**The Context IS the Case: When Inmates and Business Majors Study Teams in Prison**

Abstract: For the past three years I have taken 10 business majors at a liberal arts university to a medium security prison, where they participated in a month-long, 4-credit course, “Leading Teams” alongside 10 inmates, about half of whom were in prison for murder. In this course the context of prison has become the focus of the learning experience. In this session we will discuss this out-of-the-box course and the ways in which a single, hands-on, experiential case can drive an entire semester of learning, how the context of a class can impact the content and how classes like this can forever change the lives of students.

Keywords: Experiential Education, Leadership, TeamsThe Context IS the Case: When Inmates and Business Majors Study Teams in Prison

**Introduction**

For the past three years I have taken 10 business majors at a liberal arts university to a medium security prison, where they participated in a month-long, 4-credit course, “Leading Teams” alongside 10 inmates, about half of whom were in prison for murder. In this course the context of prison became the focus of the learning experience. The inmates and liberal arts students emerged as teammates on a project that analyzed whether teams and organizations in prison adhere to or break the theories of organizational behavior. On a foundational level, there projects asked “does OB apply to leadership and teams within prison gangs and correctional officer units?” In this cross-cultural experience my students developed relationships with people that they otherwise would never have come across other than to have read about in the newspaper, and they were forever changed because of the class that they took together. In this roundtable session, participants will be challenged to think about how unique contexts can provide business students with new skills and experiences that will enable them to lead more interesting, productive and engaged lives in college, the workplace and beyond.

*Intended Outcome*

* Explore the benefits of a mixed classroom, where business students learn alongside a non-traditional population.
* Understand the use of the context as the case. This course used one, large case, crime and punishment, and built the material around this context.
* Have fun learning discussing a truly unique class.

*Target Audience*

* Anyone interested in thinking outside the box about how to expand the notion of who is in the classroom and the benefits of including a more diverse set of students, especially for a once-off course.
* Anyone just curious about a college course they might not have come across.

**Theoretical Foundation**

*Case-based learning*

Most case-based activities in the classroom occur in a given unit or for one or two classes. One of the challenges posed by the case method is that it does not necessarily translate to the skills needed for post-college business projects in which business leaders do not have a tight, all-encompassing, self-directed case (Milne & McConnell), such as the ones coming out of HBS. The goal of case-based pedagogy is for the learner to acquire the skills and insight in the safe space of the classroom (Stinson and Milter, 1996) and to be able to one day apply those skills in the workplace. One of the key goals of this class is to take place in a context that is large and deep enough to drive the learning for an entire semester, so that students are not just learning about the case from afar but are immersed experientially in the case itself. This supports some of the research established in the literature on experiential education (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) that matches student learning needs within a broader context of the learning environment. There has likewise been a move toward viewing work-based learning as “the new college curriculum,” showcasing the value of the context becoming a rich environment for pedagogical advances (Boud & Solomon, 2001).

*Diversity*

The conversation about diversity, bias, discrimination and equality is now more topical and relevant than ever, with programs such as Google’s implicit bias training, and a more general push toward the values of cultural diversity and cross-cultural training in business education (Ramburuth & Welch, 2008). This class takes the concept of “learning diversity by being diverse” to whole new level, in that, students engage with a population that would otherwise literally be walled off from their purview.

**Session description**

60 min

Overview- this will be a highly engaging session due to the truly unique nature of my three semesters of taking liberal arts students to prison for a semester long class. My goal is to showcase the value of using “unique contexts” for business education and to facilitate a meaningful discussion to think about how other classes can benefit from case-based learning in a unique context.

Introduction- I will tell the story of one student, Travis, an inmate 24 years into a 160-year sentence for 5 armed robberies, committed at the age of 17. After the semester ended, my students advocated on his behalf. Their efforts, in addition to the time and energy of countless others, led to the governor pardoning Travis.

Theoretical underpinnings- Present the pedagogical perspective of case-based learning and how to think of expanding cases to be a semester-long, single case.

Course material- discuss the use of course material to build a single case. I used texts such as Nelson Mandela’s autobiography about his 27 years in prison in South Africa, the HBS case “Boston Gangs,” Bernie Madoff, among others that brought the context of crime and punishment to the forefront. Turning to the attendees, how to pull in material into the classroom that addresses the context.

Challenges and opportunities- just because this was such a unique class, there are several incredible obstacles and wild events that are worth noting.

Effects and outcomes- look at highlights of student reflections about the experience.

Activity- breakout group activity on how to create “case is the context” class that is realistic for your university (recognizing that many universities might not support a prison class).

Conclusion

**References**

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