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Innovating in Teaching of Business Administration Through the Case Method

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Abstract

This paper describes the experience in applying the Case Method in the subject of Business Economics: Introduction. This course is taught in the first year of the Degree in Business Administration and Management, in the University of the Basque Country. In the article is detailed the context in which the implementation of the case took place and also the activities that were developed. Finally, the main results from an opinion questionnaire about this methodology given to students are presented. As a conclusion, the overall assessment of teachers is collected once the implementation of the case has finished.

Keywords: Case method, higher education, educational innovation.

Innovando en la docencia de ciencias empresariales a través del método del caso

Resumen

En este artículo se describe la experiencia en la aplicación del Método del Caso en la asignatura de Economía de la Empresa: Introducción.

Esta asignatura se imparte en el primer curso de la Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales, de la Universidad del País Vasco. En el artículo se detalla el contexto en el que tuvo lugar la implementación y las principales actividades que se desarrollaron. Igualmente, se presentan los resultados obtenidos de un cuestionario de opinión que sobre esta metodología se pasó al alumnado. Para concluir, se recoge la valoración global del profesorado una vez finalizada la experiencia.

Palabras clave: Método del caso, docencia universitaria, innovación educativa.

1. INTRODUCTION

The experience to which we refer to in this article was conducted by implementing the Case “Kukuxu... what? Entrepreneurs against the flow”. A case which was done within the Teacher Training Program in Active Teaching Methodologies ERAGIN, in the University of the Basque Country UPV / EHU (Garmendia and Guisasola, 2014). It is of special interest to note that the case was implemented during the academic year 2010/2011, the course in which the implementation of the Official Bachelor studies at this University took place as a result of the adaptation to the new European Higher Education Area. It is with all the changes which it implied both from the point of view of teachers and pupils in relation to the new model of teaching and learning.

In particular, the Case was launched on October 6, 2010, and its implementation was carried out until December 17, 2010, when the process concluded with its last planned activity. The case was implemented in a group of 100 students (studying in Spanish), first-year students in the first four months of the course of Business Economics: Introduction. That is to say that this is a common and compulsory subject for all pupils enrolled in any of the five degrees that were launched for the first time in the academic year 2010/2011 at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration of Bilbao, namely, Business Administration and Management, a degree in Economics, a degree in Marketing, a degree in Finance and Insurance and a degree in Taxation and Public Administration.

It is worth noting the subject of Business Economics: Introduction, this supposes the first contact of students with undergraduate studies, and largely with the study of Business Economics. Moreover, as its name suggests, this is an introductory course whose main objective is to pro-

vide an overview of management, that is, without delving into any specific area, as this will be done mainly in subsequent courses through different subjects in the BA degree in Business Administration and to a lesser extent, the degree in Marketing.

Regarding the application of the Case, before implementing this methodology, the first part of the course had been taught, which corresponds to the Fundamentals of Business Economics and is composed of a single unit entitled “Enterprise and Entrepreneur. The main objective of this unit is to introduce students to the basic concepts of business economics and how the concept of Enterprise and the concept of entrepreneur are. In this sense, our case is a clear example of how a business idea comes about and how to set in motion a business project. It also allows us to reflect on the concept of the entrepreneur through the history of our three protagonists, and discuss issues such as the social responsibility of businesses and business objectives.

2. IMPLEMENTATION OF CASE

The presentation of the case took place in a seminar class (specifically, in the second seminar of the course). That is to say, given how large the group was, the work of the Case was developed completely, and as far as the face to face part is concerned, in seminar classes, this allowed us to develop and implement this methodology in the most optimal way possible (breakdown of group of 100 students of the lectures in four different subgroups of seminar classes of 25 students in each one).

On the day of the presentation of the Case, before distributing a copy of the statement to each of the students, we proceeded to explain what the case method consisted of. This was done so as to be able then to present the specific case which was going to be worked on in our subject. Subsequently, the work methodology that was going to be followed, the work schedule, the proposed activities both in class and out of class were commented on. Also the way was explained in which each one of the different activities was going to be evaluated. Once the presentation of the new methodology and specific work Case were finalized, the “Student Guide” (Y. Chica, 2011) was distributed among the students, a written document in which the most important aspects to consider in the development of the Case were summarised (activities undertaken, key dates and calendar and assessment system). Also, this document became

available to students through the support platform for the teaching of the virtual campus of the UPV-EHU, a way which was used additionally to transmit regularly (one week in advance minimum) information about the next activity to be performed in relation to the Case.

Having explained the dynamics of the work, we proceeded to set up randomly (in alphabetical order) working groups among the students present who showed their willingness to do the Case work (virtually 100% of those present). Although the ideal way in our opinion would have been to make groups of 3-4 people, finally, given the high number of students enrolled per group and the high participation of them in the proposed task, groups of 4-5 people were made.

In this first working session of the Case, there was no survey about previous knowledge or a pre-test. This was because it was precisely in this first session that the case was presented and given out. As well as this there was the setting out of the timetable for activities. In this way, they were informed that in the next work session prior to working in a small group, there would be a small individual previous knowledge test. For this, it would be essential the previous reading of the case as well as finding out how much information could be obtained about the company mainly through its website, (that is to say the company which is the object of the case is characterized for among other things, for having a great amount of information on its website, its history, its creators, its own business and activities in which it is immersed).

3. MONITORING DURING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CASE

In the monitoring of the implementation process of the case it should be noted, firstly, the positive attitude showed by the majority of the students towards the new methodology and the good working environment that was generated in the in- class work sessions. This in our opinion was contributed in a key way by the fact that the case was implemented in seminar classes (groups of 25 students, and therefore 5-6 small work-groups maximum per session) and in special classrooms (smaller ones) that favored small group work and the communication between students and teachers. Moreover, as already mentioned before, student attendance to the working sessions was generally very high. These conclusions are drawn both from informal discussions with students before and after -sem-

inar classes and tutoring times. This can be verified in the results of the satisfaction survey provided by the ERAGIN program and carried out on the students in the last working session. In the following section the results of this survey will be looked into in more detail.

As for the main difficulties encountered in implementing the case, it has to be said that the first one was the negative reaction of most of the students to the working groups being formed at random. This difficulty, although it hardly affected the in- class work, in the part of out of class work it caused many problems (although not in the majority) related to teamwork (lack of communication between members of the same group, coordination, work commitment, collaboration in carrying out the work,...) which resulted in complaints to the teacher, abandonment of members of working groups at the request of their fellow class members or by their own choice and the presentation of works only by some members of the group, etc. A second difficulty that was encountered in the implementation of the Case, was the fact that enrollment of students did not close until late October-early November, so having started the implementation of the Case on October 6, and in particular, having formed working groups, shared out the Case, assigned tasks,... we found that in the first agreed work session there were students who had changed their class group, leaving their workgroup without notification, and at the same time, students who had joined the class group without knowing the Case workflow, without belonging to a particular working group and without having read the Case. Logically, in this last case, since the students had just enrolled, there were no reasons for not letting them participate in this workflow, and therefore, they were eligible for the mark from these activities as stipulated by the evaluation system of the subject. This fact entailed the main modification of the program implemented with regards to the the plan initially designed in the in- class activities and out of class ones, and the evaluation activities. In particular, the initial prior knowledge test was not considered in the evaluation system so as not to discriminate among students enrolled at different times, although the test was conducted with the students who were then in the work session and who had read the Case. The other pupils, who did not know the dynamics of the work or the Case, were dedicated during that time to reading the Case so as to be able to work later all together in the scheduled session (small group work). Furthermore, we saw ourselves being forced to reorganize the working groups.

Regarding the evaluation system of the Case, as the individual report prior to the start of the working sessions was not considered, it became as follows (in accordance with the system of general evaluation of the course):

- Work and participation in small group: 25%
- Final report: 50%
- Presentation and defense of the final report in plenary session: 25%

4. CASE EVALUATION

The evaluation activities finally implemented were the following:

I. Individual report (initial test of prior knowledge)

This test took place on the first day of small group work in class seminars, although because of the problems caused by the late enrollment of students, as we have already discussed above, some of the students carried out the test and others on not knowing the dynamics of the work, did not do so. So that eventually this activity was not considered as initially contemplated in the evaluation system of the Case.

II. Student participation in the working sessions in small groups

This test took place in two working sessions in small groups that had been made in the implementation of The Case. In each of the sessions, small group work was conducted in seminar classes of 60 minutes each, where the working groups had to deal with the issues formulated by the teacher following the scheme of questions referred to in the teaching note of the Case. Work in small groups in the seminar classes logically favored and facilitated the participation and subsequent evaluation of students. However, and in order to accurately assess the work done by the groups, at the end of each session, the various working groups had to complete and submit to the teacher a report of what was discussed and agreed by the group on the issues raised in the session. In these sessions, different dynamics of cooperative learning such as the so-called "Pass the problem", were carried out (Andreu, Gonzalez-Escrivá and Labrador, 2008).

III. Student participation in plenary sessions

This test took place in two plenary sessions, each at the end of the work session in a small group. The agreed answers by the different work groups were shared, opening the debate and discussion on the issues raised. This test took place, therefore, during the 30 minutes that were left in each seminar session (each seminar lasts 90 minutes, of which the first 60 minutes were devoted to small group work and the last 30 to plenary session). In this case, as in the one before, it was not only to assess the involvement or non involvement of the students but also the quantity and quality of the arguments for it. It is understood that by monitoring and participating in the case, there was active attendance at all the sessions that were convened and the handing in of the required documents.

IV. Preparation of Final report

The preparation of a final report by the groups to be delivered at the end of the course. This is for the teacher to be able to review it prior to its presentation in the classroom, in the event that the group had opted for it. The final report of about 20 pages on average, was to be conducted following the guidelines of the teachers (and included in the “Student Guide”). With this activity the students had to demonstrate that they had acquired the theoretical and practical knowledge developed throughout the course and were able to apply it to the particular case of the company studied in The Case.

V. Presentation and defense of the final report

This activity took place during the last session of seminar classes of the course. In plenary session, the groups who chose to, presented and defended their work in front of their classmates and faced the questions asked by the teacher and anyone present.

Regarding the feedback in the last such activity, feedback from students was immediate upon completion of all the presentations, commenting with groups who had participated in them, the quality of the presentations and their explanations. Similarly, all members of the session were able to give their impressions of the presentations made by them and by their fellow students. As far as the final report is concerned, as each one of the presentations was being given, brief comments were made about the work done by the group, (especially major contributions and incidents, if there had been any, but always being an overall assess-

ment, if detailing a grade in particular). When all the assignments could be read in detail (there were 20 assignments, with an average of 20 pages per assignment), is when the students were able to know their grade in detail. As for the other tasks, students were able to know whether or not they had responded well to the issues raised, because on finishing each work session in small groups, in plenary session, we proceeded to reach an agreement on their answers and discuss the correct ones. Therefore, the overall rating could be known, although the exact grade of each of the evaluated activities was not known until the Case work was marked completely.

Through the previously explained activities, the following competences were able to be evaluated:

- Identify the roles and responsibilities of different business subsystems.
- Analyze information relevant to business practice, with an open and proactive attitude towards the economic-business environment and using for this purpose the information technologies available.
- Make rational decisions regarding the management of people, from the analysis of available information.
- Ability to communicate fluently, orally and in writing, in their environment and work in teams.

5. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS OF IMPLEMENTATION OF OF THE CASE

Next, we analyze the main results obtained in each of the evaluation activities implemented.

1. Individual report (initial test of prior knowledge)

Although this test, for reasons of enrollment already explained, was finally not considered as an activity which could be evaluated, and it can be said that if it had been considered so, quite a lot of students would have remained outside the activity since they had not read the Case, even though they knew it was necessary to participate in the the first work session. The reasons given were fundamentally because of absent-mindedness or forgetfulness. However, they attended the work sessions, perhaps because they did not really expect this control test to be done.

II. Student participation in the working sessions in small groups

The result of small group work was really positive. Although there were students who initially did not get involved too much in the development of classes, given its control over students and their activity, this made it easy to be in small classes and our insistence that the quality of responses could be evaluated, finally their attitude changed dramatically. As for attendance at these work sessions, it has to be said that that it was generally very high (almost 100% of students enrolled. In fact, out of 100 students enrolled in the group, 85 participated in the work of the Case.

III. Student participation in plenary sessions

As for the the student participation in the plenary sessions, it must be said that although there were not many students who got actively involved in the debates and reflections raised by the teacher, being first year students in their first term, it was surprising that in some sub-groups of the seminars, that there were several students who took part in the oral discussions voluntarily and on their own initiative, offering themselves as spokespersons for their respective work groups.

IV. Preparation of the final report

As for the preparation of the final report, 20 reports were presented by the working groups. The average of these reports was 20 pages and the quality of them was quite variable. In fact, with one point being the maximum that could be reached in this task, no group achieved this rating. The maximum rating reached was 0.8. Most works were quite acceptable although there were a few whose ratings were below 0.5. The arguments given by the students regarding the submission of the final report, is that they had a great deal of work in different subjects, all to be handed in at the end of the course. This caused students who had not known how to plan with time, to hand in “whatever they could” in order to obtain some evaluation points.

V. Presentation and defense of the final report

Of the 20 papers submitted, 16 were presented in plenary session in the last seminar of the course. The average length of presentations was 30 minutes and generally all group members participated equally, in the order established by them. That is to say that all groups made a power point presentation, although the quality was varied, in fact, 0.5 points at most could be obtained in this activity, only two working groups obtained it (precisely the same who

performed some of the best written work, and that were made up of people who were more actively involved in working sessions in small groups and plenary sessions). The majority of the rest of the groups had a mark between 3.5 and 4. Two groups received a mark of 0.25 for presentations that were not by groups, ie. presented separately, some members hardly participated, etc.

Those groups correspond precisely with those who had problems within their respective working groups, although they had not expressed this to the teacher until it became evident in the presentations. In a majority of cases it should be noted that presentations were done by some of the group members. Those who refused to participate in many cases argued that they did not want to do the presentation “in public” and others because of the lack of time they had to help with the preparation of the presentation. As for the quality of the oral presentations, it was varied, since in many cases students read or relied on written documents, but being first year students, it has to be said that the high participation in the activity (14 groups out of 20) was a pleasant surprise and the effort was outstanding in many cases.

Overall, we found that students who took part in the work of the Case developed several of the competences that had been set in the course syllabus, specifically, in the Eragin program. Thus, the work of the case enabled the students to identify the main roles and responsibilities of different business subsystems, and make rational decisions in the context of a real company, as were collected in their final reports. To do this, they had to search and analyze financial information about the company in the SABI database (free for members of the UPV-EHU), and general information about the company in different media (especially the Internet). They reflected on the concept of entrepreneur, analyzing the specific case of our three entrepreneurs. Thus, it was possible for the students to approach the business-economic environment with an open and proactive attitude. Through group work they were able to develop their ability to work together and with their presentations in the classroom to develop their ability to communicate orally with fluency. They had to use the information and communication technologies available both for looking up information and to make their presentations.

Generally speaking, basically the implementation of the Case had a highly positive reflection in class attendance. In fact, last year the same subject was taught in the same group and at the same time (the last group

in the afternoon, which is characterized by its low attendance). Specifically, the average attendance was 30% (in general, since there was no distinction between master classes, workshops and seminars). The year of the implementation of the case, the attendance was very high (60-70% masterclass, in practical classes 75% and seminars 85%). The previous year, the attendance rate was 65% and the pass rate of those was 42%. The year of the implementation of the Case, attendance rate was 91% and the pass rate of those was 65%.

Therefore, a bigger attendance seems to have had a positive and significant impact on the results obtained. As for comparisons with other groups in the same subject, it has to be said that the work methodology was similar (in fact, one group has implemented this same methodology, and in the rest, the way of working has been similar, working with cases, although not following the guidelines of the Case method). Thus, in the other groups, in general, the results were also very positive and improved with regard to previous years.

Finally, the results of the questionnaire given to students in the last work session regarding the methodology followed, is worth noting. From a sample of 51 surveys collected, the following results were obtained:

I. Considering all aspects of the methodology we have worked with, your overall assessment of the planning and development of the experience is:

1. Totally unsatisfactory
2. Somewhat unsatisfactory
3. Quite satisfactory
4. Very satisfactory

Average score: 3.0

II. Rate the mark in which you consider the methodology followed has helped you to learn, in comparison to more traditional methodological approaches:

1. It has helped me less
2. It has helped me the same
3. It has helped me more
4. It has helped me a lot more

Average score: 2.7

III. Has the guidance provided by the teacher during the process satisfied your needs?

1. Little
2. Sufficient
3. Enough
4. A lot.

Average Result: 3.157

IV. If you could choose the next course/module/term, would you opt for this methodology?

1. Yes 47
2. No 3

V. Rate the grade in which you consider that the use of this methodology has helped you to: (“1” very little, “2” little, “3” enough, “4” a lot)

Understanding theoretical content	Average Score: 3
Linking theory and practice	Average Score: 3
Increasing interest and motivation for the course	Average Score: 3
Analyzing situations of professional practice	Average Score: 2.9
Investigating for yourself about the work set out	Average Score: 2.8
Making decisions about a real situation	Average Score: 2.6
Resolving problems or offer solutions to real situations	Average Score: 2.6
Developing your communication skills (oral or written)	Average Score: 3
Developing your autonomy to learn	Average Score: 2.86
Taking a participatory attitude towards your learning	Average Score: 2.98
Improving my teamwork skills	Average Score: 3.12
Developing skills needed in professional practice	Average Score: 2.71

As can be seen, the results that emerge from the survey the students were given are really positive. In fact, 92% of those surveyed, if they could choose, would opt for this same methodology for future courses.

- As for why the experience was satisfactory for them, the following motives were found (literally student’s own words):
- It has been good because we have learned to work in teams and we have mixed with more people.

- It has helped to understand the concepts seen in the lectures and how they are applied in real life.
- The methodology used has enabled the classes to be enjoyable and we paid more attention and therefore we learnt more.
- The methodology is quite satisfactory because on doing the work, knowledge is acquired and having to present it, communication skills are developed.

As to the reasons why the experience was unsatisfactory for them, the following were found (literally student's own words):

- I do not like the methodology through assignments and presentations as many more hours of work are needed.
- It has been unsatisfactory because two of the group members have not been interested enough to aim for the highest score.

Regarding improvement proposals suggested by some of the students, we can highlight the following (literally student's own words):

- Give the possibility to choose members of the group.
- Work more Cases, with different companies.
- Rate more the work of the Case within the final mark.
- Rate individually and not collectively.

6. CONCLUSIONS

As a way to conclude, it can be said that the implementation of Case was generally very satisfactory. It is worth highlighting the influence that the new methodology had on class attendance, motivation and the interest the students had for the course.

The main problem that occurred during the implementation of the case was due to the enrollment system. This meant the class group was not finally closed until late October-early November. This caused adjustments in working groups and resulted in the individual report not being considered in assessing the case. These difficulties were finally overcome although they generated little organizational problems and the loss of time in the classroom.

We must also highlight the problems of teamwork that have been generated among members of some groups and the subsequent com-

plaint about the fact that the groups were formed randomly. Although we continue to believe that the ideal way is to form groups like this (if the objective is that students develop their capacity for teamwork). Perhaps we should establish a procedure for continuous monitoring of the work of the groups. It might also be possible to appoint people responsible in the groups and at the same time class representatives to liaise with the teachers with regard to problems that may arise. Another alternative would be to set mandatory tutorials for all the group where the teachers are informed about the state of the work. Furthermore, these measures could also avoid problems such as those suggested by some students complaining that some members of the group work more than others.

Also, perhaps some measures to analyse further the individual efforts of some members should be established. Another aspect to consider would be that participation of the students was mandatory for all activities of the Case. This would guarantee greater student commitment to the work and it would be easier to check whether the work was actually performed by the whole group. On the other hand, the fact that the seminars have taken place at different dates not very close to each other may have caused the work not to have the required continuity. One thing to consider would be the possibility of setting seminars at dates closer in time to each other.

As a conclusion, it can be said that that the overall assessment of the implementation of the case, both on our part, as teachers, and by students is very satisfactory. However, we must also say that the process of drafting a case, the grading and the implementation document is long and laborious, but when one starts the implementation of the case and results are seen, the balance is clearly favorable towards this teaching methodology. Therefore, given the effort involved in writing a Case, an implication for the future would be to create a database of Cases that could be used in different subjects, either for the same subject, but that could be rotated in different years. In this sense, teams could be created to draft Cases by areas of knowledge.

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