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If Pedagogical Experience Counts: A Sketch for Embedding Structures for Active Student Engagement and Blocking Students' Voluntary Disengagement in Executive MBA Strategy and Policy Class

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Abstract

College instructors have been increasingly facing a daunting task to engage students in classroom proceedings, while simultaneously minimize their voluntary disengagement from classrooms, largely induced by the addictive and incessant use of laptop, mobile phone, or other smart tools to cruise the cyberworld for instant gratification or entertainment. The structures for active student engagement (SASE), a pedagogical tool presented in this paper and successfully applied in the EMBA strategy class, promises to be of substantial aid in harnessing students' focus and effort for enhanced classroom engagement and minimizing their voluntary disengagement from classrooms. Moreover, the SASE is designed to contribute toward meeting several requirements from the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, such as shifting classroom focus from teaching to learning, facilitating student-student interactions, and building skills in written and oral communication, analytical thinking, interpersonal relations, and teamwork.

Key Words: Active Student Engagement, Student Disengagement, EMBA Strategy Class, MBA Strategy Class, Case Teaching, Enhancing Classroom Participation

1. Introduction

With rare exceptions, it's a common view now-a-days echoing across the college classrooms that two parties (instructor and students) assembled together for a well-defined common purpose are travelling in two different directions without any convergence. While the instructors are doing all they are supposed to do (such as lecture on or explain the subject matters, scribble on the white board to illustrate a concept, or attempt to engage students with some type of interactive mechanism), aimed at making progress toward the course learning goals, students exhibit voluntary disengagement from classroom proceedings as they are busy with their laptop, mobile phone, or other gadgets cruising the cyberworld for instant entertainment or gratification (Debnath, Tandon, & Lee, 2018). Even with experiential exercises that require members of various groups to interact, analyze, discuss, decide, and deliver the outcomes as required by the exercise, many members not only exhibit little interest with the work-at-hand, but also remain active with their cyberworld travel, additionally distracting those few trying to do the assigned work by sharing 'interesting' things on their gadgets.

The situation becomes more disappointing when a course involves presentation by students to share their research work or comprehensive case analysis with peers, a frequent requirement at the graduate level courses. If the significant part of a class session is devoted to presentations, the entire span of time may present an opportunity for many in the audience to disengage from the proceedings and engage fully into cyber travel and other chores (e.g., completing assignments for other classes), unless there are any built-in counter mechanisms put in place by the instructor. The acute level of disengagement has prompted a sense of urgency among researchers (e.g., Awidi, Paynter, & Vujosevic, 2019; Dochertya et al., 2018; Santos, Figueiredo, & Vieira, 2019) for innovating pedagogical practices to help promote active student engagement. The question is: Is there any way to minimize students' voluntary disengagement from the classroom and steer their effort back into the classroom proceedings to enhance learning?

The purpose of this paper is to present a tried and tested classroom structure, applied successfully in the Executive MBA (EMBA) strategy class requiring hours of student presentations in a session, to minimize students' disengagement from the classroom and reclaim their focus and efforts for active involvement in classroom for enhanced learning. The paper begins with a brief discussion of the overall course design and the relative placement of *the structure for active student engagement* (SASE) in the course. Next, a detailed description of the SASE as well as the procedures for its implementation in the classrooms are presented, which is followed by discussions and conclusion.

2. A Pedagogical Overview of Strategy and Policy Course

2.1 A General Overview

Prior to discussing the specific course designs used for the EMBA class which embeds the structure for active student engagement (SASE), a brief overview of the course designs typically used for the strategy and policy courses at the graduate level (EMBA or MBA) is in order. As it is labelled, *the rational model* is the most prevalent approach used in organizational strategy formulation and dominates the strategy literature (Narayanan & Fahey, 1982). This model involves an application of a sequential procedure for strategy formulation: review of the existing strategies, analysis of the external and internal environments, identification of strategic factors (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats or SWOT), development of new strategies based on the SWOT analysis, evaluation and choice of strategies, and implementation of chosen strategies (Hofer & Schendel, 1978; King & Cleland, 1978; Narayanan & Fahey, 1982). The contents of many popular textbooks in the strategic management area (e.g., David, 2003; Wheelen, Hunger, Hoffman, & Bamford, 2018) are based on the rational model of strategy formulation.

The dominant pedagogical features involving a strategy course could vary significantly among instructors and may primarily depend on the preference of the individual instructor. For example, an instructor may choose to design a strategy course based on one or more of the following: (a) the theoretical concepts of the field typically included in a textbook and/or related research publications available in the literature, (b) an application of the rational model to analyze real life corporate cases, (c) research conducted by students (during the semester) and information collected from live corporations in order to construct a case and provide strategic solutions, (d) a strategy-based simulation game with dozens of variables (decision criteria) involving hypothetical companies requiring student groups to compete in a hypothetical market; or (e) classroom discussions of major case(s) based on impromptu questions from the instructor or a set of preassigned questions to be prepared by students prior to the meeting. In addition, the instructor may require written paper(s) and/or class presentation(s) of the case analysis.

2.2 An Overview of the EMBA Strategy and Policy Course

The subject EMBA course which embedded the SASE was based on two of these features: (a) Students are exposed to the theories, concepts, and tools as well as relevant research during the initial part of the semester, as they are required to apply the theoretical foundations to perform case analysis; and (b) They are given group assignments on two cases for performing comprehensive analysis. The groups are required to analyze each case using a two-pronged approach: (a) *Approach I*--utilize the rational model to perform a step-by-step analysis of the case--review current strategies, analyze external and internal environments to identify SWOT, develop new strategies as well evaluate them, select strategies, and discuss their implementation; and (b) *Approach II*--develop in-depth and analytical responses for five to six assigned questions. For both approaches, students are to prepare written analyses as well as present and discuss their work in the class.

The two-pronged approach involving case analysis is meant to enrich students' learning experience, since Approach II (discussion questions) complements and compensates for the weaknesses inherent in Approach I (the rational model). Approach II should provide more flexibility in formulating responses compared to that allowed under Approach I. This is in recognition of the fact that while an organization is not entirely a rational entity but a dynamic one, a case analysis based on the rational model is likely to dwell within the limits defined by the facts, information, and data (e.g., SWOT analysis). It is not likely to capture all the nuances of an organization, which may play vital roles in shaping the final strategic choice, such as organizational politics, wisdom of the strategic manager, and other human and organizational factors not apparently visible. For example, Approach I may fall short of or be of limited use in generating insightful answers, as opposed to Approach II, to the type of questions, such as: (a) How would you describe the founder's leadership philosophy? Or (b) What was the impact of the founder's philosophy on the corporate culture, and does it help or hurt the corporation?

To further elaborate, the rational model is criticized for questionable assumptions of organizational realities inherent in it, such as a unitary voice exists within the firm regarding strategic choice, organizational preferences are known, cause-and-effect relationship is understood, and information is sufficiently available (Murray, 1978; Narayanan & Fahey, 1982). Bell et al. (2018) also pointed out that strategy courses today use multiple frameworks which need more integration and are not as effective as they should be. In addition, Bower (1995) was emphatic that a well formulated corporate strategy should capture the judgment, preference, aspiration, and resolve of human elements, and no theoretical model as of yet is capable of doing so. Narayanan and Fahey (1982), in an attempt to address one such deficiency, developed a modified rational model of strategy formulation to reflect the political reality of an organization. As for the EMBA course, some of these weaknesses of the rational model can be played out, explored, and dealt with by weaving inter-group interaction, debates, and deliberations in the class with Approach II (discussion questions).

The relevance and significance of utilizing the earlier described two-pronged approach are emphasized and supported by Bower (1995) as follows:

> We seek . . . via the classroom case discussion process, to educate in the nonlogical—that mixture of feeling and sentiment, comment and commitment, certainty and uncertainty—that goes into every decision and judgment. . . . directed group discussions force attention to the human dimensions through which the analytic framework is filtered in real life. . . . a combination of . . . the analytic framework of strategic planning and the process framework emphasizing human interaction . . . that make up . . . educational fare. (xi)

Therefore, the EMBA strategy class utilizes the two-pronged approach for a more complete learning.

3. The Structure for Active Student Engagement (SASE) and Implementation Procedures in the EMBA Strategy Course

3.1 The SASE

1. The EMBA class is designed to embed SASE at the start of the semester. With the specifics to follow next, several groups are formed and each group is assigned two cases to perform comprehensive analysis based on *Approach I (rational model) and Approach II (discussion questions)*, submit written papers on both cases, and present one of them in class.

2. Every group assumes and rotates through the following three roles during each session with case activities: (a) *the Lead Strategist Group* (LST) with the primary responsibility for a particular case; (b) *the Lead Critique Group* (LCR), charged specifically to critique the case analysis presented by the LST; and (c) *the Consulting Groups* (CSG), who are assigned *a priori* to either LST or LCR, to act as consultant and support the clients with their expertise (on the case). During any case presentation, all members of the class are engaged as they are members of and have the responsibility as either LST, LCR, or CSG.

3. After group formation, *two-group dyads* are defined and both groups in each dyad are assigned the same two cases, with all dyads being allocated a different set of cases. In a dyad, one group is assigned to be the LST for one case and LCR for the second case and vice-versa for the second group. While both groups in a dyad submit a written analysis of each case, the LST of a case is also required to make a presentation of the analysis to the class.

4. For the first round, each group in a dyad is required to perform separate analysis on both cases based on Approach I, so that there are two separate analyses from each dyad on each case. While all groups submit their written analysis, the LST for each case makes its presentation during the six-hour session; the LCR and CSG assigned for the case under presentation perform their roles during this time, as the example in Table 1 shows.

5. In the next round, individual groups analyze the assigned cases for each dyad based on Approach II (discussion questions), submit their written analysis, and the LST for each case make its presentation as scheduled during another six-hour class session. The LCR and CSG assigned for each case become engaged at this time.

6. The CSG is not required to analyze the third and fourth cases for which they perform the role to avoid an overkill, since they are also responsible for the two cases primarily designated to their own dyads. However, they are to capture as much information as possible from the presentation of the LST so that they can contribute meaningfully to their clients' needs once the presentation ends.

Table 1 provides an example of formation of dyads, case assignments, and allocation of group responsibilities which can be appropriate for both approaches. For example: (a) Groups 1 and 2 are in a dyad, with cases A and B assigned to both groups for separate group analysis; (b) Group 1 is the LST for case A and has the primary responsibility for the case, with group 2 being the LCR for the case; (c) Once the presentation on the case (based on either Approach I or II) is completed by group 1, group 3 will join group 1 and group 4 to group 2 as the CSG prior to opening discussion on the case to the class; (d) Similarly, group 2 is the LST for case B with the primary responsibility, and group 1 becomes the LCR for the case; (e) Once the presentation on case B is done, group 4 will join group 2 as the CSG and group 3 will be the CSG for group 1.

In summary, each group will perform a detailed analysis of two cases, present one, and also be required to contribute to class discussion with two additional cases.

3.2 The SASE Implementation Procedures in a Classroom Based on 90-Minute Case Activities

1. The LST will make its presentation on Approach I (or Approach II) analysis. *Time limit*: About 45 minutes.

2. A short quiz, with one or two questions derived from the presentation by LST, is given immediately after the presentation. The quiz is designed to ensure that students performing the role of CSG for the case devote their attention to the ongoing presentation and acquire enough information and facts about the case to serve their clients. This may also help obtain students' assessment and decisions related to and based on the case analysis presented. Only the group presenting a case will be exempted from the quiz; rest of the members are required to take the quiz. If there are four presentations in a session, all students will take three quizzes during that session, and scores on the quizzes can have significant impact on their course grade given enough weight on the quizzes. *Time limit*: About 10 minutes.

3. Once the quiz is completed, both LST and LCR join their preassigned CSG to discuss the case and obtain additional perspective on relevant issues. *Time limit*: About 15 minutes.

4. The discussion on the case then opens to the entire class, which is essentially divided into two groups at this point—LST and LCR. The LST should lead discussions in the class, engage the class, and capitalize on the experience of the class members, at the same time, deal with the opposing or contradictory views spearheaded by the LCR or from others regarding any issue(s) in a logical manner. *Time limit*: About 20 minutes.

5. The instructor plays the role of a facilitator and may intervene when necessary to steer the discussion and provide additional input at appropriate time.

6. At the end of the discussion (if there is enough time) or at another time deemed appropriate by the instructor, each group uses a comprehensive evaluation instrument, developed by Ohland et al., (2012,) to assess team members' performance, evaluator included. The instrument has been tested by its authors for validity and affords evaluation along five dimensions including member contribution, interaction, quality, knowledge, and skills. The evaluation scores should be used to weigh the individual member grade upward or downward based on the group's overall performance.

7. Since participation is an integral part of the process, students are to be evaluated on class participation during case discussion in order to encourage, engage, and motivate them. Their contribution will be evaluated based on the quality of input and not the quantity of air time or delivery masking lack of preparation. The expectation is that students should convey their thoughts in a succinct manner, willingly test innovative ideas, and provoke a dialogue among participants.

A graduate assistant may record the extent of meaningful participation (e.g., contribution, ideas, relevant questions) by individual students, or alternately, using an honor system, students may record their own contributions during case discussions, on a 4-inch by 6-inch card, to be subsequently graded by the instructor.

4. Discussions and Conclusion

The structure for active student engagement (SASE) presented in this paper has been developed and applied in our EMBA strategy class to counter the epidemic level of distractions that make learning a strugglesome and barely achievable goal. The SASE has been successfully applied in multiple classrooms over time and the result was quite consistent in terms of enhancing students' active engagement with the classroom proceedings, and simultaneously, disengaging them, in most part, from their pleasure trip to the cyber world or other distractions. As per our observations, students were paying close attention to the ongoing presentations, taking notes, capturing the presentation slides with their cell phones (rather than use it for cyber travel), and asking questions. This was due to the fact that everyone had a stake in the ongoing case presentation in terms of the assigned roles or the quizzes amounting to a sizable portion of the total grade. The LST had to prepare well (hopefully, contributing to a better analysis) to confront the equally knowledgeable LCR, and CSG were to pay attention to the presentation to perform their consulting role, all forms of participation being graded along the way.

The SASE, as embroidered in the course, involves a very tight structure in terms of procedures and allocated time. It also demands busy work on the part of the instructor in keeping track of the entire class with each student playing multiple roles (LST, LCR, and CSG) in a particular session, collecting data (for grading) on class participation throughout the day on each student, administering and grading quizzes, evaluating assignments and presentations, and weighing group members' grades on case analyses and presentations on the basis of the self-evaluations by each group. Even though some of these responsibilities can be shifted to graduate assistants, it's still a difficult feat on the part of the instructor. However, given the significance of the issue, the onus is on the instructor to face off counterproductive disengagement and ensure engagement in the classrooms for enhanced learning.

In addition to the heightened classroom involvement, the SASE is desirable for several other reasons. Researchers (Mintzberg, 2004; Santos et al., 2019) agree that for ensuring effective education, classes should be conducted so that the focus is shifted from *teaching*, which is instructor controlled, to *learning*, which is more student oriented. Moreover, the accreditation criteria outlined by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB International, 2013/2018) emphasize frequent and high levels of interaction between and among learners (student-student); in addition, the AACSB criteria underscore the requirements for active learning and engagement of students in classrooms. The SASE is designed to shift classroom focus from teaching to learning and stress student-student interactions, thus making it an important tool to help meet the AACSB requirements. It can also be used to meet the AACSB criteria on skills building in the areas of written communication, oral communication, analytical thinking, interpersonal relations, and teamwork.

It is to be noted that while the procedures and sequence of assignments involving the SASE have been presented in this paper, the scheduling specifics covering the entire set of activities can vary depending on the mode of course offering (e.g., face-to-face or hybrid) and are left to the discretion of individual instructors. The SASE can be utilized in the three-hour long MBA classes by scheduling one dyad per session as exhibited in Table 1. It can also be adjusted based on the number of students in a class; however, it is particularly suitable for small classes and may pose difficulty if the class size gets bigger. The instructor may also adjust the time limit, to some extent, related to certain steps in order to accommodate the structure within the timespan allocated to a class.

In conclusion, with ever changing classroom environment, the learning goals are becoming increasingly distant to achieve, as instructors face progressively greater challenge to keep students engaged in the classroom proceedings and prevent them from disengaging. The thoughtfully designed and tested SASE should provide a mechanism to reclaim and harness students' attention for classroom engagement, at the same time minimizing disengagement from the classroom.

Like there is no single theory of motivation available yet that can capture all the variables responsible for human motivation (Griffin, Phillips, & Gully, 2017), there is no panacea for classroom engagement which can be effective in all situations or at all times. However, the SASE promises a step forward in getting students' attention back into the class and a step closer to achieving classroom learning goals.

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Table 1: An Example on Assignment of Cases and Group Roles for Engaging All Students in a Six-Hour Class Session During *Approach I* (Rational Model) or *Approach II (Discussion Questions)* Case Activities

Roles / ***Cases***	Lead Strategist Group (**LST**)	Lead Critique Group (**LCR**)	Consulting Group (**CSG**) for **LST**	Consulting Group (**CSG**) for **LCR**	Total Time for a Case Activity
Dyad with Groups 1 & 2; Cases A & B					
Case A	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	90 Minutes
Case B	Group 2	Group 1	Group 4	Group 3	90 Minutes
Dyad with Groups 3 & 4; Cases C & D					
Case C	Group 3	Group 4	Group 1	Group 2	90 Minutes
Case D	Group 4	Group 3	Group 2	Group 1	90 Minutes