

GSB WORKING PAPER NO. 1



NEW STRATEGIES TO DEVELOP 'REAL' ENGAGEMENT BY
STUDENTS WITH THE LEARNING OF THE KNOWLEDGE AND
SKILLS REQUIRED FOR INTERNATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS.

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CRICOS Provider Code 00301J



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ABSTRACT

There is the assumption that the boundaries of functions and disciplines as they appear in organisations sometimes have their roots in the sort of management education provided by business schools. There is evidence that Australian companies *espouse* international competitiveness and especially the integrative aspect, but *practice* more 'traditional' and functional approaches, often mirroring the approaches in their professional and educational courses (Argyris, 1993). Management educators, and particularly those in business schools, need to take some responsibility for the current 'add-on' attitudes and activities which managers take back into organisations (Beck, Whiteley, and McFetridge, 1991). There needs to be corresponding management development in the practices of breaking down functional borders. The writers describe a holistic teaching/learning strategy designed to achieve *deep* rather than *surface* learning (Biggs, 1982). The vehicle for the paper is the 'International Business Competitiveness' (IBC) course of study offered to MBA students. The course unit involved a multi-disciplinary team of lecturers. It was recognised that this, in itself, would not solve the boundaries problem, indeed it could exacerbate it. Therefore, a model of international competitiveness was produced collaboratively by the lecturing team, and various integrating devices were designed. The paper will describe the model, the integrating devices, the qualitative evaluation methodology used and students' evaluative comments.

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Introduction

There has been a lot of talk about International Business and about the international content in tertiary courses (Asian Business Review, 1993; Guardian Weekly, 1992; Business Council Bulletin, 1992). There has also been a lot of discussion in the Business and Financial Press about Australia's International Competitiveness. "We [Australia] can get back to being in the top ten of affluent companies in the world by the year 2000 provided we take the initiative necessary to accomplish this objective" (Ralph, 1993). The assurances and rhetoric, however, are often underpinned by naïve diagnosis of the issues and solutions.

Educational institutions, and in particular Business Schools, must take some responsibility for this. Beck, *et al* (1991) point out that educational institutions often promote their "internationalisation" by providing statistics on international inputs, their "international" faculty, students and advisory board, and Business Schools often simply add an international function such as International Taxation/International Law to the curricula. Illustrative of this is that two of the five dimensions used by the Economist Intelligence Unit for a measure of Internationalisation of MBA programs (Bickerstaffe, 1993) involve recognising and drawing on the international origin of staff and students

Table One

Five Dimensions of Internationalism

International make up of Class
Overall International content of Program
International Experience of Faculty
Range of and Access to overseas exchange programs
International character of case study and other material

Source: MBA Student/Alumni Questionnaire, *The Economist Intelligence Unit*.

Whilst the writers think these inputs are important to a strategy for *internationalisation*, in the design of the International Business Competitiveness (IBC) as a unit of study at the Graduate School of Business, Curtin University, the writers

used these as inputs to support the conceptual model, and the learning process, but not to replace it.

There is no doubt that there was, and is, a pressing need to discuss and debate *internationalisation* in management education. Research into business schools in the USA, recognised for its pioneering achievements in management education (AACSB,1985; AACSB, 1991; Nehrt, 1987), shows “although curriculum internationalisation is by no means universal, Business Schools appear to be increasing their internationalisation efforts” (Fleming, Shooshtari, and Wallwork, 1993).

This research goes on to show that business schools are taking *internationalisation* seriously. Only 32% of 174 business schools surveyed made no reference to *internationalisation* in their objectives/mission statements, and 40% of business schools had strategies in place to address this curriculum orientation.

International Business in the curriculum of tertiary level business education is now the rule rather than the exception. In reviewing Australian MBA programs the writers concluded the intellectual aspects of international business are now well developed in programs at the graduate level.

Table Two
Analysis of Australian MBA Programs *

	Core Units have a Functional Focus	International Business is a Core Unit	International Business available as an elective or as a Specialisation
Yes	10	3	10
No or Not stated	2	9	2

In the 1990-92 Guide five of twelve listed Universities had International Business as an available specialisation. This increased to eight of twelve in 1992-1994

* The sample is the 12 Australian listed Universities GMAC

Source: The Official Guide to MBA Programs, (1992-94) Graduate Management Admission Council, Warner Books.

Curtin University has, as one of its goals, “the preparation of staff and students for life in a global community through greater understanding of, and respect for, other cultures” (Curtin, 1994:2). In support of this goal the Graduate School has made an explicit commitment to gear its curriculum “to the challenge of developing a competitive international export culture within Australia” (Curtin, 1994:2).

The writers were concerned, however, that Australian practice (with some notable exceptions) is not reflecting this emphasis. There is considerable evidence that, while Australian companies *espouse* the imperatives of an externally focussed vision and culture and of functional integration for international competitiveness, they continue to practice the “export as residual” approach, and continue to operate in a functional framework using traditionally structured organisational approaches. For example, an operations director of a successful exporter is quoted as saying “the emphasis is switching to export business because of a downturn in production in the local motor industry”, (*Australian Financial Review*, March, 1993:2). At the same time, much graduate management education continues to focus on functionally-based units of study (see Table Two).

A key question the writers asked in designing the IBC unit was this: “Are we seeing unrecognised and unintended collusion by industry and management educators?” The collusion is to keep functional structures in place whilst embracing processes such as continuous improvement in a ‘fads and fashions’ way, leaving the traditional foundations and structures intact. This approach is often mirrored in educational courses, in professional development courses (including job rotation) and in career tracks.

This observation is reinforced by the degree of emphasis placed in the business press, and emanating from senior businessmen, on the traditional stalking horses in the competitiveness debate, *viz* business taxation, costs of government regulation, macro-economic policy, labour market reforms (Business Council Bulletin, 1992). While these are important issues, there is increasing evidence that, of themselves, changes in these settings and structures will not ensure ongoing competitiveness for enterprises and industries in the current global environment. If the international competitiveness debate had been conducted ten years ago, it is likely that these same issues would have been considered important. How have they stood the test of time in such a changing and turbulent environment? Possibly because senior management, businessmen and public policy makers considered and still consider them to be part of a stable and enduring world view. This means that whilst it may

be permissible to discuss taxation, regulation costs, macro-economic policy and even labour reforms, it would only be so whilst **not** shaking both the foundations and superstructure of traditional business society. Fundamental change (such as new strategies needed for competitiveness) may be freely *espoused*, but in practice not supported. Senge (1992:5) suggests that:

... the adoption process [of strategy] fails because the new ideas are at such variance with mental models currently accepted by the organisation. More specifically, new insights fail to get put into practice because they conflict with deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting.

The writers desired to respond to ongoing evidence that whilst Australian companies *espouse* the imperative of integration for international competitiveness (**espoused theory**), they continue to appear to *practice* the more traditional and functional approaches (**theory in use**) Argyris (1993).

Assumptions and Learning Philosophy

The underpinning of the writers' approach was thus to assume that the MBA student was currently exposed to, and operating at the level of a "theory in use", which in many cases might differ from the espoused theory of international business competitiveness. The writers believed that this would inhibit real change. The writers' challenge was to develop strategies to overcome this and to facilitate *deep* (Biggs, 1982) and *double-loop* learning (Argyris, and Schön, 1974).

The writers also started from the premise that a *holistic* (and hence cross-disciplinary) approach is in line with the evidence from international best practice organisations (Rhinesmith, 1991; Senge, *et al*, 1994), and that the management education the writers provided needed to exemplify *practices* as well as *theories* of breaking down functional barriers. To achieve this, to avoid lapsing into more comfortable functional/discipline defined habits (for staff and students) the writers sought to develop a teaching/learning strategy which would continually focus all involved on the holistic approach. This strategy was underpinned by a collaboratively designed integrated model of international business competitiveness (see Figure One).

Teaching/Learning Strategy

The teaching/learning strategy involved the following elements.

- Team designing, where the writers' intention was to design an environment where major aspects of international competitiveness could be placed in a "thinking" context. Another intention was to develop a living model which would be formative in nature and allow for students' discoveries to shape the outcome.
- Team teaching, with close linkages between members of the team. The writers avoided "blocks" of time involving a single individual lecturer; segments reflected rather the interlinkages of the agreed model. Staff were encouraged to feedback to colleagues aspects of their, and also the students' progression and views (such as the students' heartfelt cry "you have raised more questions than answers").
- Carefully planned selection and development of student learning teams. Using Honey and Mumford's (1986) *Process Workshop*, students were introduced to the composite nature of contemporary organisational life. Students were given a skill session in team building, prior to the self-forming of syndicate groups which had to include a variety of team roles. Following a presentation on facilitation, team leaders were elected for each group. The team leader group was given a subsequent skills session in leading teams, facilitation and negotiating outcomes. *All teams were carefully screened to be representative of the multi-nationality and discipline background of the class.*
- The team focus was preserved by group project assignments. This work required a highly collaborative approach, demonstrable "boundaryless" analysis, evaluation, (and plan of action) for a case organisation.
- A program structure was developed, again formatively, which allowed for student initiated issues/ideas to be included through the program. These student inputs were forthcoming on both content and structure. They were encouraged by an ethos which developed in the program, as it became apparent to students and staff that an important competitive advantage is to be gained from critical thinking, ideas and the application of these to bring value-added to any aspect of business (and by transference to education).
- The unit structure and processes were designed to achieve intense and direct participation by students. The team building skills development enhanced this commitment. The writers adhered to the principles of adult learning, through student involvement in decision making, content which had direct relevance to the workplace, and by building in

continuous opportunities for both peer and lecturer feedback. This last device also enhanced student participation.

The assumption was that the more students were involved in discussing, debating and even coming up with definitions for business competitiveness, the more they would embrace deep learning strategies (Biggs, 1982). For example, in the “Skills and Resources” session, this extract from the lesson plan (always capable of being modified by students), shows the style of interaction.

Mental imagery and critical thinking were workshop and group activities; this was indicative of how material would be presented.

<i>Mental Imagery:</i>	Just for a moment, in the safe environment of this “learning laboratory”, let go, liberate yourself and try to imagine what it feels like as a human resource manager to consider global change as a constant dynamic. (Group discussion and presentation on the pros and cons of global change from an HRM perspective.)
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<i>Critical Thinking:</i>	(On the question of international business competitiveness as “smart business approaches”). Question: Are the authors talking various business approaches, or are we talking at a philosophical level - and if we are, does change involve the deeper values held by humans which are difficult to shake? How does your answer impact on the likelihood of achieving a competitive culture?
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Although students were given access to many definitions of international business competitiveness they were not given a single ready made definition. Statements like “International trade theory does not provide adequate answers to the reason why countries with similar sets of factors of production and rates of labour productivity have different levels of international competitiveness...” (Hopkins, and Cabalu, 1994) invited intriguing questions. Just as they were invited to shape and modify the lecture team’s ‘master model’, they were encouraged to adopt a spirit of inquiry into the whole notion of competitiveness.

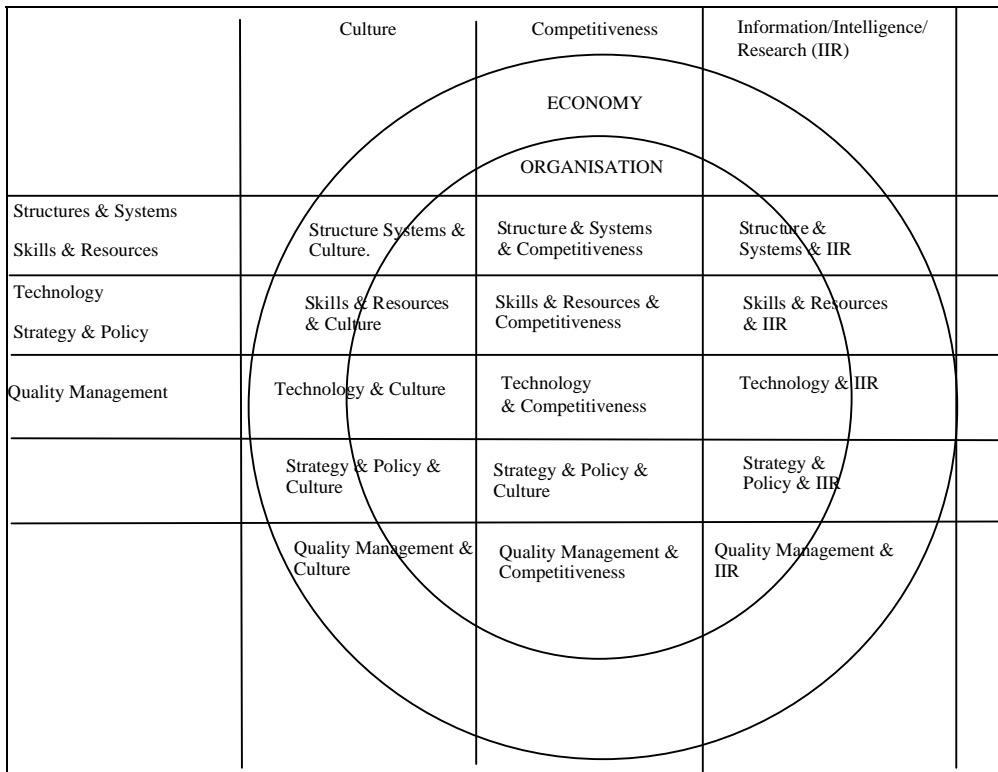
Both *deep* and *double loop* learning strategies require reflective activities (Argyris, 1990; Senge, *et al*, 1994). This aspect of the learning was addressed by designing into the course a journal/learning log. Students used the learning log device in various ways, ranging from the student who used a critical thinking model (Whiteley, and Levantard, 1993), to the group who used the journal to reflect on the group dynamic as it developed to fulfil the assignment programme. The learning log also charted the change in students’ attitudes and behaviours and provided valuable input into the writers' subsequent evaluation of the depth of learning which was taking place. These learning strategies were designed to be complemented by the writers' collaboratively produced model of international competitiveness.

International Competitiveness Model

The model was built by the teaching team as the platform on which to declaim on competitiveness issues and to provide the master model (*espoused theory*). This would be the focus of action strategies developed by students with an emphasis on feeding back directly into further development of a 'master model' of which they would come to claim ownership.

The model the writers developed wove the themes of culture and information-for-intelligence through the traditional business subjects, and, hence, functional areas. The first iteration of the model is developed in Figure One below.

Figure One:
The Dimensions of International Business Competitiveness -
A Meta Model



The Cultural Dimension

With this model, students were challenged to explore the cultures/values of the individual functional disciplines within a framework which looked at culture in its other manifestations, within organisations, local and regional cultures (Hofstede, 1983; Whiteley, 1993), national cultures (Semler, 1989; Hodgetts and Luthans, 1991; Bond and Hofstede, 1988), and mass and global cultures (Adler, 1991; Hofstede, 1980). By challenging the students to explore their own embedded cultural assumptions (disciplinary and local), and setting those alongside the international cultures which would be encountered in doing business in another country, the writers intended to move students outside the framework of the 'Australian' ways of doing business. The writers wanted to move them beyond the 'etiquette and conventions' stage of preparing to do business with another country. In their group work, they were challenged to 'put on the attitudes and values' of different cultures and then to develop competitive strategies and responses from that position. In this process the teaching team encouraged them to apply their "business solutions" within the deeply held behaviour rules of another country. Using the peer feedback

from their multicultural teams, and their own reflective learning, they chartered this process in their learning logs.

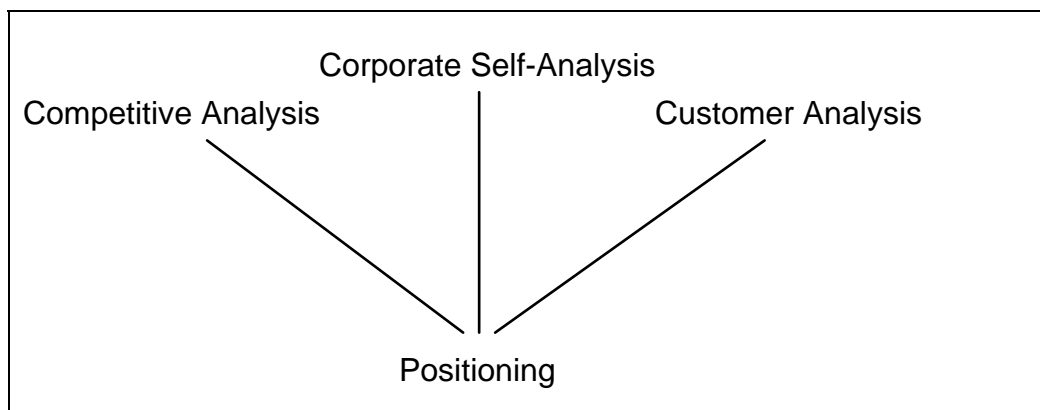
In developing this approach, the writers were cognisant of the consistent theme in evaluation of Australian managers which give them a relatively low rank, internationally, on cross cultural expertise and ability to establish international business relationships (Hopkins and Cabalu, 1994).

The competitive edge in the future will require the organisation to actively utilise knowledge of different cultural characteristics for competitive advantage (Kaynak, 1994; Rhinesmith, 1991:47). To do this requires greatly heightened sensitivity to cultural characteristics, and the sources of differences in those characteristics (The Boston Consulting Group, 1994: 38 -39).

Information and Intelligence

The other theme which was woven through the model is what the team called - Intelligence from Information through Research (IIR). The focus of this theme was 'intelligence', which the writers use in the meaning of 'capacity to understand, and for adaptive behaviour based on understanding'. 'Information' we use in the sense of data, but data in itself can confuse rather than inform, especially when there is the physical capacity to capture lots and lots of it. Data, however, can become intelligence - a map for action - through research. Kaynak (1994) has developed this in another way in the following model:

Figure Two:
Information for Competitive Analysis



Source: Erdener Kaynak, 1994, Staff Seminar, Curtin Graduate School of Business.

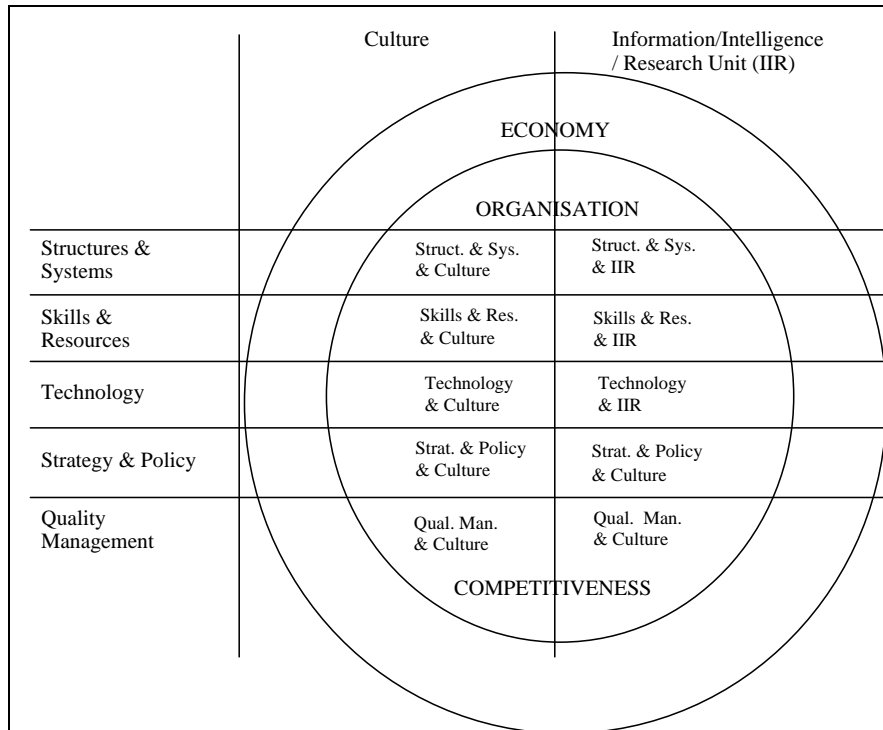
By threading IRR through all of the functional areas, the model assists in the breaking down of functional boundaries by stressing that intelligence, used as a map for action, cannot be functionally based. It must encompass all strands and create a holistic, strategic map. This is what Kaynak (1994) also seeks to achieve with his three pronged approach into market place research, corporate analysis and industry analysis.

Competitiveness

This strand was also threaded through the model and was developed as the issue to focus the knowledge and skills of the holistic model.

However, during the process of evaluation, on completion of the program, the team proposed that an adjustment be made. Competitiveness in future iterations would be the ground of the whole model rather than a strand which could be woven through it. The revised model is shown below in Figure Three.

Figure Three
The Dimensions of International Business Competitiveness
Model two



Evaluation

Arguably, a most telling signal of whether an educational initiative works stems from looking at outcomes. Were the models and methods evident in the way students went about their group assignments? (Which was to design business strategies for different international business environments.) The answer was an unequivocal - "Yes!" The models shown (annex one and two) are indicative of how student groups incorporated the thinking of *culture* and a *holistic* approach to functions into their business strategy projects. The evidence of the IIR integration was not so obvious. This will be an area for rethinking and strengthening in the next IBC.

Two interesting findings emerged from the group evaluations. The first concerned the group learning process. The student groups were each developing a business strategy from a main perspective, (say technology or skills/resources) and building a holistic model of a business in a particular national environment. Each group's designed environment was presented to the whole class (around 50 students) as the last activity in the unit. As the presentations unfolded it became obvious that the groups had not managed to optimise themselves and their learning. In the feedback session there was vociferous and vehement discussion about lost opportunities. For example, they argued that, had the groups seconded two members to a meta group, (they had ample resources to do this as there were six or so members in each group) they could have produced a meta-model of all the best ideas. In the learning logs almost all students pointed this out as something they would do differently next time.

The second finding was the cross-cultural knowledge and awareness built up within groups. The universal statement on this was that during the first part of the unit there was often traumatic disagreement, frustration and resentment. As it became necessary to understand Asian and other cultures "from the inside" and a need was felt for specialised information, usually in the shape of concrete examples of how business would be conducted abroad, those from the Australian culture were at a particular disadvantage. They had to depend on the knowledge, experience and even wisdom of the others. The in-culture roles were reversed. The experience was profound. This was reflected in the learning logs and also unit evaluation data. It was also reflected in the extremely culture-sensitive models produced by the groups.

During the unit the group facilitators held several crisis meetings; these meetings usually revolved around the group dynamics and conflicts. A lecturer took the role

of 'facilitator of facilitators'; members of the facilitator group said that the most difficult task they faced was keeping to the norm of going for consensus and harmony - "It would have been so much easier to move the group along and get things done!" (This was the general facilitator comment.)

Student evaluation of the IBC unit itself drew on an instrument produced by holding focus groups with MBA students (Soutar and Whiteley, 1994), using Group System Support technology (Lewis and Whiteley, 1992). The evaluation research, ongoing, aims to generate expectations from students about the essentials of an effective student/teacher learning environment. The results were very encouraging, both those gathered from the in-class evaluation (as below) but even more so from the impromptu comments and visits from students for several weeks after the unit ended.

Student Expectations from Lecturer

- Depth of knowledge
- Create a positive and supportive learning environment
- Ability to generate enthusiasm
- Acts as a facilitator of ideas rather than provider
- Conveys confidence in the students' ability.

Lecturer Expectations from Student

- A desire to learn
- Student has covered background material
- Come prepared with an open mind
- Personal time organisation-including study techniques.

There was a consistency about the data. For example, one of the team members had not quite kept to the spirit of the IBC 'master model' and this was pointed out by almost all students. The thing students liked most about the unit, it seems, was the growing 'hands on' awareness of other cultures and the role culture plays in business. There was a high degree of agreement on the learning environment being positive supportive and enthusiasm-generating; things they really valued. The thing they liked least was the intensity, and pace of the unit; although many students said that this was valuable learning. Some students would have done more reading earlier, and poor time management around the major project seemed to cause at least some of the intensity.

Such comments are valuable in that as the writers are preparing to run the unit in 1994/5 the writers can pass on the experiences of the 'pioneers' and alert the new students to the tips and ideas of their predecessors.

Conclusion

The conclusion is really a beginning. The writers' concern that companies may *espouse* rather than *practice* functional integration was certainly evident amongst the MBA student population at the beginning of the IBC unit. It seemed that students thought functionally and parochially as they approached assignments and group dynamics. Through IBC, students seemed to produce, however embryonically, an altered 'mental model' of the international world of business. From a belief that a cross-disciplinary approach was needed to exemplify best practices came a team effort, a model, one way of making sense of the international business competitiveness arena. The spirit of the team is still one of learning, modification and reshaping. Perhaps, as the experiment has proved worthwhile, the team will become bolder. Certainly there will be a concerted effort to promote the IIR component, whilst not shortchanging the cultural theme. Success has a way of breeding enthusiasm and the lecture team is looking forward to the synergy required of team members as they work towards further integrating their perspectives into a truly formative and holistic model.

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