

INCORPORATING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE INTO THE PREPARATION AND DELIVERY OF INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL COURSES

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Abstract

This paper suggests that training and practice in emotional intelligence (EI) can improve student learning and group dynamics during international travel courses. There are stresses, uncertainties, and fears inherent in this type of international travel. There are also inevitable conflicts that occur when a group of virtual strangers (i.e., the course participants) travel together. Based in part on our experience of leading MBA course travel to China, we suggest that awareness of, and training in EI can be an important tool for maximizing student equanimity and learning. Furthermore, this experience gives students an excellent training ground to practice and synthesize this set of competencies into their professional and personal lives.

I. INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, the international travel course has gained in value and popularity for students of business in the United States (Institute for International Education. (1999)). The obvious reason for this is that business opportunities are increasingly global and require some level of understanding of other cultures and their business practices. Other reasons include the opportunity to gain first-hand foreign experience, to build resumes, faculty interest in overseas opportunities, employer willingness to fund some or all of the cost of course travel, and student demand for variety and interest in their graduate degree programs.

As travel courses have proliferated, so have suggestions for improving the travel course experience in terms of pedagogy, student satisfaction and learning level, and group dynamics (e.g., Nelson & Ornstein, in press; Porth, 1997). Knowledge of economics, history, political process, law, business structure and opportunity, and national culture can all be argued to be relevant for effective learning. Certainly these topics represent useful and necessary *content* to prepare for the travel course experience. However, these areas neglect the *process* of travel. This process involves necessary pre-trip preparations (e.g., passports/visa, inoculations, arranging time off from work) the travel experience (e.g., transportation, logistical arrangements, site visits, class interaction), and the post-travel course completion phase (e.g., written reports, wrap-up meeting(s)).

Perhaps, not surprisingly, we found in preparing and leading MBA student trips to China that the preparation for, and experience of this type of unknown is inherently stressful and therefore highly emotional for most students. Particularly when students have not traveled extensively before, and given that travel courses are now reaching outside of the more familiar cultural and geographic territory of Western Europe, there has been an increase in uncertainty

and complexity for course participants. Determining which injections are needed prior to travel, what type and amount of currency to carry, how to cope with language differences, how to interact with fellow travelers, which airlines safety records to seek/avoid and a myriad of other details can easily obscure the purpose of the international travel course. Additionally, fears (rational and irrational) of disease, unusual foods, getting lost, injury, lack of privacy, political uprisings, etc., while on-site can block students from learning all that they might. At the group level, issues inevitably arise when numbers of people, particularly virtual strangers (i.e., the course participants), travel together for long times and distances. Group dynamics can be expected to play themselves out in positive and negative fashion. If the travel opportunity is to be maximized, process distractions need to be attended to.

To address these issues of process, we suggest that travel course leaders include advanced preparation and travel practice in the competencies of emotional intelligence. We believe that while traveling, students have an excellent opportunity to learn and exercise this new set of competencies that will enhance their trip while delivering long term value in their personal and professional lives.

II. EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE: THEORY AND BENEFITS

Simply stated, emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize, regulate, and control one's emotions to most effectively interact with others (Goleman, 1995, 1998). This concept is predicated on the understanding that emotions (i.e., feelings) are the driving force of motivation and that a poor understanding and/or control of one's feelings may result in undesirable interactions with others and the blocking of valuable inputs that cannot be fully attended to when emotions are heightened.

The phrase "emotional intelligence" was first introduced by Salovey and Mayer (1990) to identify a constellation of intra- and interpersonal competencies. The EI construct was popularized by Daniel Goleman's bestselling book of the same name in 1995 (Goleman, 1995). Reporting on the entire array of literature purporting to examine EI, Goleman identified 5 distinctive EI competencies.

Scholars of EI agree that the bedrock competency underlying all the others is self-awareness (see e.g., Salovey and Mayer, 1990; Cooper & Sawaf, 1996; Sosik & Megerian, 1999, Goleman, 1995, 1998). People adept at self-awareness recognize their emotions, their genesis, and the potential outcome of their state of feeling. For example, the student with a high degree of self-awareness might recognize that she feels very anxious about leaving her family for a 2-week travel course to another continent. She recognizes that her anxiety is likely to make her "snap" at her classmates. Preventing that behavior, or apologizing for it when it occurs, will decrease the likelihood that her colleagues will ostracize her. Conversely, the self-unaware does not recognize that he is feeling apprehensive about the upcoming 20-hour airplane flight and therefore neither recognizes the ways in which he withdraws from his classmates nor notices their disturbed response to his behavior.

The second competency is self-regulation, the ability to monitor and control one's emotional outbursts. This is not the same as having no emotions--it refers to one's ability to show emotions appropriately. The student with high self-control, for example, can put aside his frustrations while waiting at immigration whereas the student with poor self-control starts to cry or worse yet, yells at immigration officials!

The third competency, also critical for international travel, is self-motivation. This refers to

a person's ability to face problems and defeats and to carry on in pursuit of his/her goal. For instance, the international student studying in the U.S. who realizes 4 days prior to travel that her passport has expired needs a great deal of perseverance to contact the various consular/embassy officials necessary to expedite a renewed passport in a very hasty manner. Conversely, a student with limited ability to face challenges may "give up" during the travel course and demand to return home early. This outcome could be very costly in terms of money, time, and reputation for the student, fellow participants, the course, and the institution.

Whereas the first 3 competencies are intrapersonal, the fourth and fifth are interpersonal in nature. The fourth, empathy, deals expressly with the ability to listen and understand another's emotional reactions--be they verbal or non-verbal. The highly empathic student may note the look of consternation on the face of her host when she unknowingly commits a cultural faux pas. Based on her recognition she might then try to find out what she did wrong, apologize, and change her behavior in the future. The traveler with low empathy is unlikely to detect the different tones and inflections of voice that convey messages in a culture other than his own.

The last competency, titled social skills, encompasses abilities such as collaboration, communication, and cooperation. The socially skilled person uses humor at appropriate times to break tension and recognizes that when part of a group, his preferences may have to be subordinated to the greater good. On the other hand, the less socially skilled person is uncomfortable with others and telegraphs this discomfort to hosts and fellow students alike (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995).

Although EI does not expressly deal with the issue of stress, Goleman has said that, "stress makes you stupid" (Goleman, 1998). In a similar vein, famed football coach Vince Lombardi said that "fatigue makes cowards of us all" (cited in Cooper and Sawaf, 1996, p. 27). What these comments have in common is that circumstances in which emotions are heightened are likely to result in outcomes (i.e., behaviors) that are not otherwise desirable. We can all think of examples (professional and otherwise) when our emotions "got the better of us" and we did or said something that we later regretted. We believe that some "regrets" can be avoided with the incorporation of EI training into international travel courses. Furthermore, we believe that the benefits of EI training will accrue to four distinct, yet overlapping constituencies. These are the individual travelers (i.e., students and professor), the international travel course, the group of student travelers, and the sponsoring institution.

III. SUGGESTIONS FOR INCORPORATING EI INTO THE PLANNING AND DELIVERY OF INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL COURSES

Ongoing Institutional

- Build and maintain an institutional understanding of emotional intelligence training for international travelers. Share feedback from students who have used the curriculum with administrators. Share material with a broad faculty base whether they are travel leaders or not (most likely professors of organizational behavior will be most receptive).
- Ask trip leaders to routinely integrate EI training into their course plans. An EI lesson plan could be generically prepared for all faculty leading travel courses or otherwise.
- Identify EI experts on your faculty and/or staff and broadcast their talents. Extant trip leaders may not be familiar with EI concepts and may need to be trained. If EI work is deemed valuable, but trip leaders are not interested or able to train students themselves, facilitators can be brought into the class to do the work pre-travel.

Course Pre-Travel

- Increase student awareness of the concepts and value of EI. Awareness is the precursor to all change in much the same way that it is the underlying competency of EI. By increasing awareness of the subject, participants in the international travel course will recognize the legitimacy of their feelings and the fact that the ways in which they manage their feelings can have both positive and negative impacts on themselves and on their group. Awareness can be increased through instructor lecture, assigned readings, role-playing, discussion, and/or videotapes.
- Trip leaders should explicitly determine their role in EI training and practice. To exhibit leadership in this regard, the professor need not be professionally trained but must be sensitive to the experiences of others.
- Identify and discuss with the group in advance the types of emotional situations that are likely to occur. Let students know how the culture to be visited varies from their own. Give them a reliable itinerary as early as possible so that they can strategize their journey. Make specific recommendations on EI practices to include making certain practices, e.g., journal writing, a required course component.
- Plan a process for dealing with emotional moments in real time. Pose ‘what if’ scenarios with students and have them develop ideas about appropriate responses.
- Have students draw up a joint statement of responsibility outlining appropriate behaviors. If the trip leader is not involved in this task they will avoid being placed in a constant watchdog role because the group has the tools to become more self-monitoring.

Course Travel

- Trip leaders have an EI role to play. From a pedagogical perspective the manner in which the leaders handle decision-making, communication, and their personal emotional responses serves as a powerful model for their students’ learning (Kouzes & Posner, 1990). Trip leaders should expect that students will look to them for emotional as well as practical guidance when the going gets tough.
- Schedule routine discussion times for EI issues. Pick a time when the group is relatively fresh, together, and relaxed. Perhaps breakfast before the pressures of the day have begun. Establish early on what topics/issues are “fair game” and what are “off base” for discussion. Try to keep personal feedback lighthearted.
- Use EI at crisis moments. When the bus breaks down, tempers flare, the unexpected and unpleasant happens, remind participants that the EI tools are available to be exercised.

Post Travel

- Schedule a de-briefing get together *before* you travel. This lets everyone know there will be a chance for the group to reflect, sort out, and review tumultuous, happy, and difficult (i.e., emotional) events. The group will hopefully be able to resolve any differences among themselves and leave the group experience with fond memories and gratitude to the institution for the experiences gained.

- Exercise left over emotions by talking to family and friends. Use reflection time to better understand how self-awareness, self regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills can be used to boost personal performance.

IV. TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR EI AWARENESS WHILE TRAVELING

1. **Conduct energy, openness, and enthusiasm assessments.** Ask yourself and others at regular and crucial times to assess and share levels of these qualities (from Cooper & Sawaf, 1996).
2. **Hold anger reactions until tomorrow.** Sometimes it's best to keep feelings to ourselves – at least in the short term. Understand how the pressures of travel can heighten emotions; remember that these are most likely time limited relationships. Think through how reactions to anger should be expressed – or not expressed – for yourself and others.
3. **Dedicate specified times in the itinerary for group discussion on process.** There is so much to do. We will build in specific times when the group will assess how things are going. Group members will have the opportunity to make suggestions, air concerns. Improvements – in itinerary and mood – may follow.
4. **Specify personal goals for the course before traveling.** Part of the pre-trip EI preparation is for each traveler to specify their personal goals for the trip – to themselves and to others. This gives everyone good information about fellow travelers and a more accurate base on which to assess people's choices and attitudes during the trip.
5. **Consider the trip's pacing.** There's so much to do and so little time! But remember to rest and build in some alone time on a regular basis to allow self-awareness to surface.
6. **Write a journal.** Writing is a tool that can help surface feelings and ideas about how to manage them. Keeping a journal can serve as a practice and reminder of the physical and emotional journey you are taking.
7. **Be wary of the results of alcohol consumption.** Often traveling adults who don't know each other well socialize with alcohol. Realize that when tired, stressed, and in unfamiliar surroundings, drinking may depress your ability to exercise EI competencies.
8. **Work to connect with each fellow traveler.** Avoid splitting yourself off from the group with one or two special friends. This would reduce your resources and limits your future options. It also can undermine the group process.
9. **Adopt a Live and Let Live philosophy.** Your engagement with your fellow travelers, while intense, is time limited. Try to shrug off others' idiosyncrasies if they don't overtly intrude on your experience.
10. **Schedule a trip de-briefing session before traveling.** Everyone should know that the group will gather on return to review the trip, settle outstanding issues, and share improvement ideas for the next course. This gives participants the opportunity to self-regulate and delay working out some problems until return. Also, we'll assess the EI process. How can skills learned by applied in daily life?

V. CONCLUSION

Anyone who has played a part in planning or leading an international student travel course knows just how much work it is. There is abundant preparation, still much remains unknown until it is experienced. Group dynamics are initially unpredictable, and crises are inevitable. In our experience, training and practice in emotional intelligence gives all participants a means to

cope and flourish under these trying but exhilarating circumstances.

Training in emotional self-monitoring and managing not only improves the travel experience, but gives students on-the-ground practice in integrating this set of skills into their professional and personal lives. With both content and process oriented coursework, students can maximize the benefits of this learning experience. In addition the travel course, and the sponsoring institution will enjoy curriculum success and reputation benefits that may be far reaching.

VI. REFERENCES

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