# Studying MBA Abroad: Integrating Theory with Practice

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**Abstract**

This paper is a reflection on my own experience learning-by-doing while I was an international student studying on an MBA programme in the UK. It adopts Gibbs' reflective model in an attempt to present a clear vision of my experience of engaging in two consultancy projects as part of the MBA programme. This article also attempts to review the consulting year experience against the Code of Professional Conduct and Practice. It shows how the Code influenced and shaped my approach and how I dealt with any conflicts with the Code.
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**Introduction**

Reflecting on our learning experience is not only about being aware of our aptitude and ability. Going beyond this, it helps us acknowledge our strengths and weaknesses, understand how we should approach certain experiences differently, and realise what we have learned. At the beginning of this paper I would like to share Biggs and Tang's (2007, pp.43) an views on reflection:

> When you stand in front of a mirror what you see is your reflection, what you are at the time. Transformative reflection is rather like the mirror in Snow White: it tells you what you might become. This mirror uses theory to enable the transformation from the unsatisfactory what-is to the more effective what-might-be.

In order to provide a comprehensive reflection on my experience, I have adopted Gibbs' model illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Gibbs' Reflective Cycle. Source: Adapted from Gibbs, G., 1988.

**Description: From theory to practice**

During the twelve months of my MBA study at UEA, I was required to conduct two different consultancy projects that provided advice and expertise not only to clients but also to consultants. These two consultancy projects provided knowledge about conducting professional projects by utilising advisory tools. I learned how to apply consultancy tools in business consulting and steer consultancy skills to benefit the client. Furthermore, I understood that integrity, honesty and trust, among other factors, help improve consultancy quality and client satisfaction (Sadler, 2001), making business consulting a valuable resource that plays a vital role in developing businesses and improving an organisation's performance environment (Sadler, 2001).

This twelve-month journey was also one of personal development in terms of achieving the high standards required in professional consultancy. As business consulting has become crucial for many organisations, particularly due to the downturn in the economy, the consultant has the opportunity to shape a firm's future and find solutions for its problems (Biech, 2007). The Code of Professional Conduct and Practice established by the Institute of Consulting (IC) enabled me to understand how to be a team player in forging strong bonds with clients, and providing a unique service with excellent outcomes.

**Feelings: First steps into real business**

Working with people in the real business world and delivering a consultancy report was a new experience for me. Two consultancy projects had to be implemented as a requirement to complete the MBA. This section presents my impressions during my work on the two consultancy projects and highlights what went well and what did not. In addition, it serves to describe my contribution to these projects and the lessons that I learned from this endeavour.

The first consultancy project posed two big challenges. The first was the language barrier. Being a non-native English speaker had a huge impact on my confidence and self-esteem. On several occasions I was embarrassed and upset by my own inability to clearly express my opinions before the client or the group. I found myself lost in some conversations and unable to fully participate in discussions. Later, I discovered that I was not alone in this as other team members who were not native speakers of English also had the same problem. One of the things that I tried to improve my involvement in discussions and enhance the level of my language proficiency was through increasing my knowledge about the firm and its industry field. For example, the company from the first project was providing franchise consulting services, and therefore, I started reading about franchising industry in order to broaden my knowledge about the franchising industry and to involve actively in the conversation during the meetings with the client.

Another challenge was my level of knowledge about the client's business. For both consultancy projects, I found during the first meeting with the client that project objectives seemed vague and unclear to the team, owing to lack of prior knowledge or experience in the client's specific sector. Kubr (2002) states that the consultant should be prepared for the initial meeting by collecting essential orientation information about the client, including the environment and the problems existing in the sector of activity concerned. Therefore, as a member of the team, I started to improve my knowledge about the industry from the sources provided by the client.

**Evaluation: A consultant in student attire**

As the first consultancy project was a new experience for me, I found myself struggling to get the best out of it. As I work better alone, I found team work ultimately affected my contribution. However, I did everything I could to take advantage of this project. For example, I read articles and other sources to increase my knowledge about the nature of the client's business. I also decided to use my skills in research and design and utilise them to support the team.

I also found this project a good opportunity for me to work closely in a business context, focusing on how to be professional in presenting consultancy skills through an understanding of organisational cultural behaviour and business operations (Kefela, 2010). I also learned how to bring in fresh ideas, particularly during meetings with the client. For example, the core business of the client from the first project was to provide consulting services for companies based in franchising industries. Therefore, I shared with the client some consulting tools and new approaches that I learned from the MBA Consulting course. This shared knowledge between academia and businesses could drive the business by widening the client's scope of knowledge, particularly for small and medium businesses. Moreover, the team worked harmoniously, with no critical disputes or fruitless arguments among members**.** I believe this was a result of understanding and respecting each other's needs and points of view, which ultimately leads to compatibility between team members.

Presenting the work before the client was an important aspect as we frequently kept the client in the loop about the overall task and our findings. I thought it would be good to impress the client with an element of surprise, and suggested that we show the client selected aspects of the desk research done, and provide a comprehensive picture only on the day of the presentation. The team thus made a successful presentation which pleased the client and resulted in an invitation to dinner for the whole team. At the end of this first consultancy project, it was a great opportunity to enlighten myself about my strengths and weaknesses. I felt sure that I would be able to contribute much more to the next project as this one helped me to become a more active and aware learner.

Thus the second consultancy project gave me another opportunity to venture into a new business context and improve my knowledge and skills, while implementing the lessons I learned from the first project. I found myself feeling more confident and I was able to make different contributions by coming up with new ideas, discussing my thoughts and also arguing my side when necessary. From the beginning of this project, I made up my mind to be positive and take part in each group discussion. Thus, I found myself participating fully and more rewardingly in all aspects of this project in comparison with the previous one.

With respect to the project's success factors, I found that establishing appropriate objectives for every stage of the project and tracking them to ensure they were achieved was helpful in developing a strategy for mitigating unexpected setbacks. The team used the Seven Cs tool (Figure 2) to support the project, from the first meeting with the client to the closure of the project. This framework describes different stages within the project lifecycle, and also

illustrates how the overall process of a consultancy project should be carried out and how a team might cope with difficult situations.
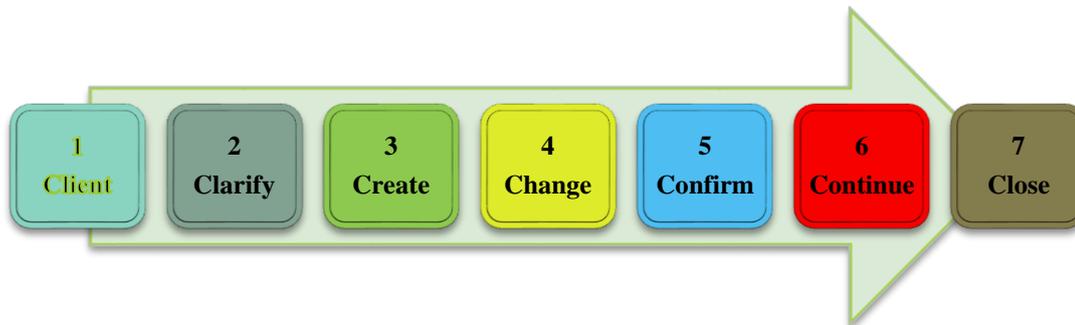


Figure 2: Seven Cs framework. Source: Adopted from Cope, M., 2003.

The following stages are examples of how the team dealt with the Seven Cs tool in the first consultancy project.

*Client:* Success of the consultancy project depends on the relationship between client and the consultancy team, and its support to achieve the objectives of the project (Cope, 2003). When the team submitted the proposal of the project to the client, they were very impressed with it, particularly the details which explained our clear mechanism for carrying out the project. The reaction of the managing director was that this proposal gave him "a good first impression".

*Clarify:* The team showed their understanding of the project's objectives and the client's needs by submitting a detailed proposal of all aspects of the project.

*Create:* The team decided to conduct an online survey using SurveyMonkey. Along the way, the team made calls and hold phone interviews. In addition, the team was successful in supporting the report with academic research, news articles and analytical tools and models. All these processes pleased the client, particularly receiving good outcomes of the report.

*Change:* The problem of low response rate forced the team to take immediate action to resolve the issue by expanding the channels of communication with the target participants. These factors underpinned the project process and helped the team explain the effect of an inadequate database, suggesting that details should be updated for any future surveys they might conduct.

*Confirm:* The team proposed to the client to conduct a survey through SurveyMonkey, and explained the anticipated costs of using the tool as well as the expected period using this

service. The client then agreed to support the team in taking the online approach. The client also confirmed that the questionnaire was designed correctly, and consisted of quantitative and qualitative aspects.

*Continue:* The team was keen to provide the client with a clear project to be used in the future, with several business tools and models that can also assist them. We aimed to add new value to their business to be continued in the future.

*Close:* The team was able to close this project down and please the client with a comprehensive study, despite the lack of responses. Our desire was to handle this project professionally and deliver the appropriate outcomes. The project ended with an invitation from the client for a meal with the team, which was an expression of their satisfaction with the findings from the survey.

I personally found that using a clear model to steer the project along the right track is very important to ensure its success. For example, the consultancy project was dependent on the relationship between client and the consultancy team, to achieve the objectives (Cope, 2003). I remember how impressed our client was during the submission of the project proposal, particularly with regard to the details which explained our clear mechanisms for implementing the project.

Participation in a real business context comes with several challenges and obstacles that may affect the timeline of the project. Perhaps one of the main obstacles we met, as a group, during the consultancy project was there was no direct contact with the actual client in order to obtain information to take the work to the next level. For example, in the second consultancy project which dealt with entrepreneurship issues, the team struggled to understand the client's main objectives, and found that the contact person was not clear about the needs of the chairman. However, to overcome this obstacle, the team sought to draw up several hypotheses in order to lead us to ask the right questions and perform the correct analyses for our objectives (Rasiel and Friga, 2002). It is difficult to work in a new environment with a lack of information and experience. Furthermore, as a student, I may have used some terms commonly used in academic contexts, such as 'critical evaluation', which, in the client's view, are inappropriate in a business report.

## Analysis: How the theory influenced my practice?

The MBA course aims to develop managerial skills for students to enable them to deal with the real business environment. I personally believe that theory without practice learned in lectures

may not support MBA students in understanding business life in the real world, as such, the Code of Professional Conduct and Practice provided by Institute of Consulting influenced my approach as an MBA student providing consultancy. Business consulting requires codes of professional conduct that govern the mechanisms of consultancy and provide high standards in the final results of a project. Sadler (2001) highlights the following basic principles that codes of professional conduct should embody:

- High  standards of service to the client;
- Independence, objectively and integrity; and
- Responsibility to the profession and to the institute.

Applying the Code of Professional Conduct and Practice to business consulting assisted me in determining how best to approach the two projects, and what actions to take. Despite each project having its own characteristics, this Code enriched my understanding and enabled me to enhance my strengths and overcome my weaknesses. Moreover, during the two team projects, I sought to use the most relevant points of the Code to shape my approaches to these projects. For instance, I appreciated that having a sense of responsibility and accountability would reflect positively on the outcomes of the project. I believe that consultants could be good ambassadors for their organisation if they surpass the expectations of stakeholders, since reputation, whether positive or negative, is associated with the name of the organisation rather than with the names of individuals. Hence, the responsibility of achieving the organisation's objectives lies more with the team than with individuals.  According to Sturdy et al. (2009), the Code of Professional Conduct illustrates the best practice a consultant needs to adopt in order to bring new knowledge into organisations and to provide high quality outcomes to the ultimate beneficiary.

I was also able to improve my own personal management practice, particularly in the first project.  I sought to strive for excellence at all times and continued to develop my management competences. Furthermore, working on these two projects was a unique opportunity to consolidate the "theoretical" and the practical in a real business context. The lesson that I learned from each project was to take into consideration not only the clients but also the need to impact on other stakeholders, such as the University, by providing excellent outcomes.  Fombrun (1996) indicates that reputation is considered an intangible asset and a source of competitive advantage; hence, as a team, it was our responsibility to deliver outstanding projects that help to enhance the competitiveness of the organisations and achieve the required objectives through the consultancy projects. Moreover, a good reputation has a

positive impact on client satisfaction and also on the client's brand image, thus adding value to their business.

Furthermore, when I applied the core competences (outlined in the code) to my personal management practice, I found it would be better to act within my level of competence and skills. When team members divide the responsibilities according to their skills it can assist them greatly in delivering a good project. Kubr (2002) believes that the consultant should possess qualities in two broad categories: intellectual abilities (e.g. dilemma analysis) and personal attributes (e.g. integrity). I agree with Kubr that, in management consulting, the consultant should possess analytical and problem-solving abilities to be able to implement projects in a professional way.

These Codes imposed on me a degree of accountability to achieve the objectives and tasks throughout the stages of the projects, irrespective of any obstacles I faced. For instance, in one of the projects there were several obstacles and challenges related to ambiguity of objectives and working under time pressure, but I got through by using the resources available in order to fulfil what was expected from me. For instance, I contributed by reading the three allocated articles and summarising them for the team, as part of our desk research. I came to understand that it is a shared responsibility to identify any problems and consider all possible solutions. From my perspective, shared responsibility is what the Code of Professional Conduct and Practice embodies in terms of helping consultants achieve the highest possible standards for clients at all times.

Furthermore, the Code emphasises the importance of effective, open communication. Throughout both projects, although I was not the team leader, I worked with the team members and sought to build trust and communicate clearly with the client. This certainly helped me to anticipate any problems and explain any unclear points. According to Kubr (2002, p. 69) "A consultant who demonstrates sincere interest, an understanding of the client's problems and concerns, and flexibility can expect the same from the client". The Code also enabled me to act independently and objectively, particularly when there were differences of opinion in the team and I needed to be objective so as to deliver the projects' aims. Another point in the Code, regarding managing others, refers to the importance of having clear team rules which can be adhered to by all team members. This helped me to deal with my colleagues, respect their opinions and give them support, particularly when under time pressure.

The Code assisted me in my adaptation to a new culture, especially as we were dealing with external clients. We showed respect to the clients' stakeholders in our communications

with them and found appropriate times to obtain the required information from them. Moreover, acting in an ethical manner, complying with the regulations of professional ethical behaviour and respecting customers, is an essential part of strengthening the consultant's relationship with the client and with any other relevant parties (Higgs-Kleyn & Kapelianis, 1999).

**Conclusion**

Working in the field of business consulting through the various stages involved in the two above-mentioned projects has given me experience that will help me in my future professional life. I have had the opportunity to develop my competence in management consultancy and also my understanding of how to deal with clients professionally. Furthermore, I learned how to plan, establish the foundations of consulting work, develop a marketing plan, build an effective team, and hone managerial and other skills that are summarised in much of the theory of the MBA course at UEA. Besides, I realised that understanding more about the topic helped me make a better contribution to the project. However, if I had had the opportunity to study for the MBA in my native language, this would perhaps have improved my learning capacity, which would have positively affected my understanding of, and engagement in, the business context. Moreover, if I had had a chance to improve my competence in management consulting and get to know more about the UK business environment, I would have involved in a part-time job while doing the English course before the commencement of the MBA course and become familiar with the business process.

As my aim of this report is to transfer the experience that I gained in my MBA studies to my future job, it is important keep in touch with my MBA colleagues who are interested in, or working in, the consultancy field and exchange information and experience. In addition, I will subscribe to magazines and periodicals related to consultancy work. Finally, it is important to carry out research and studies concerned with management and development issues in my home country, Saudi Arabia. I will make this a goal for my learning and carrying out research in the consultancy field.

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