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Communication Matters: Developing a Strategic Communication Plan for Promoting Internationalization and Global Learning within an Institution

Abstract

Implementing internationalization is, at its core, a matter of communication. This paper explores the communication that is needed to develop and implement a comprehensive, contextually-specific internationalization plan. Specifically, it utilizes a model of strategic communication planning to illustrate the communicative processes an institution could employ in its efforts towards institutionalization. The common elements of a Strategic Communication Plan (SCP) are an intentional assessment and integration of goals, context, audiences, and messages. This paper explores each of these elements within the context of internationalizing education. Specific examples are provided to illustrate the SCP in action; however, the goal is not to provide a model of what internationalization should look like but rather to provide a tool that can be utilized to guide development of an internationalization strategy tailored to the needs and resources of colleges or universities at the local level.

Keywords

Strategic Communication Plan, internationalizing curriculum, global learning outcomes

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Internationalization has become a key theme in higher education, as evidenced by this special issue dedicated to internationalization of curricula in the German context. This surge in interest in internationalization is not surprising, given the demonstrated value of global learning outcomes for students, institutions, and society at large. According to the Association for International Educators, “Internationalization can ultimately leverage the collective assets of the higher education sector to create a new generation of global citizens capable of advancing social, and economic development for all” (NAFSA, 2008, p. 3) These claims about the value of internationalization are supported by employer surveys that consistently place competencies related to global learning at the top of lists of what employers are seeking in college-educated employees. In a 2015 survey conducted for the American Association of Colleges and Universities, employers were asked to identify the “most important college learning outcomes.” Topping the list was the ability to “solve problems with people whose views are different from their own,” with other global learning related competencies, such as intercultural skills, an understanding of other societies and cultures, and the ability to work in diverse teams, included in the top ten (HART, 2015). Employers in the U.S. are not the only ones to acknowledge the importance of these skills. The Bildung 2030 report published by the Bundesvereinigung der Deutschen Arbeitgeberverbände (BDA, 2017) similarly emphasizes the need for higher education to promote international experiences and foster competencies associated with global citizenship in learners. The evidence for internationalization is strong, leading HUDZIK (2011) to conclude that internationalization “is an institutional imperative, not just a desirable possibility” (p. 6).

Indeed, a compelling case can be made for internationalizing curricula, and while there is consensus about the need for internationalization, there is much less agreement about how to go about doing it. Successful internationalization initiatives have taken many forms, ranging from strategic partnerships to the development of international co-curricular activities to more traditional study abroad programs. Unfortunately, internationalization efforts have often been derailed by disagreements over what internationalization is and how it should be operationalized. KAHN and AGNEW (2015) propose that “the internationalization of higher educa-

tion need not be stalled due to conflicting goals, idiosyncratic values, or legacies of tradition. Rather, internationalization would benefit from an approach that recognizes the many meanings and motivations and builds bridges to work through the gaps between them” (p. 9). Some scholars have taken this claim a step further, suggesting that the one-size-fits-all approach to internationalization is both impossible and undesirable because the appropriateness of any particular internationalization effort is dependent upon a variety of contextual factors, including the academic discipline, socio-political context, institutional culture, and type of university. For example, HUDZIK (2011) argues, “Varying missions and starting points will produce uniquely tailored responses to the challenges and opportunities of internationalization and globalization” (p. 10).

DE WIT (2002) focuses specifically on the European context, highlighting the need for internationalization efforts to be adapted to the individual situation. He claims, “It is important to emphasize that it is extremely difficult to make generalizations in the analysis of internationalization that are valid for Europe as a whole. ...There is still a long way to go before studies on internationalization of higher education are truly able to reflect the diversity and cultural pluralism in Europe (DE WIT, 2002, p. 72). Furthermore, caution is needed when translating internationalization strategies across cultures because of contextual differences. De Wit provides a comprehensive overview of some of the differences between higher education in Europe and the U.S. that impact internationalization. He notes, for example, that internationalization in the U.S. is driven by political issues, national security and foreign policy; while in Europe, it is driven by economic competitiveness. In the U.S., internationalization is seen as part of general education, and in Europe, it tends to be situated in academic disciplines.

Given these contextual differences and the challenges of transferring internationalization practices across cultures, what can an American scholar contribute to this special issue on internationalization within the German context? In the midst of contextual and cultural differences, one thing that is universal in terms of internationalizing higher education is the need for strategic communication planning to move internationalization from an idea to a practice. Implementing internationali-

zation is, at its core, a matter of communication. This paper explores the communication that is needed to develop and implement a comprehensive, contextually-specific internationalization plan. Specifically, it utilizes a model of strategic communication planning to illustrate the communicative processes an institution could employ in its efforts towards institutionalization. I realize that it is not standard in academic writing to speak directly to the reader, but, for the remainder of this paper, I am going to take the liberty of breaking that academic-writing norm. Since this is not a scientific research paper, but rather a “workshop report” intended as a toolkit for planning and implementing internationalization strategies, I will address you as the reader and potential implementer of these strategies, whether that be redesigning one specific course to integrate an assignment that is more international in scope or revising an entire curriculum to promote internationalization.

Strategic communication planning is rooted in the assumption that social realities are co-constructed through communication. A Strategic Communication Plan (SCP) is a strategy for co-constructing the desired reality within an organization. There are many models for strategic communication (c.f., HARVARD FAMILY RESEARCH CENTER, 2001; HOVLAND, 2005), but the common elements in most of them are the intentional assessment and integration of goals, context, audiences, and messages. The SCP can be seen as a useful complement to traditional models of curriculum and course development (c.f., WOLF, 2007). While there is some overlap between existing curriculum development models and strategic communication planning, conceptualizing internationalization as a communicative process highlights the interactive elements essential to transforming internationalization from a “good idea” into an effectively realized practice. The following section explores each element of the SCP within the context of internationalizing education. Specific examples are provided to illustrate the SCP in action. The goal is not to provide a model of what internationalization should look like but rather to provide a tool you can use to move towards developing an internationalization strategy that is tailored to the needs and resources available at your own college or university, whether you are a classroom teacher or involved with curriculum at a larger, systemic level.

1 Determining Internationalization Goals

The first step in strategic planning is to determine your internationalization goals. Work with key stakeholders to determine what your university or program wants to achieve in terms of internationalizing its curriculum. Important questions to answer in these conversations are: Why do you want to internationalize? If you are successful at internationalizing your curriculum, what changes will you be able to observe? What is your time frame for achieving these goals?

As mentioned previously, there are many different models of what an internationalized curriculum can be. Perhaps your university is interested primarily in encouraging internationalizing at the course level by integrating examples and readings that provide a global perspective into individual classes or by developing course activities and assignments that offer students opportunities to interact with students internationally. One strategy utilized at my university to promote course-level internationalization is the Global Voices Speakers program². This program, run by the university's Office of International Affairs (OIA), invites international students and alumni to volunteer to share their experiences and perspectives in classrooms. Faculty complete an online form, requesting presenters who would be willing to talk with a class about a particular topic, and the OIA matches volunteer speakers with faculty requests. This program brings interactive, intercultural experiences that encourage cross-cultural dialogue and understanding into the local classroom.

While the goals of internationalization at some institutions might be to promote classroom level initiatives such as these, other institutions may prefer to integrate internationalization more programmatically. Again I offer an example from my own Department of Communication Studies. Two of the programmatic learning outcomes for undergraduates in my Department are related to global learning (i.e., students should be able to appreciate and respect individual and cultural similarities and differences, to articulate their own cultural standpoint, and adapt their commu-

² <http://international.iupui.edu/events-programs/global-voices/>

nication in diverse cultural contexts) and civic engagement (i.e., students should be able to explain the importance of communication in civic life, identify challenges facing communities and the role of communication in creating/remediating those challenges, and utilize communication to respond to challenges on the local, national and global level). The Department has made an intentional effort to integrate the attainment of these learning outcomes throughout the curriculum. In the gateway course to the major, students are required to complete a civic engagement project in which they apply the communication concepts they are learning in the classroom towards attainment of a goal defined by a community partner organization. Last time I taught this class, we partnered with a refugee services agency in the city. There had been a recent influx of refugees from Africa who were unprepared for the cold Indiana winter, and the organization asked us to coordinate a clothing drive to collect new and gently used winter clothing. The class met with refugee families, heard their stories, and then used different communication channels (interpersonal, social media, organizational) to devise strategies for sharing the refugees' stories and encouraging donations. The activity gave students an opportunity to personalize the situation of refugees in America and to engage in conversation with others—sometimes with others who were quite opposed to immigrants coming to America—about why we should help them. The goal of globalization in this gateway course is to begin to create a global mindset within the students. Throughout the curriculum, internationalization activities such as this are embedded into classes. Then, in their capstone course, students visit a major global issue (i.e., climate change, immigration) through the lens of communication as a discipline. At the end of this program, which integrates internationalization programmatically throughout the curriculum, students should be able to effectively interact and communicate interculturally, analyze and evaluate forces shaping international events, use communication to address local and global challenges, and see themselves and their cultural context within a larger global context.

Each program or institution must decide which internationalization goals are best suited to them. There is no recipe for what your international learning goals should be, but it is very helpful for your unit to have a shared definition and understanding

of global learning and the goals of your internationalization efforts. Key to the success of any program's internationalization efforts is creating a culture within the organization that understands, values, and ultimately embodies a shared model of internationalization. Spending adequate time with this first SCP step is crucial, because it is important to know where you are heading. Only then can you begin to develop a communication plan that will help you get there.

2 Analyzing the Situation

In the second step of the SCP process, you will spend time analyzing both the external and internal environments of your institution. As you analyze the external environment, ask yourself:

- Who are external groups that could profit from your internationalization? Perhaps there are local community organizations, such as the refugee services agency mentioned above, or businesses that would profit from your initiatives. These are stakeholders that you may want to include in planning, or they may be able to provide useful resources (i.e., network links, internship opportunities for students, expertise, etc.) for implementing your ideas.
- What technology is available to you? In the age of digital communication, global learning opportunities are only an email or Skype chat away. Several years ago, I was teaching a class in Organizational Communication, and to add a global dimension to the class, I partnered with a university in Russia. Each student in my class was paired with a student studying Business at the partner university in Russia, and each pair was given a case study to read and analyze. The students used email to discuss their case and prepare a case study report in which they assessed the situation presented in the case, proposed a plan of action, and analyzed how cultural differences in business communication impacted their recommendations. If I were to use this assignment now, the students would have a wider range of technolo-

gies available to facilitate their interaction, but even with very limited technology, global collaboration is highly feasible.

- What is the current political, social, and cultural landscape? How might that shape attitudes towards internationalization?

As you analyze the internal environment, the questions you will want to consider include:

- What expertise exists within your organization that could help you implement some of your internationalization ideas? In my experiences with embedding global learning into my classes, I have found valuable “expertise” at my university’s Center for Teaching and Learning. Digital Media Services also has been a useful resource, as has the International Office. You may find expertise that will help you meet your internationalization goals in the content specialties at your institution. For example, one year when the focus of my capstone class was climate change, I discovered a colleague in the School of Engineering and Technology who regularly takes a group of students to Europe to learn about environmental initiatives in Germany and France. She and her students ended up being a valuable resource in my class as we grappled with ways to communicate more effectively about climate change. You may be surprised how many resources you have right within your institution, but unless you make identifying that expertise an intentional part of your strategic communication planning, you may overlook it.
- What internal financial and technology resources are available that could support your internationalization efforts? Many universities, for example, have a global learning classroom. Find out if yours does.
- What are the values and goals of your institution with which your global learning initiatives could be aligned? Your efforts at internationalizing curriculum are likely to be more effective if you can tie your communication into a larger rhetorical vision, such as the stated priorities or mission statement of the university. The current tagline for my university is “Fulfilling the Promise,” so when I talk about benefits of internationalization, I

frame it as one of the ways in which we “fulfill the promise” we make to our students (i.e., to prepare them by helping them acquire the global learning competencies they need for success) and to our community (i.e., by educating students so that they will be prepared to respond to local, national and global challenges).

As part of the second step of strategic communication planning, most SCP templates recommend completing a SWOT analysis, which is a systematic evaluation of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. The S and W (strengths and weaknesses) are focused inward, identifying the potential within the organization that will help you meet your goals as well as the vulnerabilities that may hamper your goal attainment. The O and T (opportunities and threats) are focused outward, identifying the external resources available that will help you meet your goals as well as the dangers outside the organization that could impede your success. Within the context of internationalizing curriculum, Strengths might be all of the valuable resources within the organization, as mentioned above. Weaknesses could be a lack of awareness among faculty about what internationalization is and why it is important or the feeling that faculty do not have time to add one more thing to their already over-full workloads. Opportunities might be community resources that could be leveraged to help meet global learning outcomes for students who cannot study abroad. Threats might be political pressures on educational systems that constrain assignments and assessments in the classroom.

Having a clear sense of the context into which you are seeking to embed internationalization is a useful and necessary stage in the SCP process. The communication strategy will need to be adapted to the unique situation. For example, communicating in response to a lack of awareness about what internationalization is requires very different messaging than communicating in response to a centralized curriculum that mandates learning outcomes, assessments, or assignments for a particular class.

3 Identifying Target Audiences and Establishing Partnerships

The first two steps in the SCP process should have helped you identify many potential stakeholders. Step 3 focuses more intentionally on audience and on determining which stakeholders you need to bring into collaborative partnership to make your dream a reality. The questions that will help guide you in this third stage of the process are:

- Which audiences will be most affected by your success/failure?
- Who has influence over these audiences?
- What is the current knowledge, attitude, behavior related to global learning within members of this target audience?
- What barriers exist to their full support/participation?
- How will this audience benefit from successful internationalization? To help you answer this question, think about the characteristics of the audience. What do they care about? How do they spend their time? What makes new information credible to them? What motivates them? What sources of resistance could hamper their involvement?

4 Developing a Messaging Strategy

In some ways it is ironic that developing messages comes so late in the SCP process. However, the time spent defining goals, assessing the situation, and understanding your audiences lays a strong foundation for developing actual messages. Ideally you will want to plan communication that will likely lead to participation and buy-in, and the more you are able to create a shared rhetorical vision, adapt your messages to anticipated sources of resistance, and appeal to the known values and interests of your audience, the more successful you will be. Of course, accomplishing your goals will require more than just designing effective messaging. Communication is much more complex than that! You will want to reshape the

way your community thinks about curricular internationalization so that you can foster the commitment to the project that will lead to sustainable success. Although there are no messages that are the magic bullets for success, there are several qualities of effective messages that make a difference. Clarity and relevance will generally facilitate success. Paying attention to what constitutes credibility and using that to frame your message is also a reliably effective strategy. Some research (c.f., SCHAU, MUÑIZ & ARNOULD, 2009) suggests that there is value in naming or branding initiatives because it can help create a shared rhetorical vision, promote unity in general procedures and enhance emotional commitment. Some tools that can aid in message design are engaging faculty, administrators, and students in conversations about their understandings of internationalization and its value, surveying these audiences about internationalization, and disseminating information on internationalization from credible sources.

5 Developing an Implementation Plan

The final stage in strategic communication planning is developing an implementation plan, which should include a plan for assessing whether goals have been attained. Because the specific content of your implementation plan will be determined by your situation and the analysis completed up to this point, I can say relatively little about this stage of the SCP other than to reinforce the need for developing an assessment strategy. Build feedback loops into your implementation plan so that you have processes and structures in place to get feedback from all relevant stakeholders (i.e., students, community partners, faculty). Try to find a good balance between qualitative and quantitative indicators of goal attainment. Often “success” is measured in terms of quantity – numbers of students studying abroad, faculty publications on themes related to internationalization. These can be valid indicators of success, but assessment of qualitative success is also important.

Global learning is about creating a generation of “global citizens” with the broad perspectives needed to advance social and economic development for all. While the goals of internationalization are global, their realization can only occur at the local

level. While the implementation of global learning involves curriculum development, entrenching internationalization into the structures and processes of the university, which is essential to sustainability, requires a more comprehensive approach. As illustrated in this manuscript, the five steps of strategic communication planning – 1) communicating with key stakeholders to determine your goals related to internationalization, 2) carefully analyzing your unique context to identify weaknesses and threats that may challenge your efforts as well as strengths and opportunities that you could capitalize on, 3) establishing partnerships that will make your internationalization efforts sustainable over time, 4) developing messaging strategies for communication about internationalization with colleagues, students, administrators, politicians, and future employers, and 5) creating an implementation/assessment plan – provide a robust and useful template for internationalizing curricula on the local level.

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