Charity fundraising project: A team based project for developing problem structuring skills

Abstract

Increasingly, graduates of business schools will face business and organisational situations with a high degree of complexity and ambiguity. In this context, teaching and learning strategies need to develop students' abilities in problem structuring and complex problem solving. This article describes a team based project set to teams of four or five students, who are required to design and deliver a fundraising event for their chosen charity. The goal of the fundraising activity is to raise as much money as they can in a twenty-four hour period. Using ideas from Problem Based Learning (PBL), students learn frameworks and tools to increase their confidence in these situations. This article describes this activity and will be of interest to teachers of final year undergraduate and masters programmes looking for a fun and inspiring activity to do with students.

Keywords

charity fundraising, problem based learning, problem structuring, consulting skills, complexity, ambiguity, team-working

Graduates of business schools face increasing complexity and ambiguity in business and modern organisations. Management and business are practices, there is a limit to how much can be learned on a purely cognitive basis and students also engage effectively in learning by doing and interacting with others. In particular, students need to acquire the skill of problem solving in a real world situation. The purpose of this article is to present a team based exercise designed to address the pedagogical challenge of how to develop and assess the acquisition of such skills. The innovation in this activity is the use of problem based learning (PBL) (Savin-Boden & Major, 2004) to develop the students' competence and confidence in tackling complex and ambiguous problem situations, sometimes referred to as 'wicked problems' (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Students are organised into teams of four or five and challenged to raise as much money as they can for their chosen charity in a twenty-four hour window. There is a competitive aspect to the activity, particularly in relation to the amount raised. Students are informed about the amounts raised in previous years, as a result, they often want to surpass the achievements of these earlier groups. The team context of the activity is important since students learn about their own performance in problem solving, but also the interpersonal and group dynamics of team-working. Some examples of the kinds of events students have organised in the past are shown in Table 1, Appendix A.

This capstone exercise is used with final year undergraduate students in a UK business school. These students are on two undergraduate programmes; a general business and management degree, and a degree in business computing and information technology. The activity runs throughout one term which in the UK is ten weeks. Although used at undergraduate level, this activity would also be appropriate for masters level and MBA students. Whilst this

activity has been run with a cohort of approximately seventy students, it is scalable and thus could be run with larger (or smaller) groups.

Theoretical Foundation

Problem based learning (PBL) originated in the medical profession and has now spread to other domains. PBL is a deep learning strategy that recognises the need to prepare students for the complexity and ambiguity of many problem situations (Savin-Boden & Major, 2004). In medical education, there is a recognition that "the complex real world is made up of messy, fuzzy, unique, and context embedded problems" (Fraser & Greenhalgh, 2001). PBL is characterised by the need for students themselves to identify knowledge gaps and gather their own information and develop capabilities to tackle the problem situation. The instructors role is facilitative, it provide guidance, but not the solution.

Teaching of critical thinking can be based on problem solving and decision making (Smith, 2003). Developing students' tolerance for ambiguity (TFA) can be achieved in various ways, including through the use of case studies (Banning, 2003; Rippin, Booth, Bowie, & Jordan, 2002) and experiential learning (Hamer, 2000; Huber, 2003). Other innovative methods, for example using movies (Sprinkle & Urick, 2016), can help with the teaching of complex concepts. There is a strong and growing trend for using experiential learning across business and management education in general, for example, areas such as food, hotels, tourism and events management. In the context of the events industry, Robertson, Junek, and Lockstone-Binney (2012) suggest the need for a better alignment between the curriculum and the needs of industry and Moscardo and Norris (2004) suggest that experiential learning can mirror real life challenges and build relevant skills and competencies. In the field of food, hotels and tourism, Lategan and Williams (2019) suggest that students can learn management skills in this way and Kim, Lin,

and Qiu (2015) describe students organising a real life conference. Some authors (Lin, Kim, Qiu, & Ren, 2017; McDonald & McDonald, 2000) suggest that reflection is a key part of the experiential learning process in the tourism industry. In the design of this exercise, reflection plays a central role in the student learning experience.

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives for the project are as follows:

- Students have increased confidence and resilience in dealing with complex and ambiguous problem situations.

- Students have increased ability to apply problem structuring methods in problem situations.

- Students have increased self-awareness and understand their strengths and development needs.

Instructions on running the exercise - The Charity Fundraising Project

A detailed description of the Charity Fundraising Project, including how it is assessed is contained in Appendix B, with some additional instructions for tutors in Appendix C. In this section, the main steps of the activity will be highlighted to give an overview of the project and how it works in practice. In this activity, the students are randomly assigned into groups of four or five to achieve a good mix of gender and ethnicity and are given the challenge of raising as much money as they can for a charity of their choice in a twenty-four hour period. This random method of team selection is recommended since it reflects the reality of business life, that students will be working with others from a variety of cultures and backgrounds (O'Mahoney, 2013). The students are given an event-window of two weeks within which to run the event and are given £50 seed funding by the business school which must be returned by the teams after the

event. There are deliberately no constraints placed on the students in terms of where the event takes place, the nature of the event or their chosen charity. Prior to running the event, students must obtain approval from the module team to go ahead, at which point they will be given their £50 seed money. The module team supporting this activity consists of the module leader, two additional module tutors and a member of the administrative team. The approval of the event requires the following: a chosen charity; a viable event idea (in the judgement of the module staff); a high level risk assessment and an identified venue. There are a series of rules that the students must comply with in order to ensure a level playing field (Appendix D). Some team formation and team building activities are recommended in the early part of the project to help students to understand how to work effectively together. These should be adapted to the maturity and experience of the cohort.

The activity is run over ten weeks during which various topics are covered. The proposed timings of these activities are shown in Appendix E. There is some flexibility on the seminar topics and the emphasis can be varied depending on the group and/or the instructor. The activity as presented here uses problem structuring tools from Soft System Methodology see Checkland (1999) and Checkland and Poulter (2006) for more details, but there is flexibility as to the tools and approaches taught to the students to help them shape their event ideas. Having run this exercise over seven years with approximately seventy students per annum, problems have of course occurred and these can be a rich sources of learning for the students. Some examples of problems which have occurred in the past, with the responses to them are contained in Appendix F.

Debriefing the Exercise

Following the exercise, to facilitate deeper learning, students are encouraged to reflect on the event and how it has gone; this process should take place both as a group and individually.

Reflection is a key feature of competency development (Illeris, 2014). Students are given guidance on the reflective process. Several models of reflection are shared with students and explained, for example approaches by Driscoll (2007), Gibbs (1998), Moon (2004), Schön (1983) and students are encouraged to select a model that they find they can relate to. The aim of the post-event reflection is for students to select a few (guidance is three) 'critical incidents' on which to reflect. Critical incidents can be things that have gone particularly well, things that have gone badly or events that have surprised the individual.

When reflecting, students can consider the two phases of the exercise i.e. the planning period leading up to the event and then the event itself. The teacher's role is to challenge and facilitate this process and also to point out what has gone well, since students can tend to be overly self-critical.

Some examples of questions that tutors can use to debrief the event are as follows:

- How creative were you as a team in coming up with ideas for your event?

- What were the key challenges and obstacles you came up against and how did you overcome them?

- How did you perform individually?

- What did you find out about yourself through the activity?

- What surprised you during the project?

- Did you have a leader? If so, how effective were they?

- How well did you work as a team?

- How well did you manage your stakeholders?

Part of this review process is a team working peer review. Each student is invited to rate and provide feedback on the performance of their peers in relation to three criteria; participation,

quality of work and citizenship. This peer assessment provides 5% of the group assessment ranking (as described in Appendix B).

The success of the events will of course vary and it is emphasised to the students is that the amount of money raised is only one measure of success (example amounts raised are given in Table 2, Appendix A). In addition to this, success might mean raising awareness of a cause, doing something innovative and life enhancing or engaging with a group of stakeholders.

Some examples of issues that students have encountered before and during the event are contained in Appendix G. Students will often reflect on the leadership of the team, in particular problems that occur if a leader is not appointed. Sometimes students will write about team conflict or problems that occur if the leader is ineffective or there are team dynamics issues. Students often comment on the resilience of the team and its ability to bounce back from disappointments or setbacks since this is often a characteristic of real world problem solving. In Appendix H are some short sample quotes from student reflections.

Conclusion

In this activity, students test out theoretical approaches in a practical, real-world context. From a content perspective, students learn about problem structuring methods. Equally important is learning about themselves in the context of a team project. This engagement with the real world provides students with experiences and critical incidents where things go particularly well or badly or they are surprised by what happens. The embedding of learning can occur when students conclude this as a planned change in their own behaviour and/or mental models going forward.

Over the years of running this activity, there has been some evidence of this deep learning taking place. In reflections, students will often report increased confidence and finding

that they have strengths and competencies that they were not aware of, but which have come to light as a result of participating in this activity. Overall student satisfaction has been consistently high for example, for the comment 'Overall, I am satisfied with this module', scores have been 4.7, 4.8 and 4.6 (out of 5) for 2015/6, 2016/7 and 2017/8 respectively.

In addition, students who have been in touch after graduation have reported that this activity was one of the most memorable of their time at University, as the quote below illustrates.

"The charity fundraising project provided real life experience of dealing with various stakeholders in numerous different settings. I found the whole experience to be very rewarding as the donations raised made a big difference to the community. As team leader, the project taught me to face difficulties head on and step up to the responsibility to act as an exemplary role model. Not only did I develop my networking and communication skills but I left this project with four new friends."(student from 2017-18 cohort).

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Appendix A

This Appendix contains two tables. Table 1 gives a number of examples of events that have been run by student teams in the past. Table 2 gives an indication of the range of amounts raised in the past two years.

Table 1: Examples of student events

Event Concept	Details of event	Indicative amount raised
Young leaders networking day	A networking event was organised where inspirational young leaders and entrepreneurs with a national reputation were invited to speak. The event was advertised and promoted amongst the University, the wider alumni network and the local business community. Attendees were requested to register to attend the event, although the event was free. At the event itself, people were invited to make donations to the chosen charity. The event was very well attended and a significant amount was raised for the Princes Trust, a charity which supports young people.	£2,000
Charity abseil (note: abseiling means to descend a near-	A team organised a charity abseil down the side of the tallest building in the University. Fifty people paid for the opportunity to have this experience after which they received a photograph and a signed certificate. The key challenges of this event were the health and safety challenges and obtaining	£5,000

vertical surface using ropes)	the necessary permissions from the building owner and the University for the event. The event went off smoothly and was enjoyed by everyone who participated. The charity supported by this event was Save the Children.	
Wine tasting evening	This team approached a wine supplier and invited them to run a wine tasting evening. The evening was hosted by a wine expert from the company who was able to explain the details of the wine and its provenance and vintage. The evening also involved some light food and snacks. Attendees were charged a nominal fee for the evening. As part of the evening, boxes of wine were for sale. The wine supplier donated a percentage of their takings from the evening to the local children's hospital.	£250
Street food festival	Students organised a street food festival in the University grounds. Local vendors were invited onto the premises and were asked to donate a percentage of their takings from the day to the chosen charity. The main challenge of the day was to organise the logistics of getting the vans on site and complying with the relevant health and safety requirements. Marketing via social media along with locating the event in a strategically favourable location in terms of footfall led to a successful event with a large amount raised for the Downs Syndrome Association.	£631

Paint Festival	Students organised an outdoor festival based on the Hindu Holi Festival which is celebrated around spring time each year. The event was a celebration and sharing of Hindu culture and raised money for the local children's hospital.	£1,656
Mindfulness and Wellbeing Event	This event was organised with the help and assistance of a local mental health charity. Students organised activities such as mindfulness workshops and training sessions, head massages, relaxation techniques for staff and students to understand techniques they can use to manage their own mental health wellbeing. Money was raised for the local mental health charity.	£658
Salsa Night	Working with a local salsa club, students organised an evening where attendees could take part in some beginner classes and have an enjoyable evening whilst raising funds for a children's hospice in the city.	£816

Table 2: Range of amounts raised

Academic Year	Minimum	Maximum	Average
2017/18	£143	£865	£443
2016/17	£124	£5342	£750

Appendix B

Charity fundraising project assignment description

In this project, students will work in Groups of four or five on a consulting project. The nature of the project is to take £50 of "stake money" from the University and to raise as much money as possible for a charity that students as a group have nominated in a continuous 24 hour period. The date window for the project will be communicated by the module tutors. The £50 is returnable and not counted in the earnings. The assignment, which will have some specific conditions and restrictions, will involve using the methods, tools and ideas of the course to plan and execute this project. Students will be supported in developing their ideas and their plan for their 24 hour event during tutorials that are run in teaching period 2.

Overall Structure of the Assessment

The assignment is worth 50% of the overall module mark, with the January exam being worth 50%. The charity fundraising project will be assessed in two parts i.e.

Element	Description	Individual or Group	Weighting
Overall performance of the Group	Amount raised and overall performance as a group.	Group	15%
Individual reflection paper	Individual reflection on how the overall task has gone and the individual's contribution.	Individual	35%

	Evidence of critical ability and self-reflection.		

Description of the individual assessment elements

Group Plan and Risk Assessment (not assessed but required to progress)

The purpose of the Group Plan and Risk Assessment is to ensure that the team has a realistic and viable approach for the project. This item provides the opportunity for formative feedback during the task to ensure the team is on track. The item will contain the following:

- A high level description of the proposed target group for the event

- A rich picture describing the overall context and scenario

- A stakeholder map showing the key stakeholders and a plan to manage them

- A high level plan describing the key activities, the timeline and the owners of the activities

- Contingency planning to identify potential alternatives in case of problems or issues

- A risk assessment which demonstrates that the key risks of the event have been identified and appropriate mitigation actions have been put in place.

The group's £50 stake will only be issued on submission and approval of the Group Plan and Risk Assessment

Overall Performance of the Group

As a team based assignment, the performance of the team is an important aspect of the overall assessment. Team working principles and concepts will be communicated during the weekly seminars. The overall performance of the group will be assessed in the following ways:

1. Overall amount raised by the team

2. Attendance at and performance in the seminars. The module tutors are experienced at assessing the performance of teams in terms of; the level of engagement with the task, the use of relevant concepts and tools in the task, the way that the team responds to challenges and difficulties along the way.

The amount raised is only one indicator of performance. A team may raise a large amount of money, but not work well as a team. Equally, a team may not raise a lot of money, but may work well to overcome issues and challenges along the way. The overall performance of the team will be assessed using a combination of these factors. Feedback will be given to teams as the project progresses.

Individual Reflective Portfolio

Purpose and Description

The individual portfolio is the main assessment tool for the charity fundraising project and will account for 35% of the overall grade. The portfolio should be a reflective account of the overall experience of the project, from the initial launch of the activity to the post activity reflection and analysis. The purpose of the portfolio is for the student to demonstrate an understanding of the application of the ideas and concepts of the module in the delivery of a real world consulting assignment. The reflective nature of the account gives the student the opportunity to critically analyse their experience, both as individuals and as team members. The

critical aspect of the reflection is important since it involves assessing the strengths and limitations of the various concepts and theories when applied in the real world. The reflection should address at least four of the key relevant themes identified below.

Form of the portfolio

The student can choose from two types of portfolio, a more text based approach, or a more multi-media approach. The assessment rubric for these two types of portfolio are available as supplemental materials.

Length of the portfolio

For the text-based approach, the length of the portfolio should be a maximum of 3,000 words including references. For the multi-media approach, students should aim for a presentation of approximately 10-15 minutes in duration.

Reflective Portfolio – checklist of relevant themes.

The following is the checklist of themes to be used in the individual portfolio. A theme is a subject area of relevance to the successful design, planning and execution of the charity fundraising project. A theme may consist of a number of concepts including (but not limited to) theories, models and frameworks. Students should aim to include at least four of these themes in their reflective portfolio. Students can use concepts taught in the course, or introduce others from their own research. If students choose to introduce their own theories, they should briefly explain the theory and its relevance to the project.

1. Theories of team working (team formation, team development, individual roles within teams, leadership theories)

    a. Examples include Belbin and Tuckman

    b. Ideas from the philosophy lecture

2. Problem structuring

    a. Examples include Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), Situation Complication Question Answer (SCQA) and hard systems approaches

3. Creativity

    a. Ideas from creativity sessions

    b. Analysis and synthesis

    c. SSM (rich pictures, root definitions and conceptual models)

4. Planning

    a. Examples include priorities grid and milestone plan

    b. Roles and responsibilities

5. Interpersonal skills

    a. Examples include different styles of influencing and persuading

    b. Models of negotiation

    c. Importance of soft skills

6. Execution

    a. Event delivery on the day

    b. Unexpected events

7. Stakeholder management

    a. Stakeholder mapping

    b. Stakeholder management

Appendix C

Guidance on preparing for a student event

  Any event organised by a group of students must first of all be safe and comply with all local policies, procedures and regulations. Teams carrying out events should therefore be advised of the local arrangements in this regard including those relating to obtaining the necessary permissions. It is advisable for each team to produce a risk assessment of their event. Risk assessments are a very useful way of planning activities, and in some circumstances they are a legal requirement as well as ensuring that teams are covered by the necessary insurance. .

Risk assessments don't need to be complicated, just follow the simple steps below:

Before the Event:

- Think of the risks

- Think of prevention/control measures

- Complete a risk assessment and submit to the tutor

During the Event

- Ensure all team members have read and understood the risk assessment

- Ensure all prevention/control methods are acted upon

  By simply completing the above steps, teams show you that they have done their absolute best to recognise what could go wrong, the damage or danger this could cause and what they have done to prevent it from happening.

Appendix D

The rules of the charity project

Rule 1: students choose their own 24 hour window which is must be continuous for example, from 9am on Monday 1st March to 9am Tuesday 2nd March.

Rule 2: all monies must be collected inside the 24 hour window (with the exception of Rule 5). If a social media or internet page is used to collect donations then these pages can remain open for a maximum of seven days after the event but must not be opened before the event day

Rule 3: students may market/advertise the event for up to 7 days beforehand

Rule 4: The £50 must only be spent on the day of the event itself

Rule 5: For an attendance based event, deposits/tickets can be sold in the seven days leading up to the event.

Rules can of course be modified to suit the local circumstances or cultural setting. What is important is that the rules are clear and unambiguously stated. Our experience has been that students will follow the rules once they understand them and policing of the rules has not been necessary.

Appendix E

Proposed timing of activities

Week Number	Proposed Seminar Activity	Time allocated
Week 1	Activity – understand the project and what it entails. Explaining the rules and logistics.	One hour seminar (face to face).
Week 2	Seminar theme – Team-working Principles of team-working, finding out about the strengths and resources in the team. Appointing a leader.	One hour seminar (face to face).
Week 3	Seminar theme – Planning your event Goal directed planning. Start with the end in mind. Problem structuring tools: Rich Picture, Stakeholder mapping (see Checkland (1999) and Checkland and Poulter (2006)).	One hour seminar (face to face). Teams also work together in their own time (one hour).
Week 4	Seminar theme – Pitching your event How to understand your stakeholders and potential audience. Problem structuring tools: root definitions (see Checkland (1999) and Checkland and Poulter (2006)).	One hour seminar (face to face). Teams also work together in their own time (one hour).

Week 5	Seminar theme – Submit Group Plan and Risk Assessment Students submit a summary of their idea, chosen charity, location, fundraising target and risk assessment where appropriate.	One hour seminar (face to face). Teams also work together in their own time (one hour).
Week 6	Seminar theme – Further planning activity Students receive £50 seed funding and approval for their event idea.	One hour seminar (face to face). Teams also work together in their own time (one hour).
Week 7	Event window.	Teams carry out the event (24 hours).
Week 8	Event window.	Teams carry out the event (24 hours).
Week 9	Students receive support on writing their individual reflections.	Support provided by tutors as required by the students.
Week 10	Students receive support on writing their individual reflections.	Support provided by tutors as required by the students.

Appendix F

Examples of student events with problems and how they were dealt with

Event Concept	Event Description and what went wrong	Response of the instructor(s)	What did the student's learn from this
Football tournament	The event was cancelled on the day due to severe weather disruption (snow).	Students were encouraged to reschedule the event by two weeks.	Students learned the importance of having a contingency plan and the resilience to continue.
Film night	Very low attendance led to poor revenue.	Encouraged the students to carry out additional side fund raising activities on the day to raise additional funds.	The importance of effective marketing of the event and the use of social media to build interest and attendance at the event.
Bake sale	Students arrived on the day to discover that the venue was not booked.	Helped the students to quickly locate and obtain permission for an alternative venue on the same day.	The student who had booked the venue had not spoken to the decision maker. Students learned the importance of correct

			stakeholder management.
Mechanical bull event	Due to a poor location, participation was low.	Helped students by encouraging colleagues to take part in the event.	The importance of location and footfall in a successful event.

Appendix G

Example issues met by students

Example issues met prior to the event	
Issue	**Potential mitigation**
Not appointing a leader	Early in the exercise explain to the groups that it is a good idea to have a leader (or coordinating role) to ensure success.
Initial enthusiasm leads to overambitious ideas, followed by disillusionment	Explain to the team that this is normal, there is a cycle to team development.
Dominant individuals stifle creativity	Teach the students methods to drive creativity. Surface that quieter individuals will need support in expressing their ideas.
Failure to move from ideas to execution	Encourage students to test their ideas out in practice early on by engaging with key stakeholders. For example, talk to potential attendees, see if the venue is available and contact the charity.
Example issues met during the event itself	
Issue	**Potential mitigation**
Major disruptive problems such as venue is not available, key suppliers do not turn up, bad weather etc	Module facilitators should try to be available for each planned event. Facilitators can then advise on what to do, without necessarily solving the problems for the group.

Small number of team members take on the majority of the responsibilities and tasks	During the planning phase, check that each team member has a clear role and responsibility assigned.

Appendix H

Some sample quotes from student reflections

Students are required to submit an individual reflection wherein they explore their overall experience and consider their own individual performance, what went well and what could have gone better; they also identify their own development opportunities.

The following samples show how individual students make sense of their own experience. In the first example, the student reflects on the problem of identifying a leader within the team. This team suffered from lack of leadership during the early part of the project and the student felt compelled to take on that role:

"Upon being informed that appointing a team leader was our own choice, I hoped that someone would come forward for the role. In previous group-work, I have always taken on the leadership role as I feel confident and enjoy the role. But, this time round, I wanted to give the opportunity to someone else as this will also allow me to see how I participate in a team with a different role. However, the idea of appointing a leader was very quickly dismissed in the group. Having received no interest for the leader role, I stepped forward as I felt it was vital that a leader was present to provide a sense of direction and in turn positively impact group performance." *(Student 1)*

Later in the experience, the student found other team members' unreliability frustrating:

"Thus, I have learnt that whilst it is important to have a trustworthy leader, it is also very important for the leader to trust team members. This is something I lacked as a result of being let down a few times, for example, I was faced with a situation where none of my team members turned up at an agreed meeting." (Student 1)

On the day itself, the student observed the team performance improve:

"Additionally, on the event day I could see my team's enthusiasm to succeed had increased, as they tried hard to reach out to various family members and friends for donations. I believe this motivation came from pressure and competition as my team witnessed various other groups executing wonderful events." (Student 1)

In this second example, the student is reflecting on the shock of finding out that the event had been cancelled by the head of security at the University:

"In the midst of rectifying this situation, the head of security relayed to us that the first he had heard about our event was that morning, and in order for it to get the 'green light' we needed to fill out more forms and obtain more health and safety information from the vendors. I was incredulous upon hearing that he had only just heard about our event, however we later discovered he had been away on personal leave. A situation that we were not aware of and was out of our control." (Student 2).

…"This was the first time that I've felt completely out of control in a group. It also taught me how attitudes can make or break a situation. Saleh (2016) says the 'golden rule' is to always remain positive in negative situations and notes that negative reactions often worsen the situation, creating even more disappointment and anger." (Student 2)

In the end the event went ahead and was very successful:

"All in all, despite these obstacles and incidents, our event did go ahead and I am proud to say that it was a success. We surpassed our £500 target for the charity and we had an incredible response from customers on the day. I feel incredibly lucky with the team I had, I thoroughly enjoyed working with them and in all honestly, I do not think that the process would have been as plain sailing with another team. The charity fundraising project, on a whole, has vividly demonstrated to me that despite our best efforts and carefully laid out plans things can

unexpectedly take a turn due to factors outside of your control, and it's your reaction and attitude to them that will make or break the situation. I'm grateful that I had a likeminded, motivated team who were determined to pursue all avenues rather than throwing the towel in at the first hurdle."

(Student 2).