Making the Student Learning Experience Fun, Memorable and Effective: A Case of Entrepreneurship Students

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Abstract: The goal of every passionate educator is to ensure that his or her students adopt a deep learning approach to the material being taught so that they can apply these concepts in their lives beyond the classroom. This is particularly true for entrepreneurship students who are expected to establish their own businesses after graduating from university. In order to achieve this very important objective, it is vital that the educator does everything in his or her power to ensure that the students’ learning experiences are made as enjoyable and as memorable as possible. This paper presents the achievement of this objective amongst a group of entrepreneurship students in Nigeria through the introduction of a team learning competition concept in an Organizational Behaviour course over two years. Students were required to form same-gender groups of five and establish companies. Each group was then required to make thirty-minute oral presentations explaining their company’s organizational culture and the strategies adopted to ensure that the culture permeated every aspect of the business. The team with the best presentation was awarded a monetary prize at the end of the semester. Observations of the students’ behaviours before, during and after the presentations revealed that the students’ engagement in the course was exponentially enhanced as evidenced by their unbridled enthusiasm and creative approaches to the presentations. It is recommended that entrepreneurship and business educators adopt a similar approach so as to elevate the students’ learning experiences, and make the university career a fun, memorable and effective one as opposed to the current tortuous grind that it is now, particularly from a Nigerian context.

Keywords: Team learning, Competition, Entrepreneurship Education, Learning Experience, Deep Learning

1. Introduction

For me, being an educator is much more than a job, it is a calling. I am deeply passionate about making my students better, and I firmly believe that a pivotal component of being an educator is to develop students’ creativity and critical thinking abilities by making the learning experience an enjoyable and memorable one. The reality is that the default teaching method in most Nigerian universities is far from enjoyable and memorable; it is merely a grind which students suffer through on their way to earning a degree. The usual style is as follows: the lecturer gives the students notes that include textbook definitions of key concepts and textbook applications of these concepts. Students take down these notes, and ensure that they memorize the content. Tests and examinations are then given to ascertain how well the students have memorized the notes, and the students who are best able to regurgitate the content of the notes do well. I experienced this style of teaching as an undergraduate student in a Nigerian...
university, and discussions with my colleagues and some of my students revealed that they also experienced this uninspiring style of learning.

When I became an entrepreneurship educator, I knew I had to change this default teaching style and adopt a new style of teaching that would make learning fun and exciting. To achieve this objective, I adopted a team learning concept set in a competition format for students enrolled in an Organizational Behaviour course. Firstly, I instigated a battle of the sexes by pitting the male students against the female students based on the notion that “whatever a man can do, a woman can do it better”. Secondly, students were required to form same-gender groups of five, and form companies. These companies would make oral presentations during the course of the semester explaining their organizational culture and the steps they had taken to ensure that this culture was embodied in every aspect of their business operations. The company with the best presentation would win a monetary prize at the end of the semester. I applied this concept for two sets of students over two years, and the results were spectacular. I was very impressed at how putting these students in a competitive team format seemed to unlock their creativity and enthusiasm towards the course, with each team coming up with ingenious presentations in a bid to outdo one another. Additionally, the battle of the sexes format proved quite enjoyable to the students with the males trying their best to prove that they were just as good as their female counterparts, and vice versa. This paper presents a comprehensive description of this format and specific examples of how students’ creativity and critical thinking abilities were unleashed. It is hoped that this paper will inspire other passionate educators to adopt a similar method of teaching so as to enhance student engagement in their courses and make the learning experience one to remember.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows: First a literature review is presented discussing the various ways in which entrepreneurship and business educators have sought to enhance students’ learning experiences. Second, a comprehensive description of the team learning competition concept I adopted is provided, along with specific examples of students’ responses to this method, and then the paper ends with a conclusion.

2. Literature Review

The ultimate objective for making entrepreneurship students’ learning experiences fun, memorable and effective is to ensure that they are able to understand the key concepts of entrepreneurship and business that are contained in the curriculum, and that they are able to translate this understanding into practical applications in the real world. In other words, it is essential that these students adopt a deep learning approach to their entrepreneurship education. This section of the paper presents various suggestions made by scholars from the management sciences (accounting, business, economics, entrepreneurship, marketing and management) on how to achieve this ultimate objective.

Boyce et al., (2001) posited that educators must play the role of facilitator wherein students are allowed to drive the learning process. The educator makes clear to the students the general objectives and learning outcomes of the course, and assists them as they pursue various avenues to achieve the stated outcomes. Sayles (2006) agreed that educators must adopt strategies that make students drive the learning process, thus becoming active learners; learning thus becomes a discovery process for the students. An example of such a strategy is getting the students to keep learning journals which have been empirically proven to enable students to engage in deeper approaches to learning.
Turner (2011) utilized a combination of course delivery and assessment interventions to successfully promote deep learning amongst 81 third-year accounting students in a New Zealand University. The first intervention involved the educator acting as a facilitator to encourage the students to drive the learning process, and reach important conclusions about the real world implications of accounting concepts learnt in class. Interviews of these students and a content analysis of their learning journals revealed the effectiveness of the interventions in fostering deep learning. The second intervention involved group work, and the third intervention was an assessment intervention which is discussed in the next section.

The use of group work as a means of fostering deep learning was a second, and arguably the most popular, teaching strategy identified in the review of deep learning scholarship (Boyce et al., 2001; Kates, 2002; Hall et al., 2004; Yong & Lew, 2005; Sayles, 2006; Borredon et al., 2011; Turner, 2011; Schonell & Hanson, 2013). Kates (2002) sought to assess the impact of student marketing teams on improving deep learning amongst these students. She adopted a qualitative approach by interviewing six students that were members of different marketing teams; students were each interviewed for one hour. The interviews revealed that there are two obstacles that might limit the ability of students to engage in deep learning whilst in a group: 1) there was a struggle for control amongst members of the group, with some members dominating discussions and determining the direction the group should follow. This led other group members to feel uninvolved, and this feeling discouraged them from really seeking to understand the concepts in the course; 2) there was a free-rider problem whereby some group members contributed little value to the group, content with allowing others to do the bulk of the work. The hardworking members of the group found it difficult to confront this free-riders about their attitude. The free riders did not engage in deep learning, whilst the other group members felt taken advantage of. Kates (2002) recommended that educators can mitigate these problems of group work by educating the students about how to resolve conflicts in group situations at the very start of the course session. Additionally, educators can use humorous “ice-breaking” and “bonding” sessions at the start of the semester so that feelings of rapport can be developed among group members which will help facilitate a more harmonious working relationship which in turn will lead to students adopting a deep approach to learning. Yong and Lew (2005) also advocated the use of group activities to facilitate deep learning amongst marketing students; specifically, regarding Malaysian students.

Hall et al., (2004) validated the efficacy of group work in fostering deep learning amongst accounting students in a longitudinal study of 292 first-year accounting students in an Australian university. The students’ approaches to learning were measured using Biggs (1987) Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) before the start of the course. During the semester, a predominantly group approach was adopted by the authors in delivering the course content, and at the end of the semester, the SPQ was again used to measure the students’ approaches to learning. A comparison of the pre-test and post-test scores revealed that there was a small but significant increase in deep learning amongst the students, and a small but significant decrease in surface learning.

Borredon et al., (2011) presented a case study of a French Business School where group work was utilized to engender deep learning amongst the students. Every student was required to joining a “learning team” made up of twelve students upon enrollment, and this team worked together until they graduated. Each team was facilitated and managed by a lecturer called the “learning manager”. Similar to Sayles’ (2006) New Zealand study, students in the learning team were required to record their
experiences of working together in learning journals. The learning manager encouraged the learning team to engage in constructive debates and discussion about their management paradigms, skills and decision-making processes. A content analysis of some of these learning journals, as well as interviews with some learning team members led the authors to conclude that the use of learning teams provided the students the opportunity to truly engage with the course material and to connect them with their day-to-day experiences; in other words, learning teams fosters deep learning amongst management students.

Dupernex et al., (2013) sought to ascertain the efficacy of a group-based case study workshop approach on fostering deep learning amongst UK first-year entrepreneurship students as compared to a traditional lecture approach. A revised version of the SPQ (Biggs et al., 2001) was used to determine the learning approaches of two groups of these students before the start of the intervention. Afterwards the experimental group went through a semester whereby the case study workshop approach was implemented, whilst the second group were taught using a lecture approach. At the end of the semester, the SPQ was used to measure their approaches to learning. A comparison of pre-intervention and post-intervention deep learning scores showed that those students in the group case study workshop had increased their deep learning scores significantly more than those students who received the traditional lecture.

Schonell and Hanson (2013) advocated the use of “break-out” rooms and a large white board as a means of maximizing the impact of group-work amongst management students in order to engender deep learning. Break-out rooms are simply large classrooms that allow students to form into groups and still maintain a “good social distance” (Schonell & Hanson, 2013, p.2). Four groups were formed and assigned a management strategy case study to understand and resolve. Some interesting findings were identified at the end of the program: 1) The group that used the white board performed the best in resolving the case study. Although it is a simple tool, it allowed them to actively put down different ideas and to discuss these ideas. 2) The space of the room matters: when groups have enough space, it enables them to feel free to animatedly discuss issues amongst themselves without fear of disrupting the work of other groups. These discussions encourage the students to develop deeper understanding of the concepts and how they can be applied to resolve real-world problems.

A third course delivery strategy identified in this review to foster deep learning is the Case Challenge strategy (Jayashree & Mitra, 2012). This strategy pits two groups of students in a head-to-head competition to resolve a case. Jayashree and Mitra (2012) utilized this method amongst management students at the Dubai campus of an Australian university. Structured interviews of the students revealed that the Case Challenge strategy encouraged them to increase their level of preparation and understanding of the key concepts needed to resolve the case due to the competitive nature of the Case Challenge.

The use of in-class simulations was a fourth deep-learning promoting teaching strategy identified in this review (Phillips & Graeff, 2014). Phillips and Graeff (2014) revealed that years of teaching experience had shown that students tended to find their first accounting class difficult to understand due to the new accounting terms and language they had to learn. To address this difficulty and foster deep learning of these concepts amongst these first-year students, the authors utilized an in-class simulation exercise whereby the students were involved in buying and selling of different merchandise and recording these transactions using the concepts learnt in class. By utilizing these abstract concepts in real-world
transactions, it enabled the students to understand and experience the practical benefits of these concepts which thus helped build their confidence, improve their attitude towards accounting, and enabled them to adopt a deeper approach to learning accounting principles.

Of particular importance to this paper is the fact that group work (Boyce et al., 2001; Kates, 2002; Hall et al., 2004; Yong & Lew, 2005; Sayles, 2006; Borredon et al., 2011; Turner, 2011; Schonell & Hanson, 2013) and the adoption of a competition format (Jayashree & Mitra, 2012) have been found to be effective in enhancing students’ deep approach to learning.

3. Team Learning Competition Concept

3.1 Description and Application of Concept

The concept was introduced in an Organizational Behaviour course offered by the Department of Entrepreneurship and Business Studies at the Federal University of Technology Minna, Nigeria. The first three weeks of the semester were spent teaching the students about the key concepts of organizational behaviour, with special emphasis laid on the importance of identifying and developing an organizational culture built on universal principles such as trustworthiness, integrity, justice and transparency. Students were also taught the importance of ensuring that the organizational culture was diffused into every aspect of the business process.

Students were then asked to form same-gender groups of five in order to settle the notion once and for all on whether what men could do, women could do better. This was done in a humorous manner and drew a lot of friendly banter between the male and female students with each category vowing to show that they could do the best. Each group was required to form a company, with each group member taking a key position within the company: CEO, Vice president marketing, Vice president Operations, Vice president human resource management and Vice president Customer relations. Each group was required to agree upon an organization culture they wished to foster within the company, and come up with a coherent strategy with which the culture would be developed and successfully diffused within all aspects of the company. Each group were then required to make half-hour oral presentations of this strategy, with all five members participating in the presentations.

To add an element of realism to the assignment, each group was also required to register their company with a faux “Corporate Affairs Commission” (CAC), which real companies have to do in Nigeria. They paid a token registration fee, and submitted the required documents listing the key officials of the company with passport photographs to boot, and received a receipt from the “CAC”. The total amount of fees received served as the winning price for the company with the best presentation at the end of the semester. In order to fairly determine the order of presentations, all company names were put in a pot, and drawn randomly. To address the issue of free-riders that is often associated with group assessments, each member of the group was assessed on his or her individual portion of the presentation, although there was a portion of the total grade allocated to synergy within the group in their presentation. At the end of each group’s presentation, their overall score as a group was announced to the class and this enabled the groups to know which company was leading the competition at any given time, and the amount of work necessary to challenge or topple the current leaders in the competition. During the last
class of the semester, the winning group was presented with the monetary prize to much fanfare and applause.

3.2 Assessing the Impact of Concept on Student Engagement

An important question to ask is whether or not the team learning competition concept achieved its desired objective of increasing student engagement in the course and making the learning experience a fun and memorable one. Critical observations of the students’ behaviours before, during and after the presentations provided credible evidence that the answer to the question was a resounding YES. The subsequent paragraphs provide specific instances of some of these observations.

Before the presentations started, several groups came to consult with me brimming with enthusiasm and creative and ingenious ideas regarding their planned presentations. One group wondered if they could utilize audio and visual aids during their presentation, while another group wanted to play a short video to enhance their presentation. Yet another group wondered if they could all wear the same outfit in order to symbolize an essential component of their organizational culture which was unity. Another group wanted to find out if they could all present at once, rather than one by one, so as to highlight how collaborative they could be as a company. The ideas came in droves, some good and some not as good, but the creative juices were definitely flowing amongst these students, and it was a wonderful experience for me as an educator to witness such enthusiasm.

During the presentations, a lot of these groups were able to execute their ideas wonderfully well, with each group doing its best to outdo the previous one in style and clarity of presentation as well as in the use of audio and visual aids to enhance their presentations. In the first year, a men’s team won the competition by a narrow margin against a female team. During the second year of implementing this method, one group actually hired the CEO of the winning company from the year before as a consultant. They signed a contract wherein he was entitled to 60% of the winnings if his consultation led them to victory. They brought the contract to my office for me to serve as a witness, and they went on to deliver an excellent presentation. One might wonder, did the consultation pay off and lead them to victory? They came real close, and actually finished second overall, missing out on first place by one point; this time a women’s team won, much to the delight of the female students as their seniors had told them about the victory of the men a year before, and had urged them to gain revenge for all womenfolk. The CEO consultant actually visited me in the office at the end of the semester to reminisce with me on his previous plans on what to do with his share of the winnings as he had been supremely confident that his clients would win.

After the presentations, several students visited me to ask if I would adopt a similar format in other courses I would be taking with them as they progressed through their academic career at the department. Some of these students wanted to improve upon their performances in these other courses, and asked for suggestions on what to do in order to make a better showing next time around. Some others actually suggested that rather than only one team taking the entire prize money, perhaps there should be a first, second and third team, with first taking 50% of the prize money, second taking 30% and third taking 20%. They argued that this would further motivate them to perform better as there were three opportunities to win something. I actually agree with their suggestion, and I look forward to implementing this strategy in future courses. The CEO consultant described in the preceding paragraph
actually went a step further. He had gained so much confidence due to his group’s winning presentation and the recognition of his fellow students of his presentation skills, that he went out into the real world and pitched a company his idea for a video-game competition amongst students, asking the company to sponsor the competition as a marketing strategy. To his surprise, the company were so impressed by his pitch that they agreed to his proposal, and he actually successfully implemented the competition.

What can clearly be observed from the students’ behaviours described in the preceding paragraphs was that the team learning competition concept truly enhanced their enthusiasm and triggered their creativity for the course. It made the learning experience fun, memorable and one to look forward to, as evidenced by the fact that the first set of students had shared their experience with the second set of students urging them to do them proud.

4. Conclusion

The goal of education is to make students identify potential they never knew they possessed and to equip them with the tools necessary to fulfil this potential. The job of an educator is thus a sacred one, and it is the noble task of every educator to do everything in his or her power to enable students to become better in every way possible. To achieve this objective, it is imperative that the educator make the students’ learning experiences fun, memorable and effective. This was my objective in introducing and implementing a team learning competition concept in an Organizational Behaviour course offered at the Department of Entrepreneurship and Business Studies located at the Federal University of Technology Minna. Two years of implementing this concept revealed that it successfully engaged the students in the course as evidenced by their unbridled enthusiasm and success of creative and ingenious presentation styles. Even after the conclusion of the course, the learning experience remained etched positively in their minds, and actually had real-world consequences in their lives as described in the body of this paper. I call on my fellow educators to adopt a similar strategy in their courses so as to enhance the student learning experience and make the university journey an enjoyable, memorable and life-changing one instead of the current torturous grind that it currently is, especially in the Nigerian context.

References


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Libraries historically highly value intellectual freedom and patron confidentiality (LaRue, 2007).

*Indirect Quotation with Author as Part of the Narrative*
LaRue (2007) identified intellectual freedom and patron confidentiality as two key values held historically by libraries.

*Direct Quotation with Parenthetical Citation*
Darwin used the metaphor of the tree of life "to express the other form of interconnectedness–genealogical rather than ecological" (Gould & Brown, 1991, p. 14).

*Direct Quotation with Author as Part of the Narrative*
Gould and Brown (1991) explained that Darwin used the metaphor of the tree of life "to express the other form of interconnectedness–genealogical rather than ecological" (p. 14).