

THE SBI CASE AS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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One of the most successful Small Business Administration (SBA) Management Assistance projects is the Small Business Institute (SBI) program (1, p.1). The SBI program uses students as consultants to small businesses in the local community. Properly used, these SBI cases can be an effective type of experiential learning.

INTRODUCTION

There should be no doubt that experiential learning, or reality training, as it has been called (2, p.109), is an important technique in the education of a business student. Experiential learning is defined here as learning by doing. It is the unstructured learning of real-world experiences.

Exercises, cases, simulations, role playing, internships, consulting, cooperative education, research, and competitions are some of the methods that can be used to increase teaching effectiveness and make the learning process more interesting for both the students and the teacher. All of these forms of experiential learning enable teachers and students to become involved in learning processes without giving it the name or perhaps recognizing the full implications of what they are doing.

Given this background, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the use of SBI cases for experiential learning with emphasis on how to get the most out of this specific learning technique.

THE SBI CASE

The SBI case requires regular, periodic visits to a small businessman by a group of students under the general supervision of a faculty member/instructor. The situation involves identifying problems, determining realistic solutions, and making recommendations for implementing those solutions. The heavy doses of reality and active student participation increases the value of this experiential exercise.

The SBI case provides a living laboratory (4, p.11) where the student can apply what he has learned in previous courses, observe the results of actions and make adjustments. He learns not because he has been told but because he has seen. He sees that there is really uncertainty in the decision making processes

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of operating businesses. He finds himself in a situation where he must study, analyze, and assess a living, functioning organization -- an operating business. He has to propose practical solutions and he has to sell those solutions to the client! entrepreneur, to his instructor, and sometimes to his partners and/or classmates.

The personal involvement in solving real problems which is found in SRI cases and other forms of real-world consulting (4, p. 11) can surpass most other methods of experiential learning in teaching effectiveness.

THE USE OF SBI CASES

Stahlecker and Papst (3) have done a survey of how cases have been used. The results of the survey suggest that the SBI cases have not been used for maximum effectiveness, as far as student learning is concerned. According to the authors this is due to the fact that faculty do not always visit the client, sometimes faculty do not spend enough time meeting with the students, and the nature of the problems often do not materialize until after the case has been assigned. For these reasons Stahlecker and Papst question the use of SBI cases as the sole or primary part of courses in Small Business Management or Business Policy.

At the University of Baltimore the format for SBI cases is rather consistent, being specified by the Director of the Small Business Institute. However, even within the format different faculty use the cases in such a variety of ways that they get mixed results.

Some of the different ways SRI cases have been used at the University of Baltimore include: as a substitute for a term project done on either an individual or group basis, as part of a total experiential learning package including computer simulation and Harvard-type cases, as a requirement of the course in addition to either other cases or a term project. Other faculty have used the SBI cases as non-graded, extracurricular activities that students could elect to participate in.

THE BENEFITS

Several benefits flow from the use of SBI cases. The greatest benefit is filling gaps of the educational experience of classroom and text. A more rounded educational experience is provided when the impact of reality is present.

Second, the personal involvement in problem-solving through group interaction deals with the important issue of group dynamics and its role in arriving at group decisions.

Third, the students get a better understanding of how the

the various jobs and/or departments of a business affect each other.

The conduct of the experience gives the student exposure to small businesses and the limited resources available to their owner/managers. The students also get practice in selling their ideas after theory and its application have been established.

In addition, the constraints of any business as well as its management bias must be overcome or taken into account when drawing up the final report. The effect of this realization better prepares the student for entering the business world upon graduation.

STUDENT REACTION

An important consideration in the SBI case method is student reaction.

The students view experiential learning as active participation in the learning process and an enhancement to the educational system.

As far as SRI cases are concerned, there seems to be general agreement that due to the fact that the focus is on realism, it is a more beneficial learning experience. The diversion from the traditional lecture and/or straight case study approach adds necessary variety for skill development and conceptual understanding to the education of business students.

Most students are eager to participate in SBI cases and those that have done more than one under different instructors claim that they got more out of it when the instructor limited his involvement in the case.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR USING SBI CASES

Based on our experience we would make the following suggestions concerning what may be the best way to use SBI cases:

(1) Do not assign one student to a case. On the other hand, do not use too many students. More than one student means you get important synergism, Too many students means that some get a free-ride. One of the authors feels that four are too many, all feel that five are too many.

(2) An SBI case should not be the total content of a three credit-hour course. At the University of Baltimore, for the majority of courses, the case value varied from twenty to forty percent of the final grade, depending on the course and the number of students working on the case. Even with a two- student team the tendency is to be closer to twenty percent than

forty percent.

(3) Do not use the SBI case in an introductory course, regardless of academic discipline. We use only graduate students in advanced and intermediate courses. If undergraduates are used they should be the better students, preferably seniors.

(4) Even when using graduate students they should be carefully selected. It isn't just that the better students will do a better job, which is obviously important to the client, but they will get more out of the experience. Where SBI cases are a limited resource as they seem to be in most schools, this becomes a very important consideration. It would be nice if everyone could do a case, but it would not be fair to the more capable students, to the client, to the faculty, or to the SBA to use students without regard to their capability.

(5) Limit faculty involvement. This is the hardest part. The danger, and it is a very real one, is that the case ends up being an experience for the faculty member not the student. The faculty member has two jobs to do. First, he is an important resource to the student, being available to discuss the case and provide advice and assistance. Second, he must evaluate the students' progress and their final report, sending them back to redo it, if necessary, before presentation to the client. Faculty should certainly be available to visit the client if the students or the client so desire. In fact, in addition to making a call to confirm the client's interest, it is often beneficial to the success of the case for the faculty member to visit the client to explain the program, the students' role, and to let the client know that he, the faculty member, is there and available to resolve any difficulties that may arise in the course of the case. After the first call and visit, however, the case is the students' and the faculty should not interfere. Of course, the relationship of the faculty to the students and the client during the course of the case will depend on the complexity of the problem, the quality of the students selected to the counseling team, and the degree of cooperation from the client.

If the results of the survey by Stahlecker and Papst(3, p.3) are correct, many of the suggestions made in this paper are not being followed by most of the schools using the SBI case method. There are certainly valid reasons for using SBI cases in other ways, but we would suggest that if the goal is to maximize experiential learning these points warrant serious consideration.

SUMMARY

The SBI case method is proving to be a most effective learning tool (1, 3). The key ingredients to this educational approach which constitute its uniqueness are (1) dealing with real-life, unresolved business problems that are truly in need

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of answers, and (2) active participation by the students in dealing with and resolving these problems.

To one extent or another, there is some artificial element in most types of experiential learning. Done properly, there is nothing artificial about an SRI case. It is real-world consulting experience.

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