

# THE FEARFUL THREE: INTEGRATING TEAMWORK, CLIENT-PROJECT, AND STUDY ABROAD INTO A SINGLE COURSE

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## ***Abstract***

*Managers function within a cross-functional, multicultural setting that necessitates providing students with a learning environment comparable to real-life work projects. The present innovation—team- and client-based study abroad course—created a rich, complex, realistic, and life-changing learning environment within a regular three-credit course completed in one semester. Delivering these results and measuring the outcomes provided tangible evidence that this innovative integration of three challenging yet complementing pedagogies (study abroad, teamwork, and client-based project) while not diminishing the challenges associated with each method, does provide rich context for learning skills needed while delivering “unforgettable” experiences.*

***Keywords:*** *Teamwork, Client-Projects, Study Abroad, Experiential Learning, Cross-Cultural Sensitivity.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Time spent in today's multinational company quickly reveals a few facts: managers must manage projects that move fast and depend upon teams of diverse people with varying ethnic, cultural and functional backgrounds. Collaboration and project management are essential as teams push to leverage diverse talent in the pursuit of a common goal—to improve relationships with customers. A number of authors have noted that a global, culturally savvy mindset is a key ingredient for being successful in such global setting and provide students with competitive advantages (de Figueiredo, 2014; Hopkins, Raymond, & Carlson, 2011). Many marketing faculties are taking on the challenge of providing undergraduate students with experiential learning activities that are comparable to real-life work environment (Askim-Lovseth & O’Keefe, 2012; Lopez & Lee, 2005; Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2009) as a means of preparing students for team-oriented, project-driven, multicultural, time-based work: coursework that helps prepare students for future careers by replicating workplace constraints and demands

while in the classroom (Erez et al., 2013). Unfortunately, such conditions are difficult to reproduce so students are seldom immersed in such learning environments and infrequently provided with classroom opportunities to develop and practice these needed skills (AACSB, 2013). Although much research exists on team-work, client-based projects, and multicultural experiences and their impact on student learning, no prior research attempted to integrate all three together in order to simulate a workplace environment in a classroom setting and explore its impact on learning. Indeed, careful review of the literature demonstrates that research on the unique combination of client-based marketing projects conducted by teams in a study abroad context have not previously been pursued. As such, the present innovation was designed to study and solve this challenging marketing and marketing education problem by attempting to answer the following research question: Can the melding of client-based projects, conducted by student teams in an international setting render marketing students more able to manage real-world marketing challenges?

### INNOVATION

Inspired by the authors' dream to help students overcome barriers between them and effectiveness in global marketing settings, we integrated three critically important yet challenging pedagogies—study abroad, team work, and a client-based project—into one three-credit hour, elective course. Seventeen undergraduate students of various business majors enrolled in this 10-week experiment during a Spring semester. Instead of creating a new course, we opted to use an existing,

**TABLE 1**  
**Student Learning Objectives**

1	Demonstrate the appropriate use of basic business and marketing theories, concepts, and tools (i.e., business planning, implementation, and control; SWOT analysis, target marketing, marketing mix) to advance organizational objectives in a multicultural business environment;
2	Demonstrate basic ability to apply market data and insights in an integrative manner through an analytical thinking process to create appropriate solutions for business problems or opportunities in a multicultural business environment;
3	Create well-designed and impactful written and oral communications, visual tools such as charts and graphs to effectively communicate market analysis and plans to culturally diverse audiences.

special topics course (MKT 394/MGT 394) that allowed us to use a course that was already in the course catalog and provided flexibility in defining its content (i.e., managing cultural differences). The actual syllabus for the course is available upon request. The first eight weeks were structured as a regular course (students met on campus twice a week for 75 minutes) and were organized around the topics needed for completion of the client-based project (see Table 1 for SLOs). At the end of week eight, students, under the supervision of the authors, left for a nine-day Spring Break/Study Abroad excursion to the client's location (Prague, Czech Republic). During the visit students interacted with six local businesses including the client, updated their deliverables based on insights acquired while on location, presented their recommendations to the client, and explored independently. Upon their return, the class was debriefed, finalized their deliverables, and grades were issued.

## **IMPORTANCE OF INNOVATION FOR BUSINESS EDUCATION**

### **Study Abroad Programs.**

The increasing economic interdependence of markets (i.e., globalization) and its impact on local, national, or international businesses are among the most significant forces influencing today's business environment (Charlebois & Giberson, 2010; Luethge et al., 2016) and business education (AACSB, 2013). As a result, educators must innovate learning activities that allow students to experience other cultures and better understand how business functions are affected by globalization and growing multiculturalism of teams working within the US and beyond (Charlebois & Giberson, 2010). Study abroad programs of varying durations are deployed to increase this competency (Clarke et al., 2009). Their wide use has been justified by benefits such as better cross-cultural navigational skills, improved academic performance, higher graduation rates, improved global engagement (Paige et al., 2009), enhanced cross-cultural sensitivity (Luethge et al., 2016), better ability to collaborate and communicate in multicultural environments (de Figueiredo, 2014), or even having life-changing experiences (Wright & Larsen, 2012). Unfortunately, integration of such experiences in the curriculum and achieving student participation can be daunting. Whether it is cost, time constraints (i.e., part-time jobs, family commitments), questioning the value, or simply anxiety about traveling abroad with a group of strangers (Koernig, 2007), students often forgo study abroad opportunities.

### **Teamwork.**

One notable outcome of globalization is renewed pressure on educational institutions to engage students in work produced by teams constructed of diverse individuals. Businesses demand graduates who are able to collaborate with people who bring different viewpoints. Students and employers identified teamwork as one of the most critical skills, and most lacking when working as an intern (NACE, 2013). An increased reliance on an expansive and collaborative approach to work is particularly true in marketing as globally diverse markets re-

quire marketers to use a variety of skills (Askim-Lovseth & O’Keefe, 2012). Despite these benefits, however, integrating teamwork into college classrooms is complicated by group dynamics. A majority of problems are grounded in the instructors’ lack of time to help students understand how a good team functions and how to manage group problems often resulting in lack of trust among team members, personal frustration, bad attitudes about working in teams, and deterioration of communication, and strained relationships (Reisenwitz et al., 2006).

### **Client-based Projects.**

Teamwork is often used in the context of completing client-based projects (CBP)—one of the most powerful pedagogical tools used by instructors that facilitate active, experiential learning, adds realism to learning experience, and improves students’ motivation and engagement, through knowing that their recommendations may be used in an actual business context (Lepkowska-White & Parsons, 2009). Notably, CBPs help course concepts come to life and enhance students’ ownership of the learning process, giving students sense of purpose for their learning experience (Lopez & Lee 2005). Even though CBPs help students develop skills needed to succeed in their future jobs and are valued by recruiters (Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2009), many instructors continue to avoid this powerful pedagogy (Raska, 2014). Whether it is about the challenges and uncertainties associated with finding good clients, defining a manageable project scope, planning, setting and managing expectations (Lopez & Lee, 2005) or grading projects and providing timely and meaningful feedback (Raska, 2014), CBPs are often perceived as “just too big to manage and not worth the trouble” (Lopez & Lee, 2005).

Clearly, study abroad programs, teamwork, and client-based projects provide students with powerful, hands-on, active learning experiences that prepare them for future careers by providing them with opportunities to practice their marketing skills in situations comparable to real-life work environments. Unfortunately, students are seldom immersed in this complex learning environments as instructors often avoid their integration into their courses due aforementioned challenges. However, the current literature, however, suggests that these pedagogies may actually complement each other. As a result, integrating them into one may diminish some for the challenges associated with these pedagogies when integrated in isolation. The present innovation is based on this premise.

## **DESIGN AND INTEGRATION OF THE INNOVATION**

The plan for integrating three challenging pedagogies into one was actually simple. First, the additional cost of the program was incorporated into student tuition. Second, the trip was scheduled over spring break to reduce the time commitment. Finally, students would spend the first eight weeks of class on campus together building their teams and solving the client’s problem. Indeed, when students have multiple (rather than single) occasions to interact with each other prior

**TABLE 2**  
**Study Abroad Agenda**

<b>Day</b>	<b>Morning</b>	<b>Afternoon</b>	<b>Evening</b>
3-5	Arrival to Prague with a group transfer to hotel in downtown Prague	Free	Class meeting
3-6	Free	Exploring Prague through Scavenger Hunt	Welcome dinner
3-7	Introductory session, followed by lunch	Meeting with the client	Class meeting
3-8	Networking in a market research company	Class meeting	Cultural event
3-9	Networking in a branding agency, followed by lunch	Networking in a marketing or sport industry company	Free
3-10	Networking in a non-profit organization, followed by lunch	Traveling back to 1348 (Karlstejn Castle)	Class meeting
3-11	Final Presentations to the client, followed by lunch	Selling client's product	Closing dinner
3-12	Free	Free	Class meeting
3-13	Departing Prague with a group transfer from hotel to airport	Arrival to airport with individual transfer to homes	

to the study abroad trip, not only are students more likely to develop friendships but also greater rapport with faculty in terms of trust. In addition, this student-faculty rapport results in enhanced student learning and willingness to learn (Koernig, 2007). The faculty hypothesized that students' acute awareness of their forthcoming study abroad would make them less resistant to teamwork. This coupled with the comfort of preparing in a familiar environment (campus) was expected to lower barriers and further improve teamwork and outcomes. Finally, putting it all into the context of a client-based project gave students a shared purpose (i.e., the chance to have a real impact on a real company).

**TABLE 3**  
**Open ended responses to “Think of your entire experience. Did you like it? If so, why? If not, why?”**

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I loved my course experience. It was challenging and just the course I was looking for. Although sometimes I felt like I was going to lose my mind, I battled through the mud and I made it. I feel great now that the class is over and I feel as though I have learned a lot! And I mean a lot! I would never be able to gain this kind of experience in any other course that I took at NKU.

I really enjoyed the idea of doing a project like this. I can't think of any other program like it. I got to do work very relevant to what I want to do as a career and had the opportunity to do it in a new environment, really pushing me to think outside of the box to find solutions.

I really enjoyed this class. I learned way more than I ever thought I would in a marketing class. Through the project itself and the abroad experience I was able to take many concepts I have learned and apply them to the real world.

I loved it, I feel like I have learned a lot! It definitely gave me a lot of opportunities to think outside the box and on my feet.

It was a lot of work, but I really enjoyed it! I liked being able to develop the project for the weeks leading up to our visit and then finally being able to present it in the Czech Republic.

I loved my course experience. It allowed me to get business experience in ways that many of my fellow classmates will never be able to do. I love learning about cultures and traveling all over the world. This has just increased my want for travel.

I enjoyed the entire experience. I had the expectation that we wouldn't do as much work as we did, but I think the work load helped make the experience better. I felt like I used a lot of my marketing skills (along with my team) to pull a great piece together for the client.

I LOVED my experience. I feel more confident as a person, and I am proud of what I have accomplished. I made new friends, and had an unforgettable experience I won't ever forget.

Really liked it, overall a great experience.

I loved it. I learned so much about my self and became more confident in my abilities.

Yes, it challenged me to learn.

I have had the instructor three times since I have been at NKU. Graduating in May I have really enjoyed each experience in his courses. I wouldn't lie to those entering in saying that his courses are easy, because they are not. It tested in what I found a pretty hard case of procrastination and poor time management. I have grew lots as a student and person taking his courses, but overall am proud of the projects I have created.

I really enjoyed my course experience. I have learned a great deal of information and knowledge within marketing and team building/group work. I also took away knowledge culturally and learned a new society in a different perspective. Being out of our comfort zone in CZ was an experience I'll never forget!

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*Note: Unfiltered responses.*

**TABLE 4**  
**Open ended responses to “Has this course changed your life or how you view the world in any way?”**

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I believe that this course has changed my life in a great way. I feel as though I now view the world through an abundance of different alternatives, meaning that there is probably more than one way to solve a problem and that each person is going to view the problem in a different way.

I got to see Prague! It was my first experience abroad and I got to do it while advancing my knowledge in marketing, which is a pretty awesome combination. I now realize just how different people's lives can be based on such small things that I wouldn't have thought about before the trip. Also, it was extremely interesting to see first hand how people of a different culture view and interact with brands the encounter.

It definitely has!! This class has influenced my way of thinking in general. Just going abroad with a group of students I realized as I got to know particular students better than I may have set a judgement before actually getting to know them. I also have realized that I AM capable of putting together a marketing plan like the one we completed, previously my self confidence in doing something like that would have been very low.

I feel that it has helped me be more prepared when interacting with those from other cultures.

It was really amazing to see such a different culture. The only place that I have traveled to abroad was England, which seemed very similar to the US. So it was interesting to see a culture that was so unique.

I think it has changed my life in that I have a bond with people who at the beginning of this course I barely knew. Experiencing such an amazing adventure

together is definitely life changing.

Since it was my first time in another culture, I believe I got a taste of how other people live. It was refreshing to get a different take on life besides that of the United States. This course has awakened my inner travel bug to get out and see more of what the world offers.

I think about things differently. Human interactions aren't as simple to me anymore, I find that everyone uses some marketing tactics in their everyday lives.

Got to see a completely different culture which was totally amazing!

This was my first time leaving the country. I now cannot wait to travel again. I see the world as their own unique culture and not comparing to the US. There are places on this earth that are so unique and should not be influenced by us in any way.

Yes. Previously I had never traveled abroad. The experience was eye-opening.

I think it was a perfect experience that gave me my first "real life" experience outside of my internship of what my future could contain day to day

It has changed my life and the way I look at different cultures. The thing I take most out of this course is things are just the way they are. Looking back on the CZ, I questioned 'Why' to a lot of things, but I understand now to just throw that question out and take experiences in for what they are. Different places and people are different.

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*Note: Unfiltered responses.*

To increase the likelihood of success and create a replicable solution, it was integrated into the marketing curricula in three phases: ideation (Spring 2015), preparation and recruitment (Fall 2015), and pilot test (Spring 2016). During the ideation phase as a learning tool, the lead author shadowed a team of instructors and students from another institution. In the second phase, preparation and recruitment, the lead author and dean enlisted the university International Programs Office to develop student interest and manage travel logistics. The lead author collaborated with the selected partner abroad on elements of the CBP and activities while in the country (see Table 2 for program details). In the final phase, the pilot test was executed.



## EFFECT OF THE INNOVATION

The primary objective of this innovation was to overcome barriers to student effectiveness in global marketing environments by improving their cross-cultural sensitivity and teamwork skills within a context of a client-based project. To assess whether or not we succeeded in achieving our objective, we conducted an online survey of our students one week prior to their study abroad (Week 8) and immediately upon their return (Week 10). Four students failed to complete the survey. Results are based upon the 76% who responded.

Did the innovation affect students' interest in study abroad experiences? Analysis of open-ended responses to survey questions asking to explain why they liked or disliked the experience (see Table 3) or describe whether the course changed student's life and how they view the world (see Table 4) revealed that all students would recommend this course to a friend, suggesting that the innovation, despite a challenging workload, provided students with a positive "one of a kind" learning experience. Several students noted that the course opened their eyes to the importance of cultural differences and awakened their desire to travel again, suggesting that the innovation had a positive impact on their interest in study abroad experiences. Finally, new friendships were reported, suggesting that this design provided students with tools that reduced their anxiety about traveling abroad.

Next, survey results were used to assess the effect of the study abroad program on students' cross-cultural skills, specifically intercultural sensitivity. Intercultural sensitivity refers to the emotional desire of a person to acknowledge, appreciate, and accept cultural differences (Fritz, Möllenberg, & Chen, 2002). In the survey, we asked students 13 questions adapted from Fritz et al. (2002) that measure intercultural sensitivity in terms of *engagement*, *confidence*, and *attentiveness*. Each dimension was measured with three to five items on a seven-point Likert scale (1-strongly disagree/7-strongly agree).

As summarized in Table 5, a series of paired t-tests revealed that the study abroad program produced a significant increase in confidence ( $t(1,13) = 3.08, p < .01$ ) and attentiveness ( $t(1,13) = 2.10, p < .05$ ), and marginally significant increase in overall intercultural sensitivity ( $t(1,13) = 2.02, p = .06$ ). The effect of the study abroad program on engagement was not significant. These results suggest that a nine-day long study abroad program centered on a client-based project has the capacity to increase students' intercultural sensitivity, especially their confidence in and attentiveness to intercultural communications.

Finally, we examined whether or not our innovative course design provided students with an opportunity to develop and practice workplace skills (i.e., time management, project management, collaboration, creativity). To assess this objective, we examined students' open-ended responses as a measure of their per

**TABLE 5**  
**Paired T-test Results (with Cronbach's Alphas)**

	t	p	Before (n = 13)	After (n = 13)
Engagement ( $\alpha = .62 / .74$ )	1.23	.24	6.14 (.45)	5.94 (.85)
Confidence ( $\alpha = .65 / .82$ )	3.08	.01	3.97 (.86)	4.37 (1.10)
Attentiveness ( $\alpha = .40 / .68$ )	2.10	.05	5.74 (.64)	6.18 (.57)
Overall cultural sensitivity ( $\alpha = .73 / .82$ )	2.02	.06	5.28 (.47)	5.50 (.75)

( $\alpha$ ) refers to Cronbach's alpha in the pre- and post-tests. Standard deviations for reported means are stated in parentheses.

ception of learning. Students appreciated the opportunity to gain relevant work experience, apply what they were learning to a real problem, collaborate with others, consider and respect others' ideas and personal differences, think outside of the box, and present outcomes of their work to the real client. Together, these results suggest that students were aware of developing and practicing skills relevant to their future employment.

The client provided further evidence that students' work was aligned with real-world expectations. When surveyed the client noted that he was able to follow the presentation throughout, and described the delivered content as "extraordinary," "very creative," and "would not hesitate to say that in most cases it surpassed the level of professional work in the Czech Republic." He noted that elements of the students' solution were already being integrated into the company's marketing strategies. Indeed, as the client reported: "I'll be honest...I was quite skeptical about what a group of American students could do for me. I was so wrong. What they did is unbelievable...I am inspired and can't wait to bring their ideas to life!"

### CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The travel partner used in this case had expertise in meaningful, educational tourism that proved invaluable. They had business contacts that were fruitful in obtaining a client for the project. At times communication with the client was hindered by the presence of the intermediary which created some challenge. Overall, the benefits outweighed this inconvenience. The location of our client was in the lead author's home country. This influenced the success of the program as the familiarity of the territory removed one unknown, decreasing the risk intrinsic to

such a project. Finally, future research should compare the results of this trip with those of a study abroad trip based solely on cultural experiences, without a CBP, to determine the incremental value of the CBP.

## CONCLUSION

We started this research with a question whether or not melding of client-based projects, conducted by student teams in an international setting render marketing students more able to manage real-world marketing challenges. Our research was motivated by accumulating critique of higher education as failing to prepare college students for their lives after college (Francis & Auter, 2017; Saad, 2015) and subsequent insights from visiting various multinational companies and spending some time with their managers. Our visits promptly revealed that managers at all levels needed to manage projects in collaboration with teams of diverse people with varying ethnic, cultural, and functional backgrounds. Skills such as collaboration, project management, and cultural savviness have become essential in today's business graduates' tool kits (Askim-Lovseth & O'Keefe, 2012; de Figueiredo, 2014; Erez et al., 2013; Hopkins, Raymond, & Carlson, 2011; Lopez & Lee, 2005; Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2009). The need for closing the gap between higher education and workplace skills and preparing students for work after college is real; many global education experts are calling for the gap to be closed (Busteed & Auter, 2018; Calderon & Jones, 2017; Saad, 2015). Despite the progress in providing undergraduate students with experiential learning activities that are comparable to real-life work environment, many of these activities, unfortunately, focus on development of these essential skills in isolation. We attempted to address this gap.

A thorough assessment of our innovation provides promising evidence for the effectiveness of this pioneering pedagogical approach, designed to reduce the fearful challenges often associated with integration of teamwork, client-based projects, and study abroad programs into undergraduate business curricula. Perhaps business educators can now employ a "melding" approach to study abroad experiences structured around client-based projects for overseas companies completed in teams that not only enhance their interest in globalization, including future travel, but also enhance their intercultural sensitivity while developing real-world, team-based skills for managing real world projects.

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