

# **Cultural Metaphoric Posters as a Cross-Cultural Tool**

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*I am not an Athenian or a Greek but a Citizen of the World*

Socrates

This paper explores the use of cultural metaphor posters as a learning tool for diverse classrooms in the Master of Commerce Program at RMIT University in Australia.

## **Background**

The College of Business at RMIT University in Australia houses many postgraduate programs. The flagship program within the College of Business is the Master of Commerce. The Master of Commerce commenced in 2002 as a response to Corporate Australia and students who wished to study a postgraduate program that was flexible. Other programs in the College of Business such as: Master of Professional Accounting, Master of Finance, Master of Business Information Technology, Master of Business Logistics Management, Master of Marketing are deemed excellent programs albeit very rigid and did not allow students to have a major and a minor sequence of study.

The Master of Commerce is a 12 course program that can be completed in 1.5 years for a full time student and over 3 years for a part time student. The program consists of 2 core courses: Professional Business Practice and Business Background – Global Capabilities for the Global Workforce. The remaining 10 courses can be selected across the four schools within the college: The School of Accounting, The School of Business IT and Logistics and The School of Management. There are over 80 Postgraduate courses to select. Thus students have the ability to design their own academic program in consultation with the Program Director.

The Master of Commerce is the biggest academic program in the College of Business and attracts 200 new enrolments each semester. Apart from a large Australian cohort of students, the program attracts approximately 120 international students from around the world. Given Australia's geographical position there is a large Asian cohort of students from China, Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Taiwan, India, Malaysia, South Korea, and Indonesia

During the past 10 years RMIT International has spent a great deal of time and effort in attracting students from other parts of the world. During the past 4 years the Master of Commerce has attracted a number of students from the Middle East, predominantly from Saudi Arabia, Scandinavian students from Sweden, Denmark and Norway, European students from France, Italy, Russia, Germany and Spain, American students from USA,

Canada and Mexico. Only a very small percentage of students from South American arrive in Australia to study. At this time a few from Brazil and Colombia have been part of the Master of Commerce.

The College of Business at RMIT University views the Internationalization of the curriculum as paramount. Each semester courses are continually internationalized to meet the demands of a global learning and teaching community from over 57 different countries at RMIT University. Within the Master of Commerce the teaching is continually addressing the internationalization of the curriculum with the introduction of global case studies, international readings that are not US centric but have a more global flavour to them. Many faculty encourage the use of international references in the students lingua franca. Developing global citizens requires a global response.

The cultural metaphor poster is an assessment in the course ISYS 2412 Professional Business Practice. Professional Business Practice is the most important of the two core courses within the Master of Commerce. This is the foundation course to the Master of Commerce and was designed with the idea that students would be introduced to the concepts of: Workforce of the Future, Global Mindset, Myer Briggs, Cross Cultural Management, Inter-cultural Competence for Working Globally and Cultural Metaphors.

Culture is an aggregate of so many meanings and interpretations. For example when discussing culture one could be referring to the culture of fashion, music, dance, food, literature, customs, language, business etc. and one would not be entirely wrong.

Evia (2004) in his research, states that all cultural differences must be dealt with in a professional communication classroom to create a cross-culturally competent system of individuals working toward a common goal. Cross-cultural competence (or transcultural competence) is used in the same way as Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2002). The concept of culture being taught in a professional academic setting is given a voice in the comments made by Evia (2004) that concur with the research of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2002) and Hofstede (2005). A deep understanding of culture and its dynamics is essential in today's global workforce, as many nationalities work side by side as never before.

In order to successfully engage in global business and understand culture one must possess an understanding of the work of Hofstede (2005) Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2002), Hall (2006), Schwartz (1999), Ohmae (1999), and most importantly Gannon (2004) in this instance, as each has identified a set of concepts that differs across cultures of the world. We must understand the application of these concepts with regard to behavioural business practices when working globally and developing global capabilities.

Any postgraduate student must also be cognizant that the links between knowledge and culture are changing as everything else has changed and Rizvi and Lingard (2000) state:

The traditional links between knowledge and culture are also changing, with a greater recognition that knowledge creating and use is mediated by cultures. The changing nature of the knowledge economy involves an intricate global-local relationship. It suggests that the nature of knowledge use and innovation

demands a simultaneous engagement with local factors as well as global processes. This is so because in cultural terms, the local is now re-shaped globally, and because the idea of global is meaningless without its local references. (p. 2).

Gannon via the 24 cultural metaphors provides students with a clear vision of how to investigate cultures around the world using a metaphor. Students read Gannon and immediately identify with the various metaphors that are presented to them whether it be Opera for Italy, Wine for France, the Symphony for Germany. The metaphors bring the culture alive in the classroom and in practice.

In the context of Professional Business Practice, students are given the opportunity to explore a range of metaphors for their culture always using Gannon as their foundation. The course Professional Business Practice, as stated, attracts students from all over the globe and is extremely diverse. In the College of Business we have nicknamed the class: The United Nations. The global capabilities that students require to develop into being global citizens are paramount to the learning experience and are encouraged by the cultural diversity in the classroom.

The teaching and learning of culture commences with the work of Hofstede to Trompenaars, Hall and finally to Gannon. A framework for cultural analysis is introduced to the students. Over a period of sessions both in and out of the classroom, students are encouraged to develop cross-cultural competence by developing three pillars towards cross cultural enlightenment: 1. Awareness, 2. Knowledge, 3. Skills.

A great deal of time is spent on students being cognisant that culture shock originates from the belief that everyone is the same. All students must read about their own culture from Gannon to more clearly understand their own culture. Once this is accomplished, students are encouraged to discuss their culture in the class at an informal presentation outlining the ideas of Gannon. Students are encouraged to share their own experiences to give a personal insight into how global business works.

Students garner cross-cultural experience and develop the ability to share their own perspective while being inclusive in their own views.

## **Using the Cultural Metaphor in the Classroom**

As part of teaching cross-cultural management, the students must explore the idea of culture in an Australian context but also informed by their own cultural experiences. Students are encouraged to share their own knowledge and understanding to give a personal insight into how global business works. The learning is broken into three separate stages.

*The first stage* is where the concepts of “culture” and “global mindset” are explored. Two classes of 3 hours each are devoted to firstly the concept of culture and the second class looks at the concept of the global mindset. Students are asked – What is it? Who has it? How can we develop it? What does the literature say about the global mindset? Which

organisations claim to have the global mindset? – Students participate in an experiential exercise where they are asked to place themselves in someone else's shoes. What does it feel like to not understand a language? What does it mean to live on a \$1 a day? How do we behave in our own culture and what differences do we employ when functioning in another culture? These activities prepare students to have a global mindset and respect and understand if not accept global cultural differences.

Finally students are asked to participate in a set of diagnostic questions to test whether they do possess a global mindset or not and then they are asked to evaluate their place of work as to ascertain whether the organisations has a global mindset as it operates around the global and nationally with workers from different cultures.

*The second stage* scaffolds the work of Professor Gannon and cultural metaphors into the discussion. The students read the introduction to the book and chose the metaphor that most closely relates to their own culture. This preparation is done before class. During class the students are introduced to the idea of metaphors – what are they? And why do we use them? They then explore the different metaphors that occur in the book and then discuss how to construct a metaphor. The Italian Opera and French Wine are used as examples to break down the process and understanding. The students then work in cultural groups to discuss the metaphor from the book they have prepared. The groups then report back to the class on their findings – do they agree with the metaphor? What works and what doesn't? – The class is concluded with a presentation on using the medium of posters and the expectations of the assignment.

*The third stage* is the assignment. The assignment was developed to get students to think about the concepts of cultural metaphors in the context of their own culture. Students are instructed to create a cultural metaphor poster either by themselves or in a group of two. The instructions are as follows: Guided by Gannon's 'Cultural Metaphors' (Gannon 2004) you are required to create and substantiate your own metaphor for your own culture. Choose a culture, whether it be your own or one you have experience in and analyze the current metaphor. Based on some of the following headings you need to create your own metaphor to explain your culture to someone who does not understand it. Remember this is a tool to help people understand a new culture. Headings include: Politics, Religion, Food, Customs, Family, Values, Education, Social norms and Communication.

The presentation should include a poster representation of the metaphor you have developed including *five key reasons to justify your findings* and an oral presentation of the poster – 8 minute explanation of your metaphor with time for questions (you must not exceed the time limit)

Academic posters are an effective way of communicating concisely and visually, and can be a powerful way of getting information across. They have the capacity to summarize information or research concisely and generate discussion. Students need to develop the ability to take a very complex idea and reduce it to a visual representation.

## How was it assessed?

The following assessment criteria is used to measure the poster

- Information presented on the poster interesting and relevant
- The poster presented in a professional and easy to read format
- The poster articulated the ideas without explanation (stand alone)
- Good use of graphics, text and pictures
- Creativity and interactivity (engagement with audience)
- Articulation of the ideas and reasoning by the group presenting
- Demonstrated an understanding of Gannon's cultural metaphor concept
- Time limit met and responded concisely to audience questions

Based on the strengths of the poster and presentation the students are given a grade (HD, D, CR, P, NN) and feedback.

## Falafel as a Cultural Metaphor for the Israeli Culture

### Religion – land of the three religions

\*Freedom of religion for all.  
\*By law and in practice each religious is free to exercise its faith.  
\*Each community has its own religious courts and council

\*The falafel balls represent the different religions that can be found in Israel: Jews, Muslims, Christians and Druzes.

\* Israel has a religious and historical meaning for all of the religions. All are part of the country. Each has its own unique characteristics and can stand on its own but combined together is what making the culture what it is. Like the falafel each ingredient can stand on its own but together create the whole flavorful falafel.



### Communication

The communication in the Israeli culture is informal, touching and eye contact is very common in social interaction. Like the small pita pocket that holds all the falafel ingredients together the physical space between people is minimal and everyone is mixed together in some sort.

There is minimum power distance (less than 10 according to Hofstede) in the work place, employee can approach the CEO and chat with him/her.

People sometimes refer to each other as "ACHI" or "Sachbak" which is equivalent to mate or bro.



### Family

Family is very important in the Israeli culture. The average size of a family is 6 people. Like the 6 balls in the falafel, Israel is considered to be family oriented compared to eastern and western European countries with high birth rate and low divorce rate.

Like the falafel, family members are very close to each other and usually live within a few minutes' drive from each other. The pattern is usually of a nuclear family. The relationships among family and friend are usually intimate.



### Food

Food has a strong meaning in the Israeli culture and the Jewish celebrations. There is a dish that is unique to each Jewish holiday. For example in the Jewish new year the challah has a circle shape that symbolizes the cyclical nature of life.

In addition, food is a mean of communication and values. It gathers family and friends together and is an example to the openness and hospitality of the Israeli people.

The Israeli cuisine is diverse due to different influences as a result for the immigrant nature of the people.



### Values and Culture

The Israeli culture celebrates life in every opportunity. The round falafel balls represent the cyclic meaning of life. Israel remembers its soldiers who died in battle and in the evening of the same day celebrate its independence day.

Humour and comedy is a way to deal with daily and historical events and is part of the Israeli culture.



### People and Social structure

The falafel different ingredients represent the multi cultural nature of the people. The Israeli people are immigrants from different countries such as the Middle East, East and West of Europe etc. as a result create the diversity of social and cultural influences.

Like the falafel where all the ingredients create the whole dish in the round pita pocket, Israel started as a collectivistic society. With the notion of all people are equal and emphasis on the group.

However, nowadays the society is shifting towards individualism due to the influence of technology and the western world. According to Hofstede Israel has a rank of 60 in the IDV (individualism) (Australia has a rank of 90).



Figure 1  
Falafel as a Cultural Metaphor for Israel

## Examples

Four examples of metaphors created by students are provided throughout this text: Falafel for Israel (see Figure 1), Jade for China (see Figure 2), a queue for Australia (see Figure 3) and coffee for Italy (see Figure 4).

## Goals of Student Learning

In addition to meeting the course philosophy of active participation, this assessment gives students a supportive forum to share ideas and perspectives from their own culture, enriching the learning experience for all. By giving students the freedom to present their own experiences and research they gain confidence to share ideas and present to the class, building good communication skills and promoting diversity in the classroom. The use of posters allows for the expression of complex ideas in visual form and engages audience imagination. The assessment also fosters lively and relevant debates. This assessment gives a voice to students that may not be comfortable sharing ideas in large classes. It is a window into other cultures and business issues.

This assignment encourages an openness to foster cultural respect and opportunities for students to showcase their individual skills, talents and interests. The students come not only from diverse cultural backgrounds but also from diverse industry and educational backgrounds, including marketing, engineering, bio-science, accounting and philosophy. There is a skill in bringing people together but it is also using the classroom diversity as a learning resource so that students learn from each other.

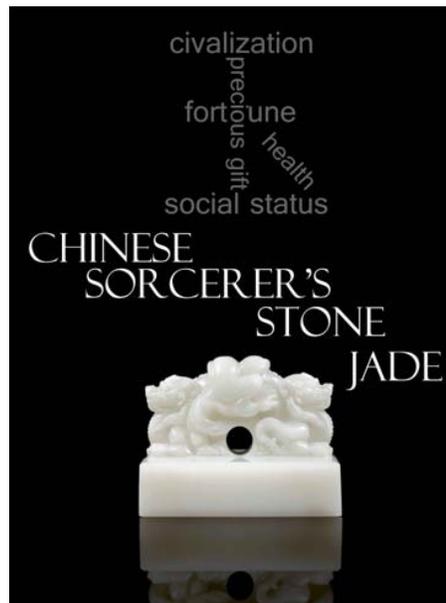


Figure 2

Jade as a Cultural Metaphor for China

## Our Experience

There are varying degrees of success with this assignment. Some students understand the concept of a metaphor in more detail than others. The stronger students use the Gannon model to explore alternatives for their own culture. One of the examples below shows Israel represented by a falafel. The student used religion, communication, family, food, values and customs as well as people and social structure to explain the metaphor.

Religion is important freedom of religion for all - by law and in practice each religion is free to exercise its faith. Each community has its own religious courts and council. The falafel balls represent the different religions that can be found in Israel: Jews, Muslims, Christians and Druze. Israel has a religious and historical meaning for all of the religions. All are part of the country. Each has its own unique characteristics and can stand on its own but combined together is what making the culture what it is. Like the falafel, each ingredient can stand on its own but together create the whole flavorful falafel.

### A cultural metaphor for understanding Australian culture: The Queue



A part of our colonial heritage.

*"An Englishman, even if he is alone, forms an orderly queue of one."*  
George Mikes

Fairness: everyone is equal in the line



Queue jumping is frowned upon





Queue's are orderly and have strict rules.



Working together to smoothly achieve a common goal



Its important to wait your turn



When doing Business in Australia, the queue is a helpful way to understand the people:

- The rules of the queue were brought to Australia by English settlers but has been adapted for life in Australia.
- The country is very orderly and well regulated. Business is conducted by strict sets of rules and etiquettes which make transactions run smoothly.
- Australian's are patient and egalitarian with a strong sense of fairness.
- Australian's are individualistic but work well together as a team to achieve a common goal, whether it be to pay their bills at lunch time as quickly as possible or clean up a city after a disaster.
- Queue jumping is frowned upon and can create anger and mistrust.
- Pushing in front of others (or being thought to have done so) is frowned upon and can affect the way you are perceived.
- It can be slower to achieve a goal than you might be used to but it is not easy to speed up the process.

Figure 3  
Queue as a Cultural Metaphor for Australia

This example illustrates a high level of understanding in relation to the metaphor and deep insight into the culture.

Other students are prone to simply describe their culture without the analysis or metaphor. The diversity within the classroom makes this an interesting process. Students enjoy talking about their own experiences and culture and for those with lower English skills it builds their confidence in the classroom. A common experience has been that this exercise is a turning point in development for students who have previously been shy or uncertain in class, they are now emboldened to share information and sometimes even challenge the findings of others!

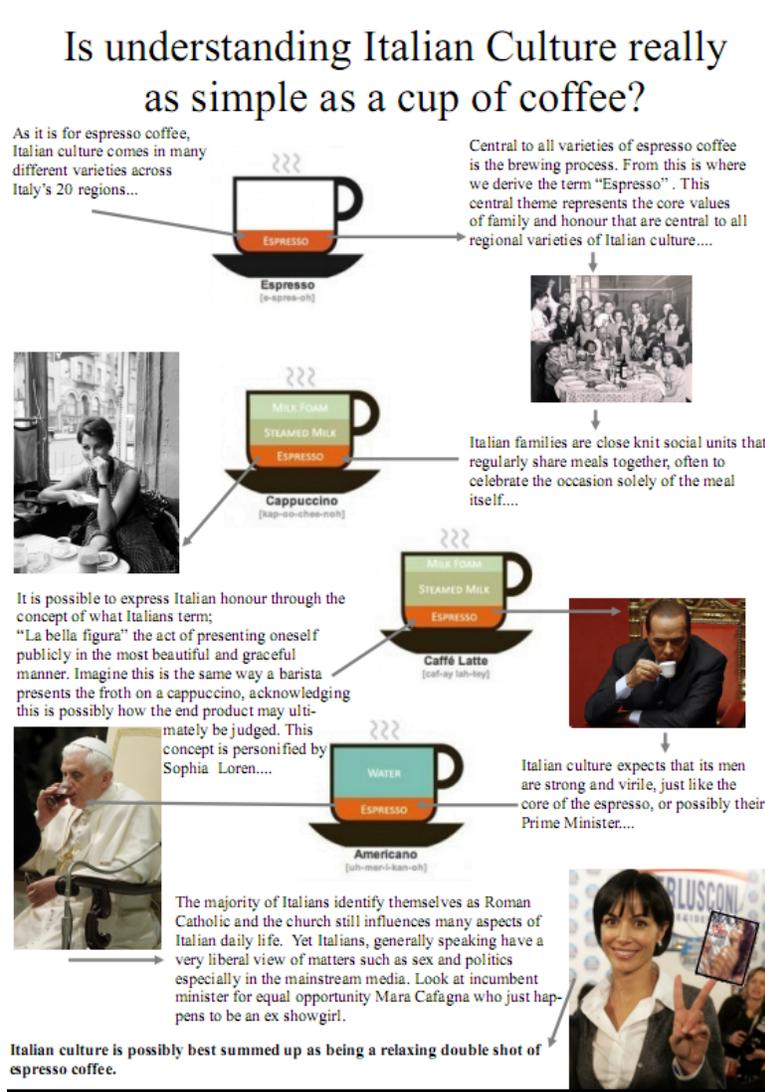


Figure 4  
Coffee as a Cultural Metaphor for Italy

The best feedback we receive is that students feel they have “learned so much” from others. It is one thing to read about culture, it is another to have it explained by people who not only understand it but are passionate about it. This exercise gives students an added dimension to the metaphor studies.

## Conclusion

Overall the experience of Cultural Metaphor posters has been a worthwhile and positive one. We aim to prepare students to be work ready global graduates and this exercise works towards this goal. It is one of many tools used to encourage students to think beyond their own borders and to understand that differences they will face working in an ever expanding global workforce. The poster is a creative and enjoyable way to engage large cross-cultural classrooms in debate and foster cultural understanding.

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