understand the ‘motives’ and ‘actions’ of the fellow students. In total 9 times have the word, ‘working style’, 6 times ‘motivation/incentive’, how others do something be mentioned. For example as a student noted:

“...now I know why (country) people don’t say anything. And I thought in the beginning they are inexperienced or uninterested but they just don’t want to offend others”

In addition, the emotions when working with others of the CCG has significantly changed compared to answers from the first questionnaire. Now the most mentioned, 12 times key word was 'relaxed' and with 4 mentioned 'relieved'. It appears that most students now enjoy working with each other compared before the CCT. There have still been students mentioning that they have a rather negative feeling when working with others, but overall the mood seems to have changed.

When ask for the change of own behaviour that was probably the main change that has been reported. Student mentioned that they now had better adjust/change behaviour as they have the feeling they can contribute to a better outcome of the group work as the following except demonstrate:

"...because the (country) students normally don't say something I ask them first before I say something. That I would normally not do but hey, it works. Now (country) say something useful too"

Moreover, when prompted to explain the 'change in own behaviour' students believed that they are now better prepared to cope with culture related behaviour. Even so that may or may not be purely subjective there was a great amount of students who mentioned that the CCT has been a revelation and that they think they are now better prepared to better/easier connect with others.

Observational results:

Two group works before the CCT has been conducted has been observed. The observer had the impression that in each group there had been students who talked all the time and some have been very quiet the whole time. In addition, the observer got the feeling that the group work was not enjoyed by everybody.

After the CCT, and in following group works, however, there was a noticeable change in behaviour as now nearly all students work together, with a lot of talking and discussions among them. Further students looked much more relaxed and seem to enjoy their group work more.

4. Discussion

The outcome of the CCT seems to have been resulting in a noticeable change in behaviour of the CCG. Can this be linked to an increase in CQ? Given the responses from the students there certainly is a strong indication that the CQ at some, perhaps even the most student has increased. This result correlates with the findings of (Young & Schartner, 2014) who stated based on their study that student with some CCT background performed significantly better adjusting and adapting to new culture related situations as for example group work with students from different cultural backgrounds. The CCG mentioned that they are able to adjust own behaviour and that they now feel to better prepared to decode the rational behaviour of others. There is some, by the students reported and also observed mood change after the CCT took place that has resulted in higher degree of interaction among the CCG members. It can therefore be stated that the findings of this study has show similar outcomes.

Those findings also correlate with the definition of CQ by (P.Christopher Earley, et al., 2006). We can therefore assume that the findings can be linked to an increased CQ. Even so the findings are not representative given it was an interpretive investigation, it can be assumed that a CCT conducted for a CCG of MBA students can contribute to develop a higher CQ. The study had several constrains as the researcher had only access to a quite small sample size, limitations in time and also not applying quantitative methods. It is therefore suggested to have additional research on that topic.

That research should apply a larger sample, perhaps a quasi experiment using quantitative research. To sum up, there are strong indication that a set of skills, subsumed as CQ can be developed with a CCT, positively influencing the students and their happiness. However, it cannot be stated if those changes in behavior can have a long-term effect, for that also further research with a longer time span would be required.

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