

# Paper Title: Empowerment Through Learning in a Virtual Environment

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## Abstract:

The traditional view of the learning style of the Asian student learner as being suited to rote learning, concrete thinking and teacher dependence can restrict the innovative learning experiences that are provided to the Asian learner. For subjects such as business where there is no one right way but rather a variety of approaches that are often contextually determined, the traditional learning style can be ineffective in fostering knowledge. This paper challenges the validity of the notion that Asian students are unsuited to a flexible, innovative, creative and open systems learning environment. After three years of providing Asian students with a virtual business environment, the evidence suggests that after initial adjustments, the Asian learner benefits exponentially from a more fluid learning environment. International students evidence higher levels of creativity, conceptualisation and understanding than students taught in a teacher-directed environment. Their level of communication and confidence is enhanced. Instead of simply learning something superficially, students know through experience.

## Key Words: Times New Roman 11 Point Bold (Style: Heading 1)

Virtual learning environments, cultural styles of learning, experiential learning, business training.

## Introduction:

International Education Services operates the foundation year programme for the University of Queensland. Students from over 85 countries, but predominately from the Asian region, attend a full-time course as preparation for pursuing a chosen course of study at the University of Queensland. One of the subjects that are offered as an elective in the Certificate IV in University Preparation is Business Management. The Foundation Year programme has four intakes per year: the primary intake in February, an express intake in May and September and a limited intake in June. Although the number of business management students varies, on average the intake levels are as follows:

Intake	No. of students
February	150
May	15
July	70
September	30
<b>Total</b>	<b>265</b>

Table 1: Student Intake

The nature of the clientele are such that majority of the students have had little or no experience with the world of work and business. Simple concepts are both alien and difficult to grasp due to language barriers. The student lacks a business framework from which to approach the material and no practical experience to give the information meaning. Traditional methods in the past have tended to create a student lacking in confidence, understanding and an inability to link theory and practice. This inner paradigm severely restricts the student's ability to communicate.

In 2002, a decision was made to restructure the business management course and challenge the traditional view that Asian students learn best in a teacher directed learning environment. This paper is a reflection on that journey and the strengths and weaknesses of the new approach

## **Traditional Learning Strategies:**

There is an assumption made about the learning styles of Asian students that they learn best in a teacher directed environment that is highly structured involving rote learning (Conlan, 1996, Gatfield and Gatfield, 1994). The student is characterised as lacking in critical perception, abstract thinking and inability to operate as an independent learner (Philips, 1990). For Chan (1999), this perception is a cultural by-product of the Confucius tradition that respects and reveres the teacher. It creates an environment in which the need to maintain face is manifest in a thoughtful and respectful silence. Kember and Gow (1991) argue that this learning style is not a cultural by-product but is a reflection of the nature of the curriculum. No doubt that they are both entwined so that learning environments constructed for the Chinese learner are often characterised by one way communication, a cautious use of case studies and role plays and restricted group work (Chan, 1999).

The cultures of the East are characterised by a higher reliance of the social group than on the individual (Ng, 2001). Ng (2001) contends that this collectivism acts as a social constraint on creativity as the individual values conformance ahead of difference. In individualistic cultures, the person may be willing to engage in behaviours that are confrontational. These cultural orientations seem at odds with the push for creativity within the curriculum of schools in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Korea and Singapore since 1999 (Ng and Smith, 2004). This development has been constrained by the unwillingness of many teachers in these education systems to value the creative student (Scott, 1999). Ng and Smith (2004) see this as a paradox. The reverence that is expected of the student towards the teacher creates the perception of the Asian student as being docile (Biggs, 1996).

Little wonder that attempts to develop the Asian learner as a creative learner are often doomed to failure. The creative learner is often characterised by traits that run counter to a teacher directed learning environment. Organisational structures and learner and teacher resistance often combine to create insurmountable barriers to cultivating a truly independent learner. The journey towards the creation of an independent learning environment begins with the first step in the teacher's head. Independence and individualism are often perceived by the teacher to be at odds with order and discipline (Westby and Dawson, 1995). This can create a barrier of fear and loss of control that can severely restrict the willingness to cross the divide. This can create resistance amongst the learning fraternity for the creation of learning environments that are unstructured and student directed.

In studies conducted in the Asian classroom, Ng (2004) found that creativity is best promoted in an environment where students are encouraged to make their own decisions. The hierarchical nature of the classroom relationship between the student and the teacher needs to be modified. Students must be related to in an equal and open manner. In such an environment, the student will grow to become an active participant in the learning process, is more motivated, is more conceptual in their thinking and is capable of integrating a creative approach to the tasks that they are confronted with (Reeve, 1996). Important in this process is the provision of an opportunity for reflection. Ng and Smith (2004) believe that the teacher needs to exert friendly authority over the student. These factors are no doubt true of all cultures.

### **A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step**

In 2002, the business management staff made the decision to cross the divide and implement a virtual learning environment. This involved becoming a member of the Australian Network of Practice Firms (ANPF). The cost of membership is \$ 2000 per annum. The ANPF is a network of training businesses operating in a virtual environment that extends globally and operates under real world business practices. A mentor was sought from the business sector to act as an advisor to the students. In this case, Ashley and Munroe, a financial planning business, were approached and expressed a willingness to be involved with the company. The students were required to form a simulated business and to trade with 150 Australian virtual companies and 4000 international businesses. Although, the simulated business trades in virtual products, in all other areas, such as the business decisions, documentation and activities, the business mirrors the real world.

The existing learning programme had to be reformatted. The material was modularised and placed into an Internet environment. A four week introductory programme was developed that was designed to create a

mental framework of management thinking within the business student as a precursor to introducing the student to the virtual company. The other modules would be delivered to support the requirements of the employee of the company in a flexible mode.

It was decided that when the business was operating, the teacher would assume the role of a business consultant. After the initial four week orientation, of the four weekly one hour sessions, one session would be devoted to a lecture and the other three to operating the virtual business. In the lecture session, the teacher would assume their traditional role. Existing assessments were retained. Discussions with other practitioners in other organisations identified that the approach adopted in other companies was a strongly teacher directed and controlled learning environment. The practice firms generally involved only small groups of students averaging around 15 in number.

The new student intake in 2003 was introduced to the idea and a workshop was organised for all the students on a Friday afternoon during which the structure and name of the company was created. The students created a company with the following structure:

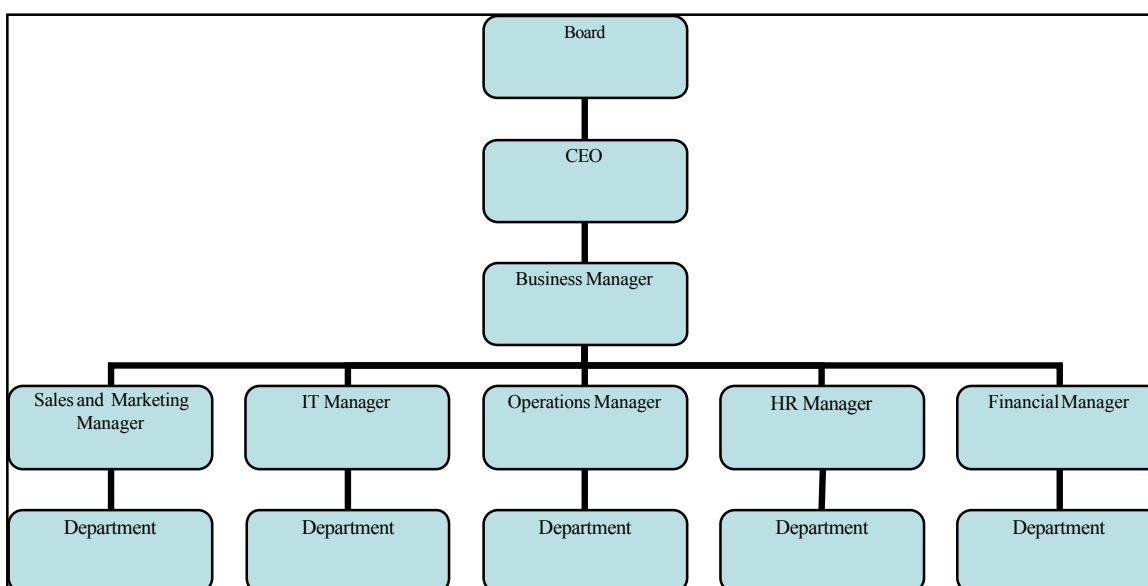


Figure Two: Organisational Structure

The students named the business: Universal Global Resources and so the journey of a thousand miles had begun.

### The Process

The Board was elected from the students. The Board then constructed the positions for the business and placed the job advertisements on the Internet. All students had to construct a letter of application and a resume and respond to the advertisement. Interviews were performed in which the students were expected to present themselves in formal business attire. Once interviewed and selected, the staff were placed through a formal induction process. The employees then were required to construct a business plan that involved conducting an environmental analysis and developing strategic goals, objectives, strategies and an implementation plan. This process was duplicated for every new intake. The employees of the business decided to sell four product lines: online magazine, office supplies, dating agency and fashion.

The business then established its own processes and rules. The employees established only two company rules:

- English must be spoken at all times
- An employee must phone in if they are absent from work.

Employees who failed to observe these mandates were fired and had two options: to contest the dismissal in the Industrial Relations Commission and/or present themselves for retraining to Dave and Ed's Employment Agency.

## **The Outcomes**

Initially students found it difficult to adapt to this style of learning. This trend has been reflected in every year of operation suggesting that there is an initial cultural barrier that must be overcome. However, those employees entrusted with managerial roles create sufficient energy and drive to motivate the staff around them. Often employees come to a watershed where they make a decision of commitment to the company and the transformation from a dependent learner to an adult learner occurs. By the year's end this was reflected in the standard of presentations that the students delivered as their final piece of assessment. They were able to talk clearly and confidently without notes on a business topic. This had not occurred previously. In the interview sessions with each student, the majority of students acknowledged the change that they had experienced as a result of their preparation. In the appendix the perspectives of one representative student is presented.

Some of the highlights of the year's operations was observing students interact with the business community, develop an e-commerce website, negotiate with Denise Quinn, the Queensland Speaker of the Year to launch the company, the production of a high quality business magazine, conducting overseas trading and being able to communicate with confidence in both a written and spoken format at a level that was unprecedented. Their essay responses in the final exam were of a standard well above that demonstrated in the past and exhibited a depth of understanding that past students had not reached. Students expressed deep sadness about leaving UGR.

In the first year it was determined that the one hour sessions were not conducive to the experiential learning so time table changes were made so that there was a one hour lecture and a one three hour slot. This was a more effective means of programming. The assessment was felt to no longer be an adequate means of assessing the new programme. An online student journal was implemented and student's involvement in UGR was formally assessed. The two examinations were retained and the end of the year presentation. Assessment was designed to be developmental rather than linear allowing students to adopt a learning approach to achieving competency. These changes were found to support the experiential nature of the program.

The greatest difficulty has been persuading those educational practitioners who are proponents of structured teacher-directed that learning is occurring in what appears at times to be a chaotic environment. They find it difficult to comprehend the evolutionary process of learning where student development is often exponential rather than linear. The fluidity of action, the high level of communication and the lack of structure that occurs within the learning environment is often frightening to a teacher that is autocratic in their approach. This tends to support Ng and Smith's (2004) contention that resistance is not to be found primarily with the student but with the teacher.

In the years that followed, students increased their interaction and communication with others and the corporate sector growing the business. They produced a company song and hosted business clients in the corporate box at Queensland Cricket. The culmination was being asked to organise an International Trade Fair in 2006 that involved practice firms from all around Australia. Every intake assesses the value of the learning programme on a five point Likert scale and the scores average 4.3 consistently.

## **Conclusion:**

The movement to a virtual learning environment has improved the communication, interaction, confidence, understanding and knowledge of the international business students. Initially students find it difficult to make the transition from a structured learning environment to the experiential environment. However, once the transition is made the Asian students, as do all international students, embrace the experience. Many return to enquire how the business is going; some remain on the Board, and all remark how the experience was transformational. They express gratitude for the experiences in the virtual company that have helped them

find relevance in the business subjects that they are studying at university. They miss the experience passionately.

It is clear that the greatest barrier to making a creative learning environment is not resident within the cultural conditioning of the individual. This can be transformed. Rather the barriers lie in the educational structures, mental paradigms and barriers that educators construct. It only takes the first step to begin the journey of a thousand miles. Although the journey is not for the faint-hearted, the rewards and benefits that are reaped along the way far outweigh the predictable resistance to change that one encounters along the way.

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## **Appendix: Opening Speech at International Trade Fair from UGR CEO Nasser Fakhro**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My name is Nasser Fakhro and I am currently the CEO of Universal Global Resources. On behalf of my company, I would like to welcome you to the International Trade Fair. It is a privilege for Universal Global Resources to be hosting such an event where business students are provided with the opportunity to practice in a virtual environment while gaining experience of the real world. Universal Global Resources is a virtual business, its set-up and structure reflect ones of a real business, it has the same responsibilities, interactions, and issues that any business would face. The concept of a virtual business is initially difficult for many people to understand, but the fact is, it works! It's a different approach and method of learning; it is more of an experience than it being an educational program.

We, Universal Global Resources, are the biggest practice firm in Australia. It is divided into four divisions which are Office Supplies, E-Magazine, Dating Agency, and Fashion where each division is in charge of their own line of products. Office Supply provides a range of products for the workplace to make life easier for fellow customers. E-Magazine is an online Magazine that covers topics that reflect a wide range of areas contributing to views on current issues. The Dating Agency is an online dating network which aims to get people closer together through activities and services. And finally the Fashion division creates fashion merchandise and manages an online fashion magazine.

Universal Global Resources is made up of a team of 350 business management students, coming from different countries and ethnic groups from around the world. The employees are completely in charge and fully involved in all operations and procedures of the company. The company was initially set up and structured by students, where each group of employees would contribute their skills, expertise and knowledge, leaving behind their legacy resulting in the company's progress, development and growth. Every 3 months, a new group of students is inducted into the company making it a total of 4 different groups each year. All students go through an interview and training process that is organized and conducted by current staff members of the company. To successfully create a business simulation, each student is given a specific position within a department along with its responsibilities based on each individual's ability. There are numerous positions and departments that operate within Universal Global Resources such as Public Relations, Human Resources, Sales and Marketing and Finance just to name a few; and positions may vary from managers, assistants, receptionists, or members of the Board of Directors.

After their training process, students are then left with the responsibility to manage their departments and direct their team with tasks of creating and selling their own line of products by applying marketing, management, and sales strategies and principles. Every employee is important regardless of where they fit into the organizational structure where each employee is valued and appreciated for their contribution and efforts. The company is simply the product of the effort, contribution and devotion of more than 350 employees from different nationalities, backgrounds, and views. Universal Global Resources is diverse, and different from any other practice firm in Australia because of its multi-cultural mix and its numerous and constantly changing staff members. In regard to this diversity, we, the employees of Universal Global Resources are constantly faced with different and complicated issues that would challenge our performance and would serve as a test to our ability. And we are responsible with dealing and solving these issues that may relate to motivation, cross-cultural communication, attendance, profit margins, negotiation, marketing and technology.

In order to function and operate, we had to learn how to deal with people from different cultures, whether they were internally or externally involved. We had to learn to overcome cultural stereotypes about different ethnic groups and work as individuals and teams to achieve successful trading and prepare ourselves for organizing events such as this International Trade Fair. Having an insight into how a business functions and operates is one of the minor lessons to be learned from a business simulation. Greater lessons are to be used and utilized such as communication, management and leadership. One of the main lessons learned in this business simulation is the importance of communication where without it, we simply achieve nothing. Learning these tools help us to take control of situations and to guide ourselves towards certain goals, and having the ability to choose the appropriate direction to take. Using business management tools, such as time management, gives us the ability to recognize our priorities and organize our schedule and time. Making

decisions and aiming for the better and creating a plan to reach this goal. Inspiring and motivating ourselves to work harder and better. And most importantly, to appreciate and celebrate our achievements and accomplishments regardless of how small or big they might be.

Universal Global Resources is more than a business simulation, it's an experience, a reflection of reality where it identifies issues and events that we as individuals, might come across in the future. It prepares, and provides us with a stronger ability to handle and get familiar with such events. The learning outcomes vary from one student to another where each student learns from this experience and takes away something different from it. Business simulations are practical proof that students gain abilities and practice skills that are valuable in daily life. As individuals, we have learnt much about ourselves, our strengths, our weaknesses and limitations. What we enjoy, what motivates us and the self-confidence to attempt new things. But more importantly, we realized the possibility of what we can be.

Thank you.