

Evaluating RETS-MICA: a constructivist alternative to the traditional MBA case-study method (in entrepreneurial workshops)

Abstract

Business Schools have come under withering attacks since before the global financial crisis.^{1,2} For their standardised, non-integrated entrepreneurship curricula and rigid methods of instruction. The crisis has extended this critique. Further criticisms relate to the inability of faculty who are schooled in Western-paradigms of instruction to manage increasingly multi-cultural entrepreneurial classrooms (Dalglish, 2002). Doubts have been raised as to the capabilities, skills and ethical awareness of such entrepreneurial graduates once they enter practice, especially of those who have undertaken higher education in entrepreneurship.³

This study reports on the implementation of RETS-MICA, a culturally-situated tool, used in training for entrepreneurship workshops (*Oganisjana & Matlay, 2012*), (*Gibb, 2002*) where international participants rarely possess English as their first language (Parks & Raymond, 2004). For entrepreneurship training and education, we argue, there is the need to move away from a reliance on the problem-based, culturally unsympathetic, Socratic, approach common in much teaching to an approach in which experientially-focused methods are paramount and in which classroom walls are broken down. We developed the RETS-MICA method because it offers a constructivist, activity-based approach to learning in culturally variable settings⁴ and includes numerous benefits such as We report on the preliminary results of our 3 year empirical evaluation of applying RETS-MICA in our workshops in terms of our participants' perceptions of the relevance and value of their learning to their future practice and aspirations. In the main our results demonstrate significant preferences for the entrepreneurial competences developed in participants by the RETS-MICA tool compared to more traditional tools of entrepreneurial education and training with culturally diverse learners.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship education, MICA, Harvard case-method, learning, pedagogy, constructivist, experiential, MBA

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Abbreviations: MICA, mcaleer interactive assessment; RETS, rapid enterprise training system; MBA, master of business administration

Introduction

Business Schools have for more than a decade and following the global financial crisis, come under withering attacks,^{1,2} for their standardised, non-integrated curricula and rigid methods of instruction. Increasing doubts have been raised as to the capabilities, skills and ethical awareness of graduates from Schools once they enter practice- especially of those who have undertaken MBA and related Masters-level studies.³

Armstrong⁵ argues that as

“full-time formal education separates learning from practice, it is inevitable that the educational process will produce people who can talk about practice rather than people who are competent practitioners.”(p.230)

In the main the focus of pedagogical attacks has been on the reductionist tendencies of faculty who reflect this institutional impasse,⁶ as they drawn upon a diet of disciplinary fragmentation and competitive technical rationality⁷ in their own professional

experience⁸ to inform their instructional practice.⁹ In light of these criticisms many argue that changes to MBA programs are slow and faltering when it comes to instructional innovation and relevance.¹⁰

Context of the study

The study reported on here attempts to re-dress some of these instructional imbalances and re-position the interests of entrepreneurship participants above other stakeholders. It evaluates the development of an approach to learning with case studies that engages the voice of participants as the main driver of practice and vicarious learning,¹⁰⁻¹³ in MBA and MA classrooms. The business case, which is a major part of the MBA instructional toolkit, has its origins in the Harvard Law School's casebook method of legal instruction. Garvin¹⁴ notes that in the legal faculty most instructors assign multiple cases for class, typically selected because

“We have conflicting principles and are committed to opposing values. Students have to develop some degree of comfort with ambiguity.”(p.58)

Tolerance to ambiguity and related capacities are also key skills desired in those graduating from business schools as they face ever more complex and changing industrial landscapes.¹⁵ Yet, unlike the development of the case method in the legal faculty, business cases

are in many instances used to reinforce a set of management concepts or principles that have been pre-scripted in a formal lecture. This limits the development of tolerance for ambiguity and other skill sets as participants search for case meanings with apriori conceptual knowledge. In other words the original, inductive reasoning purpose of the case method has been reconstructed into a quasi-deductive reasoning tool- conceptual lecture first, case reasoning after! The scope for expanding graduates' critical thinking, diversity of emphasis, multiple interpretations, sampling of failure and alternative options for action is reduced. The Socratic method of instruction also dominates the ways in which instructors seek to secure the learning of subject content and process within this schedule. In such settings the advancement of tolerance to ambiguity and related capacities are further diluted by instructors' normative use of case teaching notes.¹⁶ For business classrooms, we argue, there is the need to move away from a reliance on the problem-based, Socratic, approach common in case teaching to an approach in which:

*"The purpose of business education is not to teach truths...but to teach men and women to think in the presence of new situations. This requires a bifocal perspective: the ability to characterize quickly both the common and the distinctive elements of business issues."*¹⁴

MICA

The field of entrepreneurship is an embryonic domain, which lacks the conceptual maturity of its functionally based peers such as finance, marketing and human resource management.¹⁷ The current need in entrepreneurship classrooms is for more practice, rather than research-based pedagogies, which demand a less traditional approach to case teaching methods. The 'Entrepreneurship and Planning New Ventures' program provides an ideal test bed for experimenting with cases that encourage the inductive reasoning and tolerance for ambiguity demanded of today's graduates but still absent in business school instruction. To achieve this we have for a number of years used an adaptation of the MICA method¹⁸ as an alternative to the traditional Harvard Case method in our masters-level entrepreneurship program.

Briefly, we adopted the MICA¹ approach because it offers an activity-based approach to learning⁴ and includes the following benefits:

- a. Student-participants rather than the instructors lead and administer the process with a significant reduction in the visibility but not the role of the instructor.
- b. It requires and achieves in depth preparation- with student-participants voluntarily conducting external research, personal interviews with experts-in-practice, and other sources of information.
- c. Student-participants quickly learn to make succinct decisions and state their positions using predominantly evidence-based arguments. Participants become accustomed to critical counter-arguments by their peers and broaden their viewpoints.¹⁸
- d. Student-participants are required to follow an ethical code of conduct regarding potentially discriminatory practices in the class.
- e. Reasoning and resultant knowledge-claims are generated from a communicative-based (Habermas, 1984), collaborative process¹⁹ rather than silo-based, competitive modes of inquiry.

¹For a description and analysis of the MICA method²³

We have made the following adaptations as a result of our experience in using the MICA approach, our the belief that the field of entrepreneurship instruction needs to concern itself with practice-driven heuristics and our reflections that student-participants explicitly and implicitly request a move towards more heutagogical designs in instruction²⁰ and the de-centering of their classroom²¹

- a. Introduction of a debate format²² to drive and anchor classroom dialogues and divert attention of the Socratic dynamic away from the instructor and towards the participants.
- b. We require that participant teams, which lead the case class administration, provide the grades according to the MICA grading system. This encourages lead participants' feed-forward, transparency and sense of accountability. The original MICA system requires the instructor to administer the grading system for the class.
- c. We have introduced the use of participant-filmed video recording of class and other case-related activities for critical team reflection, feedback, feed-forward and self-evaluation.²⁴

Materials and methods

The RETS-MICA approach that we have created seeks to redress several constraints present in current Business School instructional practice and in the use of case teaching seminars. We therefore conducted a mixed-method exploratory and evaluative study to examine if participants perceived either any added value or advantages in the use of RETS-MICA participant-led over traditional, instructor-led methods. Such advantages may include behavioural dimensions (oral communication, persuasion, leadership) and attitudinal dimensions (risk-taking, acceptance of responsibility and exercising initiative).²⁵ Dimensions pertinent to coping with ambiguity and the related capacities expected of entrepreneurial graduates and executives today. The qualitative part of the evaluation is on-going and will be reported at a later date and elsewhere. Here we briefly report on the post-experience survey of participants' perceptions about the effectiveness of the new method across a number of entrepreneurship competencies.

Measurement

Following on from Droge & Spreng²⁵ we measured perceptions of the effectiveness of RETS-MICA when compared to the traditional method in the following areas: Career Preparation, Traditional Educational Goals, Use of Time, involvement and satisfaction. We also measured a set of specific competencies and evaluated the method against the course's explicitly stated learning outcomes. This split between broad learning objectives and specific competencies follows the suggestion that instructional curricula should be assessed at 2 levels: broad and specific.²⁶ Our instrument is an adaptation from Droge & Spreng.²⁵ Participants were required to directly compare the traditional, instructor-led method with the RETS-MICA, participant-led method. The respondents were asked: 'Which case method do you think is better overall? Evaluations were made using a 7-point Likert scale with '1' indicating the traditional method and '7' the RETS-MICA-method. The measure of specific competencies asked the respondents to state their preference for a given method. Finally, the evaluation against course-specified learning outcomes was administered by using a 7-point Likert scale against explicit course outcomes.

Results and discussion

Given the word limit for this report the tables (Figures 1-4) provide a précis of the results.² The results are based on a sample of 197 fully completed responses. From the figures we note that RETS-MICA method is preferred and perceived as being more effective in delivering on the new demands of Business School graduates. This paper adds value as one of the few empirical papers which furthers the discussion of the RETS-MICA method. The results have shown that participants are more likely to engage with the RETS-MICA method and challenges to be addressed when compared to the traditional Harvard case-method. This paper offers an alternative method to instructors that require more experiential participant-centric tools in the classroom. There are many reasons why this may occur, for example, either the resistance to change aspects of the instructor's ego, or the different learning styles of participant may be playing

a moderating role in the participants' experience of a case study. Therefore the questions that we need to be asking ourselves are: how are we contributing to our participants' knowledge? How are we helping them achieve skills that they will need in the business world and their lives? What challenges are we facing in business education and entrepreneurial education at the moment, and would the RETS-MICA method, be an effective way of enabling increased participation? Further, on the assumption that the RETS-MICA method, reconstructs the pressure on the instructor by needing less control on the class as they assume increasing control of class process and content, then how will the role of the instructor evolve? How do we as instructors respond and do we cope with reengineering of our roles? Also, in order to increase the reach of the RETS-MICA method, how can we conduct further research to either prove or disprove the benefits? And how can we incorporate the method to the benefit of our instructor peers' practice?

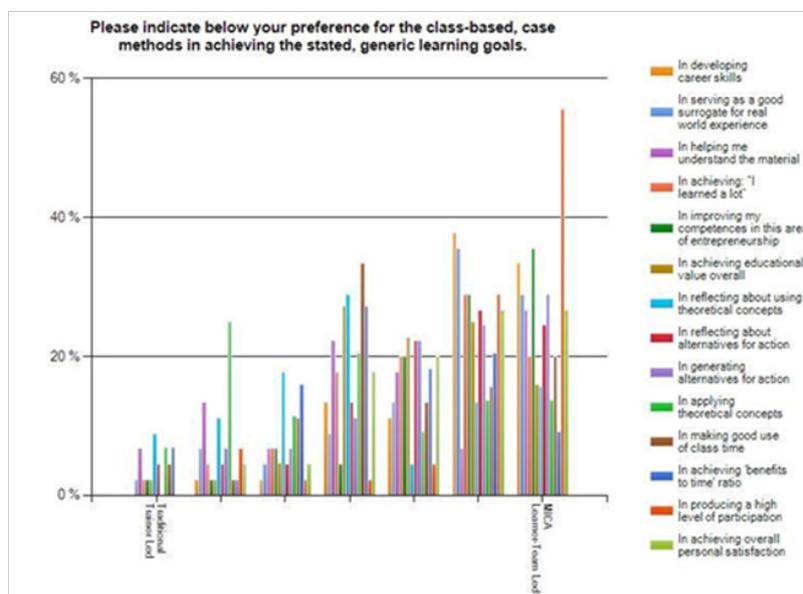


Figure 1 Participants' Comparative Perceptions of Broad Learning Goals by Method.

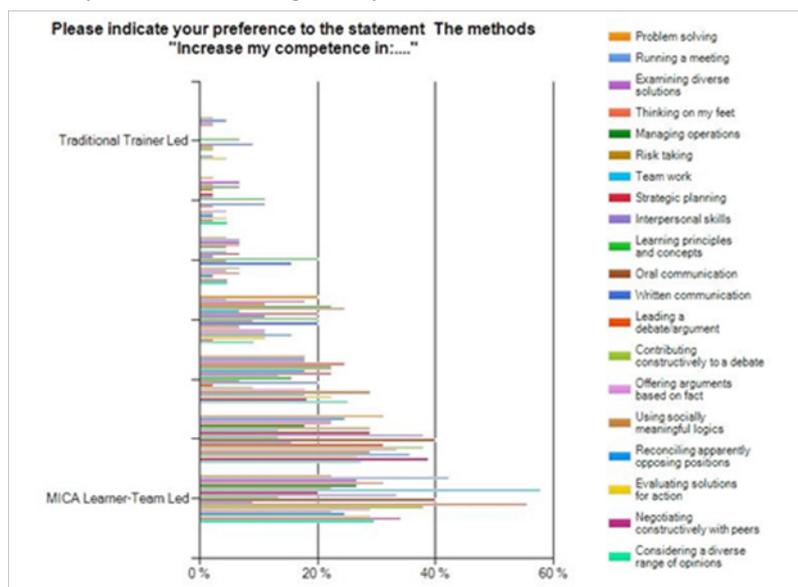


Figure 2 Participants' Comparative Perceptions of Competencies & Skills.

²Full sets of results are available upon request from the correspondence author: gonsalvese@regents.ac.uk

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