

“Transforming Learning through Strategic Management Case Studies – OUM's On-Line Alternative”

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Abstract

Engaging learners has become a major topic of discussion amongst academicians as many employers in the corporate sector have voiced their complaints regarding the employability of local graduates. Our local graduates are said to lack critical thinking skills and analytical abilities. Taking this in mind, the Faculty of Business and Management of Open University Malaysia has embarked on an ambitious project to engage learners using case studies in Strategic Management. The use of cases as a tool to develop critical thinking and analytical abilities have long been used by renowned business schools such as Harvard Business School in the United States and Curtin Business School in Australia. OUM's Faculty of Business and Management has gone a step further to transform learning for its students – the Strategic Management course is going to be offered fully on-line where the faculty's academicians will engage in case discussions with learners from anywhere in the country at any point of time. The use of cases, supplemented by learning materials, Power Point slides and videos will foster a more engaging learning environment where learners will experience real-life scenarios, make decisions and formulate strategies in the shoes of CEOs. This paper will share the faculty's plans and implemented projects for the transformation of BBPS4103 Strategic Management.

Keywords: *Engaging learners, transforming learning, case studies, on-line learning*

Introduction

One of the key success factors in determining the success of an e-learning program is engaging learners actively which requires learners to have a high degree of self motivation (Ali, 2009). Therefore, engaging learners is of strategic significance in terms of achieving learning outcomes set in the subject curriculum as well as to evaluate whether actual learning has taken place. However, the Malaysian education system from primary to secondary school has always been labeled as teacher centered and examination oriented (Lim and Hua, 2007) as cited in Koo (2007). This educational approach is quite common in Asian schools and is labeled as rote learning, which is rigid and stifles creativity (Beech, 2003) as cited in Koo, (2007). Therefore, the teacher is perceived by the students as the “Sage on Stage “whereby the teacher is all-knowledgeable and this responsibility of learning emanates from the teacher”. At tertiary level, difficulties in engaging learners online are a problem that needs to be addressed. Due to the National Agenda of wanting to be a developed country by year 2020, the success of this endeavor partially lies in encouraging creativity and innovation. Hence, the Malaysian citizen needs to inculcate the values of openness which embraces critical thinking and encouraging risk taking and experimentation (Tenth Malaysia Plan, 2011-2015). Learners need to be encouraged and nurtured to be innovative, creative and analytical. As such, the use of ICT in particular collaborative educational technology especially at tertiary level could be promoted and marketed as enjoyable. Using case studies have proven to be one such delivery method in learning that could enhance learners to hone on their critical thinking and analytical skills.

Constructivist Theories in Case Study Methods

Constructivism can be described as a theory that deals with the way people create meaning of the world through a series of individual constructs. Constructs are the different types of filters we choose to place over our realities to change our reality from chaos to order. Simply stated, it is a learning process which allows a student to experience an environment first-hand thereby giving the student reliable, trust-worthy knowledge. The student is required to act upon the environment to both acquire and test new knowledge. One type of constructivism is experiential learning in which the learner learns by experiencing first hand and thus, active learning takes place.

The contrasting position to constructivism is that of positivism whereby knowledge is the view of reality as being objectively “out there” that can be posited and as something to be sought and grasped by the knower, from those that posit knowledge as being “ in here “ constructed by the knower and inseparably as part of them (constructivism). In positivism , key aspects of the hypothetico-deductivist theory is the epistemology that asserts that knowledge consists of the truth testing statements through a set of agreed rules of discursive procedure and an ontology that asserts that knowledge is ‘about’ something that is itself outside the discursive system of hypothetico-deductive procedures (Oliver, *et. al*, 2007).

Smith (2007) further writes on John Dewey who believed that education must engage with and expand experience those methods used to educate must provide for exploration, thinking and reflection; and that interaction with the environment is necessary for learning; also that democracy should be upheld in the educational process. Hence, education is seen as a natural process spontaneously carried out by the human individual and is acquired not by listening to the words but by experiences upon the environment. Other constructivists include the writings of Montessori as cited in Wiki (2012) whereby she advocates a

learning process which allows a student to experience an environment first-hand, thereby giving the student reliable, trustworthy knowledge. David Kolb in his books *Learning Style Inventory Technical Manual* and *Experiential Learning Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, emphasizes the importance of conditional knowledge through experiential learning (Wiki, 2012). The learning cycle can begin at any of the four points; concrete experience, observation and reflection, the formation of abstract concepts and testing new situations. Kolb and Fry (1975) argue that the learning cycle can begin at any of the four points, and that it should be approached as a continuous spiral. However, it is suggested that the learning process often begins with a person carrying out a particular action and then seeing the effect of the action in this situation. Following this, the second step is to understand these effects in the particular instance, so that, if the same action were taken in the same circumstances, it would be possible to anticipate what would follow from the action. In this pattern, the third step would be to understand the general principle under which the particular instance falls.

Kolb's beliefs are consistent with the Constructivists in that he includes Concrete Experience as part of the learning process and requires students to test knowledge by acting upon the environment, thereby, giving the student reliable, trust-worthy knowledge.

Generalizations on the nature of the learner

In a constructivism type of setting, the learner is self-directed, creative and innovative. The purpose in education is to become creative, innovative through analysis, conceptualizations, and synthesis of prior experience to create new knowledge. The educator's role is to mentor the learner during heuristic problem solving of ill-defined problems by enabling quested learning that may modify existing knowledge and allow for the creation of new knowledge. Social constructivism is an extension of constructivism whereby it applies constructivism in the social setting wherein the learner is encouraged to arrive at his/her version of the truth influenced by his/her background, culture or embedded worldview. From the social constructivism point of view, it is important to take into account the background and culture of the learner throughout the learning process as this is the background also helps to shape the knowledge and truth that the learner creates, discovers, and attains in the learning process (Wertsch, 1977). Furthermore, as learning shifts to the learner, the teacher becomes a facilitator and plays a supportive role while the learner plays a more active role in the learning process. The critical goal of learning is that the learner becomes an effective thinker. Social constructivism as advocated by Laurillard (1994) of learning technologies improves learning by stating that this "depends on the context". Her answer means that learning technologies have the potential to improve learning but is dependent on context of learning. Context of learning means that any educational method depends on its effectiveness on the students, teachers, classroom style, institutional milieu and so on as much as on the material or method itself (Laurillard, 1994). For example, effectiveness of teaching technologies could improve learning by the surrounding layers of external influences from the students prior knowledge the student's approach to the task at hand and also if the student were enthusiastic about the course materials, that is his own motivations in the subject would influence the effectiveness of learning technologies to some degree (Laurillard, 1994). As such drawing from the conclusions of Laurillard (1994), an empirical study carried out by Tolmie (2001) focused on the enquiry on context is hypothesized as the use of software, gender and student's past history. Tolmie (2001) in his study reiterated that the use of technology and its impact on learning should not be in isolation that is, it should not ignore the broader educational activity of which it forms a part of, and how that either constraints technology or change as a result of its introduction, and with what effects. The traditional approach in psychology that pervades everyday discourse in many cultures is that learning is located within the head of the individual and to think of things that have been

learnt as being carried around in the head of the individual and to think of things that have been learnt as being carried around in the head of that individual. Tolmie (2001) argues that a context-sensitive approach is needed to be adopted both for the introduction and evaluation of ICT in education.

Statement of Problem

Many employers in the corporate sector have voiced their complaints regarding the employability of local graduates as our local graduates are said to lack critical thinking skills and analytical abilities. Taking this in mind, the Faculty of Business and Management of Open University Malaysia has embarked on an ambitious project to engage learners using case studies in Strategic Management.

BBPS4103 Strategic Management

Delivery Mode

Strategic Management is widely recognized as the capstone course of Bachelor of Business programmes all over the world. Most universities utilize the use of case studies for the course as only case studies can capture the learning from all the various business courses that students have sat for. Moreover, case studies encourage critical thinking and increase decision making ability amongst students. Recently, it was decided that the strategic management course in the university utilize this case study method. The normal mode for using case studies is through class discussions and tutorials. However, Open University Malaysia decided not to use face-to-face classes for the following reasons:

- Unavailability of tutors who are able to conduct case-based teaching at all the learning centres throughout the country.
- Even if the tutors are trained in case-based teaching, not all would remain as OUM tutors.
- No uniformity in the quality of delivery of the course by the tutors at all learning centres.

Based on these considerations it was decided that the Strategic Management course (BBPS4103) be delivered fully online by full-time academicians who specialize in this area. This would not only ensure uniformity in the delivery but ensure that quality of teaching and learning is maintained at all times. Offering the course fully on-line is also in line with the university's vision of being a leading provider of ODL – successful implementation of this course would serve as a benchmark for other courses in the faculty.

Assessment Format

Learning should always be guided by assessment. Thus, the assessment for this strategic management course is designed to ensure that learners are able to grasp the learning outcomes of the course via formative assessment in the form of three written assignments. The first assignment will cover Topics 1 to 5 of the module and Video Lectures 1 to 5 and will be pegged at the application and analysis levels.

This assignment carries 15% of the total marks and should be submitted in the second tutorial time slot. The second assignment also carries 15% of the total marks and should be submitted in the fourth tutorial time slot. This assignment would be based on all the video lectures which also covers all the topics in the module. As in the first assignment, this assignment will be pegged to the application or analysis levels and will be in the form of a short functional case study or working paper.

The main assignment carries 70% of the total marks and also covers the whole video lectures and topics in the module. This assignment is pegged at the synthesis or evaluation level and will consist of a full case write up – either on a given written case or a real-life organisation.

Constructivism and Engaging Learners in BBPS4103

Tolmie (2001) argued that a context-sensitive approach is needed to be adopted both for the introduction and evaluation of ICT in education. Dewey (Smith, 2007) iterated that education must involve engagement for exploration, thinking and reflection. Taking these views in mind, and the basic tenets of using case studies in learning, the BBPS4103 Strategic Management course has been designed to encourage learners' to actively participate in the learning process and most of all, to actually enjoy the learning process.

The content for the course will be delivered to the learners mainly through video lectures. These videos will be uploaded onto the faculty's new learning platform along with the assessments for the semester. This platform has been designed to be not only user friendly but the emphasis is on encouraging the learning process and motivating learners to engage themselves in the learning process.

The top of the screen highlights quotes of the day – either inspirational quotes from leaders or motivation quotes from the faculty's programme coordinators. In this way, learners will find something new everytime they enter the forum and this will encourage them to go in often! The e-tutor's and learners photos will appear each time they post in the forum. This will give learners a chance to know each other and feel as part of the team. If they can participate so actively in Facebook and other social media, there is no reason that they cannot be active in this forum – as long as they are given something to look forward to!

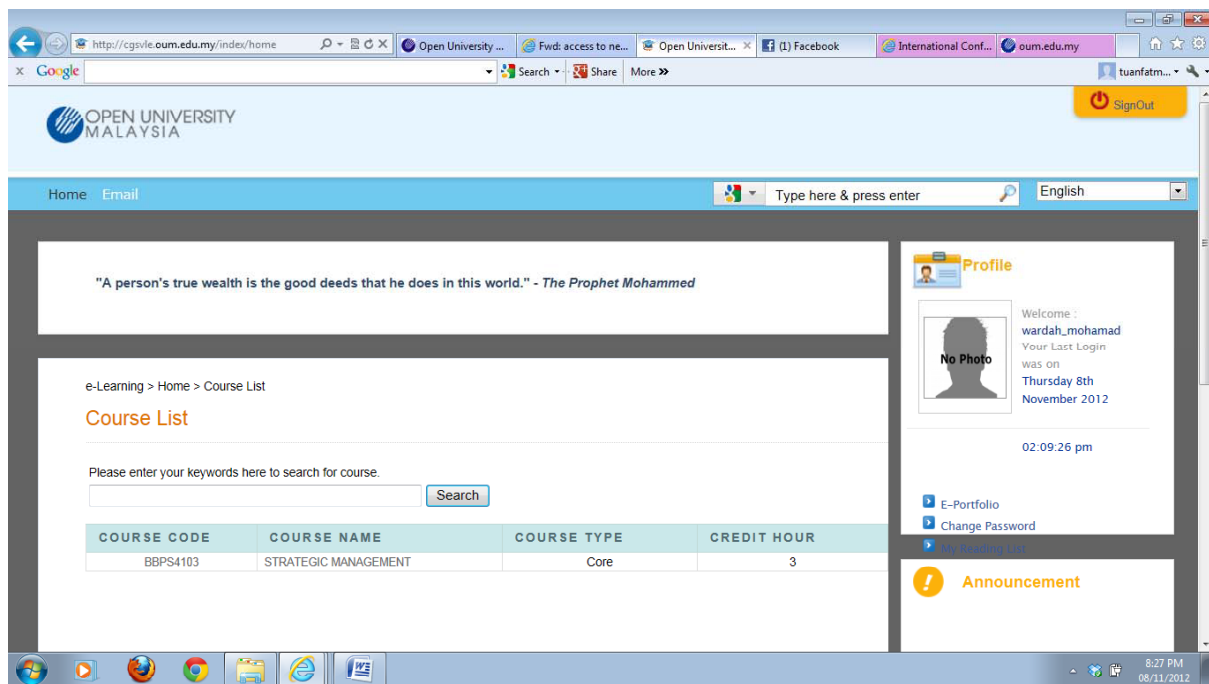


Figure 1: Learning Platform for BBPS4103

With this in mind, ten videos have been recorded - nine covering topics on strategic management and one on how to conduct a case analysis. Activities, questions and assignments are also uploaded onto the course forum to enable active and immediate discussion. Functional cases and full-cases are also uploaded and learners taken through each case through various activities and forum discussions.

The videos have been designed to attract learners' attention and engage them in the learning process. Unlike the normal i-lectures previously produced by the university, these videos go a step further by including animated graphics, real-life case examples and also exercises. This is in line with Ulrich's (2008) observation that dynamic elements should be used in learning resources and these would include animations or interactive simulations which replace static pictures in the original course content. The team producing the video even went out to shoot some sections outside to make the presentations more interesting to the learners. The Dean and faculty staff also contributed by "acting" in some scenes! This is important, as in e-learning, the content should emerge based on learners' interest and the nature of group interaction (Susilo, 2008).

The construction of matrices, for example, is specially designed so that learners are attracted to the process. Each matrix is presented to learners in different forms – some using different colours for each quadrant or the learner is taken through the construction of the matrix step by step using animation. Narrations accompany how the particular matrix can be constructed in the background.

Presentation of facts is not only in oral form but also in picture form as well as it is known that a picture speaks a thousand words. Animated words appear on screen to catch learners' attention and hopefully help them to remember the main facts. In cases where the subject matter is quite heavy or boring, cartoon characters are used to help brighten the video presentation. An example is cartoon animations of

professors in lab coats pushing train carts which display important points. Music is also added to certain parts of the videos to promote thinking and help learners absorb important facts presented.

In certain important topics, additional videos in strategic management are also added. This would include Michael Porter talking about his Five Forces Model which is available in YouTube. Video clips or slide presentations of successful business leaders and their strategies are also included to show learners real-life examples and inculcate their interest in the subject. The example of Ah Weng, a mechanic who succeeded in opening up his own workshop through implementing differentiating strategy was exemplified through real photos of him and his business.

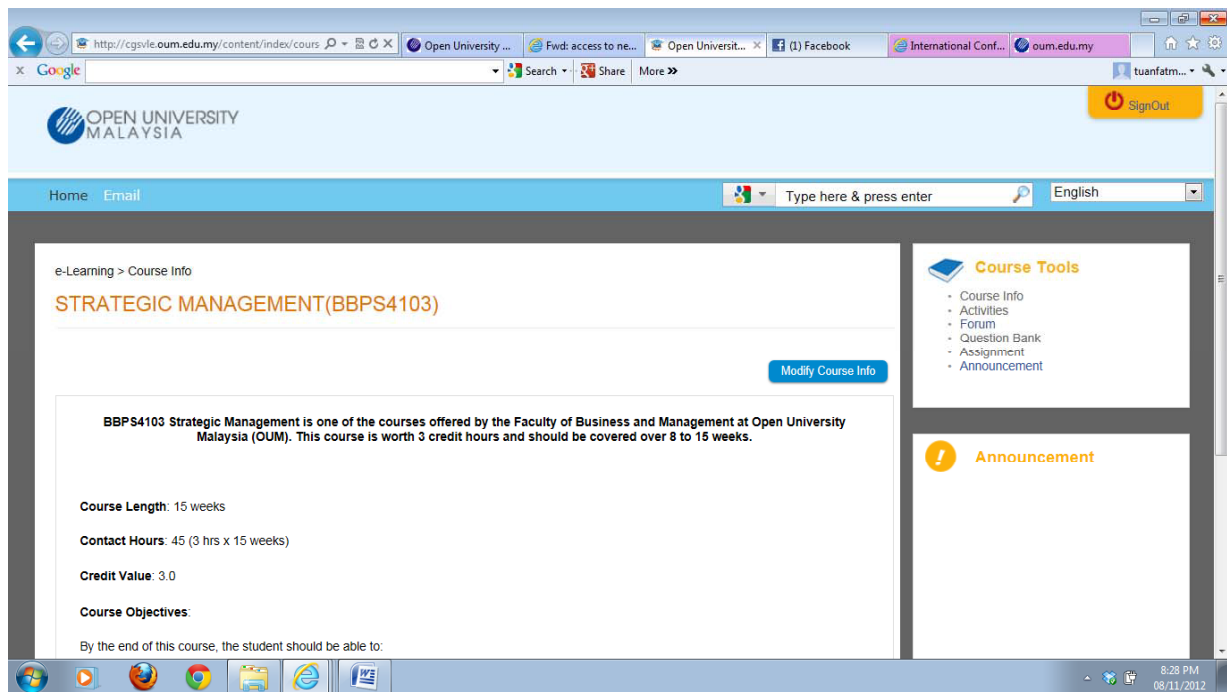


Figure 2: Features available in BBPS4103 _ Course Tools

As part of the formative assessment, exercises and assignments are also imbedded in the video presentations. For example, a short video captured the scenic panorama of Mount Fuji and questions posed on what business learners could open in the area and what strategies they would use to compete with competitors. Learners are also given scenarios and topics to talk about in the video to which they could respond to via the Strategic Management forum. This would engage them in the learning process as it would promote active discussion amongst the learners in the forum. This is in line with Smith *et al.*'s, (2008) view which advocates the sharing of experiences through debate, critical reflections and problem solving tasks linking the subject material to application in practice.

Apart from the videos, power point slides are also available on-line so that learners can skim through anytime they are free. The case studies for discussion and submission are also uploaded in the forum to ensure that learners actually enter the forum and engage in discussion. These case studies may be short, functional case studies which focus on certain topics or comprehensive case studies which require lengthy discussion and analysis. The idea here is that learners are involved in the learning process every step of

the way. This focus is in line with the aim of delivering an effective, stimulating and high quality learning experience, which is crucial to any university's success (McDonald and Hall, 1996).

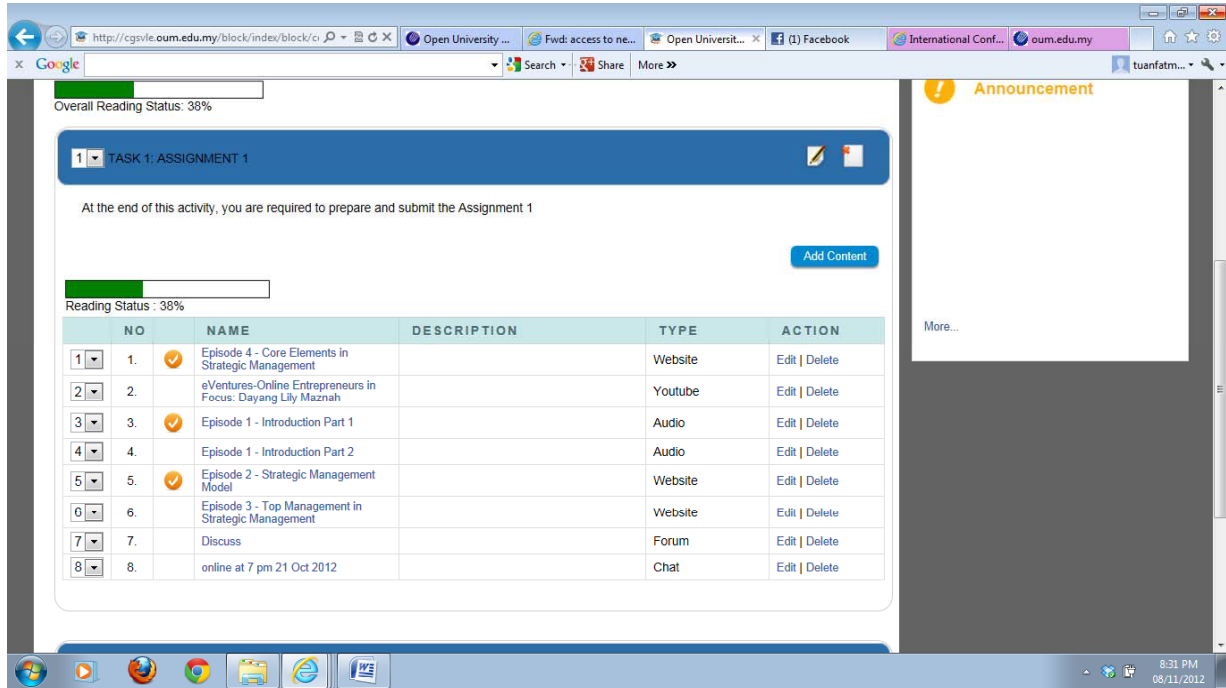


Figure 3: Activities available

Jarvis (2008) too iterated that the art of teaching is still possible in distance education through the people who design the teaching and learning process. According to him, the art of teaching lies in our empathising with the learners and thus entering into an interpersonal relationship with them. Teachers and designers have to embrace a human perspective, learn of methods, experiment with them and develop techniques using the available methods (*ibid.*). This is also supported by Richardson and Newby (2006) who suggested that academics and practitioners should explore how teachers or tutors can influence learning designs and strategies in order to engage learners in their learning activities. This is what the Faculty of Business and Management is doing through this new delivery method for BBPS4103 Strategic Management.

The academicians or e-tutors in charge of this course should be experts not only in the subject matter but have the ability to facilitate active discussion. They should give full support to the learners as there should be support from teachers or experts to guarantee the efficacy of the learning model employed (Chaves, 2009). Teachers or tutors should encourage independence in the learners and motivate them to construct their learning (Abas and Fadzil, 2008) as the success of an online community depends on the crucial roles played by the designers, teachers and learners (Karunanayaka, 2008). This is especially important for OUM as Abas and Kaur (2004) found that OUM learners depended on their tutors to ensure their success in online learning.

The BBPS4103 Strategic Management course has been specially designed to provide learners with an exciting learning experience where learners will be engaged throughout the whole course. The assessment

has been fully thought out and focuses on the course learning outcomes. This assessment has guided the delivery of the course content and structure. This is important as both the assessment and the course delivery needs to be fully aligned in order to facilitate learners' success. This is especially important as the quality of programmes and the desired level of learning transfer are achievable only with the necessary academic and social engagement aspects made possible through the right kinds of curricula design (Chaves, 2009). The assessment, the module, the videos, power point slides and the discussion in the forum should be of the highest quality as quality is the "lifeline of open universities" (Deming, 2008).

The Way Forward

The BBPS4103 project will only be implemented this 2013 January semester, thus the success of the project is yet to be seen. The main obstacle would be to get learners to enter the learning platform and engage themselves in the learning process. It is envisaged, however, that once they enter, they will be fully engaged and future business leaders will be born. We believe that the support provided by OUM's top management for BBPS4103 Strategic Management course will be a strong factor to engage both academicians and students in their teaching and learning.

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