INTRODUCING PROBLEM-SOLVING METHOD IN THE BUSINESS SCHOOL OF A BRAZILIAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This article has as the primary objective discussing the cultural roadblocks faced as part of the process of introducing a new method in a traditional educational institution, as well as showing the preliminary results of that effort, besides proposing some ideas of breaking the resistances. It also emphasizes the difficult to break the institutional mental model of producing only academic theoretical works as a way of achieving goals, no matter the quality of new knowledge and expertise created. The first results showed that 30% of the professors are "risking" themselves on the new method. The students involved – almost 400 – seem to be a little more confident, choosing the new rather than the "traditional". It appears that they foresee much more opportunities than the professors do. The preliminary results show that some new steps are required. If the resistances are deeply understood, they maybe can be diminished and broken. Another important point to be emphasized is that being in strict contact with the market would help them to develop their classes, enriching with updated and local examples.

Keywords: Methodology, Problem-solve method; change resistance

1. INTRODUCTION

As a primary objective, this article discusses the cultural roadblocks faced as part of the process of introducing a new method in a traditional educational institution, as well as showing the preliminary results of that effort, besides proposing some ideas of breaking the resistances. It also emphasizes the difficult to break the institutional mental model of producing only academic theoretical works as a way of achieving goals, no matter the quality of new knowledge and expertise created.

UPM is a traditional educational institution, located in São Paulo, Brazil. The status of a university given to UPM in 1952, which counts nowadays with 42 thousand undergraduate students and 1,400 faculty members. UPM Business School (MBS) launched 65 years ago, achieving the top grade among the five best business schools in Brazil last year. It´s seven thousand students are being prepared for the professional market to fill management positions, the reason why the curriculum of the undergraduate course is frequently revised to attend the dynamic market demands.

In 2015, MBS started a process for introducing a new method to be applied not only in the final dissertations for Business and Accounting courses but also, to the newly created Master of Business Administration major in Management of Business Development.

The method itself is not new. It accounts for problem-solving and opportunities exploration (AKEN; BERENDS; BIJ, 2012;

VANDERBOSCH, 2003; WEISS, 2011). The novelty is to implement it to a significant number of students and professors, quite used to the academic model for more than 30 years. A method guide was produced based on the most reliable and modern authors. Several revisions have been held to provide a natural and logical comprehension of the proposal.

The arguments around the obvious reality – a business school should operate in partnership with the firms in the market and prepare its students to be ready to solve problems and take decisions – have been exhausted discussed with both students and professors. Afterwards, the method has been implemented using methodology classes.

Meanwhile, the teachers attended to some workshops looking for being trained to advise the students. The business school has a total of 100 teachers acting as advisers, 60% of them with a doctorate. A considerable part of them is supposed to work in consultancy activities. Nevertheless, another part never used to work for an enterprise.

The coordination team was not naïve to believe that such a change would be easy on the first try. It is why all the efforts of convincing those teachers that their carriers will be enhanced with that opportunity of working with a method more applicable to the enterprises, would give them the chance to connect with market reality, as well as to bring examples that are closer to the reality to their classes.

At the current stage of the implementation process, approximately one-third of the total number of teachers is already present. They already guide an expressive number of students who are confident that their decision to adhere to the new method is correct.

However, there is still resistance, not only from students, but also from teachers, to prefer the new to the conventional. This recommends attitudes to encourage them to face apparent fears of approaching real-world situations in the corporate environment for the purpose of finding and proposing solutions for performance improvement.

After all, close contact with the marketplace represents an opportunity to develop business management education, enriching lessons with up-to-date and local examples.

2. CONTEXT AND ENVIRONMENT

UPM is a traditional educational institution, located in São Paulo, Brazil. The status of a university was given to UPM in 1952, which counts nowadays with 42 thousand undergraduate students and 1,400 faculty members.

The Institution is proud of its methodological level of knowledge, making appropriate the scientific method to the necessity of each one the more than 20 courses, of its several faculties. However, those adjustments are made to accomplish a certain level of requirement from the educational organizations from the country government. In order words, the scientific method is just the primer choice.

UPM Business School (MBS) launched 65 years ago, achieved the top grade among the five best business schools in Brazil last year. It´s seven thousand students are being prepared for the professional market to fill management positions, the reason why the curriculum of the undergraduate course is frequently revised to attend the dynamic market demands.

The issue arises when, as other UPM´s faculties, the Business School requires a more practical end-term work must be done, much more oriented to the market demands. In this case, the scientific method by itself does not correspond to the diverse industries in which our courses are engaged.

Another critical problem relates to the proper way of measuring students' knowledge and readiness to perform as executives in the organizations whereas they are going to work, that certainly demands from them speed up the decision taking, in a very competitive and turbulent environment.

Then, the primary goal sought for the team of educational coordinators was to find out and implement the most appropriated method to be applied to the end-term works to be elaborated by the graduate-to-be students of the Business School.

3. DIAGNOSIS

A group of coordinators started discussing along almost one year the effects felt and those foreseen in the students when the approach the period of starting choosing the subjects of their end-term work, which is considered by far, the most important job in the whole course.

Two primary methods were applied: observation and survey. The first was conducted by a team of professors that taught the discipline of Methodology, a step ahead aiming to prepare the students for the first phase of the end-term work.

During the subject that took students almost five months, they were required to provide a research project and make a superficial field research, so that they would feel the difficulties they would face during the orientation process – in the following semester if they are approved in the discipline, considered a prerequisite for the orientation process.

The teachers of the subject started noticing that both students and some other teachers began to be not interested in producing a real good work. That observation together with the surveys on grades attributed to the final products the students delivered as well as the severe engagement into the orientation process was not difficult to understand.

After several conversations and discussions, both with teachers and students that were about to graduate, many of them were emphatic to declare the current method sound good by not useful. By useful they apparently meant the scientific method which goal was to understand a phenomenon was not something that the organizations would value.

They might not know by that time, but what they were pointing out was that the scientific method should be more a tool, than an end. That led the coordinators group to look for a more pragmatic method/protocol to be applied.

4. CHANGING PROPOSAL

After meeting held both with teachers and coordinators, as well of discussing several proposals, the educational team decides to prepare a plan of implanting a proposal focusing on decision making, related both to the problem-solving and opportunity exploration.

Scholars as Aken, Berends, and Bij (2012), Vanderbosch (2003), and Weiss (2011) were the basis for the framework created. The idea was to offer another possibility to the end-term works, instead of replacing the current only one.

The proposal elaborated by the team contemplated the following items:

a) Introduction content – context and objective of the work.

b) Context content – the organization profile, environment.

c) Diagnosis content – problem or opportunity subject of the work, mapping, data collecting, data analysis, and diagnosis.

d) Solution proposal content – alternatives, gains.

e) Action plan content – actions, costs.

f) Conclusion content – considerations, contributions.

An exhibit of the process flow is provided in Attachment A.

Once the proposal was designed, it was decided that its implementation would be right away. For this reason, during the period from August to December 2015, the teachers that would work with the Methodology discipline were trained to prepare the students

in the new proposal during the first half of 2016.

As those students will be oriented in the next semester, the group of teachers that will be working with them was trained through several workshops during April and May 2016. For both faculty members and students, a strong emphasis was given in the message that they could choose between the both concurrent proposals – the scientific or the practical one.

The implantation process is on its way. The first results showed that 30% of the professors are "risking" themselves on the new method. The students involved – almost 400 – seem to be a little more confident, choosing the new rather than the "traditional". It appears that they foresee much more opportunities than the professors do.

Those preliminary results show that some new steps are required. If the resistances are deeply understood, they maybe can be diminished and broken. That would help the teachers to face their apparent fears to compromise actually to the case organizations to find and implement new practices, improving their results.

Another important point to be emphasized is that being in strict contact with the market would help them to develop their classes, enriching with updated and local examples.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This article has as the primary objective discussing the cultural roadblocks faced as part of the process of introducing a new method in a traditional educational institution, as well as showing the preliminary results of that effort, besides proposing some ideas of breaking the resistances.

Although, unexpected in a Business School, more than 60% of its teachers showed some fear or resistance to changing. The proactive group is enthusiastic about the idea and is carrying out the students with them, with can be a promise of magnificent and applicable works.

Those teachers are clearly the ones that overcome any difficulties in their classes, and excel in performance, giving their experience in the market, which is delivered to the students, as should be expected from Business School teachers.

Quite on the contrary, the resistant group seems to be awaiting the results, in a reactive – if not opposite and negative – attitude, far from what is expected by a teacher. They have to be worked, not to be convinced, but to become aware of the present need of changing, as a result of the pressure coming from the market and the organizations.

It is essential that the last group motivations – whatever they are – must be understood and treated for two important reasons. First, if they are not willing to take part in the change, they are not supposed to spoil it aiming to protect themselves.

Second, the change shall happen with or although them – maybe they are not in the right place, so they have the right to realize it to having a second chance.

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Attachment A – Process Flow