

Chapter 17

The Case Study: Much More Than Just Another Story

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ABSTRACT

Today's complex and global corporate environment requires business students to enter the workplace with more diverse skills and the ability to make useful decisions in their careers. The old adage of speaking "to" students in a classroom through straight lecturing is becoming less relevant in today's dynamic world. Rather, students must be engaged in the classroom and educators should provide the opportunity to enhance their decision making skills through real world problem solving. One way to do this is through the methods of active teaching and the utilization of case studies. Case studies are a story, or a narrative, that can induce higher critical thinking and engagement in the classroom and can prepare students for their careers by helping them make real world decisions in a simulated environment. This chapter focuses on the fundamental differences between traditional, lecture-based teaching and the importance of active learning in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

On August 9, 2015, a passenger plane flew into a massive thunderstorm. Large winds and heavy hail damaged the cockpit glass and the GPS of the Delta Airlines Airbus A320. This storm effectively rendered the flight crew blind as they flew at high altitude and with great speed. Despite the inability to see out of the windows or to use aircraft global positioning instruments, the pilots were eventually able to land the plane safely without major casualties (ABCNews, 2015). While this must have been a terrifying experience for passenger and crew alike, there was a single factor which helped these pilots get through this harrowing event. That factor was practical training. The pilots of the aircraft were subjected to many hours of simulated emergencies and continuous training, which helped them through what could have been a disastrous and terrible situation. Unfortunately, disasters can sometimes happen in the business world too. While perhaps not as dangerous as aviation, business is also a complicated, challenging and important endeavor and students walk into their classrooms every day with the hope that they too will

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be trained and readied for the future challenges of their career. Students in higher education business classes are the future leaders of tomorrow. However, the question remains of how well higher education institutions are preparing students to make crucial decisions when they face the inevitable moment where something important is on the line in their career. Now imagine if business students had a similar reality-based training regimen as pilots, which allowed them to build the confidence and the knowledge to make those tough decisions. As higher education pedagogic or andragogic leaders, it is up to the professors to prepare them for these uncertainties. However, educators in business must do a deep analysis of their teaching acumen in order to truly answer the challenging question of whether or not they really are helping their students prepare for the business decisions ahead.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To begin thinking about the concept of education and preparing students for the real world, it is important to consider some of the fundamental elements of teaching. There are certainly many different approaches to instructing and teaching students in higher education business schools. The teaching methods likely vary as much as the many people who invariably lead the classroom discussions. While there are many views on proper teaching techniques, Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson provide seven principles that could be considered when teaching students in an undergraduate university program (1987). These principles stipulate that there should be contact between faculty and students and the relationship between student and professor should be a reciprocal one. Furthermore, the professor should encourage active learning and give students prompt feedback, have high expectations, stress time on task and be open to varying levels of talent and learning abilities (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Looking at some of these principles, one can conclude that the student should be actively involved in the class and given the recommendation that the relationship should be “reciprocal”, this would support the notion that perhaps the students themselves should be contributing more to the class discussion.

As an example of this, one could consider the analogy of sport. Any sport requires the player to learn the rules and strategies of how to increase performance on the field. However, a player who sits on the sidelines and learns theory but never plays, can never reach peak performance because he or she must practice in order to improve the necessary skills for their game. It is true that oftentimes members of a team may watch others play in order to gain a greater understanding, but great sports stars didn't achieve their goals through spectating. Ultimately, they began winning through practice, and a lot of it. While education is not a sport, the idea of participation still applies. A study of 40 students of psychology further demonstrated the importance of participation the research showed increases in several important factors in participative problem based teaching methods vs. traditional methods. The first of these was that engaged students who were not just passive listeners demonstrated a higher level of critical thinking and overall understanding of the concepts being taught in the class. Furthermore, the results indicated that the utilization of problem based learning, in which students were more active in the class, increased interaction and enhanced their presentation and research skills (Hayes & Vincent, 2004). Therefore, as continued evidence grows supporting the idea of greater student involvement in higher education classes, this would seem to be in line with a greater prevalence of tools like case studies in the classroom. However, there are other factors which must also be considered before academics shake the foundation of traditional lecture based teaching in university classrooms.

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