

BUSINESS STUDENTS' FEEDBACK ON LEARNING WITH PBL AND CBL APPLICATIONS IN SALES MANAGEMENT AND PROFESSIONAL SELLING COURSES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to find and discuss the best methods to enable the development of students' sales skills. The first aim of the present study was to discuss learning outcomes in the form of student feedback about using the Problem Based Learning (PBL) and Case Based Learning (CBL) frameworks. The second aim was to describe three different PBL and CBL applications utilized in the Sales Management and Professional Selling courses in the University of Applied Sciences in Finland. The result indicated that the majority of students thought that these methods supported their learning well.

INTRODUCTION

The basic objective of teaching sales is to provide students with competencies needed for success in sales and other careers. According to the Chally Group, 39% of B2B buyers select a vendor based on the skills of the salesperson (Fogel, Hoffmeister, Rocco & Strunk 2012). Thus, sales competencies are very much needed by the newly graduated BBAs, as well as social competencies, so that they are accepted and successful in working life. In addition, they must encounter the ambiguity of the continuously changing real world, which requires new competencies. The best way to teach those competencies is use learning-centered methods instead of teaching-oriented. Marcos-Cuevas, Critten and Speakman (2014) have called for the importance of learning-centered pedagogies in sales curricula. The constructivist view of learning and teaching underlies this call for change.

According to Fogel et al. (2012), sales skills are still taught quite little in the world's top-ranking business schools. However, sales education in universities is expanding and the interest is growing (Newberry & Collins 2015, Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy 2011). It seems that universities also in Finland are slowly beginning to understand the significance of teaching sales skills. An entirely different question is how sales and sales management skills should eventually be taught. Moreover, it does not say anything about learning even if, according to the curriculum, there are sales courses available. It has been positive to notice that new innovative and experimental teaching methods have been developed and explored recently in sales studies.

Examples of these are role playing introduced by Rocco and Whalen (2014) and Rippé (2015). For sales management new methods were introduced by Young and Hawes (2013).

The purpose of this article is to explore and discuss the best ways of learning and teaching sales skills. The starting point for a pedagogy is constructivism. The first aim of the present study was to discuss learning outcomes in the form of student feedback about using the PBL and CBL frameworks. The present study focuses on describing three different kinds of PBL or CBL applications and the related learning outcomes as student experiences when using these applications in the Sales Management and Professional Selling courses. The theoretical objective is define the concepts of PBL and CBL.

The issue was approached by using the MEC feedback given by the students who were second or third year Bachelor students in University of Applied Sciences. The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) collects feedback on learning from universities of applied sciences' courses with a questionnaire containing a few structural and two open-ended questions. Observations were also made when the study groups and the teacher met each other. This collected empirical material was explored by using a very basic quantitative analysis and a qualitative content analysis.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on the theoretical background provided by the pedagogical framework of constructivism, Problem Based and Case Based Learning. The central idea in constructivism is that information is not transferred, but it requires the learner to engage in meaning-making. Learning is a result of the activity of the learner, in which students create meanings and interpretations by linking new knowledge with their existing knowledge and previous experience. It is situational, contextual and a result of a dialogue with others. The teacher's role is to be a facilitator and his/her task is to create terms of reference and contribute to the learner's individual learning processes. (Rauste-von Wright & von Wright 2000.) Problem based learning (PBL) and Case Based Learning (CBL) are consistent with the principles of constructivism (Savery & Duffy 1998).

Several schools and disciplines have for years been promoting BPL, mostly through applications in medical and nursing education. CBL has been shown to be an effective way of teaching business at the Harvard Business School. Wee and Kek (2004) rewrite business education through PBL. Theoretical evidence of the usefulness of PBL in marketing and business management can also be found (see e.g. Fagerholm & Helelä 2003; Wee & Kek 2004).

Case-based learning (CBL) is very closely related to BPL. CBL has its roots in PBL and the learning-by-doing method. (Setia 2011). Behind the CBL is the learning idea which Confucius introduced already thousands of years ago; “I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand”. As the name implies, real business examples are used in learning. The cases are real-life written cases or real cases from the corporate world. The problems that the students solve are in most cases both dynamic and highly unstructured. (Theodosiou, Rennard & Amir-Aslani 2012.) Setia (2011) states that the facilitators use guided questions in CBL in order to help the students to proceed in investigating the problem.

CBL is defined and understood in this study as a method that “involves studying actual business situations – written as an in-depth presentation of a company, its market, and its strategic decisions – in order to improve a manager’s or a student’s problem-solving ability. Cases are typically used to investigate a contemporary issue in a real-life context. There are multiple issues to consider and many “correct” or viable alternatives to solve the case issues are presented.” (Helms 2006, according to Lee, Lee, Liu, Bonk & Magjuka 2009).

Fagerholm and Helelä (2003) state that the PBL approach stimulates students to take responsibility for their own learning and stresses the development of problem-solving skills within the context of business practice. Furthermore, it promotes effective reasoning and self-directed learning as well as increases motivation for lifelong learning (Fagerholm & Helelä, 2003). According Peen and Arshad (2013), problem-based learning has been defined as “a pedagogical approach that promotes holistic learning, emphasizing on skills and capabilities beyond content knowledge. PBL is centered on an ill-structured real world problem and encourages the practice of information-gathering, reasoning, and problem-solving skills, interpersonal and team working skills, as well as acquisition of content knowledge, in the process of working out the problem in collaborative groups.” (Peen & Arshad 2013.) The main reason why PBL is so successfully applied as a learning method is that employers mostly offer opportunities to applicants who are equipped with the necessary workplace-specific skills (Baturay & Bay 2010).

These PBL and CBL methods have more similarities than differences. Both of these methods develop skills that students need in their working life later on, for example, communication skills, critical thinking, collaboration, problem-solving and self-study skills. These methods are suitable for sales education because the most critical skills that one should learn are, according to Newberry and Collins (2015), listening skills, framing benefits and relationship building skills. Both methods also use cases and problems, and the students take responsibility for their own learning that is based on their motivation to study the problem. Moreover, they study together with their peers so that they can compare and evaluate their own and others’ perspectives. In both methods the teachers do not have the traditional task of information delivery, but they become learners as well. PBL and CBL teachers understand that they have new roles as coaches, facilitators, co-learners, guides and consultants (Boud & Feletti 1997).

The methods also have small differences. For example, “Case-based learning (CBL) uses a guided inquiry method and provides more structure during small-group sessions, while PBL uses open inquiry.” (Srinivasan, Wilkes, Stevenson, Nguyen & Slavin 2007). Basically the PBL method includes precise three phases: 1) Identification of the problem and setting of the learning objectives, 2) individual study and 3) synthesis (Breton 1999). PBL starts by formulating a trigger (could be a real problem), and the students use that trigger to formulate a problem, whereas in CBL the problems are always given by a company. Corporate cases are better because it is possible to gain more information from the companies than from written case studies during the case solution process (Theodosiou et al. 2012). PBL includes specific meetings and pre-agreed distribution of work as well as a possibility to use contrived cases. In PBL the facilitators withdraw to the side after the first stage and do not guide the group even if their discussions become tangential (Setia 2011), whereas in the CBL group meetings the teacher’s role is to intervene in the discussions.

THE FIRST CASE: CBL APPLICATION, USING REAL COMPANY CASE IN SALES MANAGEMENT COURSES

The purpose of this CBL-case was to show the importance of co-operation between the case company and the university as well as to show how success or failure would influence on the students' learning feedback in the Sales Management course. The learning outcomes are that the students understand the purpose, the core concepts and the theories of sales management.

The students are able to purposefully and profitably plan, implement and monitor the company's sales management. The students demonstrate their ability to solve the problems and they have the confidence to take on sales management positions.

These learning outcomes require a variety of teaching methods, including co-operative learning methods. The course includes lectures, guest lectures of sales managers, referencing international articles, a variety of small assignments, discussions etc. One of the most important learning methods used in the Sales Management course is a CBL application in which ready-made case study examples from textbooks can be used. Alternatively, it is also possible to solve real problems in the case companies. Real cases are challenging because the teacher does not have the right answers to them. This means that the teacher also has the role of a co-learner.

The teacher defines a case task together with the sales manager of a cooperation company. The co-operation with the company requires time for joint planning, presenting the case in the lesson, listening to the students' presentations and evaluating solutions both orally and in writing. Commitment to these issues is a prerequisite for the case company's participation in the course. The size of the case groups is 4-5 students. The students write a report on the solution of the case, and it must be in accordance to the sales management theory and practice. They also give a presentation that the case company's sales manager will listen to. After the presentations the sales manager gives oral feedback and later, with the teacher, also written feedback to each group.

The study focused on the Sales Management courses held in 2011 and 2014. The first course included a case from a global recruitment company in Finland (later Y Ltd), and the second one included a regional newspaper publisher (later X Plc) case. For example, the problem in the X case was: "What is the best way to re-organize the sales in Central Finland?" Y Ltd did not perform its share as planned. The company did present the case in the lesson and promised to give each group further information if needed. However, the sales manager did not come to listen to the students' presentations as agreed, and he, despite promises, did not give written feedback on the reports that the students sent to him. On the other hand, X Plc took care of the case as agreed. The question was, therefore, how these different ways of taking care of the cases eventually influenced the learning experiences of the students based on their feedback.

Results

From the perspective of the cases' assessment, three questions are the most important. In these questions the students evaluated the course content and materials, secondly how the teaching methods had supported their learning, and thirdly, if they had received guidance and feedback supporting their learning when necessary. 19% were fully satisfied with the teaching methods in the Y Ltd case, Student's feedback from the sales management course in 2011- case Y Ltd, whereas in the X Plc case the figure was 60%, Student's feedback from the sales management course 2014- case X Plc. The percentage of those satisfied with the guidance and feedback in the Y Ltd case was 33.3% and in the X Plc case 58.6%. In the Y Ltd case the share of the strongly satisfied was significantly lower than in the X Plc case.

In the open questions the students were asked: "What was the best part of the course? "How would you develop the course?" The student responses were analyzed by using content analysis, which also revealed significant differences in the students' experiences of the two cases. During the Sales Management course (case Y Ltd) 21 students gave feedback, and nine of them wanted to give feedback on what was the best part of the course. The business case was basically found interesting (n=4), but these responses also showed the sponsor's failure. The lectures and other teaching methods were mentioned a few times as well.

"In the course, the case and the solution that had been made for the company would have been the best, but the realisation of the company's side didn't succeed quite well.", "The case was good, but then it was a little disappointing when the Y Ltd person didn't show up.", "The lectures were really interesting. It was good that the course included referencing of the article and the case."

Most of the development proposals were directed to the Y Ltd case. Seven students described the Y Ltd sales manager as lazy, non-cooperative and as a person who did not deliver on his promises.

"Such a company/case should be chosen that is committed to cooperation.", "The case gave, to some extent, a headache because the sales manager was really difficult to get in touch with. It would be good if the sponsor was more interested in the group so that he also would get eligible results. ", "Although the assignment/case was a great opportunity, I was disappointed with Y Ltd's actions."

X Plc's case received the most positive feedback on the 2014 course implementation. The students described that the real business case were interesting and challenging. This course also had two visiting lecturers (sales executives), who received a

great deal of positive feedback. The course was designed at the beginning together with the students, which was also appreciated.

"The visitors were awesome. I got a lot of good from their concrete experiences and teachings in my studies and work. ", "A practical case. At first, it seemed to be a challenging one, but when I absorbed the theory, I realized it was quite easy to find a solution and write the report.", "The right business examples and case studies. One big case, which was diverse. In the lectures there were exercises, not just lecturing."

X Plc case was liked, but it also received the most corrective feedback. The feedback focused on the clarity, depth and difficulty of the case presentation and on insufficient guidance. This feedback will enable the teacher to develop CBL. Some respondents did not like the fact that they had to write a summary of the international article.

"The case was initially quite tricky, because the field of business was unknown, and the instructor (case sponsor) didn't tell much about the case.", "The company case presentation should be later in the course, so that the students could ask more task-related specific questions on the basis of what they have learned.", "The course was a success, and the structure should stay the same in the future."

THE SECOND CASE: USING PBL AND CBL APPLICATIONS IN PROFESSIONAL SELLING COURSES

A Publication Process Using the Freinet PBL Method in Selling Course

The professional selling study module was carried out by using a new method. The special objective was to learn the basics of selling both in theory and practice. The teacher's objective was to develop an innovative and interesting way to learn. A publication was created as the final result. Freinet pedagogy and problem-based learning were both utilized. The publication consisted of articles containing clear-cut theory and research parts. The method of learning used in this experiment can be called "The Freinet PBL Method". Freinet developed his own method of learning in the beginning of the 1900's. In this method, the learners have the responsibility for their learning. The students collect information, discuss and edit it as a group before presenting and printing it as a team effort. Freinet pedagogy is based on the principle of learning best through one's own experiences by doing, observing and writing. Learning takes place as a result of motivating and sensible tasks. Constructivist pedagogy was another foundation of this new learning method.

The process of the "Freinet PBL" learning circle includes five phases: 1) introducing a problem, 2) a group discussion, 3) resource development, 4) a group reflection and 5) the solution and presentation. In the first phase the instructor gave every group of 4-5 students a problematic sentence, a so-called trigger that was related to selling. One example of the trigger was the claim "A salesman can greatly affect the customer decision". The student's task was to clarify the terms, concepts and data individually at first. They were not allowed to talk to one another. The second phase included group discussions where the important objective was to develop a learning task on the basis of the trigger. The group prepared a list of questions or elements requiring an explanation. The next step was assessment of the problem. After that they established the nature of the information needed for reaching a solution. The last step was to formulate the learning objective, which was "What kind of sales process do we need to influence customer decisions?" In the third phase each member had to individually find information about the possible solution in the related theory. Every student had about seven weeks for seeking information and writing a theoretical article. In the fourth phase every student gave a presentation on his/her personal theoretical article. As a result a synthesis was made of the contents of these articles. At this point a research question or an element of scientific interest could be raised. In this meeting, the students made a decision on which company and what kinds of methods they would use to collect practical/empirical information on the problem. The students received instructions but they were also responsible for their own decisions and solutions. For this, they were given four weeks. In the last phase of the Freinet PBL-circle they prepared a presentation and summary of the work. In this example case it was an article named "A High-quality Sales Process". The main goal was to edit the group report and write an article for a joint publication. At the end of the study module, every student received a personal copy of the publication.

Making a B2B Sales Video of a Real Case by Using the Solution Selling Process and 3E-Question Method

According Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy (2011), role play and videotaping are understood in most schools as important and effective ways of teaching sales. In the Professional Selling course in 2013 the students had different assignments, for example, an article summary and a book club, but the most important one was making their own sales video. Each student had to make a 20-minute video in where their role was selling a product to a buyer whose customer profile had been described in advance. The profile and presentation were given by an office supplier company Canon Business Center Finland. The product was the Therefore™ information management software. The students returned the videos on a memory stick or they saved it in Youtube or in Vimeo.

The teacher evaluated each student's role play in the sales process: approach/opening, needs assessment, sales presentation, overcoming objections and the closing. Every phase included multiple evaluation criteria. The students received face-to-face feedback from the teacher. This assignment of role-play with a real product and company is a CBL application which help the students prepare for the real-world challenges faced in a professional sales career. The most important competence in the sales process is learning to ask excellent questions. The seller's professionalism is what leads the sales process through discussion, questioning and with the patience to listen to the customer's response. In order to facilitate teaching and learning in this course used simpler model for analyzing needs: 3E-Questions™. The model has its roots in the known "SPIN model" (Rackham 1996) and "The New Solution Selling" - model (Eades 2004). The 3E Questions™ - model has three phases: Evaluate, Expand and Envisage. (Kalliomaa 2011.)

Results

As a final result of using the Freinet-PBL method, a publication called "Interaction in selling" was created. The articles had diverse topics, such as, the stages of a successful sales process, a productive way in solution sales and the significance of feelings in sales. The students experienced a new, very different way to learn. The majority of them were extremely positive. In their opinion, the study method was a motivating and responsible way to learn. There were also those who did not like the method at all or those who experienced this new way a really laborious way to learn. The new method of learning requires tolerance of uncertainty during the process from the both students and the teacher. The major criticism of the course stated that although the students had learned different skills, such as problem solving and communication skills, they would have liked to learn more about the skills specific to the sales profession.

In the Professional Selling course the main task was a sales video, so it affected the students' experiences to some extent. Based on the structured questions, it is impossible to argue how the students found this video assignment. The feedback was quite positive, because a total of 87.5% strongly or partially agreed that "The course contents and materials supported my learning well." and 75% that "The teaching methods supported my learning well." However, only 20.8% strongly agreed that the teaching methods had supported learning. Hence, something would have to change in the teaching so that the course would have more fully satisfied students. After analyzing the open questions, it can be said that the sales video script design and filming was a meaningful task for the students. They felt that they had learned the key skills of a B2B salesperson. A total of 16 of 24 students wrote that the sales video was the best assignment of the course.

"The sales video recording was a challenging but fun task.", "The sales video by learning needs analysis on a practical level. It was good to get feedback from the video.", "Doing the Sales Video, although it was initially a very scary sounding task.", "The best thing was to implement the selling skills in practice on the video, even if it was not equivalent to the real selling situation. However, when making the script I got to think properly of the sales process steps and appropriate questions.", "The sales Video concretized what competences we developed."

The Sales Video as the main assignment in the course encountered little criticism. Below are a few single quotes from the students' feedback.

"Organize an exam. Not everyone likes to make a sales video and even if you aren't nervous about negotiation situations, you can be nervous about the camera. A grade based 100% on the video doesn't seem fair because there were lot of different assignments in which you invested a lot.", "Clearer guidance for the tasks. The teacher was just talking and I got tired... Making the video was okay but a bit annoying. The book club was good. The article was unnecessary.", "At the beginning it was really unclear what a B2B sales situation is like. It would have been better if we had watched old sales videos at the beginning of the course."

CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this study was to describe three different ways to use BPL and CBL and explore the students' feedback on learning in Sales Management and Professional Selling courses. The findings emphasize the importance of using experimental student-centered methods with real life cases in sales studies. In this respect, the result is consistent with the study of Newberry and Collins (2015). The main results of using the PBL and CBL applications were that they were excellent methods to teach and learn sales issues. Based on the results in Sales Management course (CBL), it is clear that a real company case includes risks. Moreover, based on the results, these risks are worth taking, because then it is possible that the students have excellent learning experiences. The feedback from the students is valuable to the university and to the teacher because, based on the feedback, it is possible to improve CBL and teaching quality. The university receives 3% of its funding based on the students' feedback, so it is a challenge to the teachers to use constructivist pedagogy and take care of the planning and executing studies with company partners. All this has to be done extremely carefully.

At the end of the courses, the students seemed to have a deeper understanding of sales management and personal selling. They felt that all the courses had been challenging. However, almost all the students gave strongly positive feedback about the new ways of PBL and CBL. They liked finding solutions for problems and they also liked working in groups and the real business cases. In teaching sales management and personal selling with these CBL and PBL methods the teachers do not only teach but also learn from their students. This study gives a contribution to sales education on the university level.

The new way to learn selling by using the “Freinet-PBL method” was, mainly, an extremely positive learning experience to the students and the teacher. The students wrote excellent theoretical articles based on their observations and the research material on the firms studied. The students learned from each other, and the teacher's role was that of a trainer and the controller of learning. The students' role was extremely independent and responsible. The result also indicates that when using the Freinet-PBL method, the facilitators should guide and monitor the teams in order to ease anxiety especially in the early phases of learning. If the PBL method is not well-known to the students, the importance of the provided time and support is even higher. The Freinet-PBL method fulfilled the promise of the University of Applied Sciences to combine theory and practice. The next goal could be to explore this method by using a new technical device (IPad), writing an online book and applying this method to the e-learning environment.

Rippé (2015) also criticizes role playing because the presenter is not a stranger and the situation is not in an actual environment. However, according to the evidence of this data, this is an excellent method because the students have an opportunity to learn an approved model of the selling process. Deeter-Schmelz's & Kennedy's (2011) study shows that schools perceived role play as more effective than other techniques. If we compare the Freinet-PBL method to case-based role playing, both improve general working life competencies, but role playing has a greater focus on the sales profession-specific skills. These methods are difficult to use if the class size is too big. Keeping class sizes small is one of the main difficulties facing sales education in schools (Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy 2011). Another problem is that all constructivist methods require more time for both teaching and learning. Not surprisingly, there can be teachers who want to save their own time and, thus, they continue to use teacher-centered methods. A positive issue in PBL methods is that the students cannot be free-riders.

The present study would have benefitted from a selection of fewer applications because it would have made it more focused. The material was scarce, and its quality was quite weak. Future research is needed in order to examine the broader impacts of the PBL and CBL applications on Sales Management and Professional Selling courses. A longitudinal study should be conducted, and deeper qualitative and quantitative methods and analyses should be used. In addition, new ways of using the PBL and especially CBL methods should be developed. The PBL and CBL methods make it possible to strengthen the cooperation and networks between companies, students and universities.

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