

MULTIDISCIPLINARY CASE LEARNING IN EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

**Carl-Johan Asplund
Susanne Arvidsson
Lund University
LUND, SWEDEN**

Abstract

There is a growing body of research describing and measuring the effects of executive education provided by universities [Kerr, 2008; Musselwhite, 2006]. For many years, case methodology has been the main learning method at Lund University's School of Economics and Management and its Executive Education Center, EFL (Executive Foundation Lund), Sweden.

A large proportion of the knowledge acquired through using business cases in executive education remains tacit. This paper addresses and shares learning outcomes derived from executive training seminars.

The purpose of this paper is three-fold. First, to present an introductory executive course in business administration focused on communicating theory and practice in general management, using case methodology as the main learning method. Second, to present and discuss the learning challenges encountered in the course. Third, to examine how the faculty from different theoretical subfields/perspectives structured the used case to create the best learning environment for the participating executive managers. Finally, to present the main findings from applying a unique case methodology in a university executive education program in Sweden.

KEYWORDS: Executive education, multidisciplinary case learning

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing body of research describing and measuring the effects of executive education provided by universities. [Kerr, 2008; Musselwhite, 2006]. For many years, case methodology has been the main learning method at Lund University's School of Economics and Management and its Executive Education Center, EFL (Executive Foundation Lund).

A large proportion of the knowledge acquired through using business cases in executive education remains tacit. This paper addresses and shares learning outcomes derived from executive training seminars held at EFL, Lund University.

The purpose of this paper is three-fold. First, to present an introductory executive course in business administration focused on communicating theory and practice in general management, using case methodology as the main learning method. Second, to present and discuss the learning challenges encountered in the course. Third, to examine how the faculty from different theoretical subfields/perspectives structured the used case to create the best learning environment for the participating executive managers. Finally, to present the main findings from applying a unique case methodology in a university executive education program in Sweden.

Asplund and Bjerke [2008] presented the case methodology and three different case types that can be used at universities and in executive education. The authors state that in different learning situations different case types should be applied to promote deeper learning. The key to this is to assess the often

multiple learning needs in advance and then select and apply a suitable case to address the learning situations at hand.

During the spring of 2009, the authors along with project leader Tony Åkesson at EFL, developed the idea of applying a multidisciplinary approach to establishing and promoting integrative learning for ten managers attending a short, intensive executive course on general management called 'Business Knowledge'. There were three main aims: First, to include a new Student-written case (SWC) [Bostrom & Hakansson, 2009] and to use this case as a learning vehicle to support reflective and integrative learning in business administration. Second, to avoid the commonly used or 'classic' silo leaning (i.e. atomistic) and move towards a more holistic approach. Third, to apply integrated learning, which in this context means that the business administration topic is addressed from several sub-disciplines within the academic field of business administration. By adding an interesting business case and case questions, the overarching aim was to encourage the participating managers to connect theory with practice and also to get them more engaged in the entire course curriculum.

EFL EXECUTIVE EDUCATION, LUND

In order to put the effectiveness of managers' learning through case methodology in an institutional context, the Executive Foundation Lund (EFL) is briefly presented below. Some figures are included to indicate the scale and scope of the work involving case learning. EFL (www.efl.se) is the third stakeholder within the Lund School of Economics and Management (www.fek.lu.se) at Lund University in Sweden. It was established specifically to explore and develop the important links with the surrounding society and industries.

Along with the basic education institution (e.g. Business Administration) and the research institute at the School of Economics and Management, EFL functions as an innovative hub with the area and public organization communities towards the business school. EFL was founded in 1969 with the main purpose of informing interested parties about business and management research within the department of Business Administration at Lund University. Every year around four hundred and fifty (450) managers participate in various EFL seminars and courses. About one hundred (100) companies and organizations are members of the EFL network. Since 1998, over three hundred tailored internal courses have been designed and delivered. Finally, EFL and Lund School of Economics and Management are internationally accredited by EQUIS.

"EFL offers companies and organizations Executive Education in the fields of financial control, law, management, marketing, strategy and administration development. EFL offers development for individuals, companies and organizations" [Carlstrom, 2009]. Case learning methodology has played a major role in most of the above courses.

THE EXECUTIVE COURSE: BUSINESS KNOWLEDGE

The short intensive executive course addressed in this article offers a reflective and general view of the regular bachelor programme provided by business schools which teach business administration and economics. The main reflective elements are that at the end of each training session, participants are given thirty (30) minutes to reflect on the learning process during the day. In addition, participants complete a reflective 'letter' to themselves at the end of the course, detailing what they have learnt and how they can apply what they have learnt in practice. The principle target group is predominantly middle managers in both private and public organizations located mainly in the south of Sweden. The participants work in various roles, subfields and functions e.g. CEO, CFO, CTO, engineering, law, HR, accounting, finance, marketing, purchasing and project management, mainly in large organizations, but also in SMEs.

EFL [Carlstrom, 2009] describes the Business Knowledge course as divided into four main parts:

"The first part gives you as a participant the macro perspective, allowing you an insight into the company's role in the world and putting the entire course in perspective.

The second part focuses on the target customers and the markets, and gives clarity on important aspects of the marketing field.

The third part, the biggest, provides insight into financial links in various business operations, including your own company but mainly your own. You'll learn the language of finance, which is important when you have to take on greater responsibility within your company.

The fourth part focuses on strategy, organization and management. Here, we review and discuss important strategy issues so that participants can help to develop their own companies and organizations to innovate”.

The Business Knowledge course comprises eight (8) modules, each of which each is presented and worked upon for one day (a total of eight days). It ends with a half day where the participants reflect in more depth on their learning and the learning vehicles (including the case or cases used).

1. The company in the economic context

In this first module, how the companies function in the economic system is described and explained. This section addresses various ways of categorizing industries and organizations in mainly Sweden, the Nordic countries, and also in the rest of Europe. Some main theoretical concepts are explained and put on the macro level for debate.

2. The customer and the market.

This, the second module, addresses the micro environment of the company i.e. introducing the general system view of the company [Normann, 1975/77]. Here the focus is on understanding the field of marketing and especially the value creation process [Wikstrom and Normann, 1992] from the perspective of end- and business customers' point of view. Key theoretical marketing fields such as consumer, business and relationship marketing are reviewed and debated.

3. Accounting

During the third module, the focus is on understanding why companies are obliged to keep accounts, how this obligation is regulated and how accounts are kept. The following topics are discussed:

- Analysis of the different sections of the annual report
- What kind of laws and regulations set the boundaries?
- Exploring double entry bookkeeping
- Exploring different methods of calculations

4. Cost and revenue analysis

During the fourth module, the focus is on learning how to conduct a cost and revenue analysis. The importance of understanding the difference between some fundamental concepts in the cost and revenue analysis is stressed. The following topics are discussed:

- Understanding the concepts of:
 - Income
 - Expense
 - Revenue
 - Cost
- Result planning (safety margin, contribution margin)
- Product calculation

5. Organization and management

This fifth module addresses, mainly from the resources (RBV) point of view [e.g. Prahalad and Hamel, 1990; Grant, 1991] how organizational theory [Morgan 1986] has developed since the 20th century, mainly in Europe, the USA and Asia. Our key interest here is on how to understand, from the business idea point of view [Normann, 1975/77] the productive and efficient use of resources and competences. Other subfields of interest are core values (i.e. organisational culture) and management of companies and organizations.

6. Financial statement analysis

During the sixth module, the focus is on learning how to conduct a financial statement analysis. The purposes underlying the decision to conduct a financial statement analysis are explored, along with the actual calculation and interpretation of the results stemming from the analysis. The following topics are discussed:

- Different purposes for conducting a financial statement analysis – internal or external perspective
- How to conduct a financial statement analysis
- What kind of information is needed to conduct a financial statement analysis?
- In-depth analysis of the items on the balance sheet and the income statement
- Calculation of different financial measures (liquidity ratio, solvency, return on equity, profit margin, turnover ratio)
- The Du Pont model
- Analysis of the Du Pont model
- How can the results from the analysis be used/implemented in the Balanced Scorecard?

7. Financial management

The seventh module explores a company's financial management function. The focus is on understanding the different activities within financial management and on how companies structure their financial management activities. The following topics are discussed:

- How SMEs, large companies and public organizations structure their financial management function
- Balance sheet and income statement
- Capital requirements (inventory, accounts receivables)
- Efficient use of capital
- The structure of the capital market
- How to raise capital for the business: Equity or debt?
- Equity (risk capital, equity issue, IPO)
- Debt (bank loans, bonded debt/bond loan, convertible)
- Cost of capital (WACC)
- Mergers and acquisitions

8. Strategy and leading

This eighth and final theoretical module addresses how strategic theory [e.g. Porter, 1980; Mintzberg, 1994] has developed since the 20th century. The key interest here is on how to describe and explain what strategy is and what kind of decisions are involved at all levels. This is addressed from different stakeholders' perspectives, but the emphasis is on the executive point of view. Subfields of interest are e.g. SWOT, stakeholder mapping, and strategic activities, from operations to strategic decisions as well as fads and new trends in strategic planning. Other areas of interest are leadership and operational management.

The structure is described as follows by Carlstrom [2009]:

"During the course, participants meet up for one full day a week for eight weeks, in addition to attending a final reflective seminar with dinner. A different topic is examined each time, going into greater depth by means of lectures, debates and workshops.

This general management course draws heavily on the experiences and inputs of the participants. This often forms the basis of rewarding discussions and insights into participants' own operations and current challenges. To gain an even greater insight into how various kinds of companies work with financial tools, as many of the meetings as possible are held at participants' own companies. The learning dynamic alternates between lectures and practical exercises on the topic for the day, closely linked to the business issues and operating environment of the particular company.

Individual project work takes place throughout this course, in which participants reflect on what they have learned in connection with their companies and areas of interest. At the same time, this provides a good basis for further discussion within the organization once the course is complete".

MANAGEMENT TRAINING AND CASE LEARNING

The authors postulate that management training is at its best when it puts managers into real life situations which challenge their current ability to perceive their business from multiple perspectives. Multidisciplinary case learning is an excellent vehicle to support this target. It allows the development of a common reference 'language' and also encourages the posing of new questions for future decision-making. In addition, it also fosters the development of a narrative that participants can relate to and internalize.

Musselwhite [2006: p 57] states:

"Having already experienced the demands and speed of the real world, managers grow weary with lectures and theory. As the pace of business accelerates, corporations are seeking a faster, more tangible return on their investment in education. In response, university executive education programs are changing both the materials they use and the teaching methods by incorporating business simulations and interdisciplinary teaching teams into the classroom. By injecting real-life situations into the classroom, adult learners are more engaged in the curriculum."

The above suggests that providers of knowledge, especially in executive education, but also on university courses, have to be more innovative in finding and offering new approaches and learning methods.

Case learning methodology allows educators to communicate theory, models and tools that are relevant to and illuminate real-life situations. This promotes deeper learning [Marton, 1988] and therefore develops the skills and capabilities needed to approach and handle upcoming business challenges more successfully.

MULTIDISCIPLINARY CASE LEARNING – CASE KOENIGSEGG

During the spring of 2009, a new business case was used in the Business Knowledge executive course. It was written by two final year civil engineering students [Boström and Håkansson 2009] attending the program of civil engineering at the Faculty of Engineering (LTH) at Lund university, Sweden. The case was submitted as one part of the examination in a course on technology strategy at LTH. It focuses on a Swedish super car manufacturer, founded in 1992, which gained substantial publicity in June 2009 due to its interest in buying the SAAB car manufacturer.

Part of the course delivery deliberately includes different case types; 'classic' cases, hybrid cases and live cases (usually company guest speakers from different functions). The Koenigsegg case (www.koenigsegg.com) was used in modules 2 and 5 - 8.

The next development phase, with EFL project manager Tony Åkesson, was to use the case in a multidisciplinary way [Asplund and Jordan, 2006], drawing on different core competences/specialties in the business administration team. The case was used to communicate the sub-disciplines and key issues to the participating managers, to practice the skill and capability to perceive company issues from several theoretical perspectives at the same time.

MANAGER'S REFLECTIONS ON MULTIDISCIPLINARY CASE LEARNING

In May 2009, seven managers (out of 10) that participated in the EFL Business Knowledge course were interviewed. The aim was to reflect on and assess the different theoretical and practical contributions the course had given them as professionals. The participants were asked to complete a short survey (see below) consisting of seven questions.

Q = Question, R = number of respondent.

The authors' comments and discussion points are given immediately below each question in order to improve readability.

Q1: Did you like the case method?

R1: Yes, it was good! It is always easier to understand the theory when it is applied in practice

R2: A valuable complement to the course literature

R3: Fun and stimulating

- R4: Always good with a connection to the business reality!
 R5: Very stimulating applying the theory to a real practical case!
 R6: Fun, inspirational which stimulates the learning of theory.
 R7: Positive! I wasn't so aware that it meant so much as it then did!

These responses clearly show that the case method is very much appreciated among all the managers. The link between theory and practice was a strong theme. Adjectives used included 'fun', 'stimulating' and 'inspirational' – a very positive response.

Q2: Did the case help you to apply the presented theory?

- R1: With the case comes a background. This can be interpreted differently. The theories are applicable to the case situation. I would be interested to also get the "real" answers to the questions.
 R2: Yes through the case exercises.
 R3: I unfortunately missed some of the case exercises.
 R4: You got an opportunity to see if the theory was applicable.
 R5: Yes, we felt "forced" to really think ourselves into the real decision-making situation and to make judgments based on the theories and tools we learned and the roles we assumed e.g. venture capitalist, potential owner.
 R6: Yes, but a bit basic. It could also be more demanding!
 R7: Yes, in the main part. The case questions could perhaps be even more concrete.

The overall response was positive. R5 made a comment that supports the intended aim of deeper learning with practical applications. Two comments suggested that the case could be more concrete and demanding.

Q3: Were the case questions coming from our different perspectives relevant and clear?

- R1: Yes. We were given the opportunity to a broad analysis and dependant on how we interpreted the case questions, different answers were revealed.
 R2: Yes!
 R3: Yes. I understood why the case questions in the case were relevant. They connected to what we had read/studied.
 R4: Yes, mostly. In some cases we had a discussion of what needed to be done.
 R5: Yes, to a great extent, but I had some difficulties understanding exactly what we were supposed to do in all parts. Luckily for me, there were fellow course colleagues who could explain for me what I perceived as too abstract.
 R6: Yes, but some were a bit elementary. It could be even more challenging!
 R7: Yes, generally. The case questions could perhaps be even more concrete.

Most respondents replied "Yes", but added some qualifying remarks. R5 and R7 felt that the questions could be clarified. R6 again felt that the case could be more demanding.

Q4: How did the case pedagogy (including seminars) function? Please give examples of what was good and not so good?

- R1: There were great variations in the results, maybe dependent on us having to make some assumptions.
 R2: Good group work, but sometimes too short an introduction and de-brief.
 R3: As said, I missed two days, but the exercise about the ability to invest was good! Perhaps the summaries could be improved. Sometimes I felt that all the solutions could work equally well.
 R4: Sometimes facts were missing in order to elaborate. We had to assume certain things.
 R5:-
 R6: It worked best the first time. In some cases, I think that the case didn't contain enough relevant information which could be applied!
 R7: The engagement was good! Had some difficulties separating the case pedagogy from the other used pedagogy.

This is an area where there is clearly room for improvement. Several respondents wanted more explicit introductions to the eight seminars and also to get more condensed summaries of the course days. Perhaps this is because managers had to make more assumptions on their own due to the brief case and to the minimal financial information that was provided.

Q5: Did applying the same case in the different course modules work as a learning approach?

R1: Yes, it's OK!

R2: Yes! It's good when you recognize yourselves.

R3: I don't know! The Koenigsegg seemed more applicable to some lecturers than others.

R4: Yes.

R5: Yes.

R6: Yes, but it could be even better if you also handed out the exercises concerning finance.

R7: Yes, very clearly! The success factors are used in the same case.

Again, the answers were overwhelming yes. One respondent (R3) made a particularly interesting comment. This might suggest that the multidisciplinary case approach requires close cooperation between the educators involved to ensure that relevant part of the case supports each sub-discipline's learning targets equally.

Q6: If we are going to use a multidisciplinary case next time we have the course, what in the case and case seminar would you suggest we keep or/and improve?

R1: I suggest that it's appropriate to have the same industry and case type as Koenigsegg. It's brief and contains enough facts which give us much to interpret and assume.

R2: Maybe another industry which more know about.

R3: Good scope with both financial and market challenges.

R4: Bigger and with more facts.

R5: It's good as it is!

R6: Yes, but you get a bit tired of the same text and the surprise element. The effort and reward of putting yourself into something new doesn't appear if the case text is renewed. My suggestion is that you design the case into three parts and that you are concerned that the information which is relevant for the different case exercises is in focus.

R7: Keep: Topical examples! Interesting! New thinking!

Improve: The flow, clarity and to a certain extent the expectations of us - the students/participants.

This question elicited a wide range of answers from 'keep it as it is' and 'expand the case' to 'use a better-known industry'. There were, as might be expected, directly contradictory answers (R1 and R4) regarding the volume of factual information. Respondent 5 came up with a very practical suggestion for improvement (designing the case in three parts).

Q7: If we use cases in education at EFL, what kind of industry would you prefer the case comes from?

R1: Interesting areas where people have the chance to recognize themselves or well-known examples in the media.

R2: Not the car industry next time. Maybe an industry that everybody knows: the entertainment or service business.

R3: Consumer products in some form are always easier to relate to.

R4: Manufacturing industry with consumer products.

R5: No suggestion.

R6: It doesn't matter as long as the story is interesting and the focus is on storytelling. It would also be fun to follow a case which deals with change work in bigger companies/organizations. One example of this could be Proviva (i.e. functional food) which deals both with the entrepreneurial way of achieving success, and the company Skånemejerier's transformation to also include the scope of probiotic food products. Avoid examples of failures - it is never fun to read about. People are already overwhelmingly good at criticizing.

R7: An industry that several managers can relate to so that the focus is kept on the "new learning" which is connected to the course.

This is a critical question and has a large effect on the engagement level of the participants. The dominant answer was that the participants wanted to recognize themselves/their own industry in the case story; as e.g. entertainment, service industries and consumer products. Case selection (i.e. industry choice) is a topic which requires further investigation. One logical approach would be to have a selection of cases from different sectors that can be used in a multidisciplinary way. Participants could then be involved in selecting the particular case that is most suitable as a learning vehicle.

MAIN FINDINGS

In this final section we present some of the main findings from this study. First, the participants stated clearly that the multidisciplinary case learning method helped them understand and apply the different theoretical perspectives as well as concepts. The participants were keen to have even more demanding as well as even clearer case questions from the different perspectives within business administration.

Second, all of the executives really enjoyed and appreciated the use of this unique business case as well as the multidisciplinary case method in itself. This is demonstrated in the responses to the survey and in their active participation.

Third, there were several responses which suggested ways of improving the approach. More factual information could be included; e.g. financial information (it was very brief in this business case) and also other information on the business environment (e.g. on customers and competitors). This would result in a fuller, more informative case so that participants can independently probe into the business case in greater depth.

Finally, dividing the multidisciplinary business case into several parts could help to maintain a high level of interest from the participating managers throughout the whole learning process.

The benefits of multidisciplinary case learning are significant.

There is a significant time-saving as participants do not have to familiarize themselves with several different cases (often from different sectors). Mental energy can be focused on concepts, ideas, solutions and learning outcomes, rather than absorbing supporting data and background case information. Participants can also more easily recognize different learning strands that overlap and interweave, contributing to a more holistic understanding of real business operations. There are also, however, potential drawbacks to this approach (see comments in survey results).

FUTURE RESEARCH

Decision-making in industry and public organizations is by necessity a multidisciplinary task. Various functions (e.g. Finance, HR, Marketing and Production) must take each others' viewpoints into account in order to make informed decisions with the best possible outcomes. The multidisciplinary case learning approach perfectly mirrors the decision-making demands of the real world, with competing and conflicting interests. The authors therefore suggest that this approach could become a key learning vehicle in executive education. Several areas warrant further investigation.

First, case preparation could be improved through evaluating the level of detail required. The aim would be to strike a balance between sufficient information to build a case, versus limited preparation time. Most executives do not have a great deal of time to read very detailed case backgrounds beforehand. Further studies could assess the effectiveness of introducing separate, but complementary parts of the same multidisciplinary case at different stages of the course programme.

Second, selection of case (especially industry choice) is a critical question which has a large effect on the engagement level of the participants. The dominant answer in this study was that the participants wanted to recognize themselves/their own industry in the case story; as e.g. entertainment, service industries and consumer products. One logical approach would be to have a selection of cases from different sectors that can be used in a multidisciplinary way. Participants could then be involved in selecting the particular case that is most suitable as a learning vehicle.

The whole learning process could also be enriched with other illustrations and various complementary mini-cases in order to further stimulate the managers' interest and engagement in the different modules.

In conclusion, the authors feel that reflective, multidisciplinary case learning, where educators and participants commit to evaluating the used case, has many potential benefits in executive education.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to express their deep gratitude to all of the managers in the EFL Business Knowledge spring programme 2009 for their competence, creativity and active participation in the course and case discussions. Besides case discussion they also took the time to answer the evaluation survey. Profound thanks especially to project leader Tony Åkesson (EFL) for helping us to launch and manage the idea of applying a multidisciplinary case and learning approach in the executive course from idea to finish. Finally, thank you to Malena Carlstrom & Ylva Bockman for providing valuable internal EFL material and to Matt Cobb for his invaluable help proofreading the final text.

REFERENCES

Asplund, C-J and Jordan, P (2006) Designing multidiscipline cases. *International Journal of Case Method & Research* XVIII, 3

Asplund, C-J and Bjerke, B (2008) Learning with cases in entrepreneurial education. Paper presented at the 8th European Summer University "Entrepreneurship in Europe. University Paris Dauphine. Department Education Permanente, Paris, France. September 18-24

Bostrom, A & Hakansson, H. (2009) Koenigsegg Business Case. Institution of Industrial Management and Logistics, Lund University, Sweden.

Carlstrom, M (2009) Internal material EFL. School of economics and management, Lund University, Sweden.

Marton, F (1988) Describing and improving learning, in R.R. Schmeck (ed.) *Learning strategies and learning styles*, New York: Plenum

Mintzberg, H (1994). *The rise and fall of strategic planning*. Hemel Hempstead, Prentice Hall.

Musselwhite, C (2006) University executive education gets real. *T+P* Vol 60 Nr 5

Morgan, G (1986) *Images of an Organization*. Beverly hills, CA SAGE Publications

Normann, R (1975/77) *Management for growth*. Chichester, Wiley.

Porter, M.E. (1980) *Competitive strategy*. New York, Free Press

Prahalad, C.K & Hamel, G (1990) The core competence of the corporation. *Harvard Business Review*. January-February

Trigwell, K. and Prosser, (1991) Using student learning outcome measures in the evaluation of teaching, *Higher education Research and development*, 13, 309-7.

Wikstrom, S & Normann, R (1992) *Knowledge and value*. London, Routledge.