CASE STUDY AND RELATED EXPERIENTIAL TEACHING METHODS
IN NON-CASE ENVIRONMENTS:
THE SLOVENIA EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

In Slovenia under socialist regimes it was difficult to teach business subjects like finances, marketing, management, organizational behavior etc. in a proactive way because of lack of knowledge and literature. Works based on capitalistic economies were not acceptable in curricula and the few enthusiasts of interactive teaching methods had to search their own way. This paper describes briefly six teaching techniques (organizational policy audit, proactive teaching, entrepreneurship, improvised case studies, and simulation) that the author and his colleagues have introduced and were promoting creative and entrepreneurial mind sets.

KEY WORDS: Policy audit, proactive methods, improvised case, live case, entrepreneurial creative case method

INTRODUCTION

Generally, totalitarian regimes and their corresponding top-down and bureaucratic decision making processes are not conducive to the creation, design, and implementation of creative, highly interactive, and experiential teaching methods as an integral part of education at all levels. The current prime minister of the Republic of Slovenia, Mr. Janez Jansa, in a recent address in Vienna [Warsau Forum, June 5, 2005] expressed the idea that “Europe’s door must remain open” and said "the implementation of the European Constitution would undoubtedly mean a shift towards a more transparent, efficient and democratic Europe which would be closer to its citizens.” Such a sentiment shows a favorable disposition to be adaptable to a more dynamic world of today and tomorrow. These comments are a far cry from the situation in 1945 when the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia was created. More recently in 1991 the “Republic of Slovenia” became an independent, internationally recognized state with status as an EU member in 2004, both changes of which allowed for the introduction of more proactive learning methods rather than the traditional content-driven curricula in the past.

How would you, as a business person, governmental worker, or educator in 1945, be motivated to introduce new and interactive teaching methods to a cultural environment which has been dedicated to the status quo and perhaps even to the suppression of new ideas, including those pertaining to changing the “mind set” of students as prospective executives in the workforce? There was little literature available on these new methods and certainly, there was not much encouragement for subjects like management, marketing, and organizational behavior in the curricula. However, the author persevered with enthusiasm and encouragement from his colleagues in spite of the inappropriateness of published case studies to his country undergoing a major transformation. Those published works were based on capitalistic economies
and social systems unlike those present in Slovenia. They suggested proactive discussion in the classroom instead of passive listening.

This article focuses on the trials and tribulations of faculty dedicated to this movement in the direction of the free and open exchange of ideas, as it evolved over the past half century. As faculty move from traditional teaching/learning situations to online, team-driven, and participative discussion [Manning, Cohen, and DeMichiell, 2003], the paths to new teaching mastery levels can be challenging. It is important to note that progress can be made as long as faculty know their situation before commencing to take the “steps” from one teaching method to another.

In the article described here, there was little information available to make completely informed decisions about such expectations, pitfalls, and results of new teaching methods, except through professional societies like WACRA, which acted as a conduit for discussion of cases and other experiential teaching methods. The author participated in many WACRA programs and was encouraged to continue in the tradition of using these methods. In addition, the author held many important teaching, research, and business positions over the past half century which provides a broad perspective for any new faculty who face situations in their own country where resources are limited, new methods may not be encouraged by the country and/or the educational institution, and the reward system in place may not recognize such efforts.

This article describes briefly six teaching techniques (organizational policy audit, proactive teaching, entrepreneurship, improvised case studies, live cases, and simulation), none of which are “new” to the learning environment. However, they would be new approaches to some cultures, like Slovenia. In the USA, there very well may be cultures (even educational institutions), which are not active with all of these tools and techniques. After each technique is discussed briefly, conclusions and practical guidelines are provided to help faculty assess their own capabilities, aspirations, motivations, and interests in using cases and other experiential exercises in promoting creative and entrepreneurial mind sets.

Measurement of organizational climate is a key to success of using new ideas to foster growth regardless of the type of environment (business, government, or education). The next section represents one way to audit an enterprise policy [Kralj, 1972] and was a first step in a lifelong process of exploring participative decision-making and a tool to measure its success or failure.

ORGANIZATIONAL POLICY AUDIT

The main thesis of organizational policy research conducted over 30 years ago was that people as stakeholders take part and do things, including in business, mostly for the sake of personal benefit. Often, political decisions are the result of such behaviors; alternatively, there is enterprise policy that is reflected by formal concepts, objectives and mission statements representing the prevailing perception of needs and possibilities for growth and profit. The ability to make the best results from both aspects (political and enterprise decision making) depends on the: (1) creative direction toward the realization of the set of objectives and goals via key areas of policy, action guidance (“policies”), strategic decision-making (including strategies), and; (2) maintenance of congruent structures all the time, namely the management of execution of that policy.

An enterprise as a system must have integrated (holistic) policies. Often, policies exist in different dimensions and are interlaced, perplexed policies, and are either congruent or opposing. Ultimately, they must be integrated. In the framework of the formulation and evaluation of enterprise policy based on interest theory we have developed a method to audit (measure) the quality of such policy [Kralj, 1972]. The instrument has been in use in Slovenia since 1972, with over 2,600 audits conducted by undergraduate and graduate students and by executives in the business seminar setting. For further information on the audit and details of the research strategy see the paper Review of the Enterprise Policy [Kralj, 1995] and The survey of characteristics [Kralj, 1979].

The major lesson to be learned here is that it is possible to be innovative if one can include measurement techniques to prove your point. Not all enterprises want their “climate” to be measured; but if a faculty member is courageous enough to provide the instrument so that it doesn’t highlight problems, but rather focuses on needed improvements for productivity gains, such methods can be effective. Furthermore, these real live case studies can be published and be recycled back to the educational environment as a vehicle for getting students to think creatively [DeMichiell, Manning, Klein, Griffith, 2005]. Creative thinking can be nurtured by using proactive methods, which force students to become
involved in the problem solving process at the very beginning. This need for students to identify, question, and discuss not only the problem variables, but also the constraints, limitations, and assumptions involved in conflict resolution is discussed in the next section.

THE NEED FOR PROACTIVE METHODS

Throughout the author’s academic career, the preferred mode of teaching has always been towards the participative way although there was little encouragement to teach in that mode. In addition, there was little information available on appropriate approaches, and even less resources available to support a proactive process in the classroom.

For example, the School of Economics and Commerce, University of Maribor, evolved in stature in 1969, gaining the right to award graduate qualifications at masters and doctorate levels. The author was invited, at that time to join the faculty to develop more contemporary subjects of study. This latter specification was problematic because of special system of Yugoslavian socialist self-management, which denied business ownership and considered management as a “class category.” However, with new colleagues a start was made and modern (more flexible and adaptive) thinking was introduced. Marketing as a discipline was becoming recognized, while management was hidden under name of organizational policy, (which included the contents of governance and management), and instead of financial management the concept of financial governance was derived.

The objective of the study group was that learning must be changed in a proactive way with engagement of students. Cases from abroad were of little use because of entirely different social system and political control over teachers who were not allowed to promote capitalistic thinking. It was readily realized that expediency was the name of the game if we were to move ahead with this new wave of proactive thinking. Special methods were developed to focus proactively and include: improvised cases, the “Harvard” model, live and creative cases. These and other initiatives have led to creative business games simulating real life enterprises and are described in anecdotal format in the following sections.

IMPROVISED CASE

When teaching business policy courses in 1969, it proved impossible to employ foreign, Harvard style, case studies from existing text books since they were unfit for use because of our different, indigenous, social system. It was realized that to fill the gap in the availability of case studies about self-managerial organizations, it was necessary to learn how to write case studies. The way forward was through the live case approach that led, also, to production of classical style case studies, in due course.

The teaching policy course was initiated in an impromptu fashion. As it happened, the solution led to an innovation: the improvised case. The basic idea was to find any newspaper article describing business problems of an enterprise, usually in the section of economy and business. There is always something of interest, even a very short notice. For instance, there was a pharmaceutical enterprise that had grown a special form of rye as raw material for a soporific product. The cows from the nearby farms had eaten the rye and, as a result, were lulled to sleep, with consequent effects on the milk supply. Introduction of the case to the classroom involved role playing among four parties: representatives of the enterprise, farmers, local authorities, and lawyers. At the conclusion, also minutes of the procedure were recorded. It was a great success. For the rest of the term, similar improvised cases were introduced, resulting in the first indigenous series of proactive, case sessions at the University of Maribor.

THE LIVE CASE

The next step in this methodological development was to introduce the live case approach. Live cases in business and management are current and future oriented studies presented jointly by individuals from organizations and the teacher. They focus on actual problems, which have emerged in real life organizations and on the decisions that need to be made. The task is approached through participative learning techniques such as team work, role playing, and brainstorming. Sometimes the task is supported also through a simulation and, in specific cases, by consulting.
In the literature there is little information given about live cases as the method seems to be more appropriate for interorganizational use because of confidential information. However, the author has succeeded in getting managing directors or other responsible persons from organizations to collaborate. Usually they had been postgraduate students and, often, they decided to participate on the basis of "word of mouth" when the benefits for participants became known, (consulting, in form of confirmation or disapproval, warnings, etc.). The participants of those cases should be either mature students (in the last year of undergraduate study or graduate students) or participants of executive training seminars [Cf. Kralj, 1986].

A lengthy live case (5 to 6 weeks) requires students to gather information on site on actual problems of an existing firm and present this information through role playing during class sessions. At the beginning, a briefing on organization and problems is given by the organization’s representative. Students assume the roles of managing director, functional managers (for instance, for finance, marketing, human resources, production, logistic, etc.) and experts. If the group is particularly large, the other participants assist these students through occasional field research and through consulting and/or brainstorming sessions. During the week, the role keepers visit the organization and meet actual managers and get information. Usually managerial meetings are held in the class once in a week, the tasks are given and the minutes of the meeting are written. The organization’s representative and the teacher give feedback information. Often, participants' proposals are valuable for the organization.

A short case is used when the course allows only a couple of student contact hours, for example, in executive seminars. Instead of role playing, the group is divided in teams, for instance, 5 members per team and usually 4 or 5 teams. The work starts with plenary sessions to obtain information from the organization’s representative. Participants in these training seminars are experienced executives who often made valuable suggestions.

For the last six years, the live case approach has been used in a class of first year students in the School of Management, Koper, Slovenia. The problem has been that there are 120 students and only two sessions are available. At the first session, the information from the organization’s representative is given; during the week the teams (5 per team) have to elaborate on their suggestions and send them by e-mail to the organization’s representative, who is then able to provide appropriate feedback to the students. In spite of the constraints these sessions have proved particularly successful.

ENTREPRENEURIAL CREATIVE CASE METHOD

A further step in teaching with cases is the entrepreneurial creative case. With creative studies, participants develop an entrepreneurial idea and then create the plan on how to implement it. They devise a fictitious enterprise in which they will develop and market the idea. They consider enterprise’s policy (i.e. concept, mission, vision, objectives, goals, strategy, and structure) and planning. The outcome must be a feasible entrepreneurial idea.

This approach worked well but it was felt that a further refinement was required. In order to support the case, students were asked to make a physical prototype of the product (using Lego blocks or plastics) that could be produced and sold, and to prepare a poster to present it to the market. Costs and prices needed to be generated to create a business plan for the venture.

An entrepreneurial creative case can be simple, (e.g. a team brainstorming for 90 minutes), or can be further elaborated to encompass a more complex entrepreneurial project. In the latter instance, it can be undertaken over the course of a full semester. Each team of students develops venture ideas and designs a new fictitious enterprise documented by a business plan and policy for the venture. Each project, many of which have practical value that can be sold, is publicly presented and assessed by a group of experts. Since 1993, this approach has been carried out at the School of Economics and Business, Maribor, under the Games of Entrepreneurship initiative (executed by a colleague, Professor Janko Belak). Hundreds of workable venture ideas have been submitted [Cf. Belak, Duh, 1997]. The games increase students’ understanding of the key issues of business policy and of strategic management, enhance the students’ ability for systems thinking, encourage entrepreneurial approaches, and demonstrate the link between planning and performance. The students also learn how to cooperate and work as team.
BUSINESS GAMES (SIMULATIONS)

Games are a particular form of simulation. Role playing is an essential constituent of games where participants assume certain roles and play a part. Actors’ (students’) activities are directed by sets of rules in a given scene (starting organizational environment) and by a prepared scenario (game plan), which together represented a (re)constructed reality. There are rigid rule games characterized by computer supported simulations of dynamic organizational processes in a competitive environment that assess operations with the achieved results. Also, there are free-form games directed by a scenario representing a self organizing, learning environment; participants are given extensive freedom in their actions, and they get a feedback on managerial problem solving and decisions. In some free-form game experiences valuable materials may be used for case writing.

In games, conflict situations are created in which the interaction and the interdependence of the opponents’ decisions are reflected. Theories derived from gaming have laid the foundations of new quantitative methods and operational research, giving a further impetus to the development of war games and of business games. Real business games began to develop in the U.S.A. by 1956 with “The Top Management Simulation” sponsored by the American Management Association. The game contained elements of market, production, research, development activities, etc. This, later, became the starting point for many subsequent models, among them INTOP [Thorelli & Graves, 1964] that inspired the author to design an own game in form of a business model to support organizational policy coursework and for use in executive seminars. The first draft of the game was very simple: one product with changing quality and sales promotion, one focused on marketing issues. It was meant for three teams to be played over four periods in a few hours. While the manual version of the game permits immediate changes, we were able to design a computerized version of the game. This game has been employed on 44 occasions in its manual version (with up to 18 teams) and on 9 times when computer supported (with up to 8 teams). The game variations permit the simulation of live firms and it is also possible to plot the scene of a realistic environment with probable scenarios based on actual suppositions. Resemblance to a real life firm allows the continuation of live cases with responsibility for results and consideration of other consequences. The game can also be used to test the policies of a firm [Cf. Kralj, 1987].

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These anecdotal comments illustrate that it has been possible to introduce case methods and other proactive and experiential teaching-learning methods in non-case, and sometimes even unfriendly, environments with scarce resources. There may be faculty with the inspiration and motivation to develop and implement such methodologies, but are discouraged by country/enterprise culture, non-existent reward and recognition systems, and/or limited or no resources necessary to provide time and materials to conduct the work. The following comments/recommendations summarize several decades of case study activity in non-case study environments and may prove useful to faculty interested in these teaching methods under similar conditions:

a. Teachers as well as students need to be creative. Sometimes it is necessary that teachers improvise case material by taking newspaper reports on business problems experienced in daily practice. The process can engage students in a successful innovation project because it is up-to-date, realistic, and to the student, practical. However, it is easy to commence the project, but continuation of project work requires much more planning, continuous time with students, and progress monitoring than the usual traditional method of lecture, discussion, and testing.

b. For live cases involving business input and participation, it may be difficult to enlist the efforts of an organization to cooperate and assist in the organization of the joint venture between academia and business. The most important fact is that live cases are present and future oriented and not just based on historical facts. This continuous dialog among teacher, students, and business executives produces a “consulting” atmosphere, which means that time is valuable and results are expected. Such atmosphere also means that schedules must be met, presentations must be professional, and realistic alternatives and outcomes must be developed. However, experience has shown that if conducted properly, these methods facilitate learning by all parties.

c. Entrepreneurial case studies are especially difficult to develop and use in a classroom setting. The burden to select a topic and actually develop a case is on the student, either as an individual
or on a project team. The process is inefficient because the students need to take theory from a variety of courses and bring them to bear on a specific application area. Product design and production of prototype may be required and special skills may be needed to support this activity. While working on the entrepreneurial creative project, students should consider the following areas:

1. Entrepreneurial idea, resumptions, suppositions, and limitations.
2. Enterprise’s philosophy, including subcultures of the stakeholders, beliefs of the enterprise (opinion about the enterprise, accepted values, ethics, attitude towards workers, knowledge and sustainable development, basic philosophy of operations), and the willingness and commitment of the enterprise’s stakeholders.
3. Name of business enterprise, legal form, organization, product line
4. Mission and vision of the enterprise including programs (product line, etc.), the enterprise’s contribution and value to clients, future goals and development.
5. Expected quality of operations including process quality and reputation.
6. Enterprise organization including governance, management and other roles in the enterprise.
7. Required resources and from whom they will be provided
8. Analysis of the projected enterprise incorporating strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, business plan, conclusions, feasibility of alternative solutions
9. Managerial summary, outlining parts of the seminar paper interesting to the reader, and which might provoke further learning.

Business games can be a continuation of a live case. A business game should not be designed and played just by following a model and respecting rules (like Monopoly). The game has to be animated through realistic situations. A realistic business game is more than a training device. By means of dynamic simulation it enables to test organization policies and its operations in a competitive environment and in a mixed economy mode. Faculty should use business games to increase participants understanding of business problems at the functional level, the interrelations of the functions and parts of an organization, and relations with the environment. Therefore, an extended grading system should be developed to be consistent with these expected outcomes.

ENDNOTE

1. The author wishes to thank Professors Barra O’Cinneide from the University of Limerick, Ireland for editing the draft of this paper and Robert DeMichiell from Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, U.S.A. for editing its final version.

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