

GETTING CLOSER TO REALITY: IMPROVING UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN ACTION-ORIENTED DISCIPLINES BY ENHANCING THE MEASUREMENT OF STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on a research performed looking for ways to improve University education by enhancing students' performance evaluation. Grounded theory was used to analyze videotaped feedbacks 14 managers from 8 companies gave on 37 Strategic Marketing Plans that 182 students developed over 4 months, within the Marketing Policies & Strategies course (2003/2004), 4th year of the Combined Undergraduate & MBA Program at ESADE Business School, Ramon Llull University, Barcelona, Spain.

Lines of work detected: 1) selection of companies, 2) differentiating ends from means, 3) development of abilities parallel to strategic knowledge, 4) time optimization, 5) underlying companies' social function.

INTRODUCTION

This article describes research exploring possibilities to improve learning of University students of action-oriented disciplines such as marketing. Focus was on methods' enhancement for evaluating students' performance in their learning process. Study's environment was the Marketing Policies & Strategies (MPS) course in 4th year of the Combined Undergraduate & MBA Program offered at ESADE Business School, Ramon Llull University, Barcelona, Spain, on academic year 2003/2004.

One challenge of Universities is to adapt our methods and strategies to environment evolution (Manzanares 1998), including students (Ibáñez-Martín 2001), as their profile evolves in time. This adaptive capacity (Ibáñez-Martín 2001) is intrinsic to the scholarship engagement that society demands from University (Rosovsky 2001). Measuring whether students are able to think and act in an independent and articulate way when they leave University (Pérez Cabaní *et al.* 2000; Harvey *et al.* 1993) helps such adaptation.

Exams are crucial in the functioning of universities (Gros and Romañá 1995; Pérez Cabaní *et al.* 2000), but in action-oriented disciplines, evaluation achieved through action (Manzanares 1988), projects and practical exercises (Pérez Cabaní *et al.* 2000) can be better than through the former. In this type of disciplines, knowledge is not an end in itself but rather a means to an end (Larréché 1987). Hence, fundamental knowledge to be assimilated by students is conditional or strategic knowledge – to know when and to know why – (Castelló and Monereo 1999), besides conceptual (to know what) and procedural (to know how) knowledges.

MPS is an action-oriented discipline, and in course of reference students are trained through 4 blocks: Marketing Strategy Theory, Marketing Information Systems Theory, Simulation of Marketing Strategy and Strategic Marketing Plans (SMP) for real companies. The first 3 blocks were developed during 20 sessions of 4 hours from late September 2003 until early March 2004. The 4th block took place from mid-November 2003 until mid-March 2004.

Culmination of this educational process is the elaboration of a SMP for a concrete case proposed by a real company. Level of strategic knowledge professors succeeded that students assimilated in the course is a key success factor for these SMP. Cases selected were very heterogeneous to force knowledge adaptation to each case.

CONCEPTUAL FRAME OF REFERENCE

On one hand, cornerstone of this research is the distinction between conditional or strategic knowledge, conceptual knowledge and procedural knowledge (Castelló and Monereo 1999).

Conditional or strategic knowledge is the ability to decide the usefulness (know why) and appropriateness (know when) of the procedures to resolve open and complex jobs. Conceptual knowledge consists of knowing what certain

techniques consist of, and procedural knowledge consists of knowing how to utilize them (Castelló and Monereo 1999).

A good example of applying those distinctions to marketing is market segmentation. Conceptual knowledge (know what) applied to market segmentation is its own definition; back to basics but with a fresh perspective, we could use the definition of market segmentation of Kotler and Trias de Bes (2003):

“Segmentation consists of dividing the market (into groups of customers homogeneous among them, heterogeneous to other, *etc.*) to obtain new sales”

Once students know what a market segment is, next step in their learning process is getting to know how to do market segmentation; then procedural knowledge is applied. As an example from leisure industry (Sureda & Valls 2004):

“A structured survey was administered...to identify...leisure activity preferences (9 aspects) ... and their importance. ... A hierarchical classification algorithm using the Ward method and Euclidean distance was employed. ... The whole process yielded 8 leisure styles ... (hedonists, e-freaks, workaholics, social freaks, committed types, routine types, well-established types, passive types) ...”

Continuing example, strategic knowledge would be to know when and to know why market segmentation applies. From solution life cycle perspective, market segmentation applies from the decelerated growth onwards, but not before (“know when” edge). From that moment on, competition will lead to delivering to the market different offers tailored to different groups of customers, which crossed with expertise gathered by customers is the reason why segmentation is required from that moment onwards (“know why” edge).

In summary, we must get our students to know what a market segment is, and to know how to perform market segmentation, but we also need to train them to identify when they need to use this tool, and also to understand why they have to use it then.

On the other hand, frame of analysis was the educational process based on the 4 stages of the learning cycle according to Kolb’s Model: concrete experience, reflexive observation, abstract

conceptualization and active experimentation. SMPs correspond to the later stage, and their quality evidence level of strategic knowledge assimilated by students as cases were very different.

Means of research were feedbacks given by managers for whose companies students made the SMPs: since their interests were greater (an economic contribution was asked to companies for filtering out eventual low-interest cases), their feedbacks were to be more significant, and were to evidence work lines for improvement.

Research Objectives

Driving objective was identifying work lines to improve students’ strategic learning, and had to be translated into concrete pedagogic strategies and actions during 2004/2005 academic year.

As authors advanced in the execution of the research, we visualized that this could serve as the basis for future research both in the fields of other action-oriented disciplines and of other target students. This was converted into a second objective, and thus the final research plan balanced 1) the concrete case of the MPS course and 2) aspects generalizable to other typologies of action-oriented disciplines and/or profiles of students.

METHODS

Sample

Research was carried out by analyzing the videotaped feedback 14 managers from 8 companies gave on 37 SMP projects, developed by 182 students, organized in 37 groups, in the 4th year of the combined Undergraduate & MBA program of ESADE Business School in academic year 2003/2004.

Companies were very heterogeneous¹, thus motivating the use of qualitative methodology, which not only permits work with a small number of cases. Indeed, it also allows interpretation of managers’ perceptions and the discovery of concepts and relationships between the data in such a way that its organization results in a theoretical scheme explaining the perceptual reality (which, in essence, is the definition that Strauss and Corbin, 1998, gave of qualitative methodology).

¹ List is available upon request to josepm.rius@esade.edu.

Instruments

Research was centered on the transcriptions of the videotaped feedback that managers gave after reading the projects, listening to the presentations of the students, and resolving doubts. In order to achieve in managers a mental attitude that would permit them to give sincere feedback, they were provided with an Evaluation Form on which they were asked to evaluate each group. After that, once managers were leveraged of the psychological pressure of having to evaluate students, the interview was started just offering managers precursors of dialogue so their feedback was as spontaneous as possible.

Procedures

Selection of companies began in September 2003. It was decided to ask each company for an economic contribution to participate in the projects. As far as we know, this was the first time in Spain that an economic contribution was requested from companies participating in company-university projects. It was observed that on segmenting companies willing to participate in that way, the projects proposed were more important for companies than before. This greater interest of companies elevated the efforts of students and of the Team of Tutors to achieve excellent projects. In addition, since their interests were greater, their feedback should also be more significant. That was one of the reasons to research them.

Projects were presented to students during the 2nd fortnight of November 2003. All the projects proposed were the result of business uncertainties of a strategic nature. One week before presentation, both a briefing of their case and the concrete calendar they were going to follow throughout the project was provided to each group of students².

After formal evaluations, managers were interviewed about their perceptions of the entire experience, their level of satisfaction, the level of usefulness, the following steps that they would take after the ideas and suggestions provided by the SMP, as well as the elements that could be improved in the learning process of students. Interviews were videotaped, then transcribed in MSWord, and then analyzed with program ATLAS-ti 4.1 for Windows 95 (Build 051) for interpretation and management of texts and theory construction.

² Example of both, and of processing data, also available upon request.

Results of qualitative textual analysis were gathered in graphic form on a hierarchical map of categories³, which 74 codes were simplified in a map illustrating the 7 key blocks around the Process carried out (Objectives, Effort, Planning, Methodology, Interaction with company, Results and Presentation)⁴.

RESULTS

The detailed qualitative analysis reflected in the hierarchical map of relationships among categories enabled identifying 4 key areas that address research objectives:

- a) Selection of companies that participate in the business-university collaboration;
- b) Emphasis to the students of the distinction between ends and means;
- c) Student development of a series of abilities parallel to strategic knowledge;
- d) Optimizing time utilization for all parties.

It was equally recognized that no mention of the social function of the company was detected. In the belief that the directors of the future must clearly understand and accept this social function, this point was incorporated as the fifth key area of work to improve the social function on training the directors of the future.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Selection of companies that participate

This falls within area of "Objectives", which is one of 7 key blocks around the Process carried out. We especially highlight within this paragraph the "Commitment of the company", which is the basis of "Interaction with company", another of the 7 key blocks.

Requiring an economic contribution to companies contributes to elevating the quality of students' learning by making input quality higher, interaction with company easier, and also raises bar for University. It has to be symbolic both for ethical motives (to avoid unfair competition with companies doing this work) and for deontological motives (objective is to increase quality of students' learning).

Finally within this first area of work, it was found "Ability to question one's activities", which is an element to be monitored in the phase of selection interview with managers. A potential field for further research exists to identify elements correlating positively with this ability, as for instance level of

³ See Annex 1.

⁴ See Annex 2.

education, level of seniority, and level of managers' pragmatism.

Emphasis to students of distinction ends vs. means

Even though "Methodology", "Effort" and "Planning" are crucial for students' high quality learning, these certainly are not any end in themselves, but rather the means to the end: training them in building a winner solution for each concrete project proposed by companies.

Component standing out most in "Valuation dimensions" was "Immediate utility", related to "Realistic proposals". It is understood that these yearnings for rapid implementation are positively correlated with the interest of the projects proposed by companies, which reaffirms the first area of work already discussed.

This allows clearing out any doubt with respect to whether we need to consider 4 or 5 phases in the Strategic Marketing Process; the need to integrate the 5th phase (Action Plan) became clear after having defined the Frame of Reference, carried out the Analysis, made up the Diagnosis and decided the Strategy. In other words, companies appreciate the integration of operative and strategic marketing.

The second most outstanding element in the "Valuation dimensions" is the "Creative solutions", which leads us straight into the 3rd area of work identified:

Student development of a series of parallel abilities

It came clear that "Creativity" must be a strong ability both for its value and for being one of the components of the "Effort" block, within which "Objectivity" also appears, associated with "Rigor".

Within this 3rd area of work, we also found teamwork capacity, which enables "Group valuation" to be positive. "Ability to convince" is another of the necessary abilities identified, especially since managers found it very hard reading all the "Detailed work" before "Presentation". Under such an approach, "Detailed work" would be left for the students as a tool for compiling the work as it is done, and for the managers as a place in which to go deeper in case of details' interest or need.

Finally, an issue of difficult management appears with "Maturity". Despite the fact that maturity requires time, it was concluded that training students on

"Consistency" helps to provide them with the basis for gaining maturity in a more rapid way than usual.

Optimizing time utilization

Even through this 4th area of work could be considered as ability inside previous work area, it is important enough to merit a separate category.

Companies' capacity to dedicate time to interact with "Students", both to settle doubts and to direct efforts, depended a great deal on their "Commitment". As seen in the 1st area of work (Selection of companies), it was greater than before thanks to the system of selection.

As far as "Students" are concerned, it is important to remember that they are in the 4th year of the Combined Undergraduate & MBA Program (their experience in managing time is limited). They have also other courses (their week time has to be divided into 5 or more). For these reasons, this is one of the most important fronts of action within this 4th area of work to improve their learning.

Various possibilities exist for training students on the ability to optimize the use of time, and it is important to use them all. On the one hand, before the presentation of the company to students there are 2 important points that help. First is ensuring that students attend company presentation very well informed about the concrete issues that are going to be posed to them; hence, it is very helpful providing students with company's briefing (including information sources) a week before presentation. This helps to maximize the first interaction with the company. The second point is giving students the concrete calendar of work that they are going to develop, helping them to optimize use of their time by "Planning".

Once company's presentation is made to students, ulterior "Interaction with the company" is required during the process. Time pressure that managers face forces students to learn to be efficient with use of time. Tutors' monitoring work in order to ensure that students apply with "Rigor" the "Methodology" transmitted is an excellent instrument for training students in that efficiency.

Finally, preparation of project oral presentation to managers is an additional source of training in time management, since it demands developing "Capacity of synthesis" to get to the point. Certainly, in the 20' given to each group to present their SMP, no group can explain everything. Experience obtained

evidences that it is correct focusing students on achieving on managers 3 top-of-the-mind:

- a) Useful (that the manager sees clearly that the project solves the problem proposed),
- b) Thorough (that it is the result of an important effort) and
- c) Serious (that it was carried out with rigor).

Social function of the company

The 4 lines of work described above for improving the learning of students of action-oriented disciplines are the result-by-mention of the analysis of the speeches of the 14 managers. Need of companies' orientation to society is the 5th work line but it is a result-by-lack-of-mention. It is evident that in order to be sustainable in the long run, companies must care about society.

Research limitations and next steps

Main limitation of this research is small sample size. Even though methodology utilized permits working with few cases, next step is to triangulate data on hand with quantitative techniques. After a preliminary univariate analysis, an application of multivariate analysis techniques will be done. Factorial analysis of multiple correspondences will permit interrelationships among codes to be analyzed through a quantitative approach.

Paragraph will be unit of analysis and not the interview whenever the interview would represent a too high level of aggregation. The 8 interviews will be revised by cutting them into paragraphs. A table of double entry will be constructed, placing paragraphs in columns, and the 74 codes detected in rows.

This table will be processed with the SPAD program, whose output will be the representation, in a space of

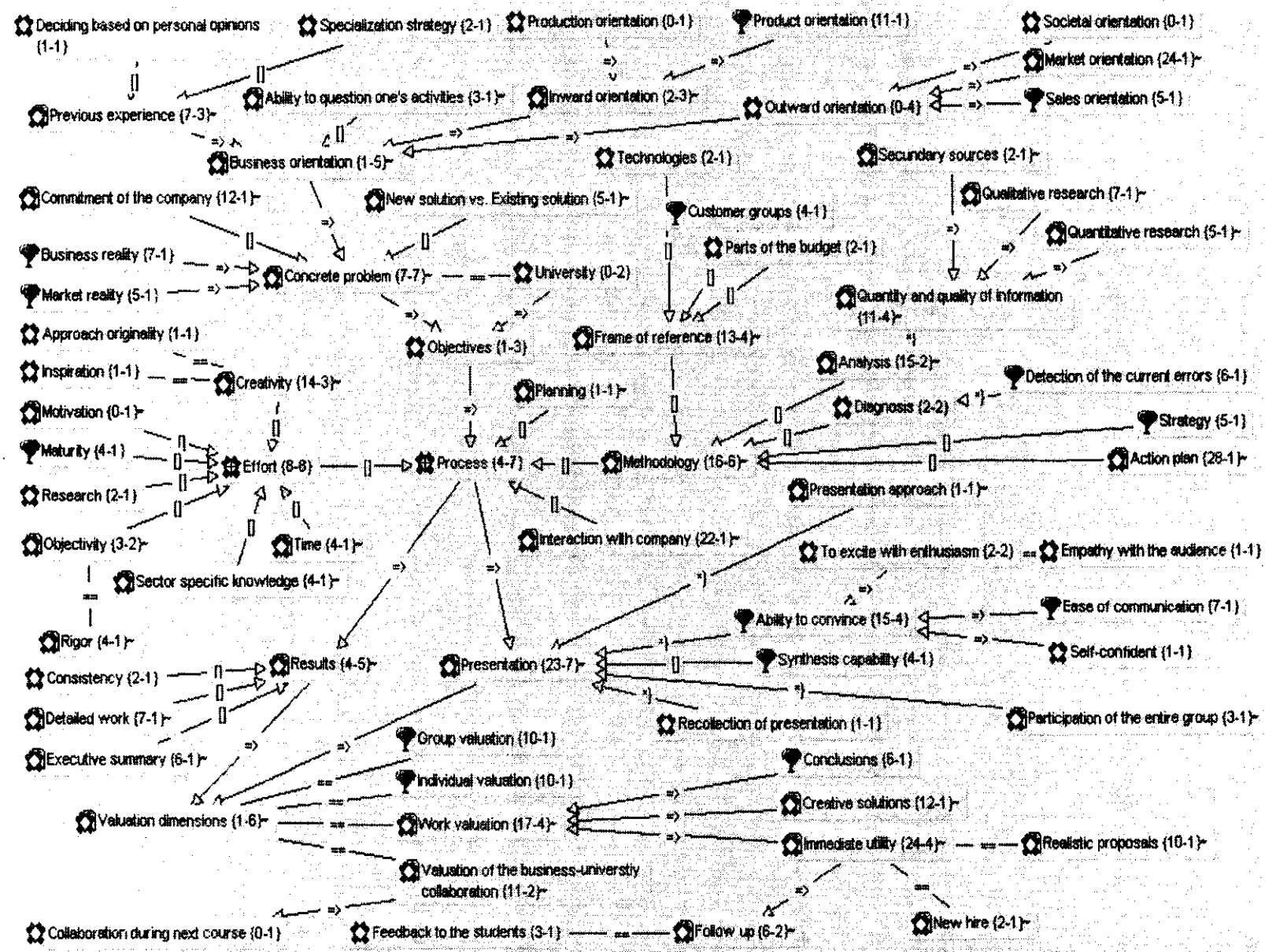
reduced dimensions, of the 74 codes in question. This graphic representation will permit the visualization and analysis of the structure of the relationships among the different codes. In accordance with the results obtained, it will be possible to construct, through the utilization of a hierarchical classification technique (Cluster Analysis), the dendogram or decision tree of the different codes. Even though the number of base interviews is small (8), the total frequency climbs to 549 quotations, therefore providing an acceptable level of statistical representation.

CONCLUSIONS

The principal conclusion of this research confirms the hypothesis that by enhancing the University evaluation systems, new possibilities are found for improving its educational function. This is consistent both with the reality of the fact that the students of today are different from those of the past, and with the increase in the complexity of the environment in which we live.

Second conclusion is that in the case of action-oriented disciplines such as Marketing, students' level of strategic knowledge learning can be better evaluated by incorporating into the university evaluation systems the evaluation carried out by the final customer (in this case companies). This is without harming other systems of evaluation both for the learning of strategic knowledge as well as conceptual knowledge and procedural knowledge.

Finally, it is concluded that from the analysis of the feedback from final customers ways can be found for developing strategies and planning concrete pedagogic actions of rapid implementation. The first four work lines are the result of the content of the speeches of the managers, and the fifth is the result of the total lack of mention of something as fundamental as the social function of the company.



Annex 2: Hierarchical map of key blocks

