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Applying continuous improvement to teaching in another culture

Frederick W. Lindahl^{a,b,*}, Russell Fanelli^c

^a*The George Washington University, 710 21st Street, NW, Washington, DC 20052, USA*

^b*Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

^c*Western New England College, 1215 Wilbraham Road, Springfield, MA 01119, USA*

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Abstract

As international business programs proliferate, the mixing of many cultures in the classroom creates new teaching challenges. This paper reports on how an American accounting professor coped with cultural differences at INSEAD in France. Student evaluations for the first course taught at INSEAD revealed a variety of problems that the professor tried to resolve by applying the principles of continuous improvement in the next course he taught. Confronting the students directly with the problem, enlisting their aid in improving the course, and eliciting specific feedback all combined to substantially raise the level of student satisfaction. The principles applied in this intervention are broadly applicable to college professors, not only those working with “international” students.

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1. Introduction

Effective teaching in different cultures is becoming an increasingly salient issue as international business schools develop. Many prominent European schools structure curricula and programs to attract students from outside the host country, thereby creating unique and beneficial learning environments. This paper relates a personal experience in an international teaching setting in which the Deming–Shewhart improvement model was used successfully to resolve instructional problems that were identified on student evaluations for the first accounting course (Langley,

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-202-994-5639; fax: +1-202-994-5164.

E-mail addresses: lindahl@gwu.edu (F.W. Lindahl), rfanelli@wnec.edu (R. Fanelli).

Nolan, & Nolan, 1992). The paper also discusses specific problems that arose as a result of cultural differences and how principles of continuous improvement were used to identify, implement, and manage changes.¹

The situation described here is one in which an American business professor, the first author, taught for one sabbatical year at INSEAD. The same course was taught twice, once in the fall term and again in the spring term that followed. The course had been presented successfully many times at two American business schools (George Washington University and Duke University), but when this course was transplanted from the United States to an international business school in France (INSEAD), an abrupt drop in student satisfaction occurred. There were no changes in the course delivery—the same textbook, agenda, and materials were used, the course was conducted in English, and the case method was extensively employed. While many of the typical explanations for teaching difficulty were absent in this setting, cultural differences between the American and international students and environments were significant. It became apparent that the international students at INSEAD possessed a different set of expectations from those of the American students the instructor had taught at GWU and Duke. The challenge for the instructor was to identify those differences and make positive changes to accommodate the international students.

Although such an experience is considered common among faculty teaching for the first time in a European international business school, the path to a solution is normally to use end-of-course evaluations in order to make incremental adjustments, gradually adapting to the different student expectations and concerns. In this case, however, a more aggressive approach was taken. Students were informed of the problem and their help was solicited in working with the instructor toward a resolution. The results were dramatic and immediate. This paper explains the process and suggests that these methods may be helpful to other faculty moving from one culture to another, perhaps even from one school to another one with a similar though not identical culture.²

2. Implementing a process for continuous improvement

After experiencing poor student satisfaction with the first course taught at INSEAD, the instructor implemented a process to identify changes that would yield positive, measurable gains within the second course. To accomplish this, the instructor applied the Deming–Shewhart Plan–Do–Study–Act model (PDSA) at the beginning of the second course. PDSA is an improvement cycle developed by W. Edwards Deming and Walter Shewhart; it begins with a planning phase and ends

¹ Another application of continuous improvement methods in the classroom is Lindahl et al., (1995).

² It is useful to distinguish between “instructor development” and “in-class improvement” (Cohen & Mays, 1981). Instructor development is the long-term improvement in teaching abilities; in-class improvement addresses concerns that arise in the context of a particular class of students. This report is in the latter category of teaching challenges.

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