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Scenario-based business studies

Abstract: The article highlights the innovative “learning by doing” approach to education centered on situational learning with a special reference to scenario-based business studies. The origin of this method is tracked. Its advantages over traditional teaching are stressed. The key pre-requisites factors are enumerated. Its application in the international trade practice course is studied. The specific goals achieved are defined.

Keywords: Learning by doing; traditional teaching; scenario-based learning; problem-solving; real-life contexts; interaction; critical thinking.

*“To be fond of it is better than merely to know it;
to find joy in it is better than merely to be fond of it”*

Confucius

*“Lectures are an ancient artifact of time when
there were not enough books, but still they persist”*

Dr. Roger Shank

Actively relaxed learning is a dream of any student and a pursuit of many teachers. Educational and training institutions are becoming increasingly aware of a different attitude to learning taken by modern students as a result of their exposure to advanced technologies. So the prime task is bridging the gap between acquiring knowledge and real-life professional practice meant to prepare graduates for their future career challenges. The modern approach is also referred to as “learning by doing” (Errington, 2003). The youth now think differently due to their, they want their studies to be authentic, engaging and relevant to their practice. Bored with traditional methods they vote with their feet and search for more interactive activities. Educational experts worldwide are aware of these worrying sentiments and call for a reassessment of teaching and learning approaches (Laurillard, 2006; Oblinger&Oblinger, 2003; Prensky, 2005; Van Eck, 2006).

Learning styles are changing. Traditional teaching based on conveying information to learners gives way to innovative methods that encourage critical thinking and understanding. In this context some educational institutions, especially those focused on professional development, are exploring methodologies that give students more control over their studies by utilizing modern technologies, research projects, as well as through interaction and application to real life problems. A case in point is the situational learning initiative recently undertaken by the University of Adelaide (Ann Davenport, Judy Baron 2007). They are promoting an innovative approach known as situational learning which encompasses a number of various methodologies involving research, interaction and problem-solving, such as simulations, scenarios, case studies and role plays. Particular attention is given to scenario-based learning which enables the students to reconstruct their future. During these sessions students are presented with contexts including real-life problems. In the process of solving them students must take decisions and deal with the consequences. The content and learning aids are available to inform these decisions. Advanced technologies (images, access to e-mail or mobile phones are utilized to boost engagement). Discussion boards and facilitated sessions (face-to-face or on-line) are arranged to encourage students to reflect on what has been happening, what they have been experiencing and what they have been learning.

Scenario-based curriculum approach was originated by Dr. Roger Shank in the late 1980s. He is one of the most reputable experts in artificial intelligence and building learning environments. His company Socratic Arts has designed and implemented learning- by-doing principles and story-centered curricula in schools, universities and corporations. In 1989 he established the Institute for the Learning Sciences (ILS), which had attracted various government sponsors (the Army, the National Guard, the Environment Protection Agency- EPA) and multinationals (IBM, Andersen, Ameritech). ILS built many simulations supported by just-in-time story-telling. This software allowed a student to play a role in a simulated world. For Andersen it meant managing fictional employees (played on video by actors), for EPA it meant running a public meeting and dealing with angry clients. For the Army it meant convincing the fellow officers of your plan of attack. World experts on every topic were videotaped and when students ran into trouble while performing some task, they listen to advice (sometimes contradictory) from the best and brightest on what they had done in similar situations.

The key pre-requisites of scenario-based learning are the following:

1. A detailed scenario describing the company that “employs” the students and their roles within it;
2. On-line resources and links allowing students to build on their existing knowledge;
3. Team-based projects and tasks in which they communicate with fellow “employees”;
4. Role plays where they live the life of a real worker;
5. Reflection questions on the process of learning;
6. Tasks and product deliverables based on the industry standards, which replace traditional assignments and exams;
7. Meeting with the instructor (Upper Management) suggesting tips and a checklist for deliverables, guiding them towards resources in need;
8. Subject matter experts (Mentors) who are available to consult on problematic tasks.

At present scenario-based learning is an extremely popular source of corporate training in the world top 500 corporations, such as General Electric, IBM, Hewlett-Packard, Motorola, Nokia, Ericsson, Lenovo group. The Universities of Taxes, Maryland, The Open University of La Salle and others have signed up to experimental masters degree programs based on learning-by-doing principles built by Socratic Arts.

Let’s take an example of applying scenario-based learning in the course of “International trade practice”. This course is centered on the contract for international sales and arranged around the whole import and export transaction procedures thus cultivating students’ actual business operation skills. This course arouses a set of practical problems and challenges which the students encounter and must resolve, such as:

- Building relationships with a customer;
- Making offers or bargaining;
- Conducting negotiations, securing a deal and signing a contract;
- Dealing with transportation issues and logistics;
- Going through customs clearance and commodity inspection;
- Settling accounts and claims, etc.

The key role of a foreign trade clerk is designed for the whole teaching course. The teaching content is arranged in the form of problem-solving activities (or situations) in which a student is engaged. A support role of an older and more experienced clerk is created for the student to consult. Each situation poses a number of questions (problems), which the student playing the part of the clerk resolves. During this learning-by-doing process the student should find out the meaning of basic international trade terms and conventions, understand the difference in various forms of transportation, study the rules of international trade practice, analyse market prices for the required commodity, learn the principles of compiling the requested documents for the authorities, take the interest of the company into account to be able to conclude a profitable deal. Meanwhile other students produce questions to help the situation develop and, gradually, while the clerk is proceeding with the problem-solving, they learn common international trade terms and conventions.

In conclusion, it’s necessary to highlight the specific goals that scenario-based learning as a teaching tool helps to achieve. They are as follows:

- Thinking outside established framework (e.g. cross-curricular and flexible thinking);
- Identifying relevant social developments;
- Recognizing the complexity and interdependence between systems;
- Applying background research;
- Collaborating with others (including knowledge-building through interaction);
- Discovering that multiple decisions are possible in a particular situation;
- Learning to deal with uncertainty and change;
- Developing creativity and critical thinking;
- Making students more responsible for the current developments.

Moreover, this method could enhance motivation and contribute to more challenging lessons in traditional education. Students who would normally be silent in class feel involved in the activity, because active interaction environment gives them an opportunity to have a voice.

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Методика преподавания иностранных языков бизнес-обучение на основе сценариев

Аннотация: Статья посвящена инновационному методу обучения на практике. Особое внимание уделяется обучению на основе сценариев. Прослеживается история возникновения метода. Перечисляются основные характеристики и особые цели, достигаемые при его помощи. Описывается применение данного метода в рамках курса по международной торговой деятельности.

Ключевые слова: Обучение на практике; традиционное обучение; обучение на основе сценариев; решение проблем; реальные жизненные ситуации; взаимодействие; критическое мышление.

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