

## Article

# Preparing Students for the “Next” Global: The Responsibilities and Tools of International Business Education

David M. Berg<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hamline University, USA

Keywords: experiential learning, ib education, globalism, global citizenship

<https://doi.org/10.46697/001c.13437>

## AIB Insights

Vol. 20, Issue 1, 2020

The international business environment is always shifting, now more than ever. One of our main responsibilities and roles as international business educators is to help prepare students to work effectively in a variety of business environments and to provide them with the tools needed to operate in changing global circumstances. Those tools include a global mindset, a sense of global citizenship, and critical thinking skills. This article helps address this need by examining what makes international business education distinctive, then by outlining some exercises and assignments that can be useful in developing those necessary perspectives and skills.

### THE EVOLVING CONTEXT AND ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS EDUCATION

The world of international business continues changing rapidly and dramatically. Recent changes in the international business environment have been so significant that the Academy of International Business adopted as its 2019 conference theme “International Business in an unsettling political and economic environment.” Seven decades of relative consensus on the benefits of globalization were ushered in by the post-World-War-II construction of multinational institutions like the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the GATT/WTO and others, with the objectives of binding nations together in cooperation and facilitating global cross-border activity. However, economic developments since the 2008 financial crisis and even more recent political developments such as the Brexit vote, the 2016 election of Donald Trump as US President and other moves toward a more “Us vs. Them” perspective have signaled in some areas a shift in focus from global to national. Climate change and trade are global issues, but gaining/maintaining agreement on handling them is ever more challenging, given diverging national priorities and agendas. Political discourse can be increasingly polarized, and even news outlets seem more partisan. As nations and organizations work to navigate this fluctuating reality, so do individuals. One of our responsibilities and roles as international business educators and scholars is to help prepare students to work effectively in a variety of business environments and to provide them with the necessary tools to operate in changing circumstances, both within their current/future organizations and in the larger world. We do this, in part, by encouraging the development of a global mindset, a sense of global citizenship and critical thinking capabilities, even as the nature of what ‘global’ means fluctuates. First, what makes international business education distinctive?

### THE DISTINCTIVE NATURE OF INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS EDUCATION

International business operates partly as an overlay to other

business functions, adding layers of complexity to marketing, finance, law, human resource management, logistics and accounting, and addressing differences in consumer behavior, trade and investment law, employment factors, culture, religion and many more dimensions. The focus of this paper is on the power of international business education to make our students more adaptive and flexible in dealing with both global and increasingly diverse domestic contexts (Hagen & Berg, 2012), making them more effective global citizens. But what does it mean to be a global citizen today?

### GLOBAL MINDSET, GLOBAL CITIZEN

Despite calls for “fair” vs. free trade and debates over whose interests should be prioritized, we are, more than ever, global citizens, and our students know that well. The internet and social media immerse students in discussions on politics, the environment, human rights, food and water security and other global issues. It is encouraging that students are thinking globally and about how they, as global citizens, can affect and be affected by a wide range of international issues. This global focus is a starting point for discussions on international business itself plus the range of global contextual issues that make it interesting and complex. Individuals with a global perspective are valued as employees, policy makers and citizens. As international business educators we can (and should) nourish that perspective and find ways to further develop it. So what are some ways to do that?

### DEVELOPING A GLOBAL MINDSET

#### THE BENEFITS OF STUDY ABROAD AND THE “YOU HAD TO BE THERE” EXPERIENCE

In order to help students develop a global mindset, we draw on a wide range of pedagogical modes; one of the most immersive is studying abroad. With challenges from work and athletics to family obligations, however, the traditional semester or year abroad is not feasible for many students today. Research shows that short-term programs can generate many of the same benefits in a concentrated form, ranging from seeing how business works internationally to gain-

Table 1: In-Class Exercises/Assignments

Exercise/ Assignment	Yes/No Issue Discussion	“What is my Global Question?”	Country Comparison/ Industry Analysis	Consulting-style Project	“What’s going on in the world?”
Concepts Addressed	Issues in global business context. Critically evaluating information.	Student- selected global issues based on their interests.	What makes countries attractive business location opportunities?	Applying international business knowledge to real-world business issues	Current events in international business and the international business environment
Level	Largely Undergrad	Largely Undergrad	Grad/Upper- level Undergrad	Grad/Upper-level Undergrad	Grad/Undergrad
Notes	Students draw on outside research. They need to explain a position, but not necessarily support it. Class consensus is often not a pure yes/no, spurring further interesting discussion, reinforcing that global issues are seldom black or white. Good starting point for discussion on evaluating sources of information.	Instructor consultation helps ensure a broad range of issues across the class. Maybe a 2-stage assignment: First to develop the question, Second to analyze it. Paper, presentation or both.	Team-based. Instructor consultation on countries and industry allows a range of countries and industries, providing a broader range of in-class presentations. Choose some less familiar countries and pairs of countries that differ significantly.	Team-based exercise can be positioned as a competition. Local business partner brings real-time question or challenge. Better/ broader information from partner leads to better analysis; consider nondisclosure agreement	Encourages students to keep up with global/ international business news. Brings current content into the classroom. Ties into student interests. Stimulates participation. Have some ideas as back- ups, although they may not be necessary. Allow some flexibility in topics; even if not explicitly business- related, can still lead to interesting global or cross-cultural discussions.

ing cultural perspective and flexibility and adopting a global mindset to relationship building and personal development (Berg & Hagen, 2011). Even a week or so can allow students to get a feel for the international business environment, especially if the study abroad experience incorporates visits to local and multinational organizations. If even short-term programs may not fit a student’s schedule/budget, what are other options for gaining global perspective?

#### VARIETY IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: GETTING STUDENTS THINKING GLOBALLY NO MATTER WHERE THEY ARE

International business educators continue developing creative ways to bring global perspectives into the classroom. Technology and the range of information available make this easier than ever. From researching international issues to working on internationally-themed projects, international business educators can help students develop a global mindset regardless of location. Table 1 summarizes the following exercises and assignments, with ideas as to where they may best fit and notes on how they may be used most effectively in international business courses.

#### YES/NO AND THE VALUE OF THE MIDDLE

The book *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Global Issues* (Harf, Harf, & Lombardi, 2019) poses global Yes/No questions, from social and environmental issues to political and economic ones, providing support for each side of the argu-

ment. An instructor can assign students to lead discussion on each side of an issue, drawing on the textbook and outside sources. A student or students present each side’s argument, and then the Yes and No teams lead class discussion. Given that sometimes there is little support in the class for a particular perspective, students are not expected to support their assigned position, but they do need to be able to explain why some people do support it. Not only does this free them from defending a position they don’t hold, but it requires them to research and try to understand another’s position, which is a valuable tool for any global citizen. One additional benefit of the exercise is the opportunity to discuss evaluating sources of information, and to encourage students to think about the perspectives embedded in many of those sources. At the end of the class, a vote on whether the class opinion is, overall, a Yes or No on the issue often leads to a consensus of “Yes, if” or “No, but”, which is also an important lesson in global citizenship, leading to further discussion. While this assignment may be more appropriate at the undergraduate level, it may be valuable in certain contexts at the graduate level, particularly to introduce international topics to a group who may be less familiar with them.

#### PERSONALIZING THE GLOBAL QUESTIONS WE FACE

Another useful exercise is asking, “What is my global question?” Students (in consultation with the instructor) select a global issue that resonates with them, frame a question around it, and then research the topic. Students choose

issues ranging from the familiar (immigration, climate change) to the more unusual (China’s strategy for involvement in Africa, global portrayal of women in media), and allowing them to select, research and write and/or present on an issue they select makes global citizenship more personal to them.

#### COUNTRY COMPARISON AND INDUSTRY ANALYSIS: WHERE SHOULD WE GO, AND WHY?

To encourage a business-level perspective, at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, instructors may use a country comparison/industry analysis project. In this project, teams of students research the business environments of two countries relative to a particular industry (again, chosen in consultation with the instructor) along dimensions of culture, politics, economics, trade/FDI, finance and whatever other dimensions they choose, then make a recommendation on which country they would choose to expand into and why. This gives them the opportunity to compare international environments and consider what makes a country an attractive business opportunity location in a specific industry.

#### INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS IN REAL TIME: CONSULTING-STYLE PROJECTS AND GUEST SPEAKERS

Many schools have access to local business partners. Some of those partners operate internationally, while others might like to explore the possibility of doing so and/or may face internationally-based competitors. This creates the opportunity for mutually-beneficial consulting-style projects as a component of graduate or upper-level undergraduate courses. International business challenges facing many organizations include market expansion, competitive analysis, production decisions and broader sourcing and supply chain management, among others. Structured as a team-based exercise, this provides students experience in analyzing a real-time real-world business challenge and sharpens critical thinking skills as teams make and support recommendations based on their analysis and research. The business partner can benefit from multiple sets of eyes on a current challenge. An appropriately worded and vetted nondisclosure agreement may allow the business partner to share more information, which will help students provide accurate and effective analysis. Local business partners can also play an important role as guest speakers in any level course, sharing current practitioner insights into doing business internationally.

#### OTHER IDEAS AND RESOURCES

These are only a few examples of exercises and projects designed to encourage students to think globally. *The Palgrave Handbook of Experiential Learning in International Business* (Taras & Gonzalez-Perez, 2015) is a valuable resource for experiential learning ideas useful both in and outside the classroom, including international collaborations, simulations and many others.

#### MAKING SURE EVERYONE IS HEARD: ACKNOWLEDGING AND MITIGATING THE RISKS OF POLARIZATION

As noted earlier, political discourse has become increasing-

ly polarized, and students can hardly avoid being affected by that. Geography, size, demographics, reputation, mission and a variety of other factors can shape the prevailing climate at any educational institution, but not all students will share the same perspective on any issue, including (maybe especially) political and global issues. Some students are well-traveled, while others have never left the country or even the state. Some come from liberal backgrounds and others from conservative ones. How do we, as international business educators, make sure that everyone is heard and also ensure that discourse does not become too heated or personal? How do we encourage expressing diverse perspectives, especially if they differ from what can be a strong classroom norm?

It can be useful to set the expectation that there is no one “right” answer to many global issues, and that we can learn from differing opinions. Many of us teach in classrooms with diverse student populations, which incorporate broad-ranging perspectives, but we need to be careful not to expect a single student to represent the views of an entire group. As noted earlier, one way of encouraging students to explore a particular side of any issue is to ask them to explain the rationale behind a particular argument without requiring that they support it.

#### KEEPING THINGS CURRENT: “WHAT’S GOING ON IN THE WORLD?”

Another way of drawing out differing interests/perspectives is asking, “What’s going on in the world?” Posing that question during class discussion creates opportunities to explore recent international developments. Regularly using this exercise encourages students to stay aware of international happenings; the topics they raise enrich classroom discussion, supplementing instructor-selected materials.

#### THINKING CRITICALLY: TAKING AND DEFENDING A POSITION

While there is great value in seeing both sides of a global issue or problem, we can help students develop the critical thinking and communication skills needed to take and defend a reasoned position. While there may be more than one valid perspective on many global issues, those perspectives often emerge from different thought processes and political/cultural/economic motivations, and sorting that out may be challenging. We can help students learn to evaluate sources and to understand that few sources are context-free – many pursue their own motivations and agendas, from nationalist to globalist, from liberal to conservative, from religious to secular. While we hear about ‘echo chambers’ in social media immersing people only in viewpoints with which they agree, we can encourage students to dig more deeply and broadly into the increasingly available information and opinion on global issues. Armed with better information from sources they have more critically examined, they can be more confident in expressing and supporting their positions. Some institutions have found structured critical thinking curricula can aid in this process (Nold, 2017); the exercises noted above can also help.

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Meyer (2017) likens globalization to a pendulum, with some

public opinion currently swinging in an antiglobalist direction. While the fundamentals of international business remain relatively constant, the context continues to shift, and the stakes keep rising. As brick-and-mortar evolves into brick-and-click, as globalism and nationalism battle for primacy, as economic integration is put to the test, a key role of international business education is to prepare students for what comes next. Helping students develop a global mindset coupled with the critical thinking skills needed to analyze both sides of an issue, evaluate information/sources, then take and defend a position is perhaps the most important legacy we as international business educators can leave them. Then, no matter what the “next” global looks like, they can approach it with confidence and preparation, and function as effective global citizens.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**David Berg** ([dberg06@hamline.edu](mailto:dberg06@hamline.edu)) is Associate Professor of Management at Hamline University, Saint Paul, Minnesota, and previously served as the MBA Program Director. He received his Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota, was the Teaching International Business Track Chair for AIB 2012 in Washington, D.C. and currently serves on the Executive Committee of the AIB Teaching and Education Shared Interest Group. His research focuses on international business education and on firm adaptation to global competition.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0> and legal code at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

## REFERENCES

- Berg, D. M., & Hagen, J. M. 2011. Experiential Pluralism: Gains from short-term study abroad programmes in the business curriculum. *International Journal of Pluralism and Economics Education*, 2(4): 408–420.
- Hagen, J. M., & Berg, D. M. 2012. International Business for Domestic Students. *Journal for Global Business Education*, 12: 47–59.
- Harf, J., Harf, M., & Lombardi, M. 2019. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Global Issues* (10th ed.). New York: McGraw Hill Education.
- Meyer, K. E. 2017. International Business in an era of anti-globalization. *Multinational Business Review*, 25(2): 78–90.
- Nold, H. 2017. Using Critical Thinking Teaching Methods to Increase Student Success: An Action Research Project. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 29(1): 17–32.
- Taras, V., & Gonzalez-Perez, M. A. (Eds.). 2015. *The Palgrave Handbook of Experiential Learning in International Business*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.