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**TEACHING STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT: A CASE STUDY
IN THE DIFFUSION OF INNOVATION IN EDUCATION**

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ABSTRACT

This paper has a dual perspective: a report of the application of discussion-based teaching and assessment to the teaching of strategic management in a UK business school; it is also an examination of the process of innovation in education through the consideration of seven components of the innovation process.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of verbal communication in the process of management has long been recognised in studies of managers' work (Mintzberg, 1973, Kotter, 1999). However teaching and assessment methods do not always reflect the importance of verbal communication and discussion skills. While Alexander, O'Neill, Snyder and Townsend's study of US BP / SM strategy professors (1986) finds class participation to be the most common means for evaluating student performance with over 94% of respondents using evaluations based upon class participation, within UK higher education such assessment, other than for formal presentations by students, appears to be little used.

During 1994 the author attended a North American teaching conference where discussion-based teaching and assessment formed the theme of a conference presentation. This event, coinciding with a reshaping of the undergraduate programme in the author's own business school, led to the rapid introduction of discussion-based teaching and assessment as the sole way of teaching strategic management subjects on that programme.

TEACHING METHOD

The existing approach to teaching strategic management had consisted of lectures and tutorials (typically 8-10 students). Tutorial activity centred upon papers presented by individual students, addressing the academic literature and including the consideration of case situations. The author, the leader of the teaching team, felt disillusioned with lectures (is a good lecture a good performance by the lecturer rather than the students?) and tutorials, where student involvement appeared to be sporadic. Academic colleagues shared those conclusions.

The principle of discussion-based teaching and assessment was used to construct a teaching / learning / assessment strategy that replaced the above, taking the form of a weekly seminar (15-20 students) lasting an hour and a half as the sole means of teaching the subject. The method operated as follows:

I. A course book, a collection of articles and case studies, was adopted for all students to purchase or have easy access

to. Readings were preferred to a textbook in that they provide greater opportunity to gain depth of understanding and to confront the student with alternative perspectives, providing greater opportunity for discussion.

The students followed a programme in which for each week there was a specific topic and readings for which all students were to prepare. Typically, for final year undergraduate students this involved up to six hours a week of class preparation.

II. Each class was based upon following a discussion sheet, a set of issues, questions and brief items of case material that added to the case material already made available. Discussion sheets were issued at the start of class. The scope of the questions was designed to ensure coverage of the material that had been prepared.

III. The first class in the programme was used to introduce the teaching / learning / assessment method to students, recognising that being assessed on the basis of contribution to class discussion, with all students having equal responsibility for preparation, was a new situation for the students that also changed the role of the lecturer.

Name cards (not used before on the undergraduate programme) were given to all students. Name cards were intended to serve a dual purpose, to avoid confusion in assessing students and as a symbol of the new way of behaving in class. The name cards were maintained even after they had become unnecessary for identification.

IV. During each class the lecturer took the role of a facilitator, principally acting to open the class topic, link issues and close the class and to promote discussion. The lecturer acted to encourage and enable student participation, as a class and as individuals.

The students experience in class was intense and consequently the progress of the class was designed to include opportunities for relaxation and variation in the activity taking place; for example by using video to provide case material, short episodes of group working to develop views on a case or issue and periods of individual reflection to develop input to the discussion.

V. For each class the lecturer derived a mark for each student. These evaluations were based upon evidence of understanding, comprehension, analysis and drawing of conclusions from analysis, and the evaluation of concepts techniques and situations, criteria that had been stated in the student's study guide. Students at any time, outside of the classroom session, could ask for feedback on how they were progressing. The feedback information was given individually, providing opportunities to explore the student's view of the teaching situation, their behaviour and ability, as well as to review performance.

The course documentation stated the criteria that would be applied in making assessments, however there was a need

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for lecturers teaching the subject to compare the standards they had been using to assess performance.

TABLE 1
BENEFITS AND PROBLEMS

Benefits	Problems
<p>Extensive student participation.+</p> <p>Increased class preparation.+</p> <p>Maintains interest throughout preparation and in class.+</p> <p>Helps to develop depth of understanding.+</p> <p>Encourages critical examination of concepts and situations.+</p> <p>Develops recognition that other students often hold differing views.+</p> <p>Provides even timing of workload and assessment, saves time by not having written course work.+</p>	<p>Existing group culture may involve discomfort for individuals who change their role by becoming participators.*</p> <p>Individuals may perceive themselves as not being able to contribute in a 'real-time' mode (self-perceptions of demonstrating nervousness, inability to express views, comparative slowness in responding).*</p> <p>Students may doubt accuracy of assessment, believing it reflects frequency rather than quality of contribution and may feel the situation is competitive.+</p> <p>Some students may prefer direct questioning to open discussion.+</p> <p>Can involve too much preparation.+</p> <p>A few students remain infrequent and reluctant contributors to discussion.+*</p>

(+ items derived from questionnaire, 186 students, administered in first year of introduction of teaching method, * items are based upon teaching staff opinion)

At the end of the semester all lecturers participating in the course compared their overall marks (average and measures of dispersion) addressing the issue of standardisation by discussion of cameos of student performance that they had encountered (e.g. 'my best student has achieved 80%, he/she may have only contributed three or four times in a class, but every time it was obvious that preparation had been thorough, the material was well understood, was being applied to specific situations and the student often demonstrated an informed and critical view of the concepts involved'....reply... 'sounds like my 90%, which was....').

Benefits and Problems: Student questionnaires together with class and individual discussion of the teaching method indicate the following benefits and problems for the teaching method.

For the lecturer the teaching - learning method provides a number of significant benefits. The proportion of students participating in class discussion was greatly increased as was the apparent student ownership of the course material. Experience of a lecture based approach often included episodes when students would aggressively question why attention was being given to certain authors and issues. Such incidents have not occurred with the new method. This may be due to lecturers no longer acting as presenters of academic material, being free to act as part of the discussion, development and questioning of material. The

method may enable lecturers to present a better role model for student learning by increasing student exposure to the lecturer as a stimulus for questioning rather than a content provider.

Mass higher education (the strategic management module has been delivered to up to 600 students, requiring thirty-five seminar groups) can imply anonymity for students. Discussion-based teaching and assessment provides a group experience in which academic staff and students interact in a face-to-face manner. The weekly need to derive an assessment requires greater attention by the lecturer to each individual student. New opportunities are provided to interact with students and to assist their development.

In addition students have frequently made spontaneous comments affirming that the classes are interesting, reward effort and that the process of discussion is relevant to 'real life' in business.

The problems presented by the teaching method can in principle be avoided or their effect reduced. The difficulties presented by an existing group culture, carried over from students' previous experiences of studying together, can be addressed by forming new groups. Reluctant contributors can be identified and an element of direct questioning introduced into the teaching session. Slowness in making a response can be addressed by introducing phases of individual or group reflection, providing the opportunity for

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preparation in meeting a pre-announced set of questions.

During individual feedback sessions many students have privately confessed to the belief that they are shy, that they project a nervous image and are poor at contributing to discussion. Often these comments have not been consistent

with the student's performance and represent a poor self-image of their own behaviour. The disparity between behaviour and self-image can be discussed with the individual student to help further development.

TABLE 2
STUDENT COMPARISON OF TEACHING METHODS

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Ineffective in teaching the subject	0	1	1	8	37	49	4	Effective in teaching the subject
Prefer lectures	1	1	9	17	27	37	8	Prefer new method
Prefer tutorials	0	1	7	14	29	37	12	Prefer new method
Prefer written assessment	3	12	10	24	24	20	7	Prefer in-class assessment

(%, Questionnaire results, Likert scale, 186 students, administered in first year of introduction of teaching method)

In general the method is seen by students as effective in teaching strategic management, preferred to lectures and to tutorials with in-class assessment preferred to written assessment.

The preference against tutorials is curious. In many respects the teaching method operates as a tutorial approach to large group teaching. The preference may reflect a range of factors including, the methods greater structure, the more immediate reward for preparation, greater participation by group members, the changed role of the lecturer and the experience of a new learning situation.

INNOVATION: CONTEXT AND PROCESS

In a rapidly changing environment education needs to innovate. The experience of the author provides a case concerning the process of innovation. This experience is examined using seven contextual factors derived from studies of business innovation (Henry and Walker, 1991, Strebel, 1987, Quinn, 1985, Kanter, 1983). The seven factors can be used by fellow delegates to reflect upon their own experience and the characteristics of their institutional context as it affects innovation.

Strategy: The type of innovation undertaken by an organisation needs to be consistent with other aspects of the organisation's enacted strategy, for example through furthering the incremental development of cost or quality or by addressing the need for fundamental innovation consequent upon life cycle developments.

The move to discussion-based teaching and assessment occurred at a time when successive UK government reductions in the funding available for each student had effectively prohibited the regular use of small group teaching. The new teaching method provided a response that was consistent with the reduced level of resources while

developing the quality of the learning experience. In addition the situation invited change. The wider undergraduate programme had been revised, creating a new identity for strategic management teaching, consequently the teaching situation was particularly open to the introduction of new methods.

The continuation of pressures to further reduce teaching costs have in turn increasingly brought into question the continuation of the new teaching method

Stakeholders: Innovation requires change and hence potentially affects the interests of a range of stakeholders, within UK higher education these include students, teaching staff, heads of department and programmes, those involved in institutional quality processes, government quality and funding bodies and employers. Stakeholder support and resistance will change over the life of an innovation.

For discussion-based teaching and assessment, support was rapidly gained and maintained from the staff directly involved and the students. Those not directly involved in using a teaching - learning method can persistently misperceive the method and open its continuation to question. In this instance the method of assessment remained open to the opinion that it was over subjective, despite the contrary belief of the staff directly involved and the consistencies apparent from the statistical analysis of the marks awarded. A process of peer review through class observation, although convincing those involved in the review, failed to alter the wider prevailing belief.

Changes in the context of higher education, such as further reductions in funding and an increased emphasis upon formalised institutional processes to achieve quality control, can be expected to further alter the support for particular teaching methods.

Structure: An organisation's innovative ability is dependent upon it maintaining an open form of organisation. The bureaucratic aspects of organisations can

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result in a lowered level of vertical and lateral communication, a slowing in the innovation process and an increase in the chance of veto for innovative proposals. Moves towards the delegation of decisions help to avoid those barriers. More fundamental innovation tends to arise from contact with those concerned with developing technology rather than the customer. Dissemination from outside the organisation requires permeable organisation boundaries and the development of a network approach.

For the particular innovation described in this paper, conference attendance provided a set of established ideas that became innovative by being moved to a new setting. The innovation occurred at a time of a comparatively high degree of delegation of responsibility to the teaching staff delivering programmes and the associated decisions required little reference to formal institutional review and approval processes.

Staff: Innovation requires a degree of fanaticism, a dedication to achieving the new outcome, to overcome barriers and a desire to enthuse others. The organisation requires a tolerance towards such 'fanatics'.

The author felt inspired by the ideas he had encountered at the conference, they provided a coherent philosophy for developing teaching practice that he found easy to express to others. The prevailing high degree of delegation placed few organisational barriers in the way of achieving change through persuading other individual lecturers to join in adopting the change in practice. Attempts were made at further dissemination within the university through staff seminars, these did not result in further adoption of the method. The reasons for the lack of further adoption are difficult to identify, but may reflect increasing resource constraints and a reluctance by teaching staff to challenge their assumptions about learning and assessment, particularly the belief that written evidence needs to be the primary, and is the safest, way to determine student performance.

Risk: The risk factors associated with an innovation need to be identified. Innovation is confronted by uncertainty concerning the organisation's ability to deliver the innovation proficiently and economically. Innovations, in so far as they are apparent to the consumer, also encounter uncertainty concerning their reactions to the innovation.

The adoption of discussion-based teaching and assessment was associated with both types of uncertainty, requiring thorough development before its introduction and modification on the basis of subsequent experience. The reactions of the student, feelings of uncertainty concerning a new teaching/learning situation, were correctly anticipated. Acceptance was based upon fully explaining the new method, its rationale and implications together with the use of the introductory session to provide a participative experience that gave immediate involvement in the new method.

Chance: The origin and progress of innovation is often based upon a fortuitous set of circumstances that involves chance events, personal characteristics and a conjunction of organisational conditions.

For the new teaching method the coincidental events included: the choice of conference and session; an

organisational context presenting the opportunity for change; the need to economise in the use of resources while maintaining and improving quality; and, at the time of innovation, a high degree of staff autonomy in determining the response to contextual conditions

Routine: A successful innovation becomes part of practice, developing its own orthodoxy and barriers to further innovation.

The 'new' teaching method has now operated for six years, its adherents are at times resisters to the continuation of change and further innovation.

CONCLUSION

The teaching / learning / assessment strategy outlined in this paper enables students and staff to develop a questioning and participative relationship to the concepts, techniques and situations examined in a strategic management course. The method focuses upon a key managerial skill, verbal communication, emphasising discussion in 'real time', and helping to develop student's perception of their communication abilities.

Innovation in education is a complex process that is relevant to all educators. The above discussion supports a number of conclusions:

- * academic colleagues from other countries can be a fruitful source of innovation
- * discontinuity provides opportunity for innovation
- * educational innovation has to be consistent with the enacted strategy of the organization
- * stakeholders have to be recognised and if possible managed
- * for internal diffusion, presentations and explanations are possibly less effective than involvement. Involving large numbers of staff and students may develop understanding and support and possibly gain further dissemination of teaching innovations and help maintain their adoption.
- * most importantly, educators need to question whether their institutional context is becoming more or less conducive to innovation.

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