LAUNCHING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND CASE METHOD BASED APPROACHES IN CZECH BUSINESS CLASSES

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Abstract

This paper relates the experiences of teachers at the University of Economics, Prague, who have used interactive teaching approaches with their university classes, and provides a set of recommendations for those who wish to try innovative teaching methods with unfamiliar audiences. The authors (1) outline the difficulties that Czech professors encounter in trying interactive (experiential and case method) instruction, (2) describe methods for achieving student involvement and for increasing enthusiasm for participative learning in two courses, and (3) present a set of guidelines for introducing interactive teaching methods for maximum success.

KEY WORDS: Experiential education, participatory instruction, cooperative learning

INTRODUCTION

In the Czech Republic, a new school law took effect on January 1, 2005, the intent of which is to eliminate the traditional “drill” method of teaching and adopt more innovative and varied teaching methods that require the active participation of students in class. While this law is aimed at basic education, pressure will be put on universities to adopt more innovative teaching approaches as well. Experiential and case method based instruction have been used extensively in management education for several decades in the U.S.A., however professors teaching in central Europe who try to teach interactively report mixed results. Since central European students are not accustomed to responding in class, few teachers adopt experiential learning methods. This paper presents the experiences of two teachers at the University of Economics, Prague, who have used interactive teaching approaches with their university classes, and provides a set of recommendations for those who wish to try innovative teaching methods with unfamiliar audiences. This paper will (1) outline the difficulties that Czech professors perceive in trying interactive (experiential and case method) instruction, (2) describe methods for achieving student involvement and enthusiasm for participative learning in two courses, and (3) present a set of guidelines for introducing interactive teaching methods for maximum success.

DIFFICULTIES USING INTERACTIVE LEARNING METHODS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

While it is widely accepted that the effectiveness of managers depends on their ability to act in a particular way and to make appropriate decisions regarding policies and practices in their organizations, Czech schools have a history of lecture/exam instruction. Teachers and students expect this method, and the university schedule and class sizes are set up to facilitate lectures and exam-based grading. Students
are admitted to the university by virtue of passing rigorous content-oriented exams, and similarly, their graduation is determined by their ability to pass an exam.

Even young university instructors are hesitant to use interactive methods, because they lack experience in their application. Young instructors also lack confidence in their ability to manage group discussions and group activities. Some may doubt whether experiential learning methods are compatible with the “seriousness” of university education. As a result (and in the absence of the appropriate training in the application of interactive methods), they often simply copy their own teachers' methods and the traditional approaches to university education for future managers live another day.

Honey and Mumford [1982] classify individuals into four types in relation to their preferred learning styles: Activists, who learn best from activities when they can engross themselves in immediate tasks; reflectors, who learn best from activities where they have the opportunity to review what has happened; theorists, who learn best when what is offered is part of a system, concept or theory; and pragmatists, who learn best where there is an obvious link between the subject matter and “real world” situations. While activists prefer such methods as role-playing, brainstorming and large-group discussion, reflectors prefer observing activities, paired discussions, and feedback from others. Theorists like to listen to presentations of theoretical models, statistics, quotes, etc.; pragmatists embrace case studies, discussion and time to think about how to apply learning to actual situations. Few people fall discretely into one category, and it is highly likely that any given class will include activists, reflectors, theorists as well as pragmatists. Since managers as a group are not theory builders, course designs that accommodate all learning styles and acknowledge the action-oriented nature of the managerial work are better suited than traditional methods to train managers.

EXAMPLES OF CURRENT INNOVATIONS

SUCCESSFUL EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES

University instructors who have adopted interactive approaches and experiential learning formats in their classes in Czech universities tend to be those with psychological training. Even under the communist regime, psychologists in the Czech Republic kept in touch with world developments in social skills training in a group format for various professional groups, including managers. Thus, psychologists at the University of Economics, Faculty of Business Administration, were prepared and eager to design and lead experiential learning classes in the early nineties, immediately after the Communist government was ousted. In 1995, they developed a one semester course “Social and Managerial Skills Training” (students attend 4 session-hours a week) based completely on experiential learning methods and using group dynamics as a vital source for self-reflection and feedback.

Students’ responses to the course have been consistently very positive. However, during the early years of the course’s existence, the instructor had to work hard to assist students in overcoming their discomfort and lack of self-confidence and to persuade them that experiential learning methods were useful. Today, students consider the course to be one of the best courses in the curriculum. Demand for the course regularly outpaces capacity. However, instructors still need to explain the rationale for student participation and experiential learning.

The course and each lesson are designed to follow Kolb’s experiential learning cycle. According to Kolb [Kolb, Rubin & Osland, 1991], the experiential learning process involves four separate stages: concrete experience, observations and reflections, formulation of abstract concepts and generalizations, and testing implications of the concepts in new situations, in a different context. Thus, any experiential learning activities, such as role-playing exercises, should be followed by reflection and feedback. Other important considerations for the success of such a course are its relevance to theory and its application to real-world situations. In other words, theoretical concepts must be clearly related to the exercises used in the course. The use of personal action plans, formulated by the students at the beginning of the course, can stimulate thinking about practical implications in “real world” contexts with the goal to learn how to transfer these skills to out-of-class situations. This emphasis on application and transferability has contributed to the of the “Social and Managerial Skills Training” course, both, in terms of improved learning and popularity with students.

To prepare students to participate in the course in a non-traditional way and to present to them the value of active learning through group activities, the logistics and methods of the course, as they relate to
Kolb’s learning cycle, need to be presented and discussed during the first session. The purpose of this discussion is to develop, interactively, desirable rules for group cooperation, explain the modified role of the teacher as facilitator and the crucial role of feedback and self-disclosure as facilitators for personal development.

To ensure the long-term success of an experiential course, it is necessary to design the curriculum around actual job demands, so that students can see how the course activities relate to situations they may encounter on the job. The results of two surveys of Czech managers [Jaroslavá & Winn, 1996; Jaroslavá, 2004] provide insights into the social and managerial skills that are needed for success in management in the Czech Republic. While these surveys merely report attitudes and perspectives of a small group of managers (respondents in the second survey were practicing managers from 113 large, medium and small Czech enterprises and non-profit organizations), the findings were valuable input to keeping the course curriculum relevant to “real world” needs. For example, survey respondents [Jaroslavá, 2004] reported that they felt that mastering a wide range of social and managerial skills was important in their jobs. Job performance is largely situation-specific, however, the survey results indicate that certain skills are needed in all organizational and situational contexts. Communication skills, with an emphasis on assertiveness and persuasion, were regarded as the most valuable skills for managerial success. Other essential skills include “stimulating others to reach common results” and “effective delegating.” In addition to behavioral skills, the respondents named personal characteristics such as self-confidence, self-reflection, self-awareness and empathy, all fostering flexibility and effectiveness in any social situation and in dealing with people in general.

Other valuable insights from this research were obtained from the respondents’ descriptions of the uncertainties they had experienced at the outset of their managerial career, and the difficulty in accepting their new role as a manager. From this point of view, the experiential-based learning course is an important tool for gaining personal experience by practicing some aspects of managerial work in a “safe” class environment. Such experience can lead to positive changes in self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, defined as “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of actions required to manage prospective situations” [Bandura, 1986], is related to preparedness and willingness to fulfill the individual dimension of his/her professional (in this case, managerial) role [Bandura, 1997].

For the instructor, the preparation of an experiential learning course can be more demanding than the preparation of a traditional lecture/discussion course, however, there is a great potential for a positive teaching/learning experience for the instructor and the students. Obvious benefits include clear evidence of participants’ growth and learning—not only cognitive, but also emotional involvement and development—as well as the students’ reported increase in self-efficacy and confidence to try new tasks in their future managerial roles.

SUCCESSFUL TEACHING OF ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS

A survey of entrepreneurship experts in the Czech Republic corroborates the prevailing view that the culture in the Czech Republic is not entrepreneurial [Lukeš, et al., 2004]. Czechs are characterized as being low on initiative, self-responsibility, and tolerance for risk – traits that are widely considered to be essential for entrepreneurial success. Czech universities are widely criticized for teaching theories, but not showing students how theories can be applied to real business situations. When these experts were asked what forms of teaching and training should be used, they reported the following: The education in the classroom should be much more “practice” oriented. Rather than be tested by classical “question-answer” format, examinations should be more application focused. Simulations, managerial games, case studies, teamwork activities, and company scenarios should be used as learning tools.

• There should be obligatory practice in companies, and more partnerships between universities and companies should be established.
• There should be a combination of theoretical lessons and practical training.
• The teachers should have entrepreneurial experience, and involve practicing managers and entrepreneurs in the lectures.
• Teachers who support students in discussing controversial examples and look for multiple solutions should facilitate the class discussions.
• The classes should be smaller, with fewer students in each class.
The courses should promote self-responsibility, autonomy, proactive behavior, and self-development.

The Department of Managerial Psychology and Sociology at the University of Economics, Prague, has launched a new “Psychology of Entrepreneurship” course, which uses a cooperative learning approach to the teaching of entrepreneurship. Instructors there have been engaged in a knowledge exchange with German and American colleagues to help develop innovative forms of entrepreneurship teaching for this new course. Also, they have been able to build on their knowledge of experiential learning from the “Social and Managerial Skills Training” course (described above), which has been refined over nine years. In addition, the Department of Managerial Psychology and Sociology has participated in survey conducted by the European Foundation for Entrepreneurship (EFER) on entrepreneurship education [Wilson, 2004]. The main conclusions of this survey are as follows:

- Entrepreneurship education in Europe has been growing dramatically over the past five years and is expected to continue growing. On the other hand, it remains elective and tends to be offered in stand-alone courses.
- A variety of teaching methods are being utilized. The most prevalent are lectures, followed by cases, projects, exercises, and reading.
- Many teachers have experimented with a range of approaches to make the teaching of entrepreneurship practically oriented: role-playing, group discussions and presentations, creativity exercises, problem solving, contacts with firms, group diagnostics, students interviewing entrepreneurs, business games, elevator pitches, etc.
- There is a need for workshops, research methods, and training in case study teaching and writing.
- There is an over-emphasis on the start-up phase. More attention should be devoted to culture, attitudes, skills, growth phases of entrepreneurial firms, intrapreneurship (internal new-venture development) and differences between SMEs and high growth companies.
- Alumni who have started companies should be tracked.

The survey supports the department’s current efforts in developing an entrepreneurship curriculum and provides an impetus for including activities outside the classroom, such as coaching start-ups, business plan competitions, internships with young firms and incubator parks.

The goal is to give students the skills they need to become successful entrepreneurs, and thereby increase their ability and confidence to start their own ventures. The methods adopted for this course are a combination of different forms of entrepreneurship teaching strategies in order to maximize student involvement and business understanding. The first course features case studies (2-3 per term), active participation of entrepreneurs in lectures (1-2 per term), field interviews with entrepreneurs, classroom discussion of business concepts in an open discussion format, and student presentations, “elevator pitches,” of their own business plans. The instructors also employ self-diagnostic tools to map entrepreneurial traits (e.g. self-efficacy, personal initiative, locus of control) and role-play games. Role-plays are efficient tools for honing practical skills, and, more importantly, they encourage students to act. Students usually like these activities because they are more engaging than the traditional approach used by most of the faculty. Role-plays and discussions are not only about talking, but also about doing. Business plans and field exercises enable students to experience the feeling of creating something new from available (limited) resources.

Students also learn to take responsibility for their own behavior. They evaluate their own performance in each seminar using the following scale: 1 – active participation with high impact, 2 – active participation, 3 – passive participation, 4 – non-participation in the seminar. The final evaluation consists of the average of these participation rankings (weight 40%), an elevator pitch presentation of their own business concept (weight 20%), and an interview with a practicing entrepreneur (40%). This interview focuses on the values, motivation, and behavior of the entrepreneur and the changes that occurred in these areas after business launch. The idea for using interviews with entrepreneurs came from Morris [2004].

Case studies are one of the more important teaching tools for this course. In the U.S.A., the practice of using case studies has a long tradition. There are long complex case studies used in graduate courses or simpler ones used with undergraduate students. The students receive the case study in advance of the class discussion. Students are expected to read the case, analyze the situation and develop recommendations. The case is then discussed in class with all students. The discussion can be teacher
directed - leading students to understand the crucial points in the case or facilitation which can be more student-centered - students lead the discussion and come to their own conclusions.

In the Czech Republic, because of the psychologist training background that many faculty have and because of the desire of emphasizing entrepreneurial thinking and initiative, the second approach is usually preferred. Therefore, students receive cases in advance for reading and preparation. Short cases, which are less complex than those, which are typically used in, graduate courses in the U.S.A. are preferred. Because students spend more time in preparing for case based classes than other classes, assignments need to be kept at reasonable levels.

The following types of cases can be used: 1. Cases with a “learn from the case” focus which are used in classroom discussions facilitated by the teacher, 2. Cases with a “recommend what to do” focus which encourage active and creative entrepreneurial thinking. Students are divided into teams of four or five. This setting facilitates the involvement of those who might be afraid to talk in larger group settings. Even the most introverted student is required to participate actively in a small group setting. After solutions and recommendations are prepared, team members present their solutions to entire class which plays the role of stakeholders, asks questions, points out weaknesses and demands explanations. At the end of the session, students vote for the most persuasive team. This is followed by a teacher-led discussion of the implications and lessons learned. This classroom setting allows students to develop self-initiative, refine presentation skills, be creative in open-ended or ambiguous situations, increase self-efficacy (when they belong to the winning team) and begin to appreciate the importance of effective teamwork.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INTRODUCING NEW METHODS

In any experiential learning course aimed at the development of social and managerial skills, the first class session should be used as an opportunity to engage students in thinking about the course content in relation to their own personal expectations. Rather than just presenting the outline of the course, the instructor can elicit immediate involvement by suggesting that students make a cognitive map of their personal priorities in relation to the presented course syllabus. Working in small groups, where students share their priorities with others, a participative and cooperative learning climate can be established at the beginning of the course. The student-generated cognitive maps should be retained and used for “framing” at the start and at the end of the course. This would allow group members to determine if the initial expectations have been met.

Individual propensity to resist change and the following four barriers are challenges to be met when introducing new teaching methods: self-interest, misunderstanding and lack of trust, contradictory assessments and low tolerance for change.

“There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, than to take a lead in the introduction of a new order of things, because the innovation has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new.” [Machiavelli’s *The Prince*]

Appealing to self interest

It is in the self-interest of those who have mastered learning through drill and lecture to keep the status quo. Students who were successful under the old system will need a rationale for changing the learning environment and some degree of confidence that they can succeed under the new rules. Effective teachers must not only create a comfortable environment for students to participate, they must also explain the reason for the change. Students who have had work experience will acknowledge that the business world relies on those who can apply theory to action, rather than those who can merely recite definitions and quote studies or theorems. When students see that the new method of instruction will prepare them for success in their chosen careers, they will be less resistant to new methods. Change theory suggests that a coalition of enthusiasts is essential for launching any new program. Thus, it is in the instructor’s best interest to find even a few students who can act as allies in adopting the new methods of instruction.

Alleviating misunderstanding and lack of trust

Introducing any new program or method of instruction provokes distrust, especially if the students have not had prior experience with the new method or with the instructor. Written guidelines can help
alleviate misunderstanding, but formal discussion of “ground rules” for the class is essential to establish mutual understanding of the new system. While student buy-in is increased when they have input to the new system, the university system creates the expectation that the teacher is in charge of the instruction and, thereby, the rules for the class. Careful explanation and clarity of guidelines will help start the class on a positive note. Trust will only be established if the instructor is consistent in adhering to the guidelines established at the outset of the class. Furthermore the instructor needs to reinforce the rationale for the approach and provide positive reinforcement early on.

Avoiding contradictory assessments

Even the most accepted climate of participation will not support learning objectives of a course when students are expected to demonstrate discreet knowledge of theory and facts to earn an acceptable grade in the class. Unless participation is rewarded, students will revert to behavior geared toward passing the course, rather than to concentrate on developing skills and striving for personal growth. Grading participation can create difficulties, however, if the teacher does not introduce a qualitative element into the assignments and activities. A balance between focused participation and free-flowing discussion is essential, so that the course is not perceived to be free of rigor or grounded theory. Grading must be structured so students don’t think that any answer is fine or that participation simply means talking and dominating the discussion. Students must be taught to participate in a way which enhances the learning experience for the entire class. Wrap-up sessions or “debriefs” help case teaching and experiential learning remain focused on the purpose of the instruction and highlight the difference in quality of various students’ inputs.

Overcoming low tolerance for change

Any new program or method of instructions will be met with resistance unless the instructor is able to tune into the current culture and environment and ease the comfort level of the most vocal resisters. Balancing the workload of a participatory course with a traditional course is difficult, since active participation requires advance preparation on the part of both the student and the instructor. Allowing in-class time for small-group concept review may increase the involvement of those who try to sit on the sidelines in a large class. Activities and cases must be chosen carefully for their relevance and links to the course objective. Role-plays and presentations can often ease students’ fears about engaging in classroom behavior that is new to them. While combining lecture and participation may seem like a compromise that will help students ease into the new program, usually the reverse is true. While explanations or mini-lectures can be used to clarify or reinforce concepts sparked by a case discussion or experiential exercise, devoting entire class sessions to traditional lectures can, in fact, communicate to the students that lectures are also valuable components of successful learning systems. For students to believe in the value of new methods, instructors must fully embrace these methods.

Barriers to change must be overcome by instructors and students. Careful preparation and launch are essential so that teachers do not abandon the new methods before they have gotten a foothold. The first day of class presents the best opportunity for the creative instructor to introduce new methods of instruction and setting the tone of the sessions to follow. The first day of class, students’ curiosity about the course is at its highest. The first class session is the “tone-setting” session, which will establish student attitudes about the class. By creating a welcoming learning environment, the instructor is preparing the conditions for the successful introduction of new teaching methods. Too often, instructors only explain the syllabus or outline the topics for the course only and, thereby, forego the opportunity to engage students from the start of the course. Instructors contribute to a passive learning environment by catering to students’ expectations of the status quo, thus hindering their ability to change students’ perceptions and behavior as the course progresses.

Teachers, like students, need support and grave acknowledgment and respect from their peers. Universities that wish to be on the forefront of change must involve their faculty in workshops and discussions, which provide encouragement and the opportunity to learn from their own mistakes and successes as well as the successes and failures of others. A maverick instructor can create a cooperative classroom climate on his or her own. But only when these methods are widely adopted, will students take them seriously and demand that other instructors adopt these methods as well and distance themselves from a pure lecture mode. Encouragement, reinforcement and guidance from deans and department chairs will help launch these new programs successfully.
TEACHER SUPPORT: ONE EXAMPLE

One form of support for teachers is to provide training opportunities to master new teaching methods and pedagogical skills. At the University of Economics, Prague, an experimental course for young teachers was implemented in 2002. The aim of the course was to support and encourage new teaching methods by young teachers at the start of their professional career. The course content covered (approximately 30 hours of instruction) discussions about the University teacher’s role in the classroom, learning styles and group dynamics, developing critical thinking for students and discussion- and experiential-based learning methods. The participants also had the opportunity to practice new skills by “microteaching” training with video recordings and structured feedback by the course instructors. At the outset, the instructors of the course had to overcome the distrust of some participants that participative methods could be used in a traditional (large group) class setting. Therefore, it was useful to introduce “small participative tools” such as snowball discussions, buzz groups, debates, and “think-pair-share” techniques that are easily adapted to any classroom format. Important for the participant’s self-efficacy was hands-on practice working with students’ questions, especially how to formulate student questions in relation to the cognitive process which is supposed to be addressed, and how to react to questions so that students are encouraged to think about more thoroughly, without labeling students answers as being “good” or “bad.”

Participation in such a course provides teachers with useful knowledge and skills and fosters attitude change towards participative teaching methods. Perhaps the most important function of such a course is to provide a support network of colleagues at the university who use these methods in their classes.

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