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# COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN BUSINESS EDUCATION: EXPERIENCE WITH A WEB-BASED COURSE AT THE EUROPEAN BUSINESS SCHOOL (EBS) IN GERMANY

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## Introduction

In this paper a shift in pedagogical approach in business education which is necessitated by demands for competitiveness for both the business schools and their products - the graduates – is discussed. Traveling paradigm and specifically the collaborative learning approach in a web-based course environment is argued to be more effective than the traditional, transfer, one. The practical implications are elaborated on a case of a www-based course on Organizational Development at the European Business School (ebs) private university in Oestrich-Winkel, Germany ([www.ebs.de](http://www.ebs.de)).

## Pedagogical Approaches for Business Education

For years the dominant pedagogical metaphor in business education has been the **transfer** metaphor. The major premise of this pedagogy is that knowledge is transferred from the instructor to the students by means of lectures, speeches delivered by guest speakers (leaders from the relevant business fields), backed up by textbooks and duplicated course handouts. The instructor is the only source and distributor of the information. Locus of control and monitoring is an external one. Students compete for grades which are to measure how successfully the knowledge has been transferred. Those who succeed in this struggle are granted a diploma which certifies what specific knowledge and in what amount has been transferred. Whether learning occurs along the way no one can guarantee. This clearly is not the most effective approach, but it is still the most commonly used one in business schools. The experience with corporate management training also confirms this (Meister, 1998).

In order for business schools to prepare competitive graduates and thus be competitive themselves in the highly dynamic and ever-changing business world, the education should be organized around a radically different approach. Baets (1999) suggests that the **travelling** metaphor is particularly effective. The teacher-student roles and relationships differ significantly from those imposed by the transfer approach. The student is the explorer and the teacher/tutor is the experienced traveling companion, a guide who helps to find the way by providing maps and a compass. The traditional role of the learner, who once used to be only a user of instruction, shifts to the one of the producer or co-producer of the instruction (Margaryan, 1998). Here not only a role change takes place, but a more comprehensive culture change occurs (Collis, 1997): students develop responsibility for their own learning, construct their own knowledge, according to their own preferences and interests, and what is most important, **learn how to learn**. Locus of control and monitoring shifts from external to internal one. The teaching (if it is at all a suitable word to use in this context) is carried out mostly by experiential methods (case studies, small-group discussions, simulation games, project-based work, collaborative problem solving, self-directed learning). Such educational environment is targeted at developing higher order skills in students (van Merriënboer, 2001): critical thinking, problem solving, monitoring and assessing their own performance, as well as performance of the others, self-directed knowledge acquisition, meta cognitive skills of locating information, as well as information processing including information analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Romiszovski, 1997). Thus, students learn to work on their own development. Management educators know that becoming a manager is to a large extent working on one's own personality. It could be argued that a committed and mature approach of the student combined with an experienced travel guide – the tutor – is the ideal learning situation for the business education.

## **Collaborative learning as a pedagogical method to support education centered around the traveler's metaphor: experience with a www-based course 'Organizational Development'**

Collaborative learning is one of the experiential learning methods discussed above. It has emerged in the last 30 years and is an effective pedagogical environment where students work together in heterogeneous group to achieve a common academic/training goal, e.g. completion of a project, an assignment or a case study (Glass/Putnam, 1988). The basic principle is that group learning fosters more achievement and growth than individual learning. Collaborative learning benefits the individual student as well as others in the group: the activities (and the outcomes of those activities) of the group exceed the sum of the individual students' work, thus bringing about a **synergy**. The power of this process is elaborated by Rowntree (1995): 'Participant are liable to learn as much from one another as from course material or from the interjections of a tutor. What they learn, of course is not so much product (e.g. information) as process – in particular the creative cognitive process of offering up ideas, having them criticized or expanded on, and getting the chance to reshape them (or abandon them) in the light of peer discussion. The learning becomes not merely active...but also interactive'. The ideal outcome is a development of highly productive collaborative learning.

Traditional educational system is competitive rather than collaborative. This is mainly due to the fact that the former relies heavily upon a competitive grading system. Competition for grades often establishes a negative interaction among students. This is the **"me" approach**, which is in direct opposition to one of the major priorities of today's business world – the need for cooperation, mutual support, and problem-solving in team projects, which, in turn, creates the need for an interdependent **"we" approach**. This is what the today's business schools' curricula most often lacks.

Shifting the educational culture from 'me' to 'we', helping the students develop their higher order skills and develop personally preparing to enter the world of business were the rationales for designing and offering a web-based course on Organizational Development (OD) to the 2<sup>nd</sup> year students of the European Business School (ebs). The ebs is a small private university in Oestrich-Winkel, Germany. Founded in 1971, it provides courses leading to a degree of Diplom-Kaufmann/Kauffrau (equivalent to the MBA degree). Online teaching is still in its infancy: the course described in this paper is the first attempt to deliver a course entirely through the Internet.

This one-month modular course covered the major aspects of OD and was aimed at providing students with knowledge and skills in five major areas: planning change; diagnosing organizations; data collection, analysis and feedback; OD interventions; and evaluation of change.

The study material was posted on a website specifically designed for this course: it included an electronic textbook, and a library of course-related materials – online articles, books, external websites. The communication was carried out through e-mail. Students were given a possibility to participate in a forum, where they could discuss various topics pertaining to the course, problems they encountered while working on the assignments, as well as post their assignments for others to view and comment on them. There was only one initial classroom face-to-face session aimed at helping students understand the 'rules of the game'. Beside e-mail and telephone feedback, students were offered an option of face-to-face consultations with the tutor during her office hours.

To pace their individual study, the students were provided with an online schedule, and each module had its objectives listed so that the students could check themselves at the end whether they learned what it was intended for them to learn. Upon completion of each module, in average one week in duration, students were required to work on case studies to apply the theory they learned in the module. The students then e-mailed their solutions to the tutor and received a feedback/grades by e-mail as well.

An important characteristic of this course were the experiential learning tasks which were designed to involve a great deal of collaboration. Students had to form groups of 4-5 people to work on the case studies. They were given the freedom to do it themselves rather than being assigned to groups by the tutor. Case study solutions submitted by the groups have been assessed on the basis of creativity in approaching the problem, depth of problem analysis, style and quality of presenting the solution. Participation has counted towards the final grade as heavily as the product itself (case study solutions) did.

Students approached the course assignments very enthusiastically and creatively: some groups went as far as forming virtual business consultancy companies where every member had his/her own role in working on case study solutions (one would be responsible for organizing the brainstorming sessions, the other would do a literature overview on the similar problems, yet the third one would be responsible for putting it all on paper, preparing a PowerPoint presentation or just a plain word document report).

There is an important point to be made on this example: we cannot and should not intervene in the configuration of what we pre-design. We can design learning tasks with a certain pedagogical approach in mind (in this case – collaborative learning), but once the process runs the students re-design or modify this approach to best suit them (in this case – some groups brought elements of role play, game, into the activities). This is a positive sign of students assuming an active role in their learning. It can be argued though that this motivation is still brought about by competition for grades rather than for the sake of learning itself.

We believe this course was successful in helping students to experience team work and problem solving in groups, and developing their soft skills. Upon the completion of the course, we asked students to comment on their experience and here are some comments from them:

“ Although this was the first time such an unusual course took place at the ebs, I personally felt very good about it, it was interesting, challenging and surely supported the team work skills. The content was very sophisticated and demanding, though it was very close to reality and provided with a feeling of really applying theoretical background on real situations and problems. The group size was okay even if there have been exhausting discussions on the subjects. The work load was a way too high for the credits offered initially. The feedback could have been a little more detailed although I thought that your idea of face-to-face feedback in your office was okay as otherwise there would have been no contact to the department at all...” (N.G.)

“ I particularly liked the idea of \*applied\* organizational theories. However, the cases often seemed not typical of usual situations in business life - most of the time I had the feeling of still doing theoretical work on another level. This may be due to the abstract description which was rather close to the original course assignment (real theories). Despite these facts, I enjoyed taking the course and do not regret having done so. The group mixing was heterogeneous, for most it was a new experience in advancing their soft skills” (N.K.)

This course was a learning-intensive experience for us at the department as well. The major challenge was the lack of an e-culture in the school’s academic curriculum. However, the course was a success. And of course we learned our lessons, too:

1. Effective feedback is of major importance. And it is very difficult ‘to do it right’ 1) in an experiential learning environment, and 2) with large numbers of students. How are we to judge performance on such a rich task as a case study, where there is no right or wrong solution? How are we to provide a timely and meaningful feedback to a class of 75 students?

One solution could be to delegate the feedback task to the students themselves (by means of peer assessment, self-evaluation). The tutor can then moderate these processes, but the largest part of the job will be done by the students themselves. And from organizational point of view, with large groups of students proper staffing is important (more than one tutor to be involved in a course). This leads to another important condition for successful online education,

2. Existence of a supportive organizational infrastructure and coordination of efforts between various university services (Registrar’s office, Course Scheduling Service, etc.) and the course designer(s)/tutor(s). Top-down endorsement is crucial. In our case, for example, we had to negotiate the student grading regulations with the Registrar. The grading rules that the university had would impose problems with assessing group work.
3. In order for collaboration to be effective students must feel comfortable in the communication format selected. Often more technology is frustrating rather than beneficial (especially when

learners are inexperienced). One can achieve a lot with simple asynchronous communication method (e.g. forum and e-mail). The choice of technology should be tied closely to the goals of instruction, and consider the experience of the learners. Students also must be convinced that the collaboration would be beneficial for them, they must see the added value of learning together. Student comments in our case show that we were successful in conveying this message to them.

What is the consequence of the application of the pedagogical methods and learning paradigms suggested in this paper? In order to be competitive, business schools need to focus more on the process of management rather than all the theory around it. And of course the approaches discussed in this paper are not the only universally applicable ones. A search for one best solution is doomed in that there exists none. Business schools have to modify the theory in order to adapt it to their unique conditions and educational goals.

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