

# CONNECTING THE DOTS: A REALITY-BASED LEARNING APPROACH IN A MASTER IN MANAGEMENT DEGREE

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## Abstract

Research carried out in recent years on the effectiveness of pedagogical methods has shown that active methods are more effective in learning and in developing skills relevant to the job market. Even so, active methods are often developed only in a confined environment, not including contact with organizational reality. If in some disciplines this absence of a real context may not have a major impact on training, management and business is an area where contact with reality can enhance the development of fundamental skills for future professionals.

Reality-based learning strategies are characterized from the outset by emphasizing the importance of including real situations, and the resulting circumstances, as a basis for the development of knowledge and skills. On the other hand, reality-based learning also allows for the mobilization and articulation of a series of innovative pedagogical strategies, such as active methods, problem-based learning, group- and collaborative-based learning. Finally, and since reality is most of the time complex and multidisciplinary, reality-based learning is characterized by a holistic approach, allowing the development of several different skills, based on the use of knowledge from different areas.

Based on this framework, the paper presented here describes the “On The Road” (OTR) program, a reality-based learning strategy developed in a master's in management degree at a Portuguese university.

The OTR initiative is a transversal practical program, involving several curricular units, and generates a triangular dynamic between students, professors, and companies. Students are challenged to develop possible solutions to real problems posed by the partner companies in the different areas of management. Throughout the year, several moments of different nature allow for breaking ground and promote the search for solutions, their critical analysis, group discussion with professors and business leaders, in a path rich in experiences.

Along this description the authors will point out the rationale behind the initiative, the main features of the program, the perceptions of the participants, and the difficulties found in the implementation, finishing with an assessment of the program.

Keywords: reality based-learning, experiential learning, active learning, problem-based learning.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Higher education learning experience aims to nurture and enable future leaders to be able to be critical thinkers, problem solvers, and active and responsible citizens of the world. Universities provide the opportunity for students to attain expertise and the necessary skills to be able to do just that.

Therefore, it is of key importance that students are exposed to challenges and problem-solving connected to the reality they will face. In this sense, reality-based learning can play a pivotal role in contributing to the accomplishment of that purpose.

Portucalense University introduced its Master in Management and Master in Marketing and Digital Business degrees, the OTR Program. This project is the first of its kind, at this level in Portuguese Universities. Partner companies are invited to pose a business challenge that they are facing so the students, with teachers' orientation, can propose some ideas/solutions. The OTR Program adopts an interdisciplinary approach, which allows understanding that challenges are transversal and therefore need to be addressed from various angles.

This project offers the students the possibility to visit, and understand the firm's reality and then encompasses various stages of interaction with the firms, the teachers, and amongst the students, and finalizes with the presentation of the students' proposals to the firms.

The feedback from all involved, students, faculty, and business, is very positive and highlights how this reality-based learning experience increases student engagement and interest, on the one hand, and supports partner firms, on the other.

The OTR Program allows extending the classroom to the business arena, promoting co-creation and collaboration thriving to make a positive contribution to the learning experience, and to society, as well.

The paper begins with a theoretical framework which is then followed by the presentation of the OTR Program. We finalize by reflecting on the outcomes and suggesting future avenues of research.

## 2 REALITY-BASED LEARNING

Business education is often seen to lack relevance and reality [1]. Students and employers from the “real world” often support this notion, arguing that business education focuses too much on theory and scholastic knowledge when it should focus more on know-how skills. Many educators have echoed this concern by introducing strategies like hands-on learning and live cases [2][3][4][5]. However, as much as these strategies are an important contribution to the learning process, they are characterized by being somewhat “artificial” in the way they present a so-called reality.

Experiential learning is understood as an approach that enables skill development by actively engaging students in the learning process [6]. In business education, experimental learning may be effective in increasing knowledge and skills transferability to the more realistic and complex situations faced by professional managers in the business environment. The experiential level of the learning experience can be lower or higher depending on the techniques used. As an example, Hamilton and Klebba [6] present a schematic organization of instructional techniques and their level of experiential level (Figure 1).

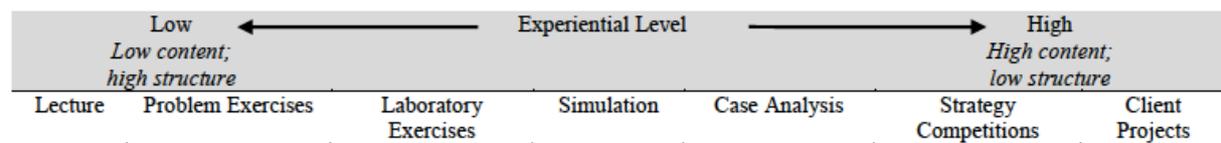


Figure 1. Experiential learning levels and the correspondent instructional techniques.

At the higher end of the continuum, one can find the instructional techniques with a higher experiential level, such as strategy competitions or client projects, involving higher levels of realism, ambiguity, and complexity, thus demanding a full range of cognitive skills such as application, evaluation, synthesis, and creative solution implementation.

Reality-based learning is an approach to experiential learning that can be matched to the high content/low structure experiential level [6]. Reality-based learning can be considered an active learning approach that combines principles of knowledge acquisition and learning by doing. But what distinguishes reality-based learning from other active learning approaches is the transferability of knowledge, skills, and abilities from the classroom to real-world settings [7].

Smith and van Doren [8] suggest that reality-based learning should follow four basic assertions: (1) to ensure that student learning is at the center of each activity; (2) students are responsible for learning; (3) the activities are drawn on knowledge and skills that go beyond the classroom and discipline; and (4) to ensure transferability of learning from the activity/classroom/discipline to the outside world.

While the first three assertions can be found in other active learning approaches such as experiential learning [9], the assurance of transferability of learning and skills from classrooms to the real world is a distinctive feature of reality-based learning [6][7].

The literature reports several advantages of reality-based learning, such as being based on real-world experience [10], being able to stimulate collaboration and collaborative leadership by reflecting on real-world experiences [11], and being able to develop teamwork and problem-solving skills as a result of solving unstructured real-world problems [12].

The reality-based learning approach is supported not only by its use in several different business education contexts, such as International Business ([9]Paul and Mukhopadhyay, 2005), Human Resource Management [7], Personal Selling [8], International Marketing [1], but there is also evidence suggesting that students prefer this kind of learning approach [13].

### **3 ON-THE-ROAD PROGRAM – AN OVERVIEW**

#### **3.1 Elements of the program – the puzzle pieces**

The main recipients of the Program, those for whom it was first developed, are the students. In the latest editions that were carried out, graduated students attending both Master in Management and Master in Marketing and Digital Business programs were appointed to fulfill the OTR Program. To develop the work that is proposed in this context, students are organized into groups of 3 or 4 elements.

The practical, “on-the-road”, nature of the OTR Program lies in the strong connection to the companies that are its attribute. Firms are selected based on the general business appeal and their interest and availability to engage in the planned activities. It has been a concern of the organization over the years to choose, in each edition, companies of different dimensions and sectors of activity that reflect the business landscape in Portugal. In each semester, two different enterprises step in which leads to a total of four firms studied throughout the implementation period of an OTR edition.

Real business issues are converted into work questions that students address and explore, seeking solutions, framed by the theoretical concepts and models learned in the courses. These questions are crucial, they’re the very heart of the Program and the pillar around which it unfolds.

Lecturers of the courses involved in the Program have a major role not only in the final set of the work questions but also monitoring and supporting students in the development of their research effort. The technical backing of OTR Programs relies on the expertise and experience of the faculty.

The operationalization of the Program and all the relevant bridges among its parts are ensured by a team of professionals from the private company WIND which owns and manages the ON-THE-ROAD brand. A coordinator is designated as a single point of contact for all aspects related to the underlying mechanics.

Therefore, the pieces of this puzzle are the students, the companies, the questions, the lecturers, and the support organization WIND. It is in a harmonious connection of these elements that the OTR Program comes to life and that each edition is built uniquely.

#### **3.2 Modus Operandi – the engine**

##### *3.2.1 Backstage*

The selection of the participant enterprises is a process comprising the presentation of the Program to a board member or an intermediate director and an interaction with him/her to understand the relevance, suitability, and opportunity of participating in OTR Program.

Once companies are selected, the construction of work questions begins. Work questions derive from real business problems faced. In the first semester, the two participant firms are called to ask questions within the scope of the courses involved in the first half of the year – Strategy, International Business, Marketing, and Consumer Trends. The first outlines are made available to the lecturers responsible for those courses who assess the fit to the contents to be delivered. If necessary, lecturers suggest adjustments to the initial outline making it relevant to be addressed in the context of the course.

In the second semester, two different companies are called to ask their questions now related to the courses involved in the second half of the year – Innovation, Brand Management, Human Resources Management, Operations and Value Chain Management, and Integrated Communication in Digital Media.

Initial contact between the coordinator in the support organization and the lecturers involved in the Program aims at clarifying the expected role of the latter and discuss the general goals. Subsequently, other interactions may occur throughout the year.

##### *3.2.2 Onstage*

At the beginning of the school year, the Program is presented to its public – in a session at Portucalense University, and students have their first contact with the whole structure, the operational plan, and the interaction among parties. They also get to know the first-semester target companies, the work questions they will be focusing on, the dates for the technical visits to the firms, and the presentation of the groups’ works.

Both firms develop at least one question related to each course involved in the semester. The groups have to choose the questions they will be focusing on, ensuring that they address one question per

course and that they have a mix of questions involving both companies. Also, to add maximum value for the participating firms, coordination makes sure that no question remains unselected.

Throughout the first semester, students collect, select and analyze publicly available data, news, and information about each company to have a deeper knowledge of the business. They also lean over the chosen work questions and start researching and structuring an answer. With technical visits in sight, students prepare a bunch of questions to ask the company representative. Technical support is provided by the lecturers whether within the regular weekly class period or in additional tutorial sessions claimed.

Technical visits are key moments that are much appreciated by students. In these events, besides having direct contact with operations and processes, students have the opportunity to talk to at least one representative of the host company and to ask questions that may help them in the development of the work in progress.

For adequate monitoring of activities and to establish relevant contacts for the smooth running of the Program, namely with lecturers and companies, biweekly online sessions are held between the coordinator and the students. Support documents and regular information are made available to OTR participants through the University online platform.

By the end of each of the two semesters of the Program, a formal session occurs where students present their final work to their peers, firms' representatives, and the faculty. Each group receives feedback from the companies' members in a highly enriching moment for the students. Although the work prepared by the students is considered for evaluation purposes by the lecturers, in this session priority is given to the comments of the firm's representatives.

In the second semester, the whole process is repeated but with two different companies, different courses, and different work questions. After the second-semester presentation session, a networking event takes place – here, students can socialize with the representatives of the four participant firms, the lecturers, and all the people involved in the OTR Program throughout the school year.

From what is exposed above, it turns out that by participating in the OTR Program students practically learn the academic issues, universities offer programs with reinforcement of the real-world component and greater connection to the field and companies benefit from the work carried out by students, which is systematic, structured, supervised by teachers and responds to real problems they face daily.

### **3.3 Deliverables**

As an output of the Program, each group of students prepares a report containing the suggested solutions for the questions they chose to address. This report is forwarded to firms' representatives and lecturers before the presentation session. Additionally, a presentation is prepared to support the delivery of the work developed.

The best moments of each edition of the OTR Program implemented at Portucalense University are recorded and assembled in a video, for future memory.

## **4 ASSESSMENT**

To assess the impact of the OTR Program on students, a questionnaire is applied after its ending.

When asked about the positive aspects, participants highlight the link established between the theory learned in the classroom and the companies' reality. Their answers include “the application of theoretical concepts to the context of real companies”, “the application of the knowledge of the classes in practical business cases”, “the application of theory in practice”, and “the importance of learning in the real context of management, in Portuguese companies”.

The collected answers also reveal students' interest in a practical component that allows them to dive into real firms, in their learning process. This feeling is perceived when they point out as positive aspects of the Program the “interaction with company representatives”, “contact with companies”, “the conversation and sharing of ideas we receive from company employees and directors”, and “interacting with companies, as it shows us a little of the reality of the labor market”, “meet the companies”, “direct contact with entrepreneurs”, “have close contact with companies”, “practical work”.

Other characteristics of OTR Program that are emphasized by students are the environment that promotes the development of creative ideas and the networking opportunity that is generated.

Firms' representatives have also been asked to assess their experience. Among the answers, we can find "we are privileged to have participated", "this exchange of experiences is very rich for companies, we learn a lot from students' inputs and we also try to contribute our inputs" and "We were honored by the invitation to participate in this program. For Vieira de Castro the perspectives presented by the students regarding the practical situations of our business challenges were relevant and with good input for us. (...). My congratulations and recognition to the ON-THE-ROAD Program and its entire faculty and students".

## 5 CONCLUSION

This article focuses on reality-based learning strategies through a deep analysis of the OTR Program developed at Portucalense University in Porto.

The OTR Program is a program integrated into the Master in Management and Master in Marketing and Digital Business of that Portuguese University. It is a Program that adopts reality-based learning strategies, bridging the classroom experience with the 'real world' emphasizing the multidisciplinary dimensions of the issues, promoting problem-based, group- and collaborative-based learning.

The experience of the participants of the OTR Program, faculty, students, and partner firms, has been incredibly positive. Integrating active learning and experiential 'hands-on' learning has enhanced the learning experience for the students and the solutions offered to the partner firms have provided valuable insight.

In a bid to better prepare students for the impending challenges in this rapidly changing business world, this type of approach enhances the development of key values, skills, attitudes, and know-how, essential for future business leaders. We do not doubt the value of approaches such as the OTR Program and hope to see more such initiatives in the higher education context.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the UIDB/05105/2020 Program Contract, funded by national funds through the FCT I.P.

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