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## Management teaching and learning: a cross-cultural perspective

### Abstract

Among the major goals of the educational system in the United States are the development of creativity and originality amongst individuals. On the other hand, in collectivistic nations such as Japan and Thailand, a social system has evolved that avoids conflict and promotes harmony. The Japanese system is rather unique and warrants a more detailed explanation. While Australia falls in between the United States and Japan, surprisingly it is closer to the Asian countries than to its Anglo counterpart. Hence, while American business practices and management education are admired around the world, applying these models without adapting to local cultures is both unrealistic and dysfunctional.

**Key words:** globalization, management education, cross-cultural learning and teaching.

**JEL Classification:** M10, M14, M16, M19.

### Introduction

Though trade has been conducted across national boundaries for centuries, we have witnessed an amazing escalation of international business in the last few decades fuelled by technological advancement, geo-political developments (such as the collapse of the former Soviet Union and Eastern bloc countries, newly emerging markets such as China, India, proliferation of multilateral trade agreements, technological advances in the areas of communication and transportation, etc), as well as the rising power and influence of multinational corporations in our day-to-day lives. Leading corporations around the world have increasingly turned their attention to foreign countries either as sourcing destinations and / or markets in order to maintain a competitive edge in today's dynamic and intensely competitive marketplace. Consequently, they need executives who have the mindsets and skills necessary to manage in an increasingly integrated and complex global economy. This trend of an increasingly globally integrated economy, has fuelled a world-wide demand for business education. However, while American business practices and management education are admired around the world, applying these models without adapting to local cultures is both unrealistic and dysfunctional. In other words, too many American business schools (and faculty) assume that they can teach management frameworks and concepts abroad in the same manner as they do them domestically. This paper will present some of the challenges facing as well as some practical tips for the transfer of American management education models in other countries.

### 1. Management teaching and learning: a cross-cultural perspective

**1.1. United States.** Among the major goals of the educational system in the United States are the

development of creativity and originality amongst individuals. Classes typically range from large lectures for several hundred students to smaller classes and "seminars" (discussion classes) with only a few students. Students enrolled in lecture courses are often divided into smaller groups, or "sections". The sections meet separately to discuss the lecture topics and other material. Professors routinely assign textbook and other readings each week, in addition to requiring several written reports each term (semester or quarter). The students are usually expected to keep up to date with the required readings in order to join in class discussions and to understand the lectures.

Through a dialectic process, students are constantly encouraged to think outside the "black box", challenge the status quo and seek innovative solutions to existing and old problems. Classroom interaction is marked by lively case discussions and exchanges of information between faculty and students. Students are expected to participate in class discussions, especially in seminar classes. This is often a very important factor in determining a student's grade, and rewards are based on individual merit and performance thereby reinforcing the individualistic psyche of the Americans.

However, while encouraging individuality and creativity, such a system is not without its downsides. Critics of the American (management) education system state that much of M.B.A. training has deteriorated into a race to steer students into high-paying finance and consulting jobs without caring about the graduates' broader roles in society. The overall feeling is that panoramic and long-term thinking has given way to an almost grotesque obsession with maximizing shareholder value over increasingly brief spans. After graduation, management students take advantage of situations where they can jostle the actual managers of companies and make a lot of money for themselves in the process, thus perpetuating the individualistic and selfish psyche of the American culture.

**1.2. Japan.** On the other hand, in a collectivistic nation such as Japan, a social system has evolved that avoids conflict and promotes harmony. Therefore, emphasis is placed on conformity and subordination – individuals are expected to fulfil their roles and responsibilities as ascribed to them by society. Hence, in terms of both student-professor and student-student interaction, listening skills, obedience and compliance rather than debating skills, independent thinking and creativity are the main characteristics of the Japanese educational system. Professors present lectures with no questions or feedback from students. Rewards are based on loyalty and on the overall wellbeing of the collective entity as opposed to the American model of individual goals and objectives. In terms of student-student interaction, a more balanced contribution from each member of team projects is ensured. The dynamics of competitive pedagogical tools such as computer-based business simulation games, however, can become less robust.

The educational systems in Japanese universities might be characterized by dichotomy of lecture-type classes held in larger classrooms and seminar-type classes held in smaller classrooms. Actually, these two types of classes make a sharp contrast with each other. On the one hand, typical lecture-type classes in Japan are taught in such a manner that professors teach students a particular set of knowledge on an academic area with one way communication from professors to students. The Japanese word of *kyoujyu* consists of two letters which means teaching (*kyou*) and giving (*jyu*). As implied by that word, Japanese professors or *kyoujyu* deliver lectures using microphone in front of hundreds of students (or thousands of students at the most popular lectures). All that the students do is to listen to their professors and note what they said down. (Note: This lecture model is quite similar to the education/lecture model at major public universities in America where professors teach large classes of several hundred (up to a thousand or so) students, especially at the lower division, undergraduate and general education courses).

However, in Japan almost all students do not want to stop the lecture by raise their hands to ask the professor a question. Even if the professor asks students something at the lecture, students do not want to answer more than yes or no. Such behaviors are normally driven by the strong veneration for professors in Japan and/or social norm of maintaining harmony. Now, how do students resolve their questions when they do not understand what the professors said in the classroom, and how do professors improve their classes so that they can match their

students' needs and abilities? Some students try to resolve their questions by themselves with the textbooks, while others try to resolve them by asking friends after the class or before the exams. A few students prefer asking professors to resolve their questions, but it is not during the lectures, but after the class.

It is certain that such lectures with a one-way communication process are not useful for evaluating whether the lectures are understandable, effective, and/or if they are useful. And in many Japanese universities, there are no formal or standardized mechanisms to elicit feedback from the students on the teaching methods and effectiveness of their professors. Some professors voluntarily implement and control evaluations from students regarding their lectures. However, in recent years the decreasing birthrate in Japan and increasing competition among Japanese universities have accelerated the use of confidential evaluations administered by third parties. Many professors objected to the new evaluation methods and processes – they are of the opinion that evaluations by students are not meaningful because students' evaluations on whether they feel that the lectures will be useful or not in future could be different once from those of past graduates who may appreciate their learning experiences more now that they are working. Furthermore, they feel that the inaccurate and subjective evaluations by students may be a de-motivating factor and actually, lower the quality of future lectures.

On the other hand, there are seminar-type classes held in smaller classrooms in Japanese universities. These classes include: courses pertaining to the student's declared major, seminars for reading academic articles in English and other languages, seminars in quantitative analysis, and labs in physics, chemistry or psychology. These classes consist of ten to fifty students with a selection system controlled by the administration (in many cases, it is just a random selection from the applicant pool). While lecture-type classes held in larger classroom are characterized by one-way communication from professors to students, seminar-type classes held in smaller classroom are usually characterized by two-way communication between professors and students and communication among students. In seminars in multivariate analysis, for example, a professor not only lectures on how to use software to calculate data, but also lets the students use the software and calculate data, and even lets students form themselves in groups to make presentations of their own chosen hypotheses/experiments. In seminars for reading foreign academic journals, professors do not lecture what the articles said, but let their

students make presentations of some articles and then lead a discussion among students.

In lecture-type classes held in larger classrooms, while grading is typically conducted on the basis of only a final examination, in seminar classes held in smaller classrooms, grading is conducted mainly on the basis of attendance and participation. Most professors give higher grades to students who participate actively in the class, and lower grades to students who are less active. In some seminar classes, no final examinations are given and the professors grade their students only on the basis of their assessment of who works harder, who thinks more deeply, who presents their opinion more loudly and more logically, and who achieves higher level of outputs. In such classes, there may be no discernable difference between Japan and the United States.

However, there is a seminar-type class which might not be seen in the United States. It is called *seminar* in Japanese – when Japanese professors and students talk about *seminars*, they pronounce the word as a German word [ze-mi-nar], because the seminar system in Japan was originally imported from Germany. Almost all Japanese professors and students do not call seminar-type classes (discussed above) as seminars except for this type of *seminars*. *Seminars* in the educational system in Japanese universities are seminar-type classes held in smaller classrooms in which students study their major more deeply. In a typical Japanese university, all professors take charge of a *seminar*, and almost all of students want to take a *seminar* starting from their sophomore or junior years. Activities in these *seminars* typically include debates, case analyses, reading papers in academic journals, writing and presenting their own academic papers. Students in such *seminars* form a group to conduct theoretical and/or empirical research when they are a sophomore or junior. And, each of them writes a paper called B.A. thesis when they are in their senior year. These papers constitute the main projects in a *seminar*.

All of the other projects in a *seminar* (except the B.A. thesis which is written individually) are joint projects with others from that *seminar*. Because class hours for a *seminar* are spent on presentations in front of the professor and classmates, team members get together often to prepare their presentations. In some cases, these meetings can reach hundreds of hours per a week. Well motivated students are highly involved in their *seminar* regardless of the enormous demand placed on their time and consequently, possible delays in graduating from the university. When the students get together to prepare for joint projects, they chat away, they eat food with each other, they drink *sake*, and they play with

each other for a change of pace. And, they learn not only how to find problems, think logically, write papers intelligibly, present them articulately, but also how to understand colleagues with different characteristics, mutually help each other, and manage joint projects to generate greater collective output together.

In addition to various kinds of joint academic projects in a *seminar*, other activities associated with a *seminar* are also perceived as important by the students. Interestingly, *seminars* in a university pit excellent students against each other. New members (in their junior year) are recruited and selected by both professor and existing members (usually seniors), while students in other seminar-type classes are usually selected randomly by the administration as mentioned above. Existing members promote their *seminar* to freshmen or sophomores for almost whole a year, encourage excellent students to take the entrance examination of their own *seminar*, and prepare and carry out the examination with their professor at the beginning of every school year. In the recruiting project, *seminar* members experience stiff competition from other *seminar* members competing for the best students from the general student pool. Other aspects of competition among *seminars* include presentation of papers written by students in a *seminar* in student conferences and journals, and *seminars* are generally compared and evaluated in terms of excellence. Furthermore, *seminar* members sometimes have a sports day, when all *seminars* come together to compete in baseball, football or bowling against the other *seminars*. These activities enhance the team spirit among *seminar* members and increase the motivation for academic and research activities in their *seminar*.

Another unique characteristic of the *seminar* system in Japanese universities is its alumni association. Strong ties among members in a *seminar* are formed over a long term (two or three-year) and generally last even after they graduate from the university. The alumni association of the *seminar* usually gets together to express feelings of gratitude for their advisory professor, to renew their old friendship, and to meet current students for the first time. During the thirty year career of the professor which is the norm in Japanese universities, the alumni association of a *seminar* grows considerably larger and the association may finally consist of hundreds of members with very close and strong ties. The alumni sometimes present information about the challenges and benefits of working for their company. The alumni sometimes also give students money for seminar activities, lectures on business trends, and even placement opportunities for new

graduates. Hence, such alumni ties and activities greatly contribute to raise the prestige and value of the *seminar* system in Japanese universities.

Hence, the *seminar* system in Japan is more like an organization rather than just a class, in which members are bound by strong ties and driven to maximize their contributions to each other and to society in general. In many respects, a *seminar* system and its members (past and present) seem to function like a Japanese firm, *kaisha*, and its workers. Many Japanese professors and students regard the *seminar* as the most important class in their educational system. However, while some firms are in top shape, other firms may not be as successful. Equally, it cannot be said that all professors in all universities in Japan succeed in the teaching and management of their *seminars*. In fact, teaching in a *seminar* is most likely to be difficult and time-consuming to spare enough time for the professor to pursue other activities such as research or consulting. It is not unusual to witness a faculty retirement party in which hundreds of young and old alumni take part as well as colleagues – often, the professor would be considered as one of the most successful and great professors in terms of education even if their scholarly credentials in terms of academic research were not exceptional.

**1.3. Thailand.** The educational system in Thailand has many similarities to that of Japan in that conflict avoidance and social harmony are more highly valued than independent thinking and creativity. Going along with whatever one is told (even when it is obviously wrong) and fitting into social settings with colleagues is more important than inquisitive thinking. Saving face is more important than getting it right.

Like Japan, Thailand is a monarchy. With a popular and powerful king who has been on the throne for sixty years, Thais are taught that a good citizen is one that is respectful of authority while working to achieve social harmony. In education, this translates into respectful students who work very well in groups.

In most situations, students in Thailand prefer one way communication in which the teacher lectures and feedback is neither solicited nor expected. When questioned by their teacher (which is more likely to occur with visiting instructors from other countries), students are conditioned to simply answer “yes” to all questions about their understanding of the material being covered (whether they really understand it or not). This comes in part from the Thai language which does not have a word for no. It is also considered rude to imply that the instructor was in some way unclear in his/her presentation or that the student was not capable enough to understand the material. After all, saving face is

more important than getting the answer right. All of this makes for serious misunderstandings when visiting instructors mistakenly believe that positive responses to questions imply any particular response to or understanding of the material being covered.

There are certainly differences between the education system in Thailand and the ones in Japan, the United States, and Australia. One major difference is in access to education itself. In Thailand this access has often been highly limited. Traditionally only the wealthy and the well connected have enjoyed any real access to quality higher education. While this has changed a little recently with the opening of new universities targeting those aspiring to join the small but growing middle class, access to the top institutions is still limited mainly to the rich and the well connected.

University students in the top universities in Thailand are often second and third generation children of educated parents. Furthermore, only a small percentage of the public in Thailand has ever had higher education in the first place. Admission to a top Thai university is sometimes viewed more like an entry ritual into the upper echelon of society than as a valuable educational opportunity. Without a doubt, Thailand is a very class conscious society.

Those students fortunate enough to be admitted to the top Thai universities are often those with English language proficiency and travel experience overseas. This makes Thai university students much different from the majority of society which has limited proficiency in English and is unlikely to ever travel outside the country. As such, higher education in Thailand has tended to promote the status quo of inequitable income distribution rather than serve as a means for upward social and economic mobility.

Another unique aspect of higher education in Thailand is the role played by religion. Over 95% of Thais report that they are Buddhist. Two key principles of Buddhism (subservience to older people with authority and practicing the “middle path”) directly impact the behavior of Thai students. Teachers (especially older ones) are treated with the utmost respect. Taking the “middle path” often means that students will take the middle point (indifference) on surveys rather than agreeing or disagreeing. This makes peer and instructor evaluations difficult to evaluate.

One of the most important words in the Thai language is “*samuk*” which means fun. Thais believe that all things worth doing (including education) must be *samuk*. Unless students find a class to be fun, it is likely that many of them will simply tune it out and not complete the assignments. Therefore, it is essential for instructors to incorporate interesting and enjoyable in-class activities in order to keep Thai students engaged.

**1.4. Australia.** While Australia falls in between the United States and Japan, surprisingly it is closer to the Japanese model than to its Anglo counterpart. Australia is at the forefront of producing new high-tech equipment and responsible for many advances in the telecommunications, information technology, manufacturing, mining and agricultural industries. Australian scientists and researchers have also made significant contributions to medical science.

Australian universities and institutions of higher learning are consistently ranked very highly and respected as providing a high standard of instruction. Students at Australian universities and colleges attend lectures, tutorials, seminars, as well as conducting independent research in libraries or laboratories. They are encouraged to collect and analyze data independently and either as an individual or as a group. The system encourages students to ask questions, to develop an argument in a logical form and to participate in discussion and debate with other students and professors. In other words, students are active learners in the Australian educational system, and don't just passively listen and/or learn by rote (memorization). Most colleges and universities assess student performance through examinations, essays and reports, oral presentations, class participation, practical work and tests.

While the methods of instruction (learning) and assessment might seem very similar to that of America, Australians have always prided themselves as a classless society. Given the nation's historical origins, it is no surprise and this principle is very much embedded in the Australian educational system. Using a sports analogy, there is a greater priority placed on team efforts and welfare rather than on individual accomplishments and accolades (though there is some recognition of the latter). However, given the country's small population and geographic distance, the educational system demands Australian students (and other stakeholders) to be more outward looking and international in perspective than most nations in order to take advantage of economies of scale. The predominant mentality is that Australia, as a relatively young country, has to be more ingenuous to compete with larger and longer established countries, and the educational system is used as the main vehicle to teach and reinforce such an orientation.

### Conclusion

Hence, while American business practices and management education are admired around the world, applying these models without adapting to local cultures is both unrealistic and dysfunctional. This paper will present some of the challenges facing as well as some practical tips for the transfer of American management education models in other countries.

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