

More Real-world Relevant Learning for Business Students: An Online, Self-learning Tutorial for Finding and Critically Analyzing Information *In and Of* the Situation at the Time

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Abstract

Concerns that business school graduates, program curricula and classroom teaching are lacking in real-world relevance have been on-going for almost as long as schools have been established. Traditional, theory-based and classroom-oriented teaching has not been leading to relevant learning. Students need to develop real-world situational relevance through learning to use their knowledge as the basis for developing their critical thinking, to search for and find information *in and of* the situation at the time, and to follow this with problem analysis and action planning.

Strategic Management courses require students to complete business case situation analyses and make evidence-based recommendations for future strategy. Students have difficulty in doing this because they do not have the critical thinking and situation analytical process and procedures that they need to use when no-one is around to tell them what to do! Within an overall situational strategic management approach an on-line tutorial was developed to support web-based distance courses in Strategic Management. This was designed to enable students experientially to learn critical and analytical thinking processes in finding data, creating information and making findings and conclusions. The tutorial is based on a business case exercise wherein students are required to undertake a market analysis. It takes students step-by-step through the in-situational search for data, structured analysis, and interpretation of the information to give findings and conclusions. Skills gained from using the Situational Strategic Management Approach (SSMA) to analysis also are outlined.

Key Words: Strategic management; Business; Real-world relevance; Critical thinking; Situational strategic management; Case analysis

Introduction

In North America the numbers of business graduates every year are 20-25% of university graduates overall (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2013; *CAUT Almanac*, 2013-2014). It therefore must be a concern that, North American business schools, their programs and graduates, for some time, have been continually charged with lacking relevance to the real world of business management (Behrman & Levin, 1984; Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Business Week, 2008; Canadian Business, 2006; Doria, Rozanski & Cohen, 2003; Elliott & Goodwin, 1994; Hall, 1986; Leavitt, 1986; Livingston, 1971; Management Education at Risk, 2002; Mintzberg, 2004; Muff, 2012; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Porter & McKibbin, 1988). More specific concerns have been raised regarding business school

program curricula and content, academic standards and student learning, e.g., Arum and Roksa (2011); Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), *Eligibility Procedures and Standards for Business Accreditation* (A-EPSBA) (2003-2015); Di Meglio (2009); Khurana (2007, pp.335-352); Mintzberg (2009); Navarro (2008); Pfeffer and Fong (2004); Rubin and Dierdorff (2009); and Rynes, Trank, Lawson and Ilies (2003).

Perceiving that discourse is not practice, we focus on business school programming and classroom teaching practices that, apparently, must not be leading to “real-world relevant” student learning outcomes. A concept of different teaching and learning types is offered and an *in-situational* teaching orientation and analytical approach are described. The online, self-learning tutorial is designed to facilitate student self-learning of finding and critically analyzing information *in and of* the situation at the time.

Theory Knowledge versus Information in and of the Situation at the Time

Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, and Krathwohl (1956) cautioned that: “Because of the simplicity of teaching and evaluating knowledge, it is frequently emphasized as an educational objective out of all proportion to its usefulness or its relevance for the development of the individual” (p. 34). These authors went on to say that:

“What is needed is some evidence that students can do something with their knowledge, that is, that they can apply the information to new situations and problems... This has been labelled “critical thinking” by some, “reflective thinking” by Dewey and others, and “problem-solving” by still others... This requires some analysis or understanding of the new situation; it requires a background of knowledge or methods that can be readily utilized...” (pp. 38-39).

Business school management knowledge *per se* is “theory” that can be taught in a non-situational manner: received from the teacher, remembered and regurgitated. It has no power in itself to provide definitive explanations and predictions in the real-world, i.e., the answer. In contrast, scientific theory has this power. The so-called management theory only can provide perspectives and possible insights, i.e., various approaches and considerations. Management theory *per se* can be seen as lacking relevance in real-world situations and theory knowledge can only inform the student about what to think about and what to look for. Situational information must be obtained investigatively *in and of* the situational reality at the time, and it must be critically analyzed to understand the situation and its possible future developments.

Types of Teaching and Learning in Business Schools

A concept of teaching and corresponding student learning types in business school classrooms is shown in Figure 1, based on the axes: (1) *Orientation Relative to Real-World Situation: Inside vs. Outside* versus (2) *Knowledge or Information: Received Theory vs. Situational*. Four types of classroom teaching and student learning are characterised in the matrix: Doctrinaire, Opinionated Spectator, Applicable Methodologies, and Informed Player.

ORIENTATION RELATIVE TO REAL-WORLD SITUATION			
	Outside	Inside	
KNOWLEDGE OR INFORMATION	Relative to the Here-and-Now Situation	Opinionated Spectator (Watching Television)	Informed Player (Detective)
	Received Theory in Classroom	Doctrinaire (Quoting the Textbook)	Applicable Methodologies (Crime Scene Investigator)

Figure 1. A Matrix of Teaching and Learning Types in Business Schools

Doctrinaire Teaching and Learning

Doctrinaire teaching promulgates management theory without considering any practical uses in the real world. Students can be led to believe that the textbook theory can be applied generally and somehow scientifically in the real world to get the right answers and results. Doctrinaire students only can talk theory-normatively about what should be and what should be done.

Opinionated Spectator Teaching and Learning

Classroom discussions of business management examples or cases can take a spectator orientation where students are oriented outside the situation and expected to “apply” theory knowledge and offer their opinions. Students-as-spectators or lookers-on only can take what they see at face value and only can offer unsupported or intuitive opinions. They only can talk in a doctrinaire manner, theory-descriptively or -prescriptively, about the situation at which they are looking, saying how things appear to be and what individuals in the situation are supposed to do.

“SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) Analysis” can be used to structure business school classroom discussions of case exercises. Unfortunately, SWOT Analysis need not include any *in-situation* analysis. Students can be allowed to take case words and phrases at face-value and, without doing any analysis, list them intuitively in SWOT categories, e.g., “*The case says that this company is facing a growing market, so this is an Opportunity.*” Unfortunately, this type of learning can lead students to think that they are applying theory to analysis of the real world when, in fact, they are not.

Doctrinaire, Opinionated Spectator teaching and learning may be similar to the detached approach described by Mintzberg (2009) as prevalent in American business school classrooms and leading to management hubris and failure.

Applicable Methodologies Teaching and Learning

Applicable Methodologies is the teaching of applicable and therefore inherently real-world relevant and useful methodologies. Students learn, as situation insiders, what to do and how to do it, in terms of investigation and problem-solving generally and relative to various contextual type-situations. Teaching and learning of accounting, quantitative methods, and mathematical approaches in subjects such as market research and manufacturing management can be seen as applicable methodologies. In contrast, standard methodologies usually are not made explicit in teaching of general or strategic management. Such methodologies that are situationally-applicable and useful are needed as means for students to

orient themselves inside case and real-world situations, find information *in and of* the situation at the time, and carry out critical analysis and problem-solving.

Textbook theory frameworks can provide procedural and content check-lists to indicate generally what information to look for and where to look for it. Students can develop information search and literacy skills, including search and information assessment skills through exercises requiring them to search for and obtain real-world information on large companies and their strategies. Such exercises need to be minimally directive and left open-ended. There can be no skills development if students are given lists of specific information to find and told where to find it, and no evidence of them using their knowledge.

Informed Player Teaching and Learning

In any sport and in business, only the players on the field are in the changing and developing situational here-and-now reality. Only the players in reality are relevant and only they can analyse, decide and act. The teaching orientation therefore is *inside* the here-and-now situation, even if this is only as described in a classroom case exercise. Students are put in the roles of inside-situational investigators, analysts, critical thinkers and problem solvers. Real-world contextual orientation with in-situationalization including *searching for and finding information in and of the situation at the time* can assist students in learning to be relevant Informed Players in actual real-world situations.

Students can be detectives, investigating and analysing the situation through finding and piecing together information *in and of* the situation at the time. Detectives have check-lists of procedures and methods, and of places to look for evidence, and these are tailored to the particular criminal investigation situation at the time. Detectives must be researchers, information literate and analytical, and critical thinkers in finding and interpreting evidence and in identifying means and opportunity (i.e., strategy implementation activities, actions and results) and underlying motive (objectives). The Informed Player teaching and learning type involves use of Applicable Methodologies.

When students have identified the business managerial problem or opportunity for action they must go from being detectives to being managers and decide what action to take. Over and above case exercises, role plays and simulations can include implementation decisions and actions and can provide results for further analysis and decision-making.

A Situational Strategic Management Approach

Strategic analysis in the situation at the time is learning to look in the right places, to ask the right questions, to search for and find the right information, and to identify the important issue(s), problem(s) or opportunities. In a real strategic situation the analyst is not told what information to search for and where to look for it, what questions to ask, nor what the important issues may be. The Situational Strategic Management Approach (SSMA) explicitly links textbook strategy concepts and frameworks with strategic analysis *in* the changing here-and-now situational reality. It is a vehicle for teaching case exercises in the classroom so that students are oriented *in* the situation and are guided in finding information *in and of* the situation at the time and in critical thinking analysis and problem-solving. The concepts outlined in the approach may be transferred to real business problems, to inform corporate decision making.

The situational strategic management approach explicitly starts with the inside-situation orientation needed for information search and understanding of the situational reality. This leads to thinking like a detective searching for information *in and of* the situation at the time.

The strategic gap concept can be used for in-situationalizing and for establishing the time frames for past-and-present analysis, future analytical projections, and future strategy formulation and implementation planning. The difference between the future projected outcome and the desired outcome is the strategic gap that must be closed through formulation and implementation of a future strategy for improved performance.

The strategic management process generally can be seen as consisting of: Analysing → Planning (including Strategy, Resourcing and Organizing) → Implementing and Executing → Monitoring and Controlling → Feedback information. The last step inputs to the next cycle of Analysing, etc. The component items of situational strategic management are shown in Figure 2.

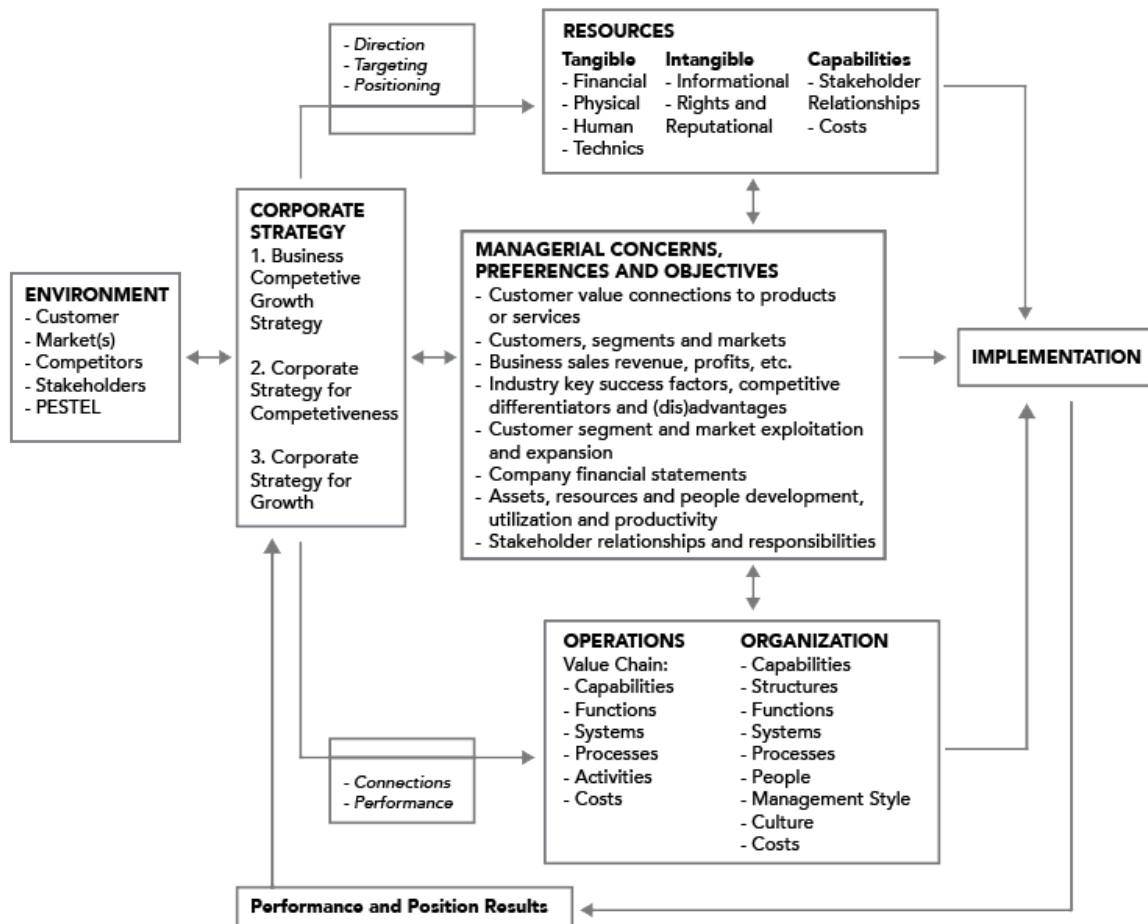


Figure 2. Situational Strategic Management: Strategy Framework

Situation Analysis

Considering the company in its competitive situation, the analysis process is worked through from the observable specifics of company business connections and performance (as data, information and findings), to the intangible but more fundamental conclusions regarding past and present strategic position and the direction and underlying strategy. Considering Business Competitive Growth Strategy as

the basis for past-and-present analysis, the kinds of information for which to look and where to find it are described.

What to look for: Information and findings on Managerial Concerns, Preferences and Objectives (MCPO's) for performance and position:

- MCPO1. Customer value connections for products or services
- MCPO2. Customers, segments, markets and competitors
- MCPO3. Business sales revenue, profits, etc.
- MCPO4. Industry key success factors, competitive differentiators and (dis)advantages
- MCPO5. Customer segment and market exploitation and expansion
- MCPO6. Company financial statements
- MCPO7. Assets, resources and people development, utilization and productivity
- MCPO8. Stakeholder relationships and responsibilities

These MCPO's are intended to be what is generally important in the minds of strategic managers and are used here as a means of structuring the information search. Any specific objectives stated in the case can be put under the appropriate MCPO.

Where to Look: The eight MCPO's can be followed analytically, relative to each Strategy Component:

- SC1. Strategy (customer – product-or-service) connections
- SC2. External customers, markets, competitors and stakeholders
- SC3. Company resources and capabilities: characteristics, quantities and deployments
- SC4. Company functions operations: characteristics, quantities and deployments
- SC5. Company organization, systems and people: characteristics, quantities and deployments

It is most important to do all past-and-present analysis before moving to future analytical projections, and to do all future analytical projections before moving to future strategic planning. The analyst should not confuse past-and-present analysis with future analytical projections or future planning. If so, the logical progression of analysis and planning will be lost.

The Online Tutorial

Undergraduate students in strategic management courses often assume an Opinionated Spectator orientation unless they are explicitly told not to. Students-as-spectators are unlikely to perceive any need to develop in their minds a "tool-kit" of applicable methodologies, nor any need to develop in-situation investigational, analytical and critical thinking skills. In case exercises, students can be asked to provide analysis of the market and of the company's and competitors' performance and positions, etc. Relevant quantitative information is provided throughout the case but Students-as-spectators are unlikely to be aware that they always have to look for and use whatever quantitative information is available. Instead, they have learned to offer Doctrinaire theory and contextual observations such as, *"The case says that the market is flat and this always can be a problem."* When attention is drawn to the quantitative information in the case Students-as-spectators can complain that the instructor should have handed out the specific information and shown them exactly what to do with it (because this is the instructor's job). Being a Doctrinaire and/or Opinionated Spectator can be a comfortable position in the classroom but Students-as-spectators do not learn to be relevant *in* real-world situations. Students-as-spectators can talk generally about what should be done but, as they are not oriented *in* the situational reality, they can have little or no facility for understanding reality and deciding what to do.

To assist in leading students to re-orient themselves from Students-as-spectators to Informed Players, the self-paced online tutorial was created based on information available in a case exercise, Victoria Heavy Equipment Limited (from Ivey Publishing). Student learning of information search and analytical skills is not helped by providing the numbers and showing students (as lookers-on) exactly what is to be done with them. The tutorial therefore aims, first, to lead students to take an in-situational orientation so that they can learn what numbers are needed and how to look for and find them (anywhere in the case). Second, the tutorial leads students through a methodology for analyzing quantitative information on company and competitor market performance and positions. This analysis is used to inform the recommended next step the company ought to consider taking.

The tutorial uses critical thinking skills, rather than just information gathering, to work through the quantitative data analysis of the given case with the aim of providing a fuller picture of the company's current state in and of the situation provided. The self-paced tutorial may be found in the learning object repository, stor (<http://stor.mun.ca/>) under the title of Case Analysis Tutorial. The primary steps covered include: approaching the case, reading the case, organizing the data, analysing the data and making a critically-informed recommendation based on the analysis. Aspects of the tutorial are discussed below.

Approaching the Case

Analysis of a case involves: data sorting and recommendation formation. The first part starts with understanding and sorting the data from the company history as presented in the case and associated financial statements. Analysis involves determining where to find the important details to describe the situation. This involves identifying the scope of the case (text, financial statements, secondary data like websites, library search); choosing a framework (e.g., SSMA); pulling from previous knowledge (e.g., marketing, finance, organization, human resources, strategic management, ethics); and identifying and sorting details and data. Any number of frameworks may be used to find, categorize and summarize the data. Following a systematic methodology can assist students in choosing and using appropriate frameworks. The second part involves using critical thinking to analyze the organized data in order to make an informed, recommendation and fact-supported justification to address to the question or problem presented.

Reading the Case

Students were instructed to read the case in its entirety, multiple times if necessary, to establish a good understanding of the situation presented in the case. With the questions to be addressed in mind, they were then asked to note facts, details or data that they believed to be relevant. In this case (Victoria Heavy Equipment Limited), students were asked to "recommend to the company what its next step ought to be".

Organizing the Data

While reading, students should be thinking about how to organize the data. Using the Situational Strategic Management Approach model (SSMA) steps, students can identify and organize the performance indicator data, such as size and growth rate, competitive sales figures, dollars, units, and percentages across the markets. Some of this data is provided in the case while the rest was needed to be calculated. When completing the calculations, students needed to move around a bit, as is done when completing a crossword puzzle. Frameworks and models do not always follow a strict linear process or may need adapting in order to be effectively applied.

In a given case, some data is not readily found or calculated as it is just unknown. There may be other sources to find the data; such as libraries, trade journals or the Internet. In addition to the case study description, students may need to use the financial statements provided to identify the performance indicators.

The ability to find, organize and sort data is an art that is perfected with practice. In the tutorial, students are provided with a geographic market and segment analysis matrix to aid in their data organization. The tutorial then walks students through how to find or calculate all aspects of the geographic market and segment analysis. When data is taken directly from the case, its exact location is specified in a summary explanation. All calculations are also shown. With the market and segment analysis complete, students are shown how to complete an analysis of the projected market decline in the years under consideration. Again, data taken directly from the case is clearly identified so students can follow the thinking processes employed. All calculations are also shown. A summary of all calculations is provided for students to review and check their work and understanding.

Analysis and Making a Recommendation

Students are often surprised to find that this preliminary analysis and sorting is just the first part of the case analysis. Next, they need to take their findings and reflect upon them to come up with a sound, evidence-based, recommendation or answer to the question(s) posed at the outset, *What do you recommend the company do as its next step?* Students learn to think critically when reflecting on the case, organizing and analysing the data, considering the question initially presented to report upon, and making an informed recommendation. The recommendation must be supported by the information found that support the judgments that are made. This is the basis of critical thinking that constitutes a sound case analysis. To aid students with better mastering critical thinking, an online self-paced Critical Thinking Tutorial (see <http://stor.mun.ca>) was presented to students. This tutorial also contains self-check questions at the end of the tutorial for students to test their knowledge of critical thinking skills.

Finally, the tutorial ends with a reminder to students that they may be asked to respond to other questions about a case which may require using different frameworks or models or aspects of the same model. Together, these models and frameworks make up the business analyst's toolkit.

In Conclusion

This paper has been rooted in the continuing concerns for business school management education to become more real-world relevant. Bloom et al, (1956) produced a taxonomy of educational objectives and also pointed out that, *"What is needed is some evidence that students can do something with their knowledge, that is, that they can apply the information to new situations and problems..."* (p. 38). This important situational dimension appears to have been lost as Bloom's Taxonomy has become the dominant orthodoxy in educational discourse, programming and documentation. This paper therefore has explicitly recognised what appears to have been lost: that orientation inside the here-and-now situation is required for relevance in the real world. With this in mind a matrix of teaching and learning types in business schools was proposed, and Doctrinaire and Opinionated Spectator types were seen as characteristic of less relevant teaching and learning.

More relevant teaching and student learning was seen as requiring standard Applicable Methodologies that could be used in any and all situations, and explicit situationalization to orient students inside the here-and-now situational reality so that they would take on the role of Informed Players. It was suggested that detective-like investigative thinking is needed in order to become Informed, i.e., to be able to find information in and of the situation at the time which would inform the decision making

process. A Situational Strategic Management Approach was proposed as both a concept and standard method intended to enable students to learn to become more real-world relevant Informed Players. Through a self-paced online tutorial, students were offered the opportunity to learn to apply the approach. The flexibility of this Situational Strategic Management Approach may be adapted to real business situations.

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