

Recreating Cultural Immersion in an Online Environment

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Abstract: The 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic threw a curve ball into everyone's spring teaching schedule. But for those of us who were a week away from taking their students overseas, it was a game changer. How do you create make-up material for one and a half credit hours while staying true to the course objective of "understanding another culture through immersion and interaction?" My course (usiness Culture of Greece) is a three-credit hour course which includes an in-classroom eight week component, followed by a weeklong trip in Athens during spring break. Faculty will discover how to incorporate activities that inform and engage students even when they cannot travel. Ideas shared can apply to domestic travel and are irrelevant to country-specific content.

This submission includes a list of activities faculty can use to replicate in-country experiences designed to meet learning outcomes. Activities such as, expert question and answer discussions that normally occur face to face; meetings with local students of the same age to discuss current topics; watching a native language film and debriefing with a film expert; and a final presentation of their course project to their local business client that occurred on Zoom. Preparation discussion questions, student highlight quotes, and lessons learned will be used to help faculty plan for future courses.

The Setting

"Internationalization has been a prominent feature of the higher education business curriculum in the twentieth century." As Edwards and colleagues describe in their July 2010 edition of the Higher Education Research and Development Journal, (Edwards, et al., 2003), universities are creating course assignments and experiences that enhance global awareness for their students. Indiana University's Kelley School of Business is among these universities, and since 2011 has offered [short travel courses](#) to expose sophomores to the world of business beyond the United States. Among the [student learning outcomes](#), we list a section specifically addressing cultural awareness and global effectiveness.

- IU BLOOMINGTON UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM COMPETENCIES AND STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES (SLOs)
- (SLO 7.1: Identify the risks and opportunities associated with determining and implementing optimal global business strategies.
- SLO 7.2: Integrate international, regional, and local non-market forces into strategic decisions of multinational corporations.
- SLO 7.3: Analyze obstacles resulting from cultural differences and recommend leadership approaches that leverage diversity to enhance business performance.
- SLO 7.4: Identify the personal and contrasting attitudes, values, and beliefs that shape business relationships.

The Problem

C272 Business Culture of Greece is a three-credit hour course which includes an in-classroom eight-week component, followed by a weeklong trip in Athens during spring break. 2020 was the 10 year anniversary of the course with a vibrant schedule planned for a March trip to Athens, Greece.

As with all other academic programs, the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic threw a curve ball into all teaching schedules. It was a game changer for the C272 course, because the students were scheduled to travel the week after live classes were cancelled. The faculty faced several serious questions, particularly: “How do you create make-up material for 1.5 credit hours while staying true to the course objective of ‘Identifying personal and contrasting attitudes, values, and beliefs that shape business relationships?’ How do you create cultural immersion in an online environment?”

In Search of a Solution for Personal Connections and Authentic Experiences

Before designing additional assignments to make up for the missed in-country experience, I researched for potential virtual activities with measured outcomes. Among them was a virtual walk through London: culture learning through a cultural immersion experience was published in the fifth issue of the *Computer Assisted Language Journal* (Chen Y., 2020). This activity utilized Google street view and virtual 3-D environments in which learners used avatars to virtually walk through the streets of London while interacting with one another via text and chat functions. The conclusion of the paper stated that “all four English learners involved in the study benefitted from their cultural immersion, to varying extents, in the virtual environment.”

Our course was designed to have students work directly with a Greek business client (The Museum of Ancient Greek Technology), and complete a virtual tour of the museum [exhibits](#). If we wanted students to virtually explore Athens, we would need more time to find tours that were comparable to the London project.

A related study (Luethge et al., 2016) examined the effectiveness of using virtual communities technology with students enrolled in undergraduate business courses in two different countries. The students were assigned a virtual cross-cultural experience project that global virtual teams worked on during the semester. Several limitations were found in project deliverable expectations as well as some anticipated challenges involving technology. Still, the researchers concluded that the design was “A valuable learning experience as a precursor to studying abroad, allowing both students and faculty to dip their toes into international waters prior to actually taking an international plunge.”

The previous methodologies presented us with viable virtual options to create effective assignments that can enrich students’ skill sets in cultural awareness and global effectiveness. Interacting with fellow students from other cultures brings a level of understanding that cannot be duplicated by more traditional in-class assignments. Even with an extremely tight timeline, establishing shared classroom experiences that included virtual interaction and personal sharing to impart a sense of cultural immersion in an online environment was well worth our time and effort.

Aligning On-Line Experiences with Learning Outcomes

To create a virtual and rich experience for this course, faculty designed four types of projects to meet learning objectives in the virtual space without the in-country interaction:

1. Virtual discussions with Greek professionals in the geopolitical and finance sectors – students reviewed curriculum vitae and LinkedIn profiles for the two guest speakers and prepared questions related to what they had learned in the classroom.
2. Greek movie viewing (*A Touch of Spice*, by Tassos Boulmetis) and debrief with a faculty expert in Greek cinema and culture – students discussed Greek culture examples studied in their course work and historical perceptive depiction of the 1923 Asia Minor population exchange between Greece and Turkey.
3. For client case completion, students virtually presented their ideas for marketing and promotion to the management of the Kotsanas Museum of Ancient Greek Technology.
4. Virtual discussions with Greek students assigned to small groups of Kelley students and guided questions on several topics of Modern Greek society.

In preparation for each assignment, students were guided to answer a list of questions. These questions ensured their preparation and integrated concepts they learned in the first eight weeks of the course.

Table 1. Assignments & Instructions.

Assignment Type	Instructions
Greek Professionals Discussions	List three preparation questions you have for our guest based on the CV and LinkedIn profile, and in relation to specific information we discussed and learned in class. Include information of your reasoning behind each question.
Greek Movie Viewing	List three examples of high context culture that you see in the movie. What were some of the ‘hidden’ messages, or parts you did not understand? How do you understand Greece’s history of the Asia Minor population exchange better after watching this? How might this influence a Greece’s attitudes towards Turkey? How do you know this?
Client Case Completion	Before you prepare to present your ideas to the museum representatives, list three questions you have relating to the recent COVID-19 pandemic and management of the museum’s operations. Build on the April Q&A session we had with the representatives and consider how you could continue to build the relationship with your client.
Virtual Discussions with Greek Students	Your goal for this discussion is to get to know the students and discuss your cultures’ similarities and differences. Discuss primary education, role of family in your lives, influence of religion in society, politics and people's views on them. I would encourage you to ask what their perceptions of the US are, or you can get into discussions about regulations around recreational drugs, gun control, immigration and social justice. Go as deep as you feel comfortable. The learning objective here is to give you content to reflect on and compare/contrast with what we learned in the classroom. Please RECORD your Zoom session (you should invite the Greek students to your call) and list it in your Canvas assignment.

Table 2. Student Reflections to Assignments.

Assignment Type	Student reflections	SLO References
Greek Professionals Discussions	<p><i>“Mr. Kostopoulos spoke with much pride about Cyprus and underscored just how important it is to the Greeks. In class, we discussed how Greeks considered Cyprus to be theirs because of the presence of Greeks on the island and the added insult of its allegiance to Turkey if the island was not split. However, Mr. Kostopoulos also explained why the rest of Western civilization should be concerned with Turkey’s interest in the island and why NATO cannot take action first against Turkey. This gave me a wider perspective on how important Greece and Cyprus are to NATO.”</i></p> <p><i>“An interesting connection that he brought up in relation to our class discussions is how prepared Greece was for this crisis. Because of their constant change throughout their history, I believe that they were ready for this massive change as well and were able to adapt. A big part of why the United States has struggled more to adapt is because of that lack of turmoil and change throughout history. Another interesting perspective is to look at this from the leadership point of view. Having a new prime minister that the country of Greece is optimistic about could have also a positive impact on the way that the country as a whole reacted to the situation.</i></p>	7.2 7.4
Greek Movie Viewing	<p><i>“One thing that I’ve wondered throughout the semester is how has the extent of globalization, which we see a lot of in America, impacted Greece? Towards the end of our discussion, Frank mentioned American versus Greek cuisine, and how modern Greek cuisine is changing in many ways. He stated that American cuisine is “Imperial”, and that people “eat what they want to become.” This notion is very accurate, but at the same time Greek cuisine is being influenced very much from other cultures around the world. So not only are Americans guilty of heavy culinary influence from other cultures, but the Greeks are too.”</i></p>	7.4
Client Case Completion	<p><i>“I remember Professor Kolovou explaining to us that if we ask a direct question to a Greek person, they will likely get offended and may not even answer the question. It is important to lead into your question with an opener and then ask your question. Expanding on that, it is important to present all of your data in a presentation before offering a suggestion. This is because in Greek culture, it is important to respect the power distance between people, which means you need to defer to those with seniority. All of this was the exact opposite of what I had grown up doing, so it was difficult for me to adapt. In C104, I was taught to present my idea and then to expand upon it, and that was not going to fly in Greece. Learning about high context cultures helped me to understand a big difference in how businesses operated between our two countries, and helped me significantly when working on the most influential part of this semester, the Kotsanas museum presentation.”</i></p>	7.4
Virtual Discussions with Greek Students	<p><i>“Theodoros told us about how the college search process works in Greece: they take a test and based on their scores out of 20 they are placed at a certain Greek university unless they choose to leave the country (which many do). We discussed the brain drain in Greece many times and how more and more young</i></p>	7.4

	<p><i>people are leaving the country for college, which is not that common in the US since there are so many universities country wide.”</i></p> <p><i>“I found it fascinating when George said that during his time in the US he was slightly afraid of the police due to the stories he had heard about them through the media. It saddens me that most people foreign to the US feel as if they are being targeted by the police when they visit as we pride ourselves on being one of the most free/inclusive countries in the world, yet other cultures do not see us that way. We talked about how he and his family got pulled over when visiting the US and he was afraid that something bad was going to happen which shocked me because I have never felt this way before when dealing with law enforcement, and while he said nothing bad happened I have read plenty of stories before that show that this is not always the case.”</i></p>	7.4
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Qualitative Feedback

Although these assignments were arranged in a two-week time period, the students documented learning and value in their experiences that mirrored comments I have collected in post-travel reflections, from previous years.

Lessons Learned

If our intent in cross-cultural immersion is to teach our students how to adapt to new situations, we have to “walk the talk.” The Spring 2020 COVID-19 Semester created challenges and opportunities to do things differently. I would have never thought that coordinating virtual discussions would result in this type of a student comment:

“This was a very nice change of pace from class as we finally got to see Greece from the perspective of someone our own age, which was lacking in many of the topics we learned and could have been used as an answer for an alternative perspective in all of our readings and assignments. Overall, I am very happy we got to connect and feel that I have a much better understanding of life in Greece for a young student.”

This was an awakening for me and a motivation to bring in younger and different perspectives in future semesters, even before the study abroad component. I plan to utilize technology and engage with students their age before we travel in-country. My students will be more familiar with their Greek colleagues and engage in deeper conversation when they meet in person. I also realized that since our students are more comfortable with technology, it would benefit us to use virtual tours and more video of places we plan to visit and explore. My students will be ready to engage with their surroundings when we arrive in Athens.

References

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