

INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION. AN EXPERIENCE OF INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

K. C. SOARES*

JON MEGIBOW**

The academic community, in general, is understood to encompass an environment for knowledge acquisition, supportive of research into new realms, and the encouragement of learning. The “oratory” means of conveying knowledge with one person speaking and others listening — created the basis for the “lecturing” approach to transmitting knowledge. In the twentieth century, “field trips” were an opportunity for “getting out” of the formal classroom and for learning in other environments. The industrial and education fields have long believed in and utilized the “apprenticeship” system and approach to learning. Laboratory experiences have dominated the biology, chemistry, and physics classrooms and more recently many of these experiences have been extended to field activities, outside of the formal classroom/school environment.

The initiatives, such as, Junior Achievement (at the high school levels in the USA) provide students with the experience of creating their own business;

* K. C. Soares is a Senior Consultant in management, organization development and institution building, and human capacity building, and executive coaching. She holds a Ph.D. from Cornell University. She is currently a grant awardee of the Foundation for the Support of Research of the State of Bahia (FAPESB) and a Visiting Professor of the School of Management, Federal University of Bahia, Brazil where she is collaborating with them in new areas of innovation and globalization of the School. She worked for over 18 years in the Organization of American States in social and income generating projects and was responsible for the OAS Center for Training and Development. She has worked in Africa, Europe, and the Americas. K. C. serves on several Boards, including School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution — Board of Advisors; Board of Directors for OAS Federal Credit Union, The Amani Institute, and Partnership for Sustainable Peace; and, was the Founding President of IODA-International Organization Development Association.

** Jon Megibow is the Director of Operations for the Center for Global Initiatives of Darden School of Business, University of Virginia and a Senior Lecturer. His Ph.D. and M.A. are from UVa, B.A., Grinnell College. His areas of expertise are Communication Strategy and Cross-Cultural Communications and he has co-authored a textbook on the fundamentals of management communications. He holds leadership positions in a number of professional organizations, including the Board of Directors, Consortium for Graduate Study in Management. He has served as Director of Admission for the Darden School and has been a visiting faculty member at IAE in Buenos Aires, Argentina and IPADE in Mexico City, Mexico.

planning, designing, producing their own product; marketing; and, relationship building. Internships and part-time work programs provide valuable learning experiences and can provide income, in some cases. Learning and didactic approaches are dynamic, have changed, and sometimes register changes in economic interests and realities.

In the social sciences, over fifty years ago, action research and applied research gained recognition in the social sciences as valid learning and research approaches. The prevailing scientific methods for research and learning through the 1930's and 1940's were data collection and research focused, with slow change to other observational forms, such as the time and motion studies related to increasing efficiencies and productivity. As the human being and human groups became the source of inquiry and observation, the methods of research continued changing and the terms such as action research, field research, and applied research became more prevalent in the social sciences.

Institutions of higher learning incorporate, as valid learning methods — case studies, scenario analysis, internships, and short-term work experiences, for example. These methods reflect changing attitudes toward ways of learning and, to some extent, reflect an interest of more inclusion of the learner in these processes. Similarly, institutions of higher education have been utilizing strategic alliances to form relationships with other institutions of higher learning. These relationships can complement, expand, and introduce new and innovative programs that are beneficial to the institutions involved, their students and professors, especially.

This article is about learning via a hands-on and practical experience that requires the application of theory and acquired experience in a real workplace situation, in another culture. It is an attempt to provide a “space” for applying classroom learning in a workplace environment. Of particular interest is that this experience occurred in organizations in a country other than that where the students were studying.

Specifically, the article addresses an innovative learning experience created by the School of Management, UFBA in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil and the Darden School of Business, UVa in Charlottesville, VA, USA. The master's level students (candidates for MBA and EMBA) of Darden participated in a short consulting experience in one of four Brazilian organizations located in Salvador, Bahia. Discussions began in 2012 focusing on mutual interests and possible alignments between the two institutions vis-à-vis areas of academic and international programs. The process culminated with the first program in May 2013 of student-consultants with client organization in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil.

Goals

The goals of the Program are related to an innovative experience in professional development in Management, where the MBA/EMBA students of the Darden School of Business would have the possibility of complementing their classroom studies with an Organizational Consulting experience within a distinctive business culture workplace.

The Program was made viable by the following goals:

- creating innovative and open/safe space for practical learning and applied theory through contact with new work processes in Bahia organizations;
- encouraging Darden students to start developing more awareness and being more attuned to nationals of other countries through working together in a unique socio-historical and cultural environment;
- researching, analyzing and providing viable recommendations for the consulting issue/problem of the client organization; and,
- developing *case studies* based about the actual consulting experience in the client organization with the view of contributing to the formation of new managers within a global framework.

The Program

Setting the Stage

This Program was designed to give the graduate student a short-term, but deep, understanding and work experience with an organization and where a result (deliverable) was expected and was a key component of the consultancy. Over eight organizations were approached to ascertain their interest in participating in this new Program and they all expressed interest. They each stated that they had a real and existing issue or problem that they were interested in investigating/resolving, within a short time-frame. Given that twelve students registered for the program, four organizations were selected and agreed to participate in this pilot program of student-consultants. An attempt was made to include an organization from the private, public, not-for-profit sector and from a mix of different goals - these organizations became active stakeholders in this Program.

Meetings were held about six months before the program with the four organizations accompanied by the professor working with them and a

member of the program staff. The program was discussed and after interest in participating was ascertained, the consulting issue/problem was discussed and verbal agreements to participate were reached. Subsequently, the Program staff prepared — a short description about the organization and the consulting issue/problem statement. These were reviewed by the organization, finalized, and approved. The organization description and its website, and consulting issue/problem were then sent to the Darden School of Business about five months before the Program began.

The Program for the Darden students was designed to occur immediately after exams and during a one-week term break. The students arrived in Salvador, Bahia on a Friday, started the consulting assignment on Monday, and made their consulting results and recommendations to the client organization on Friday, and returned to their homes on Saturday.

Clients

One of the factors that strongly contributed to the success of this pilot program was the openness and willingness of the client organizations to engage with the program and the students. In each instance, a specific person in the organization was approached by a member of EAUFBA, usually where a relationship already existed. Given the close relationship between EAUFBA and organizations in Bahia, the discussions were open, fluid, and productive.

This environment of transparency and honesty lead to a very respectful working relationship as the student-consultant arrived. Some of the specific aspects that contributed to this environment were:

- engaging and thorough discussions held prior to any commitment to be involved in the program
- all consulting issues clearly defined ahead of time
- all consulting issues were real issues/problems that the organization wanted help with
- all consulting issues were reasonable in terms of ability to produce results in a short-time frame
- all persons involved were willing to and accepted the language challenge

Stakeholder responsibilities

Key to the understanding of “what was going to happen” was the full discussion about responsibilities of each of the stakeholders. This greatly contributed

to clarity and the flow of work. These “responsibilities” and related expectations were discussed and shared with all stakeholders and they are as follows:

Of client organization:

- Select an issue/problem that reflects the organization’s priority interests or necessities that would be the consulting focus of the Darden student consultant team
- Identify a “person responsible” that will accompany and orient the Darden student consultant team during their practical experiences in the organization
- Provide a supportive work environment that would enable the Darden students to engage in their consulting experience
- Schedule time, at the end of the week concluding the work, for a presentation by student consultants — of results and of their recommendations for the client organization

Of Darden:

- Recruit and select MBA student’s for the Program
- Manage the selection process, with EAUFBA, of the participating organizations and the consulting issue/problem for each student-consultant team
- Provide the financial support and international logistical planning related to the students’ arrival and departure — Bahia, Brazil
- Recognize the role of the team of EAUFBA professors and graduate students that accompany each student consultant group in the development of the Program together with the participating organizations

Of EAUFBA:

- Establish team of professors from its staff and its Graduate students for the coordination and development of the Program and for its implementation with the Darden team
- Identify and establish contact with Bahia organizations that have an interest in participating in the Program in collaboration with Darden and acquire their agreement to be involved
- Take charge of, in conjunction with the Darden team, the planning and implementation of the activities of the Program
- Professors would present an overview and contextualization of the questions/problems selected and answered questions and responded to comments that the students may have

- Make available the infrastructure and logistical conditions with the University and other necessary supports for the satisfactory development of the Program

As the Program evolved, it became clear that we needed to include new items (which will happen in the next Program), however, in this first instance people smoothly accommodated necessary changes.

Brief overview of the actual schedule

a. Welcome, getting acquainted

The EAUFBA staff believed that it was important for the students to meet the professor and student with which they would be working in this work context and experience. We imagined that some students might be stressed by the travel and with uncertainty about of the consulting experience, concerned or worried about the task ahead of them particularly coupled with the fact that the work would be in a Portuguese speaking environment. The welcome and getting acquainted were designed to be a casual and friendly moment in time where everyone started getting acquainted. Self-introductions were made and then everyone regrouped by client organization team. The team members became acquainted with each other, including the Professor and student from EAUFBA; shared information about the client organization; talked about and asked questions about Salvador; and, talked about other things of interest.

b. Historical and cultural visits

The State of Bahia is where Brazil was discovered by the Portuguese in April of 1500. It is where the Portuguese landowners brought African slaves to Brazil to work on their plantations. It is a State with many historical markers and monuments; it has 417 municipalities and is a State larger than the country of France. The city of Salvador has a robust Afro-Brazilian culture and cuisine. The historic center of the city of Salvador is a United Nations World Heritage site.

An important aspect of the Darden students' understanding and awareness of the culture was for them to visit key historical sites and monuments, churches, and marketplaces before starting their consulting assignment. They also visited, on the north coast beyond the international airport, an internationally renowned marine turtle preserve and project. We believed these visits

were necessary to help them transition into this new environment, where they would be working for the next week.

c. Consulting with client organizations

The consulting experience started before arrival of the students in Bahia—they were given basic information about the organization, its consulting issue/problem, its website, and in some instances held Skype meetings with the EAUFBA faculty member. It was envisioned that they would start their process of due diligence before arrival.

The on-site consulting activity was a five-day experience. Four days were dedicated to on-site meetings, and interviews, discussions, and the fifth day for the presentation of results. In most instances the client organization also arranged for visits with people or groups with which they were already working so that the student-consultants could get a more complete understanding of each organization's areas of actuation, understand better the complexity of their challenges, and talk face-to-face with the people already involved with the organization.

The nature of the consulting issues ranged from preparing legacies – many of which were social legacies for the organization to the internationalization of products and services of their clients. The visits to other people and groups were designed to give the student access to more information, an opportunity to actually experience their client-organization's reality.

d. Presentation of results to client organization

The fifth day of the consulting experience was when the student-consultant team made a power point presentation to their client organization. This included, in general, a brief summary of what they encountered and discussed during their meetings and visit, results and recommendations. The client organizations expressed their pleasure with the student-consulting experience and the usefulness of the results – they were all very appreciative.

Some targeted learning elements of the Program

The authors believe that the following were critical aspects of the Program that contributed to its success.

1. In situ experiencing of a workplace in another culture

This experience was especially challenging for both the student-consultants and the client organization. How does one relate, communicate, work in another culture, for a short period of time, where the social and cultural markers/parameters were absolutely new to you? This challenge is elevated with the expectation that the student-consultant team produce a deliverable that includes recommendations.

The client organization is challenged because they have to modify, for five days, their own work patterns, give special attention to and provide information and materials for the student-consultants, and they have to speak in a language other than the operative language of their workplace. They are also invested in the outcomes and the quality of the outcomes since others in the organization were highly aware of this initiative and the expectations level was high.

2. A visit, yes, but much more

This was a special opportunity for the students of Darden to become acquainted with a new country, a new culture, and a new workplace. Learning about the history and culture of the city was considered a fundamental part of this learning and consultancy experience. As such, it was designed to give the student a better breadth and depth of understanding of the reality that they were involved with during their time in Salvador, Bahia and that of the milieu within which their client organization operated.

3. Consulting work experience with deliverables

A key aspect of this work was the expectation that the student-consultant provide results for the client organization on the final day of their consultancy. This need to deliver results was an important “driver” for all parties involved. This results-oriented experience is considered to be one of the unique aspects of this learning experience and is one of the factors that differentiates this Program from others.

4. Non-English speaking workplace

The student-consultant was working in an environment where the principle language spoken in the workplace was Portuguese. This was not the primary language of the majority of the students; additionally, the students came from a graduate program that was conducted in English.

5. Risk taking

It was recognized by the partner organizations - the client organization, EAUFBA, Darden - that this was a pilot program. They understood their responsibilities and the expectations had been fully discussed (as mentioned previously). They also realized that risks were inherent with innovation. As such, the principle risk for the partners was **reputational risk**, followed by **relationship risk**. On the individual level, a risk to the partners' professional **esteem** and **image** was understood; and, certainly important for the two Schools was their **academic credibility**.

Factors contributing to goal attainment

a. Clarity and understanding of responsibilities

Initial discussions among the partner organizations made clear the goals of the program for them and ascertained that they understood them. Their responsibilities were articulated and verbally agreed upon, and these were presented in writing and articulated before the client-organization committed to participating. .

b. Consulting issue/problem

It was imperative — given the short time period for this consultancy — that this issue/problem be clear and within the realm of addressing and/or resolving within a four day period. Several meetings of the EAUFBA staff and professors with the client organization were held regarding the issue/problem so that it could then be written for clarity, purpose, and within the possibility of resolving in a short time period. Additionally, it was critical that the client be involved in this process of crafting the overview and issue/problem so that they, too, were committed to addressing the goals. In summary, the issue/problem was clear, understandable, and achievable within five days.

c. Summary about client organization

A brief summary of the organization, including its website, was written to give the student-consultant general overview and information about the organization. This also included the consultancy issue/problem. It was prepared more than five months before the program began by the EAUFBA person already having direct contact with the client organization, and there was consensus agreement of the final text. The objective was to ensure the acceptance and buy-in by all partners.

The participating client organizations came from a broad range of interests and fields:

- Public, state entity of national organization, micro and small business development
- Public, state entity, Extraordinary Secretariat,¹ international event
- Private, national and international, energy and alternative energy
- Private, media enterprise, newspaper

d. The following two factors specifically refer to the student-related portion of the Program:

1) Invested time in “getting acquainted” before the consulting began

The program design included an initial interaction between the EAUFBA staff and professors/students with the Darden students as mentioned previously. One of its primary purposes was to provide a “safe space” for the Darden students’ entry into a new organizational culture. It was intended to be a casual time; getting acquainted with their team after a brief welcome; and, being able to ask questions and clarify doubts. It is important to note that the Professor’s relationship with the client organization contributed toward the fluidity of the student ease in working with a new client.

2) Each team was led by a EAUFBA professor and student, each of which was fluent in English

Their roles included providing guidance for the students, conducting the meetings, giving advice and feedback to the students, and generally clarifying any questions that the student-consultant might have. This experience showed that the role of the EAUFBA professor and students was critical — they had many roles, including guide and interpreter. They explained, for example, background information, gave overview, explained situational factors and cultural imperatives; they helped clarify doubts of the students and questions arising from the data and information; they answered questions pertinent to the consulting issue; and, they accompanied the Darden students to all meetings and site visits

Some innovative program aspects

I. Creation of a strategic alliance with multiple components of interest for faculty and students

¹ A state entity created for a specific purpose that has a closing date established when it is created.

This relationship was designed to be an equal and collaborative relationship between two institutions of higher learning that was created to allow innovation in methodologies and approaches, and to further develop relationships of respect which advanced new ideas and experiences. In this first program, each institution provided inputs that were critical for the success of the program, as described below:

a. The EAUFBFA:

- Identified and met with possible client organizations
- Discussed with and finalized the consulting issues/problem
- “Closed the contract” with the client organization
- Designed the Program, including its operational aspects — from student arrival to departure
 - Met with professors and tapped into their interest in participating and commitment to this Program
 - Professor and client organization designed the organization-specific 5-day agenda — the days that the student-consultants were with the client organization
 - Professors identified and recruited the MS student that would accompany the student-consultant team
 - Prepared and presented power point presentation, with question/answer session, about the historical, socio-cultural aspects of Bahia for Darden students
 - EAUFBFA students were, initially, responsible for the interpretations of Portuguese-English-Portuguese. However, their role expanded to, for example, providing information, clarifying situations, giving background and culture explanations, and answering questions
 - Professors lead this applied learning process, conducted meetings, facilitated
 - during interviews and site visits, and provided technical and socio-cultural support and explanations
 - Designed and conducted the welcome and getting acquainted session, and designed, organized and implemented the celebratory luncheon, as part of the program’s closure
 - Provided all the planning, organizing, and on-site management of the program, and the useful problem solving associated with program/project implementation

- Every evening the EAUFBA staff made themselves available to the Darden students at their hotel to, for example, answer their questions, make clarification about the day, provide necessary context

Part of the agreement with Darden School of Business was that the EAUFBA professors and students would write a case study about the experience and the results relating to the client organization with which they worked. This activity is currently underway.

b. Darden School of Business:

- Formulated the initial concept, visited the EAUFBA to explore possibilities and interest
- Approached EAUFBA to explore the possibilities and their interest and, subsequently, reached agreement regarding this strategic alliance
- Designed basic MOU for the leadership of both institutions
- Helped design the Program with the EAUFBA staff
- Responsible for recruiting students and preparing them for the Program
- Responsible for the financial management of the program
- Provided information about, and discussed with, the staff of EAUFBA, the writing of a case study the Darden-way

2. Short time-frame

This program was designed to provide a culturally relevant, global, workplace experience during a short and specific time period. As such, the students had high intensity and concentrated experiences, in many regards. They were also expected to produce a result which undoubtedly led to additional pressure to perform and represent their School, with dignity. They perhaps felt some pressure from the Program, in general, since they understood that they were the first group from Darden to participate in this strategic alliance.

3. Working in the offices of an organization located in a country and culture other than their own

Being physically present and working in another's workplace was a fundamental and critical learning component that differentiates this Program from others. Darden was searching for a "way" to provide a richer — than simply conduct visits to organizations in a country — experience and to provide a cultural-based and applied learning situation. They realized that many of their graduates would be working internationally after graduation and also that many

had not had an actual work experience in other countries. This program was devised to provide that experience. Additionally, it occurred in a large country (the B of the BRICS countries) where everyone spoke a language other than English. This situational aspect helped them to understand better about people and organizations from other cultures and to also realize some of the universalities about people.

4. Deliverable/results were expected

One of the special components of this Program and one that differentiates it from others, such as, internships and “visits”, is that the student-consultants were expected to produce relevant and useful results. This expectation was a stress-inducer for some of the Darden students. The professors and EAUFBFA student accompanying each team were fundamental in helping the students, responding to their workplace needs, and assisting with relationship building, among others. All teams produced credible, insightful, and useful recommendations.

5. Presentation to client organization

Related to aspect #4 above, was the expectation that the student-consultant team make a power point presentation to the client organization and conduct/manage the question and answer and discussion session following the presentation. The preparation for this activity required daily attention and contributions by the team. These presentations were well prepared, very thoughtful, contained insightful observations and suggestions/recommendations. There was lively interaction and discussion with those present.

One of the client organizations was so enthused with the student-consultant team's work during the week that they scheduled the presentation of results in an auditorium on their premises and invited over 50 of their staff to attend. The other student-consultant teams made the presentation to their client in the EAUFBFA site.

Findings and Conclusions

There exists strong interest in improving and expanding opportunities for new and relevant learning. The strategic alliance formed between two educational institutions of higher learning provided the means for the new ideas described herein to be explored.

The goals of this strategic alliance were in alignment with the internal focus of both of these institutions. The following provided the impetus for this program:

- creating innovative and open/safe space for practical learning and applied theory through contact with new work processes in Bahia organizations;
- encouraging future Darden students to start developing more awareness of being more attuned to nationals of other countries through working together in a unique socio-historical and cultural environment;
- researching, analyzing and providing viable recommendations for the consulting issue/problem of the client organization; and,
- developing *case studies* based about the actual consulting experience in the client organization with the view of contributing to the formation of new managers within a global framework.

Of particular interest in the design and implementation of this program are the following:

- care in identifying, discussing and reaching consensus with the client organizations
- a workplace environment of interest, respect and commitment was maintained particularly due to the following:
 - o clearly defining ahead of time the consulting issue/problem
 - o consulting issues/problems that were real
 - o consulting issues/problems that were reasonable for a short time-frame consulting experience
 - o all persons involved accepted the language challenge

The stakeholder responsibilities, and thus the expectations, were clearly articulated and agreed upon by those involved. This allowed for a healthy relationship between all parties during the implementation phase of the program. Additionally, care was consistently given to the socio-cultural aspects of the Program, especially for the student-consultants.

Some of the learning experiences of the Program that gave considerable emphasis to its qualitative results were:

- this was an *in situ* work experience, in another culture
- this was a consulting experience with deliverables – not just a visit
- this learning experience occurred in a non-English speaking workplace
- this was a risk taking endeavor for the stakeholders, including – reputation risk, relationship risk, and it impacted academic credibility.

There are five clear innovative aspects of this Program that together differentiates it from other applied learning experiences:

- 1) creation of a strategic alliance with multiple components of interest for faculty and students
 - 2) short time-frame
 - 3) working — physical presence — in a country and culture other than their own
 - 4) deliverable/results were expected
 - 5) a presentation to the client organization, with the results, occurred
- It is the intention of the two institutions of higher learning to integrate observations, constructive feedback and learning to improve the design, and to conduct this Program annually.

Bibliography

- ARGYRIS, Chris. *Intervention Theory and Method. A Behavioral Science View*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1970.
- FREIRE, Paulo. *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York: Continuum Books, 1974.
- GILBRETH, Frank & Lillian. *Time and Motion Study As Fundamental Factors in Planning and Control*. New Jersey: The Mountainside Press, 1921.
- GILBRETH, Lillian & COOK, Alice Rice. *The Foreman in Manpower Management*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1947.
- HAMEL, Gary & PRAHALAD, C. K. *Competing for the Future*. Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press, 1994.
- HOPE, Jeremy & HOPE, Tony. *Competing in the Third Wave: The Ten Key Management Issues of the Information Age*. Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press, 1997.
- ROSEN, Robert; DIGH, Patricia; SINGER, Marshall, & PHILLIPS, Carl. *Global Literacies: Lessons on Business Leadership and National Cultures*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2000.
- SENGE, Peter M. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday Currency, 1990.
- TOFFLER, Alvin, ed. *Learning for Tomorrow: the Role of the Future in Education*. New York: Vintage Books, 1974.
- ULRICH, Dave & ULRICH, Wendy. *The Why of Work*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 2010.
- WHYTE, William F. & HAMILTON, Edith L. *Action Research for Management*. Homewood, IL: Irwin-Dorsey Press, 1964.