

## **A STUDENT SUMMER PROGRAM IN GERMANY: CRITICAL INCIDENTS IN CULTURE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*A number of US business college students, along with accompanying faculty members, attended a two-week summer program hosted by a German College of Business. The program involved small numbers of students from institutions in the UK, India, Indonesia, Russia, Germany, and two colleges in the US. A number of typical culture incidents and problems arose which can provide critical cross-cultural learning. The central thesis of this pedagogical essay is that instructors and program directors should seize upon unplanned critical incidents, not as problems, difficulties, or bad behavior, but as normal cross-cultural interactions that can teach students as much or more than the planned variety of interactions.*

*One such cultural incident arose at the Youth Hostel, where all the students stayed, when a number of unknown students repeatedly failed to wash their breakfast dishes as required by Hostel rules. There were complaints, collective punishment and a somewhat emotional lecture to the program participants which ignited dissent among the students.*

*Other incidents included an American student falling asleep on the Hostel living room couch, and students missing program sessions. Many nationalities were late or absent but the entire US contingent (who were from two different universities) were later singled out and classified together as a problem.*

*The most revealing issue involved a tuition give-back paid by the German organizers. A partial refund was made during the middle of the program. American students, who had been told that perhaps all tuition would be refunded, complained to one of the American faculty members who relayed the complaint, along with their request for a greater refund, to the German program organizers. This provoked a significant defensive response from the German program.*

*An analysis of these culturally important critical incidents illustrates several different cultural dimensions. Germany is much more collective than the US or UK and it would not be unusual for all students of a certain category to be treated collectively. Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance both play a part in the tuition give-back issue. Germans are very low Power Distance and would take offence if a person of high position attempted to obtain results outside of normal procedures. Germans are, at the same time, very high on Uncertainty Avoidance. Violating procedures and rules in Germany may carry a greater moral weight than is usual in many other cultures. This strong reliance on procedure and rules means that any implication of not having done the correct thing might need to be taken as a professional attack necessitating a full and formal defense of one's actions. Whereas in the US, the student's complaint might easily be dismissed as unjustified and refused without comment, in Germany an unjustified complaint, even by a student, can become a moral issue that offers a professional threat.*

Seven American students from two US institutions, along with accompanying faculty members, attended a two-week summer program hosted by a German College of Business. The program involved small numbers of students from institutions in the US, UK, India, Indonesia, Russia, Germany, and a few other locations. They were grouped in multi-cultural teams and taken through the process of creating business plans. This process included lectures given by the German hosts and visiting international faculty. German business students were provided daily to act as guides and councilors. The group work, of course, afforded excellent opportunities to directly experience the issues of working in cross-cultural groups. During the two weeks, all the students resided at the same Youth Hostel and took a number of field trips together to visit business firms and cultural destinations. This, along with their various experiences during free time, afforded additional experience with German culture. Although a great deal of cultural learning took place through the organized efforts of the German hosts, the most important learning opportunities always occur when unforeseen problems or issues arise. A number of typical incidents arose on this student trip which, with proper analysis, could provide just such learning.

These incidents cannot be simply explained by bad behavior. It should be kept in mind that all participants in this program behaved in a manner that was normal and typical for their cultural backgrounds. If the purpose of taking students abroad is to learn about cultural differences and issues, then it would be counterproductive to somehow train American students to act French in France and German in Germany. To intentionally create an experience abroad that provides no difficulty for students, would be to minimize all possibility of actual cultural learning. Although it is always nice to make a good impression, that is not the primary purpose of an overseas student trip.

It must be noted, that program directors and visiting faculty may have different motivations. Faculty who bring their students abroad generally are seeking to provoke experiential cross-cultural learning in their students while program directors have the additional motivation of running a smooth program and making a good show of it. Bureaucratic and career motivations may make program directors unreceptive to unplanned critical incidents, especially any that may look like a "problem". Astute directors may find, however, that by treating these incidents as "normal" learning opportunities, which can be analyzed in the classroom, they can defuse what might otherwise be seen as embarrassing and threatening problems. The incidents detailed here should be seen as just a sampling of cultural learning opportunities faculty and program directors should be on the look-out for.

This is a pedagogical essay concerning a single summer program abroad and is not meant to be taken as a research paper or a literature review. Furthermore, this example is of American faculty taking American students to Germany. A reverse example would be interesting but would not add useful balance. Faculty of any culture might appreciate the points made here. An exhaustive listing of issues arising out of a large number of student trips abroad would also certainly be useful. However, the idiosyncratic nature of such a large number of cross-cultural interactions might obscure the central thesis of this essay: that instructors and program directors should seize upon unplanned critical incidents, not as problems, difficulties, or bad behavior, but as normal cross-cultural interactions that can teach students as much or more than the planned variety of interactions.

The first such cultural incident arose at the Youth Hostel when a number of unknown students from the program repeatedly failed to wash their breakfast dishes as required by Youth Hostel rules. Some of the nations represented had reputations in Germany of being undisciplined, and some student groups were known to be of a class that commonly relied upon servants for things like washing dishes. Although there was much supposition by various groups about which other group must be responsible, the culprits were never unmasked. The young men and women, who kept the German Hostel, were not amused and made a formal and emotional complaint to the German program head. The German student guides were also not amused and made many comments backing up the Youth Hostel workers. The Youth Hostel imposed collective punishment upon the entire student group by denying all of them access to any further breakfast or access to the kitchen. This hurt the students from poor countries much more than those from rich areas who could easily afford to eat at cafes. The German program head subsequently made a somewhat emotional lecture on responsibility to the assembled program participants igniting some dissension among the students. Students from the US and UK particularly did not think it was fair to punish everyone for a few student's failure.

A second Youth Hostel incident involved an American student falling asleep on a Hostel living room couch in a common area. The supposition was that the student must have been drunk and irresponsible. The same American student later fell ill with flu and missed several program sessions. Despite this, he managed to provide important content to his winning group's business plan. Members of other nationalities also were late or missed sessions but the entire US contingent (who were from two different universities) were later classified together as a single problem by the German program organizers as if they were one individual.

The largest issue involved a tuition give-back paid for by the German organizers. The pre-paid tuition was low to begin with (350 Euro) and 100 Euro was refunded during the middle of the program so that students would have some spending money for weekend excursions. American students, who had been told, prior to the program that possibly all the tuition would be refunded, complained to one of their faculty members who relayed the complaint, along with a request for a greater give-back, to the German program organizers. This provoked a significant defensive response from the German program head, who then spent much lecture time detailing the program budget and showing how much the students were getting for just a nominal fee. This defensive response was repeated in later communications to the American faculty. An additional amount was eventually refunded at the end of the program but dispersed in differing amounts according to the distance the student had traveled to be there as well as the level of national development of their country.

A final issue concerned small student presentations national student groups put together early in the program. Short, off-the-cuff marketing plans were thought up and presented to managers in a real German company. The student groups were asked to be sure and email their presentation materials to the company before the end of the program. One of the American groups had simply used a marker on a piece of clear plastic to draw a graph and had presented a purely fictional and impossible plan. Thus, as the plan and its materials were worthless, they did not take the request seriously and did not provide them. The German company made repeated requests to the program director who made this into a somewhat major issue. Eventually, after being repeatedly

ordered to comply, the students put something together and emailed it from the US a couple of weeks after returning.

Such problems can be taken in at least two ways. They can be looked at as the unfortunate acts of immature students from countries that do not raise children well (especially by the German hosts) necessitating loss of face and apologies all around. This viewpoint can have unfortunate consequences for relationships between the visiting institutions and the German host college. For the hosts and faculty, even those trained in cross-cultural studies, it can be difficult to not react in negative ways when the organizational mechanics of the situation push them to do so. Organizational inertia would demand official reaction to complaints and other problems regardless of how cross-culturally dysfunctional such reaction might be.

Another view would be that these “embarrassing” incidents should be expected and are normal behavior by inexperienced students acting out their normal social norms in a foreign and unknown social environment. Incidents like these are very revealing. Although they cannot be manufactured, scripted or predicted with any precision, some sorts of “embarrassing” incidents are sure to arise. Astute faculty should use these incidents as invaluable teachable moments.

\* First, the dish-washing issue at the Youth Hostel: The reaction from the Hostel personnel and others seemed extreme to the American and British students. Geert Hofstede(1980, 2001) scores German culture as being high in Uncertainty Avoidance, which is an intolerance of ambiguity. Avoidance of ambiguity usually results in rules and procedures with which to make more certain that which is not. German culture is very structured with “Rules” and rule-breakers are not simply short-cut takers, but may be considered “Bad” people. Rule-breaking may result in a rather emotional response that may be surprising to Americans. The US has possibly the most individualistic culture on earth, certainly much more than Germany (Hofstede, G., 1991). Collective punishment was given to all the summer school participants, as the individual felons could not be identified. This collective approach resulted in lots of predictable objections from students from high individualism cultures like the US and UK.

\* There are many ways of violating the rules in Germany. In gray areas, where leeway could possibly be given to a fellow German, it may not be given to a foreigner, especially a foreigner from a somewhat unliked country. While you may not ever be able to actually point your finger at it, anti-Americanism is widespread in Germany and other Western European countries and American culture may be considered somewhat deficient in terms of politeness and sophistication (Webb, J., 2007). Thus, it is possible that falling asleep on the Youth Hostel couch would not mean much unless the staff was predisposed to make something out of it. In addition, the Hostel staff was young; and the young tend to be relatively high in Masculinity and not prone to tolerance. Attendance and being on time are also part of the process, as they are part of following the rules. It is well known that being precisely on time in Germany is vital, and how much worst it is to not show up at all. People from the US need to be especially blameless in these situations or else they will hold themselves up for criticism. It was very noticeable that in the emails from German faculty, the American students, from both institutions, were always lumped together as if they were either one individual, or else equally at fault for whatever could be said about any one individual.

\* The issue of the tuition give-back by the program caused the German program director to act very defensive in the classroom. He went into great detail to defend his position. In the US a student might have just been reminded that there was no guarantee that all tuition would be reimbursed and the subject would then be dropped and forgotten; but in Germany the student complaints were taken with such great seriousness that the issue seemed to represent a kind of professional threat that had to be defended against. In a society built with so much structure and rules, i.e. High Uncertainty Avoidance (Hofstede, 1991), everyone must strongly justify themselves when challenged even a little bit. Therefore, challenges to authority in this way are as rare as they are truly serious.

\* Finally, the issue of American students not turning in their company presentation: The American students thought that their presentation was a work of fiction and completely worthless to any real-life company. In addition, there would be no effect on grades if it was never turned in. Finally, the American student group had no official leader, and in an individualistic culture, often no one will step forward for an unofficial group without good reason. The US is a guilt society (Hofstede, G. (1991) and there can be no individual guilt if no individual is personally responsible. In more collective cultures, each member of any group will feel responsible to act for the group and will feel shame if the group does not do what is expected (Hofstede, G. (1991). Never-the-less, they were asked for the materials from the German Summer Program, who had likely promised the materials to the company. However worthless the materials might in fact be, there was a process involved. Germany has a high UAI (uncertainty avoidance index) meaning not only that there is a lot of structure and rules, but also that “Process” runs organizations. In the US and UK, it is the final product (the materials) that has meaning; in Germany it is the “Process”. The “Process” is actually more important than any one product or result because the “Process” creates all results and without it there would be no results (in the German organizational model). Thus, it is not possible to ignore or circumvent “Process” even in small unimportant ways. Just as in the first item above, offenders may be considered to be “Bad” people deserving of an emotional response.

These types of critical incidents in cross-cultural interactions can, if properly presented as applied analysis by faculty provide students with greater understanding of issues in international management than can be provided by carefully scripted country tours of museums and companies (Brislin and Yoshida, 1994). Although the German Summer School Program was designed by its German faculty to provide some of these types of incidents through the students working with other students from around the world, they obviously did not intend for cross-culture learning to take place in the ways listed here. Yet, the incidents from this list represent “real life” and the learning from working in cross-cultural student groups is somewhat simulated. This type of cultural immersion will enhance and complete any international student educational trip along with the usual visits, seminars, and other constructed student activities.

## References

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