

Business Higher Education “In Action”

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Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the link between competitive business higher education and action learning as an appropriate method for improving the educational process. A really competitive university should focus on both information and capabilities and should permanently adapt to its students and to demands in the work market. Although many ideas are very well understood by simply reading a text or seeing a documentary, every process is really “felt” only when “doing things”. My paper aims to present the general benefits of action learning, by having as a case study a course of Operations Management. I use as a sample my students from the Faculty of Management (second year of study), in the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, Romania. Students have to meet both the perspective of traditional learning and action learning. Students have participated in many projects looking as simple games (i.e. they have to organize themselves in teams in order to produce snowmen, hats, pancakes, etc). Debriefing is very important and leads to a series of conclusions for each student that he/she keeps in mind for a long period of time from then on. The main methods used for this paper are observation and a questionnaire in which my students gave a valuable feedback. Results confirm the hypothesis that action learning leads to deeper knowledge of the processes.

Keywords: *business higher education, action learning, knowledge, capabilities, results.*

JEL classification: I21, I23, M51.

Introduction

Competitiveness in business higher education is difficult to be measured. However, it is clear that being competitive means both attracting good students and, by having these inputs, attaining good outputs, graduates who really develop their knowledge and capabilities. Whilst capabilities are clearly better developed by action learning and training programs rely on this idea, this paper aims to emphasize that action learning is better also for acquiring knowledge.

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1. Competitive business higher education and the need for action learning

Competitiveness in business higher education, as competitiveness in education generally, is very difficult to be measured and is clearly subject of a biased view. Quality is for sure an important factor to ensure competitiveness, but even defining quality in this field means some issues to be addressed.

As quality and implicitly competitiveness mean a good relation to customers' needs, the first issue arises when defining the customer, who may be considered the service user (the student), the payer for the service (the government and/or a company) or the final user of "products", by thinking that graduates are the products of education service (the future employers). By looking at students as consumers rather than products, a second important issue arises, as generally students are able to identify their short term needs, but they do not have enough knowledge and experience to know what they need for the long run (Green, 1994). Therefore, looking at the market and graduates' view might be sometimes a much better approach.

Higher education should lead both to specialized knowledge and to skills for applying this knowledge in real complex situations, including communication skills and skills of working in teams (Ramaswamy, et al., 2001). Actually, teamwork has become a strategic tool for companies' competitiveness. However, there are authors who consider the notion is rarely really used in both academic and corporate thinking (Reich, et al, 2009).

As new changes in the work market can be observed practically every day, it is clear that the methods of teaching should easily adapt to this dynamics. Academic institutions' culture should be driven by changes in the external environment (Grant, et al, 2010). The authors point out the need to develop additional and alternative methods of teaching that are more relevant for students' future work than traditional lecture, seminar and computer laboratory formula. All instructional methods have advantages and disadvantages and the "art" of professors and trainers is to make them flow from one to another, making the process seamless to the students. This is more important as knowledge determines most frequently and often, decisively, the obtaining of competitive advantage by the companies, without which these ones can neither develop nor survive (Grigore, 2008).

Knowledge transfer in traditional education means learning is an external, objective process, in which knowledge must be transmitted and received in the form of information, theories and research findings, after reception learners being able to apply the knowledge to their own purposes (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002). However, there is also another possibility of knowledge transfer which appears to have much better results. Thus, through action learning, learners not only absorb the results of research produced by specialists, but are also able to generate knowledge. It is actually what Kolb observed a long time ago (1984), when developing the so-called "experiential learning cycle", composed of four stages:

(1) concrete experience, (2) observation and reflection, (3) forming abstract concepts and (4) testing in new situations.

Action learning means learning from experience and critical reflection on that experience, through group discussion, trial and error, discovery and learning from each other (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002), by addressing actual workplace issues, in relatively complex situations and conditions. Action learning is a powerful and inspiration technique, even if it sometimes risky (West & Choueke, 2003). Action learning is clearly contextual: it depends on the organizational culture, on the purpose for which it is designed and on the existing constraints (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002).

Social-constructive theories (Woolfolk, 2001) consider social interaction an integrative part of the learning process. Working in teams deepens the learning experience and promotes active learning (van Offenbeek, 2001). What it is very interesting, it appears that in collaborative learning, students learn more when giving an explanation than when receiving one (Ross, 1994). The reason is clear: a more active implication when explaining than when listening. Collaborative learning means that students engage in a common and authentic task where each peer depends on and is accountable to each other (Rahman, 2009). Communication and cooperation are vital and this is also what the modern society requires.

Effective team implementation can increase motivation for work and job satisfaction (Griffin, et al, 2001). Of course, this idea can be easily transferred to the learning process. There are many articles in which the emphasis is put on teamwork, as it is generally “easier” and it creates synergy. While this is generally true, there are some conditions to be met in order to attain synergy. Working in teams is not an easy task and satisfaction of team members is determined by multiple factors such as team’s composition, group processes within the team or the nature of work by itself (Campion, et al, 1993).

For faculty projects, working occasionally in teams for the learning process is useful, but not as much as it is when a really team-based learning environment is created (Radu, et al, 2010). Team-based learning environments should involve small student teams working together for the entire semester, using class time to discuss readings, solve problems and apply concepts, previously learned through individual reading assignments (Avery-Gomez et al, 2010). Of course, individual work is also important in this process. Without this individual part of the learning process, group discussion would not have a strong basis.

The traditional learning environment in Romania does not encourage enough action learning and teamwork. As a result, there are also many students who consider the combination between individual work and classical teaching methods as the only really good working formula.

Although I generally combat the criticism with respect to case studies and action learning, I have to admit there are also real problems, disadvantages, and potential risks when using this method. First, in many situations it is not appropriate. Second, there is the risk of over-simplification, and insufficient information can lead to inappropriate results. Last but not least, there is the risk that

students may not see relevance to their own situation and therefore do not cooperate as they should (Radu, 2010).

Action learning process helps students to develop their ability to think differently, unconventionally or from a new perspective (“thinking outside the box”). This is especially because of a deeper understanding of a process when really doing it. The idea of a whole team involved is also important, as there are more thoughts, plans and ideas, and sharing them should always lead to better, synergetic results.

2. Case Study – Action Learning in Operations Management

My experimental analysis concentrates on the course of Operations Management. Operations Management is not easy to be understood by undergraduate students and because of this I tried to apply action learning methods.

The main methods used for this paper are observation of my students’ work and results and a questionnaire in which my students gave a valuable feedback.

I could easily see and even feel the general benefits and potential risks of action learning for the course of Operations Management for the students of the Faculty of Management (second year of study), in the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, Romania. Actually, what I did is – without wanting just to play with words – action learning about action learning.

Briefly, for a series composed of 5 groups of students, the team project in 2012 consists in really producing something. Their production process serves as an introduction for various concepts. By chance, through drawing lots, each group of students had a particular type of project, as presented in the following table. Each group is composed of about 20 students, which represents 5 teams of 4 members. However, some of the teams are composed of 5 members. Teams are very competitive and their colleagues from the other groups do have to choose what project they consider to be the best (with justification). Each member of the team has to also write an individual essay of about 3 pages regarding their topic (this is assessed only by the professor). The essays are also important for feeling the pulse of the learning process. While talking about the same thing, people do think and feel differently. Therefore, it is very important for everyone to describe this experience in his own view.

Students have participated in many projects looking as simple games, but the competition between teams does transform these “games” into real work. Of course, debriefing is very important and leads to a series of conclusions for each student that he/she keeps in mind for a long period of time from then on.

The five types of projects they had to work on are the following:

- Group 1 – they had to produce, at choice: (1) snowmen; (2) ice-cream in the shape of snowmen; they had to make a film of 5 minutes to show what they do, how they organize; the purpose refers to understanding the different principles of organization for mass production (snowmen or ice-cream) and individual

production (film made); they also had to write an individual essay “Mass production versus individual production – how we organized differently for the two types of products”;

- Group 2 – their theme was “Six Thinking Hats” (one white, one red, one black, one yellow, one green, one blue); hats could be made of any material (including paper) and had to be brought to the course (of course, students kept them afterwards); students should also have a film of 5 minutes to show how they chose a particular manufacturing process; the purpose refers to understanding the criteria that serve as a base for choosing a particular process, or, in other words, how to attain the best value for cost for the finished product; they also had to write an individual essay “Quality, cost and value for cost – Six Hats”;

- Group 3 – they had to build towers made of a series of preset materials; students could make the towers using all or part of the following materials: sheets A4 (maximum 20 / team), flipchart sheets (up to 4 / team), cardboard sheets of flip chart size (up to 2 / team), adhesive tapes, colored post-its, colored markers; they did not need to make a film; all the teams worked simultaneously for 30 minutes; the purpose refers to choosing the best technology by taking into account the following criteria: (1) cost of raw materials, (2) total time (they were allowed and encouraged to finish earlier!), (3) design, (4) height, (5) stability, (6) resistance; all criteria were equally important; they also had to write an individual essay “Choosing the best alternative on several criteria – the towers”;

- Group 4 – this time students could choose what they should produce. Maybe even more than for the other projects, it could be seen that creativity and analytical thinking were encouraged; students also had to make a film of 5 minutes to present the process, the concept of “bottleneck” and some solutions to the problems that arise from that bottleneck; the purpose refers to illustrating with originality the concept of “bottleneck” and solving problems that may arise; they also had to write an individual essay “The bottleneck. Case study: production of...”

- Group 5 – students had to produce pancakes; they also had to make a film of 5 minutes to present the production process and the organization that allows a bigger production capacity; the purpose of their project refers to organizing in order to produce as many pancakes as possible in a given time frame (students had to make calculations for a period of 5 hours, of course without simulating the whole interval); they also had to write an individual essay “Production capacity – pancakes”.

The projects for Operations Management were designed in this way in order to have a proper and therefore balanced combination between “push learning” and “pull learning”. These action learning-based projects are a good example of “pull learning”, in which students are really in charge of their learning by exploring their actions as they work. However, in order to retain some concepts and to move further to another topic, “push learning “ is also needed, the one in which students have less power in defining the knowledge they need to develop.

As other studies also suggested (Santos and Powell, 2001), a balanced approach between “push” and “pull” learning seems to be the best way to move further.

Results confirm the hypothesis that action learning leads to deeper knowledge of the processes. By having the same main questions as students from previous years had, their average scores (marks) were higher for a test applied during the semester. It is expected that this result to be also confirmed at the end of the semester, at the final exam (to be seen in June 2012). I can also confirm that a similar project was just partly implemented last year (students could choose what they wanted to produce in order to demonstrate the difference between mass production and individual production; they also had to estimate the costs). Results were also better in 2011 compared to previous years, but it is expected that this year the progress will be greater, as in 2012 projects were used as introduction for different concepts and all the course was designed in order to make really use of action learning.

Risk aversion is different among my students and this is one of the reasons for which they behave differently when dealing with their unfamiliar tasks. Edmonstone (2002) developed a task / setting matrix that explains some important attitudes regarding action learning. According to the task / setting matrix, problems can be seen as a combination of either familiar or unfamiliar tasks and familiar or unfamiliar settings.

Table 1 Task / setting matrix and the Operations Management projects

		Task	
		Familiar	Unfamiliar
Setting	Familiar	1	2 – Operations Management projects
	Unfamiliar	3	4

The projects are a combination between a familiar setting (students were allowed to choose their own team; they generally previously did work together for other projects) and an unfamiliar task. Although action learning can be used also for improving familiar tasks, it was not the case, as the main objective was to introduce a series of concepts by having them previously tried “in action”. Actually, as also Edmonstone (2002) noticed, in Cell 1 (combination of familiar task and familiar setting) there is also the danger to create a problem just for the purposes of the action learning program, by lacking the challenge needed.

My experimental projects also helped me to observe the different behaviors caused by the situation in which knowledge was not only received by students, but it was also partially created by them. Edmonstone (2003) presented the energy investment model, developed from the research of Goleman in 1995 (“Emotional Intelligence”). In the energy investment model, four behavior styles of set members are identified, by taking into account two dimensions: energy (which can be high or

low) and attitude (which can be positive or negative). Therefore, there are the spectators, who are positive about what is happening, do want to contribute, but lack confidence, by having a low energy. Then there are the victims, who unfortunately stand low in both dimensions. There are also the cynics, who do have a high energy level, but a negative attitude, by tending to block any change which they do not personally own. Last but not least, there are the players, the ones who stand high in both dimensions and who make excellent set members. My students' work for their projects for Operations Management showed all the four behavior styles. However, the role of the professor as a facilitator is very important, in order to transform most of them into real players.

For the course of Operations Management, a visit to a factory or even to an organization, only to see how operations work, is essential (for instance in a restaurant, to analyze the layout planning; or in any medium to big company to analyze the procedures). For any course, such a partnership is very important. It is important for students, in order to see the relevance of a series of topics and in order to learn as they should from the very beginning. It is important to add that sometimes in order to learn something you have to unlearn others, which is not an easy process. Therefore a combination between action learning and seeing the concepts applied in real organizations helps them learn as they should from the very beginning. The partnership is also important to professors, in order to permanently add new perspectives to their courses, to be permanently up-to-date and to make their courses more attractive. Last but not least, it is important to companies as well, by having the possibility to identify some of the students as potential suitable employees. By having people involved in such experiments, companies can also have access to an important set of information regarding the potential of leadership of the students. In such teams, all should be equal, as there is no one to have a formal authority. However, their involvement is different and potential leaders can be quite easily identified.

Of course, just practicing action learning is not enough. Partnerships with companies should be more often used. Koo (1999) pointed out the need for learning more about action learning for all the involved parties – the educational providers (the government and the education institutes), the professors (who in action learning terms are better called “set facilitators”) and the employers and future employers of the learners, who are interested in this training and educational approach.

Conclusions

Action learning should be used more in higher education environment and I consider it really can be successfully applied in business higher education for all the courses. As in general strategies are better implemented when people do understand the necessity of the established objectives, it is clear that “action” is needed for a better learning process. Although many ideas are very well understood by simply reading a text or seeing a documentary, every process is really “felt”

only when “doing things”. Students discover various elements by themselves as opposed to passive acceptance of what others say and are motivated to find out new elements in various papers.

A potential problem when using action learning is the intolerance of mistakes, which may lead to a lower implication of students. There are students who do not want to give any particular answer unless they know their answer is “correct” and therefore they do not actively participate in debates. Moreover, they do not want to try to “do” something if they do not know what will be the consequences. Professors’ aptitudes are very important. They have to create an environment in which students to be sure that there are not “correct” and “wrong” answers and behaviors and that all ideas will be considered. Professors also have to be able to facilitate discussions, in order not to turn into a “chaos”.

It is very important to add that, by using action learning as a method for teaching, professors learn as well, due to the interactivity and to some unexpected results (that are always appearing) and therefore they can continually add new perspectives to their courses, which should improve the educational process.

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