

Online Project Based Learning in International Business Education: Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice

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Abstract

This paper addresses one of the most important challenges faced by international business faculty and students, that is, how to bring the real world of business into the classroom or training environment by providing the needed platform and systematic step-by-step process to support students in their roles as managers and decision makers in a global setting. Students are provided with interactive, engaging, and innovative software which help to bridge the gap between theory and the rigorous decision making process of solving real, complex business problems. The three teaching/learning software, based on a platform developed by Janavaras & Associates, Inc. (JAI), www.janavaras.com – the Global Market Potential System Online (www.globalmarketpotential2.com), the Global Marketing Management System Online (GMMSO, www.gmmso3.com) and the Export Import Management System Online (EIMSO), www.eimso2.com) - are Project-Based Learning (PBL) tools designed to be used for international business projects.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the rationale for using PBL web-based tools in teaching international business courses, briefly describe each of the JAI software, and the learning outcomes and the benefits to students and instructors alike. This article suggests that the JAI approach is critically different from other international business simulations because it is a) holistic; b) integrative and interactive; c) cognitive and experiential; d) innovative and resourceful; e) illustrative (case studies) and f) multidimensional. Results based on surveys conducted by instructors confirm that the software enhanced the student's international business understanding and improved their team working and critical thinking skills.

Project-Based Learning (PBL)

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a model that organizes learning around projects. Research projects are complex tasks, based on challenging questions or problems that involve students in design, problem-solving, decision making, or investigative activities. They also provide students with the opportunity to work relatively autonomously over extended periods of time, and culminate in realistic products or presentations (Jones, Rasmussen, and Moffitt, 1997). According to Shields (2005), PBL incorporates methods from problem-based learning, cooperative learning, constructive learning, active learning and project management theory. Developing workplace know-how should be the main objective of any project-based learning. Shields identifies five competency areas that projects should address: 1) the ability to identify, organize, plan and allocate resources, 2) interpersonal skills, 3) the ability to acquire and use information, 4) the ability to understand complex interrelationships, and 5) the ability to work with a variety of technologies.

Interactive learning, made possible with the arrival of the World Wide Web, has a lasting impact on a person's ability to retain and understand information as described by the classic study conducted by the National Training Laboratory's "Learning Pyramid" (DeKanter, 2005). As represented by the statistics on retention rates below, students will have a greater opportunity to learn and retain the information presented in the web based tools than by simply learning the material in a traditional way:

- Teach others/use immediately 90%
- Practice by doing 75%
- Discussion Group 50%
- See a demonstration 30%
- Learn from audio/visual 20%
- Reading 10%
- Lecture 5%

Using-web based learning tools are a natural progression for education. Currently four out of five managers under the age of 34 have significant video game experience. With this new "gamer" group also comes a new belief system, which arguably better equips gamers than non-gamers (Beck and Carstens, 2005). Beck and Carstens have shown that games and simulations help to build user's confidence in their own abilities, develop leadership skills and improve self-dependence.

Despite the lack of a universally accepted model or theory of PBL, five criteria should be considered when determining the effectiveness of a model: centrality, driving question, constructive investigations, autonomy, and realism. First, projects must be central to the curriculum and not peripheral; meaning that projects are the curriculum. Second, projects should be designed to force students to encounter and struggle with the central concepts and principles of the discipline. Third, projects should create constructive investigation that involves inquiry, knowledge building, and resolution. Fourth, projects are student-driven and not instructor-lead or scripted. Fifth, projects should be realistic and relate to the real world (Thomas, 2000). According to Shields (2005), PBL focuses on both the process and product of an assignment, develops the ability to adapt to change, and develops team dynamic and project management skills.

The JAI Software Approach

The JAI approach finds its theoretical and empirical justification from the international business and strategic management literature (Cavusgil, 1980, Ghoshal and Bartlett, 1991, Grosse and Behrman, 1992 and Holtbrugge, 1997). Regarding International Marketing Management literature Kotabe and Helsen (2001, 578-580) mention that the content of global strategic marketing plan that guides the strategic and tactical marketing decisions usually covers four areas:

- Market situation analysis
- Objectives for each country
- Strategies and resource allocation
- Action plans (for each marketing mix element)

Hollensen (2007, 670-673) describes the development of a global marketing plan as follows:

- Deciding whether to internationalize
- Deciding which markets to enter
- Market entry strategies
- Designing the global marketing program – developing the international marketing mix
- Implementing and coordinating the global marketing program according to the allocation of marketing resources indicated in the marketing budget.

The more recent explosive growth in web based learning or other technological pedagogical resources has been achieved but not without major debates between practitioners of the traditional school of classroom lecture based teaching and the new school of interactive learning. Reluctance or even resistance to the introduction of innovations such as web-based learning and teaching to a university can be explained because the process can be complex and unsettling to the existing structure and require changes at various levels (Samarawickrema and Stacey, 2007). These authors suggest that the introduction of technology and more innovative teaching and learning methods in most universities starts with the basic provision of distance education done through the use of learning management systems (LMS). Thompson et al (2001) suggest that Universities seem to be gradually adopting more mixed mode methodologies including online approaches and there is a shift from distance based learning strategies to screen based pedagogical methods of which the JAI software are an example.

The challenge most software designers face, as noted by Kirkley and Kirkley (2005), is to figure out how to bring the real world into the classroom or training environment (making the project realistic). The interactive teaching and learning tools based on the JAI approach are designed to bring realism into the classroom and beyond. They enable students to identify global business opportunities, develop international marketing plans and exporting strategies, as well as prepare all the necessary documents online from anywhere in the world. Students, working individually or in groups, have an opportunity to integrate all functional business areas, assess the impact of environmental forces on business decisions and bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Figure 1: Jai Web-based Software Platform

Quick Links

- ▶ Module 1
- ▶ Module 2
- ▶ Module 3
- ▶ Module 4
- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Title & TOC Page
- ▶ Report Selection
- ▶ Full Report
- ▶ Score & Comments
- ▶ Help
 - ▶ User Guide(English)
 - ▶ User Guide(Greek)
 - ▶ FAQ
 - ▶ Do's and Don'ts
 - ▶ Suggested Websites
 - ▶ Case Examples
 - ▶ Glossary
- ▶ Articles
- ▶ Chat
- ▶ Logout
- ▶ Back
- ▶ Send Technical Issue

BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND THE REAL WORLD OF BUSINESS

Module 1 - Instructions | Suggested Websites | Glossary

Module 1 - 1.1 Company Analysis

Industry	
Company Name	
Company Contact Name	
Website URL	
E-mail Address	
Address	
City	
State/Province	
Zip Code/Postal Code	
Country	United States

Note: From the dropdown box, select the currency you will use throughout the project. If you use a currency other than the ones shown, enter the name/symbol for it. Make sure you are consistent! The web site shown below gives both names/symbols and provides conversion capability. Weblink: <http://www.ratesfx.com/resources/symbols.html>

Currency Type :

1.1 a) Company background

Learning Outcomes

As a result of using JAI software as a key teaching and learning tool students should learn how to:

- Research, analyse, interpret and use data to make business decisions in a global setting.
- Apply what they learn in the classroom or training environment.
- Integrate knowledge from all functional business areas and be able to make decisions in a global context.
- Perform a situation analysis of a company in a global context.
- Practice how to research global markets.
- Identify and evaluate high potential country markets for company's products/services.
- Conduct competitive analysis.
- Determine best entry mode strategies.
- Develop customize marketing plans and strategies.
- Use internet resources and information effectively.

The JAI approach leads to a systematic gathering and evaluating of information to build a learning experience that stimulates students using online resources. This approach seems to be consistent to that suggested by Chickering and Gamson's (1999). These authors recommend 'Seven principles for good teaching practice' encouraging: i) interaction between students and faculty; ii) development of reciprocity and cooperation among students; iii) use active learning techniques; iv) provision of prompt feedback; v) emphasis of time on task; vi) communication of high expectations; and vii) respect for diverse talents and ways of learning.

Several surveys have proven (Janavaras, 2007, Janavaras, Gomes. Young, 2008, Gomes, Janavaras, 2008) that GMMSO software is an excellent way for students to enhance their understanding of decision making in international management and bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Benefits to Instructors

These web-based tools provide instructors the ability to bring the real world into the classroom, while offering an interesting, engaging and stimulating environment to their students.

Some of the instructor benefits include:

- Minimum preparation time.
- Instructor's manual and PP presentations.
- Ability to monitor student progress and review completed projects online.
- Real-time business tools.
- User friendly (need basic computer skills only; detailed instructions are provided to guide you in completing the process).
- Interactive and integrative (students can work independently or as a members of a team from anywhere in the world).
- Cognitive and experiential (hands-on)
- Resourceful and innovative (up-to-date web sites and targeted resources are included for each phase).
- Multidimensional (can be used for global, regional and, individual country markets).

- It can be used from anywhere in the world with internet connections!
- Generate reports, provide feedback, and keep scores as shown in figure 2 and 3 below.

Figure 2: Generate Reports

Quick Links

- ▶ Module 1
- ▶ Module 2
- ▶ Module 3
- ▶ Module 4
- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Title & TOC Page
- ▶ Report Selection
- ▶ Full Report
- ▶ Score & Comments
- ▶ Help
- ▶ Articles
- ▶ Chat
- ▶ Logout
- ▶ Back
- ▶ Send Technical Issue

Report Selection

Title and table of contents report	Generate Report
Executive summary report	Generate Report
Module 1 - 4 report	Generate Report
Bibliography report	Generate Report
Full project report	Generate Report

Figure 3: Scores & Comments

Home | About Us | Site Map | FAQ | Contact Us

GMMSO
Global Marketing Management System Online

Basil Janavaras Logged in

Quick Links

- ▶ Module 1
- ▶ Module 2
- ▶ Module 3
- ▶ Module 4
- ▶ Executive Summary
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ Title & TOC Page
- ▶ Report Selection
- ▶ Full Report
- ▶ Score & Comments
- ▶ Back To Project
- ▶ Back
- ▶ Send Technical Issue

Score & Comments

Module 1	<input type="text"/>	View Comments
Module 2	<input type="text"/>	View Comments
Module 3	<input type="text"/>	View Comments
Module 4	<input type="text"/>	View Comments
Overall Score	<input type="text"/>	View Comments

JAI Web Based Software

Export-Import Management System Online (EIMSO©) - www.eimso2.com

EIMSO, Export-Import Management System Online, is a management research and planning tool designed to help develop a company's import or export strategy and operational procedures. **EIMSO** consists of two dynamic software programs: Export Management System Online (EMSO) and Import Management System Online (IMSO). Each software program consists of four modules:

Figure 4: EMSO (Export Management System Online)



EMSO (Export Management System Online)

1. Company Situation Analysis
2. Global Market Search - Selecting Country Market
3. In-Depth Market Analysis
4. Entry Strategy and Marketing Plan

Focus: Export Marketing Strategies and Operations

Figure 5: IMSO (Import Management System Online)



IMSO (Import Management System Online)

1. Company Situation Analysis
2. Determining Country of Manufacture/Origin
3. Import Strategy
4. Selection of Key Parties

Focus: International Logistics, Importing Strategies and Operations

Global Market Potential System Online (GMPSO©) - www.gmpso2.com

GMPSO is a research and strategic planning management tool designed to help students bridge the gap between theory and the real world of business. **GMPSO** consists of two dynamic modules.

Figure 6: GMPSO (Global Market Potential System Online)



GMPSO (Global Marketing Potential System Online)

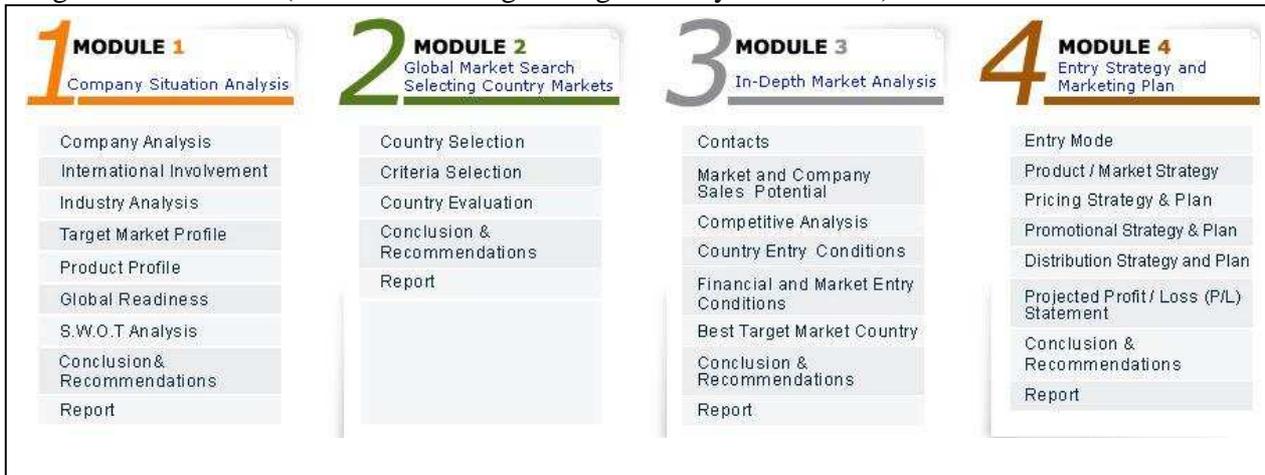
1. Conduct a company situation analysis in a global context.
2. Identify countries with high market potential for your products/services.

Focus: International Business, International Management.

Global Marketing Management System Online (GMSMO©) www.gmmso3.com

GMSMO is a research and strategic planning marketing/management tool designed to help students to bridge the gap between theory and the real world of business. **GMSMO** consists of four dynamic modules.

Figure 7: GMMSO (Global Marketing Management System Online)



1. Conduct a company situation analysis in a global context.
2. Identify countries with high market potential for your products/services.
3. Conduct an in-depth market/competitive analysis and select the best country market.
4. Determine best entry mode strategy and develop the marketing plan.

Focus: International Marketing, Global Business Strategy and International Management.

Potential Users

The JAI platform is designed to guide students and managers through a systematic and integrative process for gathering, evaluating and entering data for a chosen company into each software system. The expected outcome is a comprehensive and dynamic global business plan, which can be executed anywhere in the world. It is designed for:

- Business managers, government trade specialists and trade consultants seeking high potential markets and developing their marketing plans
- Instructors teaching courses in International Marketing Management, who wish to bring the real world into the classroom, so that their students could enhance their understanding of international business and improve their team-working, research and critical thinking skills.

Teaching Suggestions:

The suggestions below are based on the author's eleven-years of classroom and training experience with GMMSO software and that of other colleagues.

1. Review the GMMSO prior to assigning it to your students for the class project.
2. Assign it early, that is, the first or second week of classes.
3. Assign it as a group project (Up-to- five (5) students per group). Individual assignments should also be considered on a case by case basis, depending on circumstances.
4. Recommend an industry and publicly held companies or provide a list of companies to choose from.
5. Require a project proposal consisting of Module 1.1a – 1.2.e.

6. Allow students to work on the project during class time (If you teach an online course specify a time students can contact you with project related questions).
7. Visit with the groups while working on the project in class.
8. Have deadlines for the completion of each module along with the final project.
9. Consider grading each module separately and give students feedback.
10. Since this is a group project, grade the Group site only. Tell your students to use the Individual site for recording their notes and keep track their contribution to the group project. As an Instructor you are able to access both sites.
11. Challenge students to search for answers instead of expecting answers with the click of the mouse (they will learn a lot in the process)!
12. Remind students to “Save” the information entered every time, that is, before they leave the screen they are working on.
13. Suggest to your students to save the information they have entered to a Word document as a backup (as we all know, no web site or data base is immune to hackers and server related problems).
14. Ask students to review the User Guide, Case Examples, Resources and Glossary before they begin working on the project. Glossary terms are hyperlinked in all 4 Modules.

Concluding Remarks

The twin engines of global economic development, information technology and globalization, have accelerated the growth of web base pedagogical resources and revolutionized the teaching and learning methodologies through the use of the internet. However, there is diverge of opinion as to whether internet based learning tools, used by business schools and business professionals for training purposes, enhance the students decision making and critical thinking skills. Several surveys have proven (Janavaras, 2007, Janavaras, Gomes, Young, 2008, Gomes, Janavaras, 2008) that the JAI software had enhanced the skills of the students, such as critical thinking, web-based research, team working and decision making. In addition, the software enables students to identify perform a situation analysis of a company, identify best markets, perform an in-depth market an competitive analysis, select best entry modes and develop the strategic marketing plan for each and every market in which the company decides to do business.

Today, the use of international intranets, extranets and all sorts of technologies and software for commercial purposes has become a basic survival condition for most businesses. Internet has revolutionized the way, marketing consultancy research is done today with more targeted access to information resources and web based strategic marketing tools like JAI software. Although universities have been slower in adopting and integrating innovative technologies for teaching purposes, in the latest years they are gradually adopting more mixed mode methodologies, including online approaches like the JAI and other international business simulations.

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Note: *If you are interested in becoming familiar with the JAI software register as an Instructor and create a course (free of charge!). If you have any questions or concerns regarding the use of the software please contact basilj@janavaras.com*

Appendix

Sample Project Assignment (50% of the course grade!)

You will be using the Global Marketing Management System Online (GMMSO) for your group project (www.gmmso3.com). **The GMMSO is a web-based global marketing/management research and strategic planning tool. It will enable you to:**

1. Conduct a situation analysis of a company, Module 1.
2. Determine best country markets for your company's products/services, Module 2.
3. Perform in-depth market and competitive analysis, Module 3.
4. Develop a marketing plan, Module 4.

NOTE: You are provided with detailed step-by-step instructions, user guide, glossary and sample cases along with the web sites designed to assist you with the completion of the project, all on Online!

After you register individually as explained above, you will be assigned, on a random basis, to a group of 3-4 students. As a group, you must:

- A. Decide on a company/industry (**click on Module 1.1**) and select one product or product line (if you company has more than one product line) for your project. **Make sure to research your company/industry before you decide on the one.** You may want to select an existing US or foreign based company (it does not have to be involved internationally) within the chosen industry.
- B. Although this is a group project, it will be in your best interest to review the GMMSO on your own before you start working on it. Go to the Navigation bar and click on and review the **"User Guide, Do's and Don'ts, FAQs, Resource Sites, Sample Cases and Glossary"**.

CAUTION: 1). In order to save the information you enter, make sure to Click on Save every time. 2). To be on the save side, I strongly recommend that you copy and paste the information you enter into the GMMSO on a Word document in the event the system goes down for whatever reason.

- C. **Group Project Proposal: The Project Proposal consists of Module 1.1a - f & 1.2a – e (See Assignments for the due date). The Instructor will review the proposal and respond using the **Comments function of the GMMSO.****

D. Group Project Evaluation and Grading (Modules 1-4 Reports, Executive Summary and Bibliography). Upon completion of each of the GMMSO project components (See Assignment Schedule for due dates), the Instructor will review each one, provide feedback and respond using **Comments** function of the GMMSO. The final grade will be determined and entered at the end of the semester, that is, after the entire project has been completed. In the event you have questions as you work on the project, you can e-mail me.

Make sure that you complete the following project components:

- A company situation analysis, Module 1 (20 points)
- Country selection and evaluation, Module 2 (20 points).
- An in-depth market and competitive analysis of the top two countries and selection of the best one, Module 3 (points).
- A marketing plan to be used in the country you have selected, Module 4 (20 points).
- Bibliography, see navigation bar, (10 points).
- Executive Summary, see navigation bar, (30 points).

Grading Criteria: The criteria to be used in grading the GMMSO project are as follows:

- Strategic and critical thinking – 30% weight. Papers that focus on description and historical explanation will be considered unsatisfactory.
- Quality of research and information sources and data bases – 20% weight.
- Thoroughness – 30% weight. You must follow through on all parts of the GMMSO.
- Knowledge of and the ability to apply and integrate business fundamentals as taught through this and all other courses – 10%
- Proper and correct English. All assignments are expected to be free of typing errors and grammar – 10%

Software Registration: You must register individually (No later than Monday, May 17th at 5:00 p.m.) by using a Purchase Code provided or e-mail to you by the Instructor). To register and to begin working on the class project do the following:

- **Enter:** <http://www.gmmso3.com>, click on Student enter your Purchase Code, complete the Student Registration Form (Institution: Minnesota State U, Mankato; Instructor: Basil Janavaras; Course: IBUS/MRKT428, Fall 2011, Section 01) and click Submit.
- After you have completed your registration successfully, you will be able to access the system using your username and password for both the Individual and Group sites (You will be assigned to a group consisting of 3-4 members after successful registration). If you have any registration related problems, e-mail me at basilj@janavaras.com.