

Sell-ON: Learning by doing pedagogy at VESIM Business School

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Abstract

The Director at VESIM Business School closed his laptop and looked at the members of the Dean's Council. He had just read out the bad news and something had to be done about it. The year was 2014 and the student's campus placement in corporates was looking grim. This was the fifth company who had visited the campus and had given an adverse comment about the soft skills of the students during the placement interviews. The question was how to inculcate those skills in the students during program that will enhance their employability. The knowledge imparted by distinguished faculties in the classroom had to be supplemented with something else to be transformed into skills required for business. The Dean's Council came up with a recommendation to begin a series of on-field programs that will act as a simulation of workplace. One program specific to develop business and soft skills called "Sell-On" was proposed for all the students. In this program, they perform a business task in the real world and enhance their learning by doing. A list of Experiential Programs at VESIM Business School is attached in Annexure A.

Introduction

Vivekanand Education Society's Institute of Management Studies and Research (VESIM Business School) was instituted on 31st March 1994. It runs two programs in Management Education i.e. master's in management studies (MMS) and Post Graduate Diploma in Management (PGDM). Currently the student intake is 180 students in MMS and 120 in PGDM. Since its inception, VESIM has been at the forefront of business studies, developing business leaders who strive to make a positive impact on companies they work with, people they meet, and the society they serve. This allows the institute to help more deserving students, who are aiming for fulfilling lives and glorious corporate careers.

"Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn."
— Benjamin Franklin

Acquiring knowledge through experience rather than classroom teaching is the crux of Experience Based Learning method. It connects Learning outcomes with real life problem situation for the students so that they can find their own unique solutions. This method builds holistic skills instead of focusing on a single component. The students also need to be conscious of the social environment in which the business is carried on.

To achieve this end, VESIM Business School has introduced, "Sell-On", a mandatory activity for students that introduces them to real life situations and makes them better prepared for their corporate journey.

The result is a highly successful model of program delivery which is gaining widespread support amongst all the stakeholders.

Background

Traditional teaching methods are meant to handover knowledge or skills to the learner ignoring the overall development of the learner. It incorrectly assumes what are the needs of the learner.

"Experiential learning stimulates original thinking and develops a wide range of thinking strategies and perceptual skills which are not called forth by books or lectures". (Williams, 1986). "In

Experiential Learning, students benefit from discoveries and experiments by learning through observation and interaction, while at the same time they explore the real world". (Dedouli, 2001). David Kolb proposed the cyclical model of experiential learning, wherein, he states that learning begins from concrete experience to reflective observation, then to abstract conceptualization to active experimentation. (Kolb, 1984).

In modern times, learning in the classroom is no longer enough. Knowing the way to solve issues, operating collaboratively and thinking innovatively are vital skills of the twenty first century. "Therefore, Experience Based Learning is generally accepted as an effective method for teaching processes, such as problem solving and decision making" (Thomas, 2000). "Besides, experts should help in developing character's emotional, social elements apart from cognitive" (Katz & Chard, 2000). "Other positive outcomes by using Project Based Learning are the reduction of student's anxiety" (Boaler, 2002), and "the enhancement of student's learning quality compared with conventional teaching methods" (Thomas, 2000).

Management education involves acquiring skills that are useful to counter the short and long-term challenges of business and ensuring that the business performs to its maximum potential. These skills were acquired in the past using traditional classroom methodology, wherein the teacher would 'teach' using teaching aids and sharing his/her experiences. This method has been successful for hundreds of years for conventional subjects, but, for a skill driven program like an MBA, the teaching must be taken out to the real life for enhancing the employability of the student. In a B-School, where students are taught using 'chalk & talk' they would 'learn' the subjects and pass with flying colors but would not get selected for good jobs in premium corporates. Even if they would get selected, they would need extensive training on-the-job. On closer examination, it was found that the students had enough knowledge on 'What' are the theories and models behind the subject but were unable to perform the 'How' part of it.

In addition, there were other drawbacks of pure classroom teaching. The teaching is focused on the ability of the teacher rather than the ability of the learner. It was assumed that a highly qualified teacher would automatically transfer knowledge to a class of sixty students irrespective of their individual absorbing capacity. To be fair to the class, the teacher would focus on the 'lowest common denominator' thus disengaging the brighter ones. Traditional Classroom teaching also makes the learners dependent on the teacher, who ends up in spoon-feeding them without bringing out their creativity and strengths. Sometimes, there is a teacher bias in the classroom towards the bright students and the left-out students give up on the learning itself.

"Assuming that all students cannot learn in the same way, it is important for educators to develop and implement alternative teaching methods" (Muthukrisma et al., 1993). According to Aggelakos, the solution lies in Experience Based Learning where "learning isn't limited in terms of knowledge and information, but rather with their teacher's help, it provides students with the opportunity to transform themselves during the learning process" (Aggelakos, 2007).

The Concept

The Concept of Sell-On is 'Do and Learn' where students gain skills by performing in live setting. The learning goals are set well in advance and the activity is designed to achieve the desired goals. The Selling activity is specifically chosen since selling per se involves use of extensive interpersonal skills, hence they can hone it for their corporate journey. It is also the basic function of economy and the fundamental reason that corporates exist. Students joining a B-School need to be exposed to sales as a function so that they learn things that will help them for rest of their lives.

The Learning Objectives being that the students should be able to identify and explain customer needs and wants, be able to apply various selling techniques, explain and describe the management principles learnt, demonstrate public speaking skills, identify and suggest role of Social responsibility in business and practice and evaluate team building skills.

Pre-event Planning

VESIM Business School has a strong association with many NGO's (Non-Governmental Organization) who work towards upliftment of such disadvantaged people like mentally or physically challenged, women from extremely poor financial background etc. These groups of people work for the

NGO's to produce hand crafted products which the NGO sells at a reasonable profit to its limited set of customers. This is where VESIM Business School comes in and works towards a winning formula for all concerned. Students order products well in advance based on the estimated target per team. The products are packed for a group comprising of eight to ten students each. Pricing is fixed in consultation with the NGO to ensure fair returns to them. A faculty mentor is appointed for each group of students. The role of the faculty mentor is to interact with the students on a regular basis, keep them motivated to increase sales and sort out any issues that arise during the event. The School does not keep any margin for itself. The total revenue collected, including the profits earned is passed on to the concerned NGO.

Student Training and Motivation

On day one, a 'Selling Skills' session is scheduled for the students which is conducted by an industry expert and motivator. The effort is to bring out a can-do spirit amongst the students. This is followed by a session from the NGO who explains to the students about the 'Product' and the effort that has gone into making it. Students are sensitized about the condition of those who have made the products.

The group who has achieved maximum sales is declared as the winner and certificates and prizes are awarded to them. The groups are then asked to prepare a report and a PowerPoint presentation of their experience which they present in the presence of the NGO, faculty members, Deans and Director.

Implementation

Students are divided into groups of ten on a random basis and they are designated as 'Sales Manager' for the duration of the activity. A group leader is chosen for each group, who receives the package, interacts with the faculty mentor, handles cash and returns unsold inventory. The Group Leader is designated as 'Area Sales Manager' and one faculty mentor is selected for each group who is designated 'Regional Sales Manager'. Each faculty mentor then briefs the student group allotted to them. They explain the objective of the exercise, the way the event is to be conducted and general guidelines on communication, dress code, pricing etc. The students are then let out on the field. During the event, students report daily sales to the group leader and the group leader in turn reports to the Faculty Mentor. The Group leader deposits daily cash and orders further inventory if required from the Faculty Mentor. Faculty Mentor makes it a point to accompany the students on a few visits.

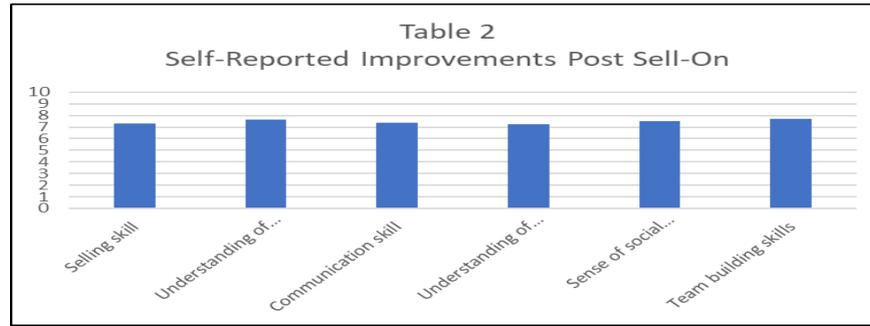
At the end of the event, cash and inventory are tallied and money is handed over to the respective NGO. The students are then asked to give a feedback on their learnings from the event on a ten-point scale on the following parameters –

- Selling Techniques learnt
- Understanding the customer needs
- Communication Skills learnt
- Understanding Management Principle.
- Awareness of societal issues
- Working in Teams.
- Outcomes

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018
Date of the activity	11th to 14th August	13th to 15th August	17th to 20th August	17 th to 23 rd August
Number of students	176	112	240	300
Sold goods worth GBP	1051	1618	2444	8333
Sale in GBP per Student	5.97	14.45	10.18	27.78
Supporting NGO	GODS	GODS	Udyamita, Envirovigil	Udyamita Seva Sahyog

In four years since inception, the Sell-On program has increased in quantity and quality. The number of students has gradually increased from 176 to 300. The amount of goods sold has taken a quantum jump from GBP 1051 in the year 2014 to GBP 8333 in the year 2018. (See Table 1). Part of the reason for increase is the increase in the number of students participating in the program, but the bigger reason is increase in sale per student which went up from GBP 5.97 to GBP 27.78.

At the end of the Program, students were asked to give their feedback on the improvement they found in themselves on a scale of 1 to 10 on the parameters set in the objectives. The overall improvement felt by the students has been very satisfactory (See Table 2)



The average self-improvement on all parameters i.e. Selling Skills (7.30), Understanding the Customer (7.62), Communication Skills (7.36), Understanding the Principles of Management (7.25) Social Responsibility (7.48) and Team Building Skills (7.70) has been above seven.

The biggest gain for VESIM Business School has been on the placement front. The Sell-On Program in conjunction with other experiential learning pedagogy has helped students get placed and that too at a higher salary package. (See Table 3).

% Placements as well as avg. Annual salary last four years				
Batch	2013-2015	2014-2016	2015-2017	2016-2018
% PLACEMENTS	74.41	78.945	79.125	94.785
AVG. Salary offered as CTC in GBP	3522	4022	4489	6056

Students placed in the industry directly from the campus has gone up from 74% in 2014 to 94% in the year 2018. The salary package offered by the corporates to the graduating MBA's has climbed by more than 40%.

Discussions and Conclusions

The Director and the Dean's Council have expressed satisfaction at the progress that students have shown at placement interviews since past four years. Sell-On has proved to be a very effective pedagogy for VESIM Business School students to learn basic skills required of them in the corporate world. It uses experiential learning where students acquire skills by dealing in real life situations. It not only enhances their employability skills but also their ability to face failures and sensitization of societal issues. It has proved to be a very successful model and can be replicated at other B-schools too.

Sell-On creates a sense of accomplishment in a student and he/she feels involved in the learning process. It takes meticulous planning, disciplined implementation and thorough analysis of the outcomes through tremendous efforts of Heads of Departments and associated faculties to achieve this success.

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Annexure A

Experiential Programs at VESIM Business School

Sr. No	Program	Description	Duration in days	Learning Objectives
1	Parichay	Outbound Management Games Program	2	Apply ingenious ideas to solve a given problem. Practice and evaluate team building skills. Exhibit effective communication skills through written reports and public speaking through oral de-briefing. Explain and describe the management principles learnt.
2	Sell-On	On-Field Sales	6	Students should be able to: Identify and explain customer needs and wants Apply various selling techniques Apply various selling techniques Apply various selling techniques Demonstrate public speaking skills Identify and suggest role of Social responsibility in business Practice and evaluate team building skills
3	Yuva for Seva	Community Program	21	The Student should be able to: Analyze the real problems facing the community. Assess the interventions required by the community. Formulate solutions for the community.
4	Summer Internship Program	Industry Exposure	90	Student should be able to: Apply classroom learning to work-place Demonstrate disciplined work culture Complete Projects in a time bound manner Create a network within the organization
5	Management Internship Program	Industry Research	120	Students should be able to: Apply classroom learning to identify industry problems Apply research methods to solve industry problems Write a report on the research conducted.
6	Domain based Projects	On-Field task completion average @ 1 day per subject	25	Student should be able to: Apply domain knowledge to complete the given task Complete Projects in a time bound manner. Present the findings to the class.
7	Strategy Business Game	Computer based Simulation	2	Student should be able to: Apply domain knowledge in a competitive environment.
8	Insanity	Sports Participation	3	Students should be able to: Exhibit leadership skills Use their strengths to the maximum Demonstrate team qualities.
9	Leadership Activities	Event Participation @ 1 day per student per year	2	Students should be able to: Exhibit leadership skills Demonstrate team qualities.
10	Employability Skills	Mock Group Discussion & Personal Interviews	2	Students should be able to: Demonstrate the right approach to Group discussion and Personal Interviews.