

IBE stands for International Business Environment



IBE Assignment

(Interim Report: The Story So Far)

March 2000

STRATHCLYDE GRADUATE BUSINESS SCHOOL

John Bothams

Students Names
Withheld



Proposal: *"A New Approach to IBE and learning" or "How we learnt to stop worrying and love complexity and uncertainty"*

The March exams came and went and in an effort to drive forward we began discussing Task 2 even though Task 1 was yet to be completed. Due to a need for reassurance that we were on the right track we decided to speak to John Bothams about Task 1. Surprisingly he was not very complimentary about our efforts and even indicated that we had not appreciated what was required. We took these comments on board and modified assignment, (adding a few charts for good measure).

Suddenly GSM was upon us and we realised what a vast amount of work needs to be completed. We began to meet as a group on a weekly basis to study for GSM. At this point the pressure was to simply get task one in.

We each reviewed the re-draft of Task 1 prior to submission and felt sure that it was more than adequate - had we progressed to group think without even realising? We submitted the assignment to John Bothams and embarked upon GSM Analysis Case Study (something useful unlike IBE - who cares about Kwa Zulu Natal anyway?).

TASK 2 - A STORM BREWS

Before we received any feedback on Task 1 and prior to writing any reflections we had already begun to work on Task 2. This was due to a desire to simply get /BE out of the way, and the panic that set in when we discovered that some of our peer groups were almost finished 1BE was not pleasant.

As will be seen from the enclosed partially completed Task 2 report (Appendix I), some members of the group found this an interesting issue to look at and were keen to develop some original ways of considering and assessing the development status of countries. Others in the group were entertaining doubts. Why 'waste' time on this 'trivial' task? Surely it would be better to just 'give them what they want and move on to the next task. Why were some group members unable to appreciate the importance of specP

{And then it happened: we got our assignment mark back. 45% - wait a minute!! What was John Bothams playing at? OK our submission wasn't brilliant but we all knew the level of performance would usually have guaranteed a safe pass. The man must be mad, perverse or simply a bastard.' But maybe it wasn't all John's fault - maybe it was the others in the group who were dragging 'me' down with their idleness. We didn't understand what was going on but we knew that it was not our fault as individuals. Why, we all wondered separately, had we hitched our chances of success to these idiots. After all none of us had ever had problems passing exams on our own.'"

INTRODUCTION

Our study group consists of five people with various backgrounds and educational experiences but when we got together we thought we had at least one thing in common; we all knew how to pass exams. Over the years we have developed the skills that allowed us to absorb information to be regurgitated at a later date during an exam and ensure the successful acquisition of degrees, certificates and diplomas. We thought this must mean we were good at learning.

We assumed an MBA would be no different, we would attend classes, form working groups as and when required, submit assignments and pass the exams. Sure it might be hard work, but as long as we ticked all the boxes we would be able to add a Strathclyde degree to our collection. We gave little thought to how we would be learning, indeed we never even considered the processes required to learn - surely that was obvious. Then came IBE...

This interim report describes how a group of five students discovered they had set out on a journey to what they thought would be a familiar destination, but found instead they were on an intellectual mystery tour. It is a postcard from an interesting and exiting land we didn't know existed and which we are still exploring. We have already been altered by the experience and no longer see ourselves as academic tourists, but have become explorers in uncharted territories.

In due course we will submit a full account of our metaphorical journey, but wish to take this opportunity report on where we think we are at present and where we are going to those who 'sponsored our expedition'. We also seek their permission to continue the journey. The report draws on the diaries we have kept individually over the past year, conversations we have had and relates our experiences to the theory we have read.

TASK 1 -THE JOURNEY BEGINS

Our group came together on the 17th January 1999 to complete the required tasks for 1BE. We began enthusiastically and decided to complete Task 1 quickly before the March exams and pick up the rest afterwards.

We happily completed the environmental analysis of Kwa Zulu Natal - placed yellow 'Post-its' in clusters on the wall and discussed the merits or otherwise of investing in such a venture. We found we could discuss points for hours on end and frequently moved off on different tangents without reaching any conclusions. We liked the social aspect of the group and as none of the individuals within the group were characteristic comp/eter/finishers Task 1 dragged on.

John Bothams tried to reassure us that a lower mark at the beginning of IBE inevitably meant a greater mark at the end but this was of little comfort Suddenly this great group that had succeeded in working so well for GSM became a lead weight dragging us as individuals down. None of us could believe that had we been undertaking this task ourselves we could possibly have failed.

What were the options?

- Reject the criticism - john is mad / perverse / a bastard
- Find a scapegoat - John / one of the group / the task / the university
- Just pick ourselves up and try to do the next task 'better' - redesign it to fit what the tutor wants.
- Abandon the group - maybe I'd be better on my own
- Try doing the reflection any way - it was just another task that needed completed.

It had not yet occurred to any of us that there were other options. There followed a period of deceptive quiet when we all retired to think about what had gone 'wrong' and do some more exams. There was only one small task to tidy up - to write our reflections and so it was decided that we might as well do this... ..

REFLECTIONS

The act of sitting down and carrying out an intellectual post modern turned out to be more difficult than any of us had imagined. it had nothing to do with Kwa Zulu Natal. It was all to do with 'us' - the individual and the group. All of our individual reflections detailed the way we had developed in working together. While acknowledging the pleasure of fellowship, we all recognised that if the group was going to succeed we would need to become more efficient. The more we discussed the reasons for our failing the less acceptable the reasons seemed, we all agreed we had become distracted and had merely wanted to complete the tasks given but surely that was what it was all about.

Gradually we began to discuss more profound issues and ask more difficult questions....why had we chosen to do an MBA and what was the point of IBE? Was there any point in simply submitting tasks time after time to the same formula... .is that learning? Did John really want another glossy production about South America to add to the collection on his bookshelf?

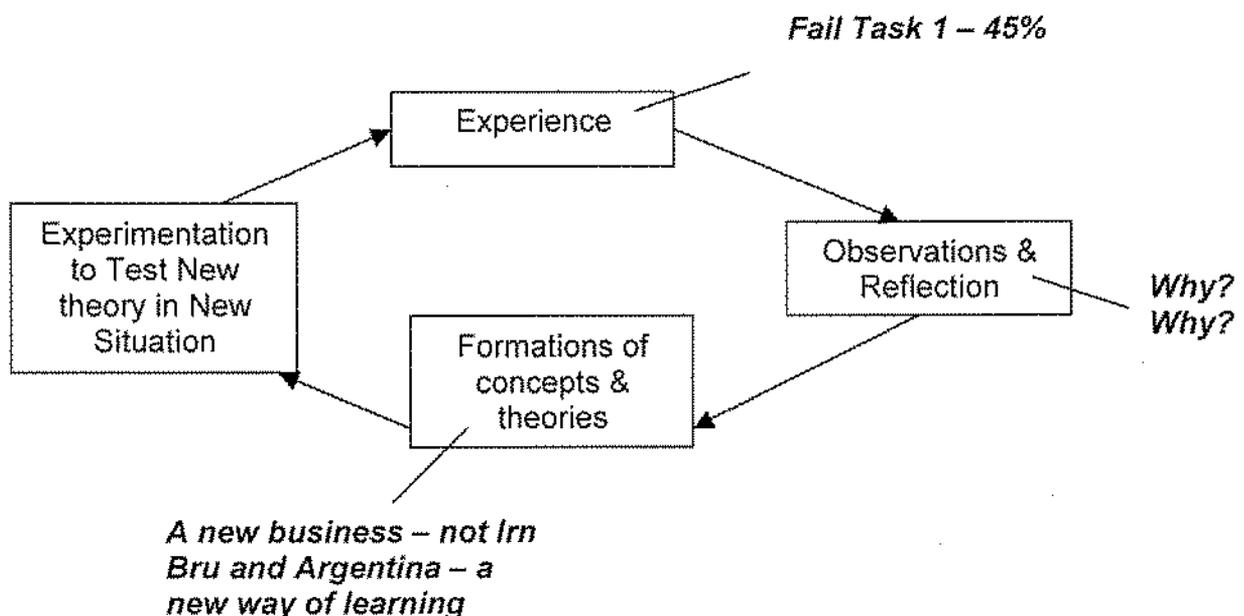
Without realising it we were becoming animated and enthused. Scepticism and dismissal were replaced by genuine curiosity, We found ourselves telling each other the sort of "what-if" stories Schwartz (1991) describes. The discussions between us fired our imaginations and allowed our faith in each other's abilities and commitment to be restored. The importance that Van Der Hiejden (1996) places on conversation became clear.

We had left the beaches where those on an academic package holiday sun themselves and had set off beyond the safe confines our known world to a new conceptual continent, just beyond our intellectual horizons. Before reporting on how we are getting on there, we will pause to consider the way we analysed what we now recognise as a learning experience. We chart a theoretical map of our journey.

LEARNING THEORY - A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING

At the start of the process we all thought of learning as primarily involving the acquisition of knowledge, in essence a state to be achieved. As we reflected on the events described above and had an opportunity to read the literature related to the subject of learning we came to appreciate the dynamic nature of learning as 'a relatively permanent change in behavior that occurs as a result of practice or experience' (Bass and Vaughan, 1967). There are many theories that describe ways of looking at the learning process. The fact that there are so many indicate none represent an absolute truth, but we were able to find some which gave us a framework to work with to gain a better understanding of the process we had gone through. The following notes outline some of the theories we discussed and used as foci for our conversations.

- The Experiential Cycle



From Kolb et al (1974)

· Stimulus - Response Theory.

Gagne (1975) describes a more linear process of learning with a chain of eight events that are said to occur;

¥ Motivation : We all wanted to learn and were prepared to give up time and emotional energy to undertake the journey even when it became clear we didn't know where we were going.

Perception : We had initial difficulties identifying clear objectives especially once we rejected the notion of simple task completion.

Acquisition : What is it that we actually wish to learn? The group moved away from the habit of trying to acquire facts and started to work on behavioral processes and attitudinal skills.

Retention : Having been overwhelmed by factual information we had to consider how and what we retained. We started to develop the ability to 'strip out' useful pieces of theory, information and models from background reading in order to decide what to retain for future use.

¥ Recall : By working as a 'learning group' we developed shared understanding and recognition of experiences the group was going through. By reanalysing the extremely difficult period of the group's life we were able to set the joint memories into new contexts.

Genera/isation : The learning experience we had allowed us to break out of the specific task we were focused on (Irn Bru in Argentina) and generalise our new found skills in other business areas both contemporaneous and projected.

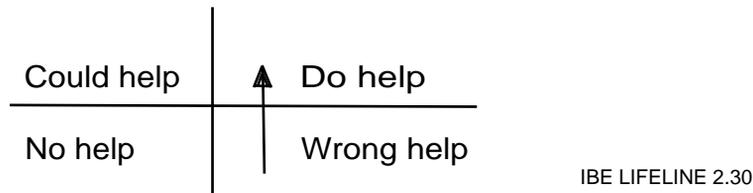
Performance : As we emerged from the phase of frustration we developed an overwhelming desire to put what we thought we had learnt into practice, This aspect of the learning process explains in part the course the group's activities have followed.

¥ Feedback on performance : The experiential aspect of the group's learning experience has focused on the importance of feedback in shifting the paradigm we were operating in. We have also learnt to seek out both internal and external feedback on our individual and group performance. The value of being in a University environment started to make sense.

· Right Help - Wrong Help.

We recognised that whilst undertaking task 1 a lot of the characteristics of "Wrong Help" were appropriate for the group. We had no overall perspective we were very much driven by individual tasks. In addition we had inappropriate learning goals we believed that our goal was to learn about Kwa Zulu Natal. We

also overloaded ourselves with data to the extent that we were unable to identify the most significant information.



Moving from the "Wrong Help" quadrant to the "Do Help" quadrant required a new definition of the problem. The goal was not to find out about Kwa Zulu Natal, the goal was to understand how we learn, how we would identify what we did not know and how we could effectively share learning as a group.

Did this not mean that the actual tasks undertaken were of secondary importance and that 1BE might in fact not be anything to do with Im Bru and Argentina?

° Single and double loop learning

Argyris (1977) describes a way of classifying approaches to learning we found illuminating at the risk of being overly simplistic. Initially we found that our approach of simply tackling the surface symptoms of a problem (single loop learning) was insufficient to move the group forward. Instead it became necessary to question why the problems had arisen in the first place in order to tackle their root causes. (Double loop learning)

Some authors (Pickard 1997) have criticized this approach since it takes no account of 'the sudden leaps in understanding that result in people breaking out of customary ways of thinking and perceiving'. However we found it a helpful way of explaining how the groups' approach to problem solving had evolved.

MAKING LEARNING HAPPEN - THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Having looked at the learning process we had lived through during IBE from different perspectives it became clear that we had stumbled into 'self reflective

learning' without fully realising what it was. As Mezirow (1985) states 'self reflective learning involves challenging and breaking out of old mindsets. It also requires unlearning as well as new learning'. But this was not entirely by accident. Such a transformation would have been very unlikely away from the situation we found ourselves in on the 1BE course. As Argyris (1982) points out, such learning is, 'only possible in an environment that enables and empowers individuals to be responsible, productive and creative and to see error as a positive learning vehicle. It also requires acknowledging uncertainty and spanning information boundaries'. This all now seems obvious but would have been meaningless jargoning before the experience.

We have therefore come full circle to see that John B. (thats was not in fact mad," trying to be perverse or of questionable parentage.) Instead he had set up an environment in which a true learning experience could take place. To overcome the latency in our cognitive processes and achieve a quantum leap in the way we looked at the world and ourselves required a large amount of energy which we needed to contained in a safe environment. We came to see 1BE as a sort of 'intellectual reactor'. At times we came close to melt down, but the resultant product could not have been forged in a 'cold reaction'. The paradigm shift which took place during 1BE is its own way the result of a sort of catalysed learning) reaction, if not quite intellectual alchemy.

GREETINGS FROM A DISTANT SHORE

So where are we now? Perhaps we are lucky to be making our journey of discovery at a time of unprecedented change. Every certainty in life seems to be being challenged and reassessed. What is business? What is information? What is society? What is a nation? Which laws do we obey? How does work fit into our lives? For many people such fundamental shifts are terrifying - how can a human brain make any sense of the complexity and uncertainty? How can we remain in control?

The imperatives set at the start of IBE to 'expand our imaginations', 'see business as part of the bigger picture' and 'to take responsibility for our own learning' meant little when we read them to begin with, but as we have made our journey through the course they have liberated the groups' minds and allowed us to revel in the maelstrom of change in our world. We have broken 'out of the box' and decided to set ourselves new tasks in order to maximize our learning.

As we reflected on tasks 1 and 2, the word we used more than any other was why? This small linguistic probe was one of the most useful tools we used to dissect our experiences and focus our thinking. As we have hinted at in this report, we came to question the basis for the tasks set in the rest of the [BE assignment. Tasks 3 & 4 require students to carry out a search of an unknown environment and present their vision and analysis to a real client organization.

Why Argentina? Why Barrs? We decided we would choose another unknown environment and another client. The environment we decided to explore was the world. The company we have chosen as a client is one we decided to set up and register ourselves. We learnt that both business and learning is about taking risks so we decided to up the stakes,

Our journey continues. Along the way we have met many interesting and 'remarkable people' who have helped us challenge our views of what being in business means and changed our perspectives of how we view and understand the environment. We like the new land we are in.

WISH YOU WERE HERE - CAN WE STILL PASS THE COURSE?

The purpose of this interim report is two fold. Firstly we felt we needed to record our thoughts on where we were and how we got here. This view will evolve as we move into the future, Secondly we are aware that we have strayed from the path set out by the assignment directions in a literal sense, although we consider that it is more important that we paid attention to clue at the start of the instructions that invited students to 'think outside the box'. We have set out how our group has gone about doing so and how it has metamorphosed along the way. We cannot 'unmake the journey', nor indeed would wish to do so, however, we considered it wise to seek license to continue our expedition of discovery and reassurance that what we are doing is compatible with University regulations. " We still would like that bit of paper as well!

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