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Preparing the Expatriate Candidate for Global Success: A Best-Practice Analysis of Cross-Culture Adaptation Training

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Increased demand for global citizenry has led scholars and educators alike to seek ways to improve intercultural communication competence (ICC). Research has focused on the theoretical underpinnings of ICC and how to implement these theoretical factors into a practical educational model. Yet, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the implementation of ICC education in the ever-increasingly popular online context. This quasi-experimental study provides a look at how online expatriate candidate training might influence ICC. Results indicate that online expatriate candidate training provides an effective model for organizational practitioners with limited time and resources.

Keywords: Expatriate Preparation, Candidate Assessment, Online Learning

Our converging world demands that we prepare for globalization in whatever form we experience, whether it be through social media, world news broadcasts, or simply melting pot communities. Yet when we travel abroad, we must be prepared to experience the host culture to the full extent. Acculturation is not a simple process, but one that must be met with our best efforts prior to departure as well as through the process of culture shock after a period of time in the new surroundings.

Much of our task training over past decades has taken place at institutions of higher education or on-the-job (OTJ). However, the onset of online education has provided a secondary avenue for learning that has proven effective in a few contexts. The purpose of this study is to learn how online and OTJ education might enhance expatriate candidate intercultural communication competencies (ICC). The review of literature discusses globalization, ICC, online education, and OTJ education, followed by a description of this quasi-experimental study and results. The conclusion and discussion provide valuable insight into online education of ICC for expatriate trainers and educators.

Review of the Literature

Globalization

The interconnectedness of our world has become more evident over the past few decades. From the onset of 24-hour news to ripple effects of world catastrophes on global economies to the university's focus on preparing the graduate for a globalized society, globalization has claimed a pervasive position within our lives. According to Black and Gregersen (1999), more than 80 percent of organizations send people abroad for various reasons. Such ventures can cost organizations up $1,000,000 in respective cases, yet the American Council on Education (2000) reports deficiencies in the way institutions of higher education and organizations prepare expatriate candidates for these global tasks.

Intercultural Communication Competence

From the sociological and psycho-characteristic focus (Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999) that brought about acculturation factors of marginalization and assimiliation (i.e. Caligiuri, 2000), scholars have moved beyond traditional stress-related indices (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005; Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991).

Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) factors such as appreciation of local food, host national interaction, and specific job responsibilities, while abroad, eventually gave way to organizational competency factors (Hemmasi, Downes, & Varner, 2010). Pinto, Cabral-Cardoso, the Werther (2012) later discovered that adjustment proficiency dictated expatriate desires to either stay and strive or return early.

Current ICC scholars have moved the study of acculturation and expatriate success to discussion regarding family accommodation (Lee & Kartika, 2014), culture-specific differences (Hippler, Caligiuri, & Johnson, 2014), or simply a person as they adjust to their respective environments (Haslberger, Brewster, & Hippler, 2013). Still, other ICC scholars seek purely theoretical descriptions of ICC factors. In their late issue of the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, editors Arasaratnam and Deardorff focus nearly its entirety on the theory of ICC, yet provide little to no comment regarding the implementation or education of pertinent competencies. Therein, scholars focused on the interpersonal-intercultural disparancy (Kealy, 2015; Spitzberg, 2015), agreement upon the definition of ICC (Chi & Suthers, 2015; Kim, 2015), and even feelings toward those of other cultures (Martin, 2015). This lack of attention to actual ICC skill development creates a stark contrast to felt expatriate needs pre-departure and while in the field.

Online Education

With the increase in higher education classroom content via online formats (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Ginn & Hammond, 2012), researchers and administrators have continually sought data regarding the effectiveness of online education. From understanding the psychology behind online education enrollment (Wang & Baker, 2015) and assessment of online education behavior (Phirangee, Demmans Epps, & Hewitt, 2016), to simple explanations of strong online education pedagogy (Crews, Wilkinson, & Neill, 2015), online education research is replete with documentation. Amidst all these studies lies a lingering question as to the legitimacy of online education. Education administrators have been uncertain of just how well online education works.

Ya Ni (2013) discovered student course content understanding and assignment proficiency to be independent of the mode of education (i.e. online or face-to-face). This revelation is paramount in the discussion of online education legitimacy, proving that though other factors may influence student education levels, class content format does not. Furthermore, Ya Ni found that due to potentially lessened anxiety facilitated via online education, students engage in conversation in a more heightened manner both quantitatively and qualitatively. What we know to be true is that students learn more when the classroom atmosphere is conducive to learning (Ramsden & Entwistle, 1981).

While Ramsden and Entwistle's research is dated, the findings therein may shed light on why some today would rather take an online class while sitting at Starbuck's® than in a traditional classroom. According to Ya Ni, student interaction and learning outcomes make up the overarching measure of success for both online and face-to-face classroom models of learning. She argues that online education robustly provides within both of these educational factors (see Moore & Thompson, 1997; Thirunarayanan & Perez-Prad, 2001).

Furthermore, Akcaoglu and Lee's (2016) research proves online education can lead to a heightened sense of social presence among groups. They state that when placed in an online forum, students tend to create social bonds more readily, thus increasing their respective likelihood of learning classroom content. This study assesses the effectiveness of online education as it pertains to expatriate preparation in an effort to learn how online education might serve a broader community of potential expats. However, there are times when expats require acculturation and intercultural communication competence education while already in the field.

On-The-Job Training

Ideally, every potential expat undergoes extensive pre-departure training for the intercultural task ahead. However, we know this is not the case and that such a lack of training leads to an expatriate attrition rate of up to 65% across private industry, government and military, and religious missions (Harris, Moran, & Moran, 2004). These early returns are detrimental to both the expatriate and the sending organization as both face loss of financial investment and personal psychological repurcussions.

With the number of expatriates already in the field who have not yet received any or adequate ICC training, it is imperative that the field of scholars continually seek ways to enhance expatriate acculturation while on the job. Typical on the job training (OJT) takes place in the comfort of one's own home culture, but expatriates must often learn both their tasks and the host culture simultaneously. There are both benefits and challenges to this model of training. Training in a host culture allows participants the ability to experience the culture while learning about how to acculturate therein, providing a greater learning atmosphere that in turn increases learning. However, learning in the field means there has already been a process of culturel saturation that can lead to severe culture-shock if not recognized early and that external culturally influenced stressors can plague effective learning.

According to Alipour, Salehi, & Shahnavaz (2009), continuous training is imperative for overall personnel skills developoment and initiative success. Moreover, these scholars found that on the job training increases a person's quality of work and ability to reach clearly defined objectives. Furthermore, van der Klink & Streumer (2002) discovered that the efffects of OJT are beneficial, yet limited, and that prior engagement with objective-related content plays a more primary role in predicting one's ability to perform well at a task.

Nonetheless, there is ample room for improvement in the area of OJT as studies have shown that though effective, it is not sufficiently effective on its own in creating a sense of shared organizational culture and necessary skills development (Barzegar & Farjad, 2011). Across several years of OJT research studies like that from Evertsson (2002) revealed that women are less likely than men to participate in OJT, yet when they do participate are more likely than men to seek training that is specific to tasks rather than promotion-oriented training. Ironically, people who participate in OJT view it in a more positive manner than do those who choose not to participate (Truitt, 2011).

Still, there is substantial support for the importance of OJT for both the employee and the employer. For example, Nischithaa and Narasimha Rao (2014) found that OJT was an imperative part of successful hotel operations. Such training is what provides personnel with the necessary

skill base across the sectors of private industry, government, and missions (Sommerville, 2007). Furthermore, Knoke and Kalleberg (1994) noted that OJT is a non-negotiable toward a successful bottom line and a satisfied labor force.

Rationale

With continued globalization, the need for expatriates ready for the demands of host culture living is ever-growing. Yet, many of these expatriates lack appropriate training in ICC that would otherwise afford them positive cross-cultural experiences. Therefore, many of them are returning early due to many stressing factors. Efforts are being made by many to better understand the theoretical underpinnings of successful experiences abroad while a few are experimenting toward effective training modules thereof.

The growing interest in and legitimacy of online education leads to a question of its validity in ICC development. However, for numerous decades OJT has held the reigns of workforce training post formal education. Yet, the data is lacking regarding the effectiveness of online and OJT in the context of expatriate ICC education, leaving scholars to examine the roles online and OJT might play in enhancing cross-cultural experiences and increasing the likelihood of candidate success. From the literature, it is therefore reasonable to assume that ICC administered online will produce greater pre to posttest intercultural communication readiness than OJT. This study seeks to answer the question of the validity of online ICC education.

Hypothesis 1: Control group participants will experience a significant pre to posttest increase in the 16 factors and overall GCA score.

Methods

Participants

For purposes of this quasi-experimental study, the participant pool was made up of university students in the Southwestern United States. Students were both traditional and nontraditional in age, but there was not an appropriate number of nontraditional participants to separate age as a factor. There were also three nontraditional age community members who participated in study abroad, but were not enrolled in the university. Participant ages ranged from 20 to 74, with the majority of participants 20 to 22.

Procedures

Study abroad participants were recruited over the course of a year prior to departure for enrollment into a travel study course in Intercultural Communication. The course lasted three weeks with only 10 days designated for travel in London, Paris, and Rome. For purposes of this study, this group of 13 became the treatment group while a group of students taking the same course simultaneously online and not traveling with the instructor became the control group.

At the onset of this short-course, each participant completed the Go Culture Assessment (GCA). Administered online, the GCA provides participants with data regarding their overall intercultural readiness as a pretest. GCA scores are immediately made available to each

respective participant and the instructor, a certified GCA coach. The GCA provides each participant with 16 factors related to their respective intercultural readiness and an overall readiness score. Since each factor is evaluated separately, a GCA coach is able to provide personalized intercultural communication training targeted to an individual's needs rather than a blanket training program.

Personalized training is typically performed in a one-on-one setting, but Velten (2015) has shown that individualized training can happen effectively in a group setting. For purposes of this study, participants were placed in either a hands-on in-the-field abroad experience during training or designated to an online-only at-home version of the course. In an effort to extend our understanding of best practices in ICC development, this test provides an avenue for assessing in-the-field and online ICC education.

The treatment group traveled to London, Paris, and Rome during the short-course and received in-the-field GCA coaching along the way. This coaching was administered face-to-face in group settings a total of five times since the GCA's 16 factors cluster into five training sessions. These sessions took place at restaurants, hotel lobbies, and in a train dinner car. Sessions were taught in general, allowing each individual to focus on his or her growth areas per their respective GCA results.

The control group also experience the GCA coaching paradigm, but in an online-only format. These participants stayed in the U.S., most of them working from home, to complete the short-course and GCA training. For these participants, the GCA coaching was laid out in written form and students were asked to comment on the content via Blackboard® threads. Nowhere during the training is a participant asked to disclose his or her scores, but they are instead asked to comment on potential reasons why a person might have a low score in a given area and what they might suggest to assist that person in heightening those scores. All participants then completed the GCA as a posttest at the end of the short-course.

Measures & Analysis

Assessment of participant intercultural readiness utilized the Go Culture Assessment (GCA) in a pretest-posttest model. Administered online, the GCA provides participants a snapshot of their overall intercultural readiness as well as breaks their scores down into 16 factors for ease of specified training. This instrument is based on direct correlations with ICC conceptualizations and has been validated with expatriates going to 30 countries (see Dodd, Lytle, & Winegeart, 2008). The present study revealed an overall Cronbach alpha of .90. Previous predictive validity studies indicate a range of multiple correlations from .62 to .86 (Dodd, 2007; Velten, 2015). GCA scale items and Cronbach reliability alphas for this sample are included in Appendix A. The data were entered into SPSS and subjected to paired t-tests for the treatment and control groups and Cronbach's alpha for scale reliability.

Results

For the treatment group (OTJ Training), seven of the 17 overall factors were significant from pre to posttest and 10 factors were not significant. Significant treatment factors include Resilience and Communication Empowerment (n=11, sd=6.28, t=-4.80, df=10, p=.001), Social

Inclusion (n=11, sd=16.35, t=-3.14, df=10, p=.011), Flexibility (n=11, sd=12.50, t=-3.14, df=10, p=.011), Communication Motivation (n=11, sd=18.44, t=-3.60, df=10, p=.005), Relocation Motivation (n=11, sd=15.14, t=-2.39, df=10, p=.038), Interaction Initiation (n=11, sd=13.00, t=-2.78, df=10, p=.019), and Overall Readiness Score (n=11, sd=8.43, t=-3.92, df=10, p=.003). See Figure 1.
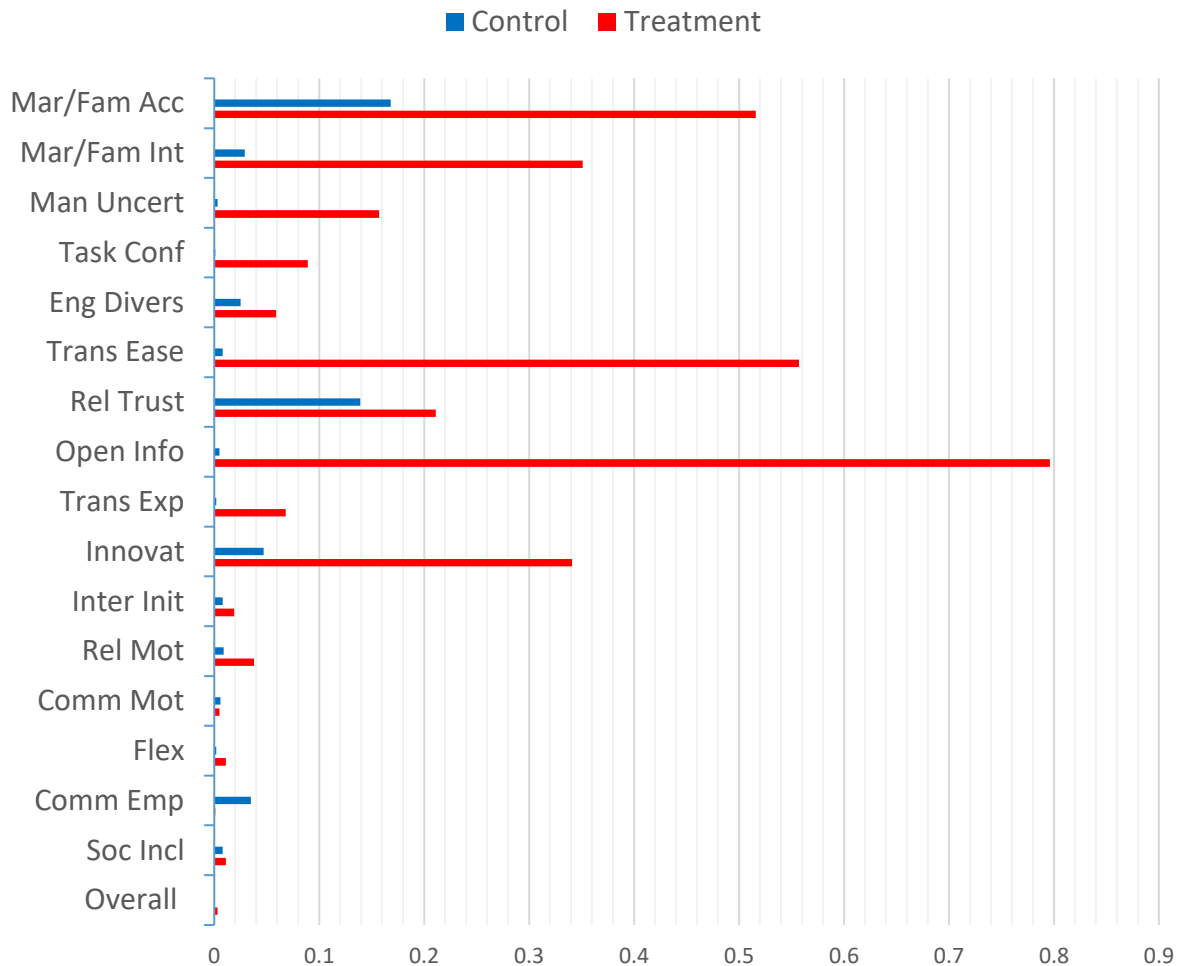

Figure 1. Control / Treatment p Values (Shorter Bar Indicates Greater Significance)

Non-significant treatment group factors include Innovativeness (n=11, sd=12.06, t=-1.00, df=10, p=.341), Transition Experience (n=11, sd=10.02, t=.2-05, df=10, p=.068), Openness to Information (n=11, sd=11.36, t=-0.27, df=10, p=.796), Relationship Trustworthiness (n=11, sd=11.28, t=-1.34, df=10, p=.211), Transition Ease (n=11, sd=14.90, t=-0.61, df=10, p=.557), Engaging Diversity (n=11, sd=10.20, t=-2.13, df=10, p=.059), Task Confidence (n=11, sd=10.25, t=-1.88, df=10, p=.089), Managing Uncertainty (n=11, sd=19.73, t=-1.53, df=10, p=.157), Marital and Family Interaction (n=8, sd=7.07, t=-1.00, df=7, p=.351), and Marital and Family Accommodation (n=8, sd=10.35, t=-0.68, df=7, p=.516).

Within the control group (Online Training), 15 of the 17 pre to posttest factors were significant and two were not significant. The 15 significant control factors include Innovativeness (n=12, sd=16.76, t=-2.34, df=11, p=.047), Transition Experience (n=12,

sd=11.03, t=-3.98, df=11, p=.002), Openness to Information (n=12, sd=9.00, t=13.58, df=11, p=.005), Resilience and Communication Empowerment (n=12, sd=10.07, t=-2.41, df=11, p=.035), Transition Ease (n=12, sd=11.65, t=-3.22, df=11, p=.008), Social Inclusion (n=12, sd=14.35, t=-3.22, df=11, p=.008), Flexibility (n=12, sd=10.55, t=-4.10, df=11, p=.002), Engaging Diversity (n=12, sd=10.23, t=-2.60, df=11, p=.025), Task Confidence (n=12, sd=14.12, t=-4.29, df=11, p=.001), Communication Motivation (n=12, sd=11.93, t=-3.39, df=11, p=.006), Relocation Motivation (n=12, sd=19.92, t=-3.19, df=11, p=.009), Managing Uncertainty (n=12, sd=20.51, t=-3.80, df=11, p=.003), Interaction Initiation (n=12, sd=14.35, t=-3.22, df=11, p=.008), Marital and Family Interaction (n=10, sd=17.13, t=-2.56, df=9, p=.029), and Overall Readiness Score (n=12, sd=8.10, t=-5.06, df=11, p=.000). Non-significant control group scores include Relationship Trustworthiness (n=12, sd=10.87, t=-1.59, df=11, p=.139) and Marital and Family Accommodation (n=10, sd=12.65, t=-1.50, df=9, p=.168)

Conclusions and Discussion

Based on the results of this study, the hypothesis is partially confirmed as only 15 of the 17 pre to posttest GCA scores were statistically significant. First and foremost, this study speaks to the significance of expatriate education, whether that training takes place in the field or online. Critics of online education have long bemoaned the context for its lack of learning outcomes, but this study confirms the strength of online education for means related to expatriate education.

Results of this study are surprising, given the amount of time provided each participant to affect change on their GCA pretest scores. Yet, from the results we see that both OTJ and online training prove effective contexts for expatriate education. This is good news for practitioners sending expatriate candidates abroad who do not have the time or resources to provide face to face pre-departure training. Instead, effective training can be provided either OTJ or online.

Moreover, this study points to the importance of effective expatriate business education in our undergraduate and graduate programs. Teaching international business principles is important but inadequate when considering the international business person's required skill set in success across cultures. We must continually seek methods of enhancing the educational experience so that graduates enter the workforce prepared to compete in a globalized marketplace where they are required to communicate and travel across cultural borders. Assessment and training in intercultural communication competence has a home in higher education and should not be withheld until specific workplace demands call for it.

Implementing an educational plan, such as the one used in this study, into graduate school curriculum would better prepare students for expatriate experiences, thus giving them a competitive advantage over peer graduates. Results of this study indicate that though online implementation of such an expatriate training program yields the greatest results, there is still strong evidence for face-to-face delivery. Whichever method in employed, it is evident, based on this study, that candidates for expatriate experiences can significantly increase their readiness when provided strong, research-based education.

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