

A note on
Innovative Teaching Practices in Management Education¹
 Designed and Developed by Dr. Rajagopal²

Introduction

In the contemporary sphere of teaching in higher education courses there are frequent pedagogical shifts in delivering contents to the students. The most significant changes include increased manifestation on current teaching approaches, introduction of new teaching strategies, increased focus on the design and delivery of courses, organization of classes, meticulous contents and coverage, more self-learning space in teams, increase in confidence about learning and sharing, and a more student-centered approach towards teaching (Donnelly, 2008). The relationship between the higher teaching skills and course experiences of students demonstrates the effectiveness of applied learning. It is observed that self-determined student motivation along with teacher autonomy provides student greater satisfaction to students, which leads to comprehensive learning, better course grades and higher teacher-course evaluations (Filak and Sheldon, 2008). Learning effectiveness is developed through careful selection of learning activities, application of best practices in both delivery and content of programs, and particularly effective learning relationships between learning approaches and moderations of learning stages by the professors. Teaching management courses effectively requires learning autonomy wherein students can develop logical path of problem solving through preferred self learning techniques. This may lead to the learning insight to 'think global' for students and 'teach local' strategy for professors familiarizing students to deal with local management situations (Rothwell, 2008).

In view of the above research insights I have developed many innovative and interactive learning approaches that are being practiced in the courses of International Marketing and International Commerce Strategy delivered by me to the undergraduate students at Monterrey Institute of Technology and Higher Education, Mexico City Campus since January 2004. These learning approaches are broadly categorized into moderator supported learning tools and self-learning modules³.

Moderator Supported Learning Approaches (MSLA)

In this learning approach professor serves as bridge in integration of information, technology, and student teams into a unified leadership framework stimulating to analyze the given subject, develop content interactivity, identify problems and frame logical solutions in teams instead of learning core concepts conventionally 'across the curriculum'. Following are the learning tools practiced by me in this category:

¹ This document is prepared for discussion in the Teaching Effectiveness Seminar (TES) organized by AACSB at Tampa, Florida during October 23-24, 2008.

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³ All innovative teaching approaches discussed in this note are being practiced by Dr. Rajagopal in various courses of undergraduate, graduate and executive development programs.

Learning Appraisal Seminar (LAS)

Learning Appraisal Seminars are designed to be conducted as learners' forum at the end of each phase of the curriculum of the course. Students are divided into groups and a concurrent topic is assigned to each group for developing a paper and presenting it in the seminar. Chairperson and discussants for each presentation are chosen from different groups. Participants of all groups are expected to use major concepts discussed in the previous sessions to develop papers on the given theme. Break-up of the analysis includes introduction to the topic, brief resume of relevant concepts discussed in the previous sessions, thematic convergence of major issue of the seminar topic and theoretical issues, situational reflections on the topic, take-home lessons. All students are expected to participate in each presentation. Class strength of my courses is 24 students on an average and 4 presentations are scheduled in the class duration of 90 minutes.

Some of the recent seminar topics include:

- Impact of global financial crisis due to stock market crash on international trade of developing countries like Mexico (Sessions coverage- international monetary system, role of IMF, macro-economic factors, political intervention and cultural values)
- Serving regional trade agreements- what went wrong with South Korea- Chile free trade agreement of 2004 (Sessions coverage- political environment, regional trade agreements, world trade organization, conflict resolution)
- Augmenting organic products marketing in Mexico- how market research can help enterprises (Sessions covered- emerging markets, market segmentation, market research techniques, global market place)
- Coping with the complexity of export documentation and export contract- what we learn from best practices in exports (Sessions covered-Export procedures, international commerce law)

LAS has been considered as a tool to revise the topics discussed in previous sessions in a liberal environment by students consulting books, periodicals, professional journals and professor for expert opinion. LAS is administered to groups in each semesters once after 75 percent of the syllabus has been covered. This innovative teaching technique has been well appreciated by the students of international marketing course taught by me. Key elements for the success of classroom seminars included an upfront needs assessment to prioritize topics, interactive sessions promoting skill development through actual practice of various strategies, open discussions to identify challenges and solutions, and a convenient and customary time slot (*e.g.* Pinherio and Heflin, 2008).

Case debates

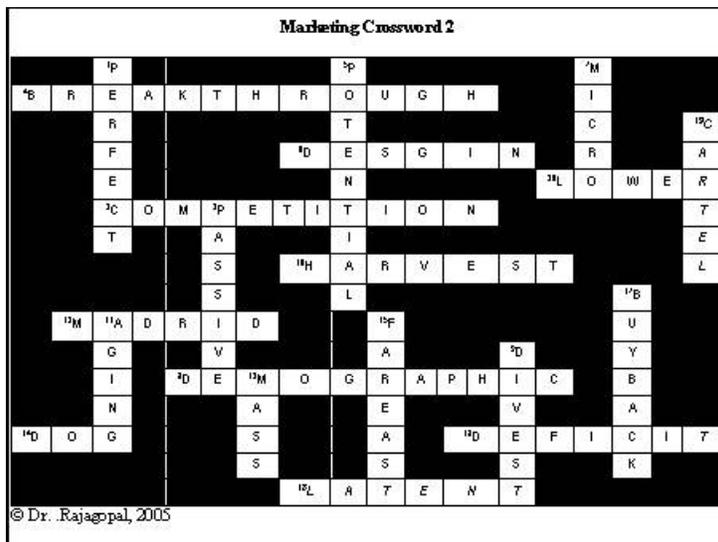
This learning tool is applied to the groups of students of international course since 2006 as post-discussion learning stimulus. Case debates are organized in the course and administered to teams after three different cases on the given topic have been discussed in the class. Emerging issues from all cases are steered to develop analytical insights on the

theme and are debated using Case Breakdown Method which is analogous to ZOPP⁴ method used by a German consulting company. In this process insights of participants are invited in the four analytical categories including management focus (customer centric, service orientation, profit centric, competitive etc.), strategy construct (advanced marketing mix- 11Ps which include product, price, place, promotion, packaging, pace, people, performance, psychodynamics, posture and proliferation), causes and effects, and lessons learned. This process is termed as Data Board Preparation (DBP). Upon listing the insights of all participants common attributes from each category of DBP are integrated. Thus final attributes appear in each analytical category. This process is termed as Data Integration Process (DIP). In conclusion of the case debate a strategy statement is constructed based on the DIP attributes which serves as case learning experience. The process of working with Case Breakdown Method is exhibited in Appendix 1.

As this teaching method is an extension of common case discussion approach, student revealed that they understood the anatomy of cases and gained deep managerial insights. Case debates are organized after one third course contents are covered each time. Six cases with a blend of Mexican, Latin American and Harvard Business School cases are discussed in one third of course curriculum.

Crossword Play

I have developed 100 crosswords on various topics of marketing including marketing-



mix, sales management, services marketing, brand management, e-commerce, business dynamics, logistics, operations management and six sigma applications in marketing services. These crosswords are administered to the students of various courses and levels (undergraduate and graduate levels) in teams as an open book game. Crosswords play is administered to the students twice during the course. Working teams enjoy full autonomy in solving the

crosswords and learn new concepts while referring to various resources in library. Later unsolved points of crosswords are discussed in the classroom and solution is presented. A sample crossword is exhibited above for reference.

⁴ ZOPP, from the German term "Zielorientierte Projektplanung" translates in English to "Objectives-Oriented Project Planning." ZOPP is a project planning and management method that encourages participatory planning and analysis throughout the project cycle with a series of stakeholder workshops.

Many students found that solving academic crosswords is a unique experience and it helps promoting generic learning skills. Recent popularity of crossword puzzles in management education has to be viewed in the context of the sweeping changes in learning perspectives of students. Crossword solving supplements the efficacy of new learning process through self-learning in management education. Learning through crossword puzzle is also considered as an approach to develop *learning entertainment* of marketing concepts (e.g. Cinnéide, 2006). All crosswords authored by me are under consideration for publication in book form.

Computer Simulations

I have developed a small program in Excel using complementary random numbers on various variables affecting marketing strategy of a competitive firm. Annotations for variables and interrelationship of variables are provided in the supporting Excel file. This simulation exercise has been named as **BESTMARK** (Business Enterprise Strategic Transitions in Market). I hold the copyright of this simulator (pending patent). This simulation is played in teams and results are presented in the classroom. While playing simulator, if students change the value of one variable (e.g. price) all variables such as volume of sales, inventory cost, market share and profit also changes. It is necessary to optimize the market share and profit using the best combinations. This simulator is operated in individual computers and not on LAN system. Further upgrading process of the simulator is in progress. This exercise is administered in graduate courses of marketing strategy, competitor analysis and sales management.

I have also developed a simulation game on marketing strategy based on the principles of Chess. The game can be played in reference to the corporate cases. The concept of the simulation game has been demonstrated to the Faculty in a seminar and the game has been tested in the course. The automation of the game in LAN/Windows NT environment is on. The game has been titled as “**Strategic Moves: The Business Chess** (A Game to Build Logical Aptitude for Business Decisions)”. The game is useful for the students of Masters Program to refine their skills in building marketing strategy under competitive situations. Currently the process of development of the simulator is in progress with a software consulting company in India. The Conceptual demo of the simulator may be viewed at http://www.geocities.com/prof_rajagopal/Demo.pdf

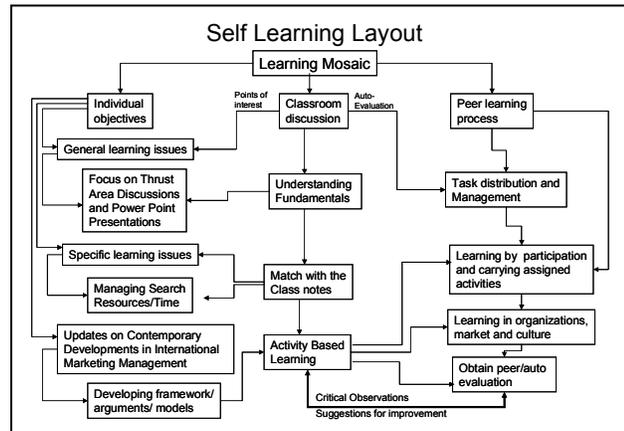
Card Games

Managers require skills to take quick decisions in the market to move ahead in the competitive market situation and lead in the target market. In order to refine the competitive skills of the managers, I have developed a card game based on the rules of simple *playing card* games. The game has been titled as “Trump Card: Leading in Competition”. The theoretical motivations to this game have been the choice theory paradigms and behavioral settings in team working. The Trump Card game consists of 52 playing cards with difference strategy choice to be played in a given environment. There are 12 competition environment stated in brief case form which serves as background for the teams to choose their strategy during the play. There are 4 sets of Trump Cards

proposed in a pack to enable 4 teams to play simultaneously in 3 different competitive environments per team. This game is developed for working managers to help them refine their choice matrix and play the most appropriate strategy in a given competitive market environment. Trump Card is under consideration with publishing firms for publication and distribution as an academic learning tool.

Self-learning Tools (SLTs)

Self-learning perspectives enable students to work remotely, using open-learning techniques, as self-managed learners in a task-centered program. The legitimacy of self-learning in a higher education setting is crucial in understanding the differences and similarities both within the classroom learning and liberal learning (Taousanidis and Antoniadou, 2008). Self-directed learning skills lean towards evidence based problem solving, improving interpersonal and group skills, self-assessment and knowledge building. The competence and aptitude in self-learning of management issues include knowledge comprehension, competitive communication skills, leadership and self-concept (Pearson *et al*, 2007). Accordingly, this category of innovative teaching includes the following approaches being practiced in my courses. Self-learning layout is exhibited above to know the process of learning in SLT assignments.



Poster Sessions

Developing attractive posters on a given theme of international marketing has proved to be a very creative way of learning. Students are divided into group of two and assigned a perspective within a major topic of marketing. For example students are assigned the topic “International code of marketing of breast milk substitutes- Conflicts with multi-national companies” with the product marketing strategy topic and students are expected to illustrate their best efforts. Topics for poster sessions within all major areas of marketing are identified in a brainstorming session. This self-learning exercise is organized in association with common events of marketing department during the semester and posters are judged by the committee of professors and invitees. Selected poster presenters are requested to present their theme in a forum. In order to develop attractive posters with effective communication additional coaching is given by me.

Creating and presenting posters requires students to develop and use the vital skills of enquiry, critical analysis, and dissemination of findings. Poster presentation would appear to have potential as a learning strategy and as a method of assessment. My experience as professor shows that despite the intensity of the assessment procedure, observing the

emergence of analytical debate and creative achievements of students, learning in poster sessions is an exhilarating and worthwhile experience.

Break 'n Build

This is an interesting self learning game in teams of students. A set of marketing cases are given to different teams of students who are advised to read them thoroughly. Teams need to take out critical discussion parts of the cases and list out the facts sheet of the cases. Each team is expected to do this exercise with their respective cases and enlist critical discussion parts along with the facts sheet of the case. Teams are advised to exchange this document in asymmetric manner without sharing the principal case. It is anticipated that all teams have read all cases. Now the students have the task to build the case with the document available with them. Teams enjoy the liberty to consult Internet, books, periodicals and professional journals. Finally, the case built by the students has to be presented in the class room. In this self-learning method teams are relatively large to work on information gathering. This method of task management develops ability to learn continuously and the learning process is directed towards understanding the problems and obtaining the results (O'Keeffe, 2005).

Free fall learning (FFL)

Free fall learning is a preferential learning method wherein students choose their preferred topic in marketing curriculum and explore the strategic fit (internal and external of the firm) of marketing management concepts in a local environment. In the method students need to choose preferred marketing topic, issues therein and select a local company. Students need to work on core and relational variables of the chosen marketing issue in reference to the selected local firm. A document needs to be developed considering the following protocol:

- i. Background / Scope of the assignment
- ii. Focus of the assignment
- iii. Methodology (selection of company, product or function and the rationale thereof, data sources-primary or secondary, and analytical methods)
- iv. Profile of the Company
- v. Review of management/marketing strategy
- vi. Main findings
- vii. Analysis of problems/gaps emerged – Illustrate through fish bone (cause and effect) diagram
- viii. Suggested Strategy
- ix. Action Points (Listing of major issues that requires action on the suggested strategies)
- x. Bibliography/References/Notes

Students can consult all resources to strengthen their project. This document has to be presented in the classroom for full house discussion. In FFL process teaching and learning sequence is designed to help students and working managers to gain awareness

about the independence of the theoretical and applied situations in the business firms. This is a regular feature in all courses taught by me.

Evaluation of Learning Assignments

Learning assignments⁵ carried out by the students in the MSLA category are passed through two levels of evaluations done by the peers and instructor. Evaluation is based on 11 variables at both levels and proportionate score are taken out of both evaluations to assign the final grades the participating students as stated below:

- i. Co-evaluation by peers-members of the team (30%)
- ii. Instructor's assessment (70%)

Evaluation system for the SLT assignments is different than MSLA assignments due to higher emphasis on individual learning. However, in some cases assignments are judged by experts externally. Pattern of evaluation for SLT assignments except for poster session is stated as under:

- i. Auto evaluation (15%)
- ii. Instructor's assessment (85%)

Evaluation pattern for poster session includes:

- i. Co-evaluation (10%)
- ii. Jury assessment (25%)
- iii. Instructor's assessment (65%)

Evaluation of MSLA and SLT assignments are aimed at measuring abilities for concept development, information search, information utilization, problem solving, creative thinking, logical presentation of ideas and matching decisions with the contextual requirements. This process helps in building context-bound approaches in improving the pedagogical quality of various learning tools that may be productively used in conjunction with students' preferences in effective learning (e.g. Hosie, *et al*, 2005).

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⁵ Evaluation formats are available with Dr. Rajagopal, Professor, ECADE, ITESM-CCM

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Appendix 1

