

Activity/Exercise Session:

Will this be on the test?

Establishing Relevance in Strategic Management

ABSTRACT:

Finishing my first lesson as an undergraduate, student teacher in a high school classroom, a student asked, “will this be on the test?” My reaction surprised me; the question felt like an insult. Over time, I realized this question demonstrates students’ lack awareness of the content’s relevance to the real world. Often presented as a function reserved for top management teams, strategic management may seem irrelevant to students preparing to enter the workforce. Ambitiously, this interactive session strives to eliminate “will this be on the test?” in undergraduate strategic management courses by demonstrating classroom activities to establish relevance and motivation.

Keywords:

Strategic Management, Strategic Thinking, Classroom Activities, Relevance, Student Motivation

INTRODUCTION

When teaching a theoretical topic, students may struggle to grasp the real world implications and ask the educator, ‘will this be on the test?’ A collegiate educator’s ability to link course material to real world situations establishes relevance and motivates students (Frymier & Shulman, 1995; Kember, Ho, & Hong, 2008). As a required management capstone course designed to launch a student’s business career, strategic management textbooks and curriculums often focus on the processes, decisions and challenges encountered by a firm’s top management teams (TMT). According to the Department of Labor, TMT positions such as chief executive require more than five years of experience (Labor, 2016). For undergraduate students entering the workforce as entry to mid level employees, a strategic management course may seem irrelevant. Bower (2008) confirmed students as well as many business professionals view strategy as irrelevant. To establish relevance in strategic management courses, this 90 minute session offers techniques to complement strategic management curriculums in a classroom setting of traditional, late undergraduate students.

By experiencing several classroom activities, Management & Organizational Behavior Teaching Seminar (MOBTS) participants will learn methods to establish relevance in strategic management. The session targets three learning objectives to establish relevance in strategic management classes including 1) demonstrating a students’ ability to think strategically 2) illustrating to the student that in a business environment, all employees, regardless of their title, acquire knowledge relevant to strategic management and 3) expressing to the students the importance of understanding strategic management as a skill to further students’ future careers by diffusing relevant strategic knowledge practically and professionally in the business

environment. The following section introduces the theoretical foundation for the importance of relevance and the resulting benefit of student motivation. Subsequent sections provide the learning objectives for the exercises, an overview of the classroom based exercises, and a final section that discusses the MOBTS conference session activities and timeline.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

For collegiate educators, some course materials present a greater challenge to establish real world relevance to students than others. Abstract theoretical course content or course material geared towards upper management can prove difficult to establish relevance for students preparing to enter the workforce as entry to mid level employees. This section discusses the importance of relevance in a college classroom and the ensuing benefit of student motivation.

Relevance

The theory of relevance establishes that a student’s cognitive processes would naturally focus on pertinent information to generate a maximum effect with the least amount of effort (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). In the collegiate classroom, an undergraduate student preparing for a career, would focus on pertinent instruction applicable to the student’s impending professional life. Qualitative, quantitative and theoretical research demonstrates the importance of relevance in education (Frymier & Shulman, 1995; Kember et al., 2008; Schaupp & Lane, 1992). To establish relevance in a collegiate classroom, instruction materials must link to real world application. The twin benefits of establishing relevance in the college classroom include students’ naturally focusing on the instructional materials and an increase in student motivation (Kember et al., 2008).

Motivation

“Motivation and learning are inseparable” (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017, p. ix).

Existing research demonstrates the link between collegiate student motivation and academic success (Trolan, Jach, Hanson, & Pascarella, 2016). While abstract theoretical course content demotivates students, course content that expresses the theory’s professional application motivates students (Kember et al., 2008). Strategic management courses risk demotivating students not only due to abstract theory, but also due to content geared towards the upper echelon of a firm’s organizational chart.

Theoretically, relevance grounds abstract concepts to real world situations. Cognitively, relevance captures students’ cognitive abilities to focus on pertinent information. Practically, relevance motivates students and can lead to students’ academic success. The following section outlines three learning objectives to establish relevance in strategic management courses.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This section reviews three learning objectives intended to complement traditional strategic management curriculums. Each learning objective builds on the previous learning objective to establish relevance by demonstrating the universality of strategic management concepts in the workplace.

Learning Objective 1: Demonstrating a students’ ability to think strategically

While many strategic decisions reside with the TMT, students possess the innate ability to detect patterns and think strategically (Mintzberg, 1987; Rindova, Ferrier, & Wiltbank, 2010; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). To establish relevance in strategic management courses, students

should recognize strategic thinking as an innate ability rather than a skill reserved for upper management.

Learning Objective 2: Illustrating to the student that in a business environment, all employees, regardless of their title, acquire knowledge relevant to strategic management

The second learning objective establishes the relevance of a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats analysis (SWOT) by disabusing students’ notion that all relevant strategic information resides with the TMT and demonstrates all employees possess potentially strategic relevant information.

Learning Objective 3: Expressing to the student the importance of understanding strategic management as a skill to further a student’s future career by diffusing relevant strategic knowledge practically and professionally in the business environment

As students recognize their ability to glean strategic knowledge potentially unknown to a firm’s upper management, the final learning objective establishes the relevance of understanding strategic management concepts and theories to filter relevant strategic knowledge. This learning objective also encourages students to practice effective communication skills to professionally relay strategically relevant knowledge to the appropriate firm leaders.

The following section outlines the logistics of several class activities to incorporate each learning objective.

EXERCISE OVERVIEW

This section offers two classroom exercises (Strategic Tower and Twisted Dots) as methods to demonstrate learning objective one, storytelling as a method to demonstrate learning

objective two, and a presentation technique with a video clip as a method to demonstrate learning objective three.

Strategic Tower

Overview. For learning objective one, demonstrating a students’ ability to think strategically, I use an adaptation of a team building game, ‘Tall Tower.’ This activity demonstrates the students’ innate ability to think strategically to judiciously achieve goals.

Materials. A tape measure (able to measure 2 feet or more) and sheets of 8 1/2 x 11 paper, enough for each group to receive 10 sheets. For example, if the class has 24 students with 6 groups, I bring 60 sheets of paper from the recycle bin with no private information.

Class Size. 5 - 50.

Timing. 20 minutes.

Instructions. Divide the class into at least two groups or small groups of 3 - 4 students. Each group will receive 10 - 8 1/2 x 11 sheets of paper. Using only the provided 10 sheets of paper, the groups have 5 minutes to build the tallest, freestanding tower possible.

Debrief. First, I measure each tower and declare a winner. The concluding discussion revolves around asking how the students decided on a particular structure and the building process. See the appendix for a common results and links to other strategic concepts.

Twisted Dots

Overview. For learning objective one, demonstrating a students’ ability to think strategically, I use an adaptation of the pencil and paper game, ‘Dots and Boxes.’ I use this game to reinforce the students’ ability to think strategically and as a teaching tool to review test materials.

Materials. A different color dry erase marker for each group, a dry erase board with a grid of 5 by 5 evenly spaced dots (see Appendix). A list of questions for review, typically, I have 30 - 40 questions (multiple choice and short answer) prepared.

Class Size. 5 - 50.

Timing. 30 minutes; however, it depends upon the amount of material for review.

Instructions. Divide the class into at least two groups or small groups of 4 - 5 students. Each group receives a unique color of dry erase marker. With no notes or technology available to the students, I ask questions of each group in turn. For every correct answer, a group draws a parallel or horizontal line between two dots with the ultimate goal of completing a square. If a group answers a question incorrectly, the group does not draw a line. Before each question, I tell the class how many more questions remain (see Appendix).

The twist, once the grid contains 5 - 6 horizontal or parallel lines, I either add a row of dots or erase an exterior row of dots (with no lines drawn). I explain that a firm's strategic landscape continues to change and strategic management requires firm's continually acquire strategic information. After a few more questions, I change the rules and tell the class that with a correctly answered question, the groups may draw a line OR erase a line on the grid. A group may only erase lines not part of a completed box. I explain to the class that successful strategic management means adapting to the "new rules of the game," which may occur during a platform disruption, a new competitor enters the market, etc. Once I finish asking the review questions, the group with the most boxes wins the game.

Stories

Overview. While I am a proponent of multimedia in the classroom, I also value the opportunity to weave stories and fables into the lessons. At the conclusion of a class, I often tell a story with a ‘strategic moral’ for learning objective two, illustrating to the student that in a business environment, all employees, regardless of their title, acquire knowledge relevant to strategic management.

Materials. Sample stories (see Appendix).

Class Size. Any size.

Timing. 5 minutes.

Instructions. Tell the story. The appendix includes two stories with ‘strategic morals.’

Presentation Technique and Video Clip

Overview. For learning objective three, I intentionally botch a few PowerPoint slides with small fonts and wild animation. After a few botched slides, I show the short clip from Dreamworks Pictures’ “Megamind” (see Appendix). The botched slides and video clip illustrate the importance of professional presentations.

Materials. Adjust 2 - 3 slides from a lecture PowerPoint to include small fonts (below 18 font size), fuzzy graphics or images and multiple animations (i.e. boomerang, flip, etc.). A link embedded in a PowerPoint slide to Megamind video clip (see Appendix).

Class Size. Any size.

Timing. Less than 10 minutes (including ‘botched’ slides)

Instructions. Lecture from ‘botched’ PowerPoint slides for several minutes then show the video clip.

Debrief. I use this learning objective to share presentation maxims such as, ‘just because PowerPoint can, does not mean it should,’ and ‘keep it clean and crisp.’ I use these maxims to remind students to present their information in an aesthetically pleasing format. With too many animations, PowerPoint becomes visually distracting and can detract from speaker’s the message.

SESSION DESCRIPTION

The following outlines the time allocated to each activity, the learning objective and the associated activity for the 90 minute session. Due to the interactive nature of the session, the timeline can easily accommodate a late start or a change in length.

0 - 15 minutes. Introductions, including participants meeting those sitting near them and a brief review of the theoretical framework and an overview of the learning objectives.

16 - 35 minutes. Explain learning objective one. Participants engage in the strategic tower class activity.

36 - 50 minutes. Explain learning objective two. Participants hear a story and discuss storytelling techniques.

51 - 65 minutes. For learning objective three, participants see the first slide of the third learning objective presented in a ‘botched’ PowerPoint manner, followed by the Megamind video clip and discuss presentation tips for students.

66 - 85 minutes. The participants learn the use for the Twisted Dots classroom activity by playing Twisted Dots with trivia type questions.

86 - 90 minutes. Although the interactive nature of the session allows participants to ask questions at any point during the presentation, the last five minutes reserve time for

participants who prefer to ask questions during a formal Q & A time or any other unanswered questions.

APPENDIX

Strategic Tower Common Results

When conducting the Strategic Tower activity, some groups rapidly begin folding paper with little discussion, while others spend time fastidiously assessing structure options. Typically, the groups begin assessing their tower to other groups tower. At this point, the structure may change or the strategy may change. For example, I had one group that decided the other groups’ towers would never stand without support and their strategy was a sturdy, low tower of wadded up papers.

I use this activity not only to demonstrate strategic thinking, but will also refer to the exercise when discussing competition and strategic moves. This game can also help explain abstract concepts such as Intended Strategy, Emergent Strategy, Realized Strategy and Nonrealized Strategy. For example, during the debrief time we may discuss the groups’ intended strategies versus realized strategies.

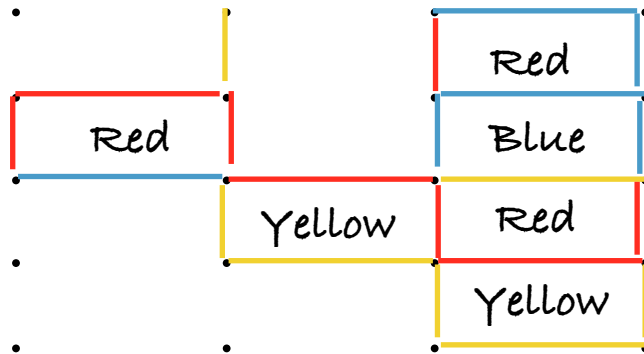
Twisted Dots

For each question, I state the current question number and the total number of questions. For example: Question number 1 of 35, what is strategic management?

Beginning Board Sample:

•	•	•	•	•
•	•	•	•	•
•	•	•	•	•
•	•	•	•	•
•	•	•	•	•

Ending Board Sample:



NOTE: The board may not fill completely, the game concludes after asking all the review questions. The purpose for stating the question and total number of questions is to allow the students to strategically decide whether to draw or erase a line.

Story Sample 1:

Story link: <https://www.jainworld.com/literature/story25.htm>

Moral of the story. Each man only understood a part of the elephant. In a firm, typically only the TMT views the entire firm. However, just as each man acquired fastidious knowledge of one part of the elephant, employees acquire unique, in-depth knowledge in their area of the firm. The TMT and employees both acquire strategically relevant information, however, each obtains different information. Employees can help a firm and potentially their career by learning what strategic knowledge a TMT values through a course on strategic management and sharing that knowledge professionally, accurately and efficiently.

Story Sample 2:

Story. Lululemon, a clothing retailer, places stations for employees to fold clothes next to dressing rooms (Tjan, 2010). While folding clothes, employees inconspicuously listen to customers' comments (Tjan, 2010). Lululemon's management and frontline employees discuss

customer comments to ensure the merchandise continues to meet the customers’ needs (Tjan, 2010).

Moral of the story. Some firms recognize the value of frontline employees to gather strategic information, while other firms do not poll employees for strategic information.

Whether or not a firm asks for strategic knowledge, an employee’s strategic knowledge may be useful in strategic management. Knowing who, when and how to share acquired strategic knowledge may further an employee’s career.

Video Clip

“Megamind: Oh, you’re a villain all right, just not a super one.

Titan: Oh yeah? What’s the difference?

Megamind: Presentation!” (McGrath et al., 2011)

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/dy2zB8bLSpk?t=10s>

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