

Playful teaching or “learning by doing“

An example of two practical university projects at Fontys University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands

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Key words:

Entrepreneurship, Fontys International Business School, Fontys University of Applied Sciences, interactive learning, international business, playful teaching, project-based learning, the Netherlands, Venlo

Summary

This paper aims to share two best practice learning arrangements currently taught at International Business and Management Studies at Fontys Venlo, the Netherlands. These courses exemplify the best practices in the domains of interactive learning and playful teaching, elements which are at the heart of Dutch higher professional education. The two learning arrangements are called Project Business Plan and Project Mini Company. They are interrelated, being stepping stones along the same learning line. Learning outcomes are achieved by interactive learning and playful teaching. Concerning Project Business Plan, you will read in this paper about how students form their project groups, develop their product ideas using interactive brainstorming techniques, and pitch their products so as to convince other project groups of the value and feasibility of their product ideas. Concerning Project Mini Company, you will read about how students actually design, develop, produce, market, and sell their own products almost completely on their own. Extensive teaching experience has shown that students adore highly interactive, high stimulation, business simulations in which they are allowed free reign to do their own thing within a semi-secured “play” environment. In this paper, we hope to inspire and encourage you to take the highly rewarding leap towards incorporating similar project-based, student-centered simulation activities within your own teaching environments.

Part 1 Introduction

This paper aims to share two best practice learning arrangements currently taught at International Business and Management Studies (IBMS) at Fontys Venlo, the Netherlands. They can be seen as *best practice examples for interactive learning and playful teaching*, elements which are at the core of Dutch higher professional education.

The education system in the Netherlands

The Dutch education system consists of eight years of primary education, four to six years of secondary education and two to six years of higher education. Higher education in the Netherlands is split into two branches. Students either follow a research oriented education at a research university, or a higher professional education at a university of applied sciences (cf. Nuffic, 2015: <https://www.epnuffic.nl/en/publications/find-a-publication/education-system-the-netherlands.pdf>). Both types of education have their own admission requirements, duration and titles (Nuffic 2015). Table 1 illustrates the differences between the two.

Table 1 Research universities & universities of applied sciences contrasted

Research University	University of Applied Sciences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Theory driven ▪ Scientifically oriented ▪ Research assignments ▪ Learning occurs individually ▪ Higher study pace ▪ Fewer contact hours ▪ High degree of self study ▪ Less personal. Big classes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Practice driven ▪ Work field oriented ▪ Practical assignments ▪ Learning is individual and project based ▪ Slower study pace ▪ More contact hours. More coaching ▪ High degree of collegial study ▪ More personal. Small classes.

Source: Keuzesprong 2016

Fontys University of Applied Sciences

Fontys is one of the largest universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands, with study programmes in almost all educational sectors. Fontys University of Applied Sciences consists of 29 different institutes with 85 different bachelor programmes and 22 different master programmes. Fontys offers educational programmes in economics & marketing, communication & media, health care, teacher training, science, arts, law, sports, languages, technology and IT. Fontys currently has more than 4500 employees and 44.000 students. The largest campuses are located in Eindhoven, Tilburg and Venlo. Furthermore, Fontys has 41 research centres which conduct practice-oriented research. Classes at Fontys are held in small scale teaching environments which ensure that sufficient attention is paid to each individual

student. Thanks to their experience acquired here at Fontys, students are well equipped to authentically contribute to any businesses or institutions immediately upon graduation.

Fontys International Business School

Fontys International Business School (FIBS) is one out of 29 institutes of Fontys University of Applied Sciences. FIBS is located in Venlo and offers 4 different fulltime bachelor study programmes to students: International Business and Management Studies, International Marketing, International Business Economics and International Fresh Business Management. The two learning arrangements (LAs) referred to in this paper are part of the study programme “International Business and Management Studies” in Venlo. With over 40 nationalities on campus, Fontys International Business School is a true gateway to the world of International Business and Management Studies.

International Business and Management Studies at Fontys Venlo

The study programme International Business and Management Studies (IBMS) is a four year study programme (240 ECTS) which awards students with the degree “Bachelor of Business Administration”. IBMS combines all elements of international business from marketing and sales, finance and accounting to general management, HRM, operations and business research. Typical for an applied university programme, IBMS in Venlo focuses on the development of important skills relevant for professional practice. Examples of such skills are in leading, presenting, holding meetings, negotiating, and report writing. Compulsory parts of the study programme are two internships of four to six months respectively in study years three and four. These internships are conducted in two different countries. In year three, students have the possibility to spend a semester abroad at a partner university. With the above serving as an introduction, this paper now turns to our two best practice learning arrangements here at Fontys.

Part 2 Two best practice examples for playful teaching from the Netherlands

This paper aims to share two best practice learning arrangements currently taught at International Business and Management Studies (IBMS) at Fontys Venlo, the Netherlands. The two learning arrangements in question are called “Project Business Plan” and “Project Mini Company”.

In the first year, students do Project Business Plan. Here, they work in a team to design and

execute a feasible business plan. The project stops with the fully developed idea which is described in a business plan which students have to produce and then pitch to an investor. In the second year, students proceed to set up their very own student company. Here, they take on the various roles as in a normal enterprise – general manager, production manager, HR manager, marketing manager and so forth. Unlike Project Business Plan, this arrangement does not stop with idea development. It is full simulation, with all pitfalls and rewards of student-centred education. In this environment, students go through the process of designing, producing and actually selling their own products. In fact, the teacher simply fulfils the function of a coach, posing questions rather than actually giving the answers.

Extended teaching experience has shown to us that students adore highly interactive, high stimulation, business simulations. In the following, we hope to inspire and encourage you to try similar activities in your teaching environments.

Project Business Plan

At IBMS here at Fontys International Business School, students participate in a project each and every semester. Project Business Plan is their second semester project. In the following, we would like to share some more details of the contents of this learning arrangement.

Project Business Plan can be seen as a good example of playful teaching or learning by doing. In week one, students are asked to form groups of six. Throughout the semester, each group is then asked to develop an innovative product idea, capture it in a canvas, formulate their idea in a business plan, and pitch-present their idea in front of an investor and lectures. This all happens within 14 educational weeks. Each week, the course consists of two kinds of classes. There is a 45 minute input session which provides students with theory, and one consultation session, during which the lecturer gives students feedback on their innovative product ideas. Grading of the course is based on the business plan report (50%, group grade), and the final presentation in front of the investor and the lecturing team (50%, individual grade). Using this diptych assessment structure ensures that students cannot pass the course with free-riding. At the same time, it enables the measurement of different skills.

Week 1/2: Lecture topics are *product idea and teams*. Based on real life student examples from previous years, students start planning their own innovative products for their project team's business plan. Project teams are introduced to the concept of Belbin team roles. With the help of Belbin's team role inventory, students find out each other's natural roles within a

team and then allocate roles to all team members accordingly. Planning is student-centred. In our experience, such self-led discussions consistently prove a highly creative process that takes students out of their comfort zone.

Week 3: Lecture topic is *Canvas business model*. Students are introduced to an external consultant (Mr. Wilders) who fulfils the role of potential investor throughout the project. In the lecture, Mr. Wilders gives an overview on the business model canvas (cf. Osterwalder & Pigneur) and provides relevant business examples. In the same week, students participate in a full day workshop, where they start building their own canvas business model. During this workshop, students are encouraged to “play” with their ideas. Using post-its, project teams are tasked with posting their ideas on each other's canvases so as to comment on each other's product ideas. In this way, students not only get feedback from lecturers and an industry expert, but also from their peers.

Week 4: The topic is *Pitch product ideas*. Each project team pitches their business model in front of their audience, consisting of the other project teams, the lecturer, and Mr. Wilders. It has to be convincing. If it is not, the team fails. In response, the entire audience once again gives feedback. This is our students trial by fire. Pitches can be really boring or they can be inspiring. Depending on their ability to convince their audience, project teams receive a Go / No Go on their idea. As teachers, we like this. Students know exactly where they are at.

Week 5 / 6 / 7: The topic is *marketing*. This is broken down into the following themes: analysing the environment, researching the market, investigating sales potential, segmenting the market and defining the marketing mix. The forthcoming input is used by students to set up their own marketing plan. During this process, students incorporate knowledge acquired from prior learning arrangements. In the business plan learning arrangement, the focus lies on using environmental analysis and market research for determining market and sales potential and setting up a marketing plan for their product idea. After lecture input, students start conducting market analysis themselves. Students are deliberately left on their own during this phase. Teams lead themselves. If students are doing well, the teacher just monitors. If groups are sinking, the teacher jumps in. Students need to work hard in this setting, but the possible learning curve is maximized.

Week 8 / 9: The topic is *surveying and setting up sales, production and purchase plans*.

Student groups work on their project. The lecturer provides input on surveying where after students have to collect their own data. Students start researching potential suppliers for production and determine distribution channels for their sales. Students practice setting up sales, production and purchase plans. Also here, we ask students to present and discuss their results in class. They then apply this practical experience to their own project.

Week 10: Lecture is turned into *consultation time*. Every student group gets the chance to receive feedback on their work by lecturer and industry expert. The more input they bring and the more complete their elaborations, the more feedback and advice they can receive.

Week 11 / 12 / 13: Lecture topic is the *financial plan*. Lecture weeks 11 to 13 are reserved for completing the report. In addition, an interconnection of the course with another learning arrangement in the area of finance is made. By this, the students gain input for setting up their financial plans for the project.

Week 14: Lecture is turned into *presentation rehearsal*. In week 14, the final lesson week of the semester, students hand in their report and rehearse their presentation. They have the possibility to receive feedback on their presentation rehearsal which they can do in person or via submitting a video. The real presentations in front of the potential investor take place afterwards. In order to motivate students, the best 3-4 groups enter a contest in front of an external jury. Upon winning project teams are rewarded with 500 Euros.

Altogether, project business plan provides students with a unique learning experience, in which entrepreneurial skills can be exercised within a safe environment. It does so by building upon prior learning arrangements and by granting project teams the entrepreneurial freedom to generate great ideas.

Project Mini Company

This is one of the courses which students value most at our business school. Many students come to the Netherlands to Fontys, because they have heard about the mini company experience here in Venlo. Project Mini Company has a very similar setup as Project Business Plan. Only this time, the company is not fictional, but operates as a real company with real money and real shareholders. Mini companies are formed consisting of eight to 10 students. Students come from three different study programmes here at Fontys International Business School. Each Mini company is assigned a lecturer who coaches students throughout the

project if needed. In an ideal case, a Mini company is also guided by an industry expert (a Mini mentor).

In the first few weeks of the project, students have to make two very important decisions. Firstly, they need to decide who does what. It is their choice, based largely on their study specialization. They also decide which roles the company needs. A nice example of this is given in the video clip, which the Mini Company has produced themselves:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFAJKpF6iQs&feature=youtu.be>

Secondly, students have to think of a product idea for their real company. They then set up their company and define the company's mission, vision and values. Students apply the knowledge gained during the Project Business Plan to map out their business idea in a business plan. IBMS students often do so with the help of a canvas model, as learned in Project Business Plan. Starting capital for the company is raised by selling company shares. After profound market research, students then develop the product. Suppliers need to be found, raw materials are purchased and finally products are produced. While some Mini Companies outsource their production, others produce all products by themselves. Products are then marketed. Nowadays, Facebook pages are created, promotion videos produced, press releases for newspaper articles prepared etc. Also sales are organized by the students themselves. They determine the sales channels they want to use and organize sales themselves. At the end of the academic year, the company is liquidated.

During Project Mini Company, students apply knowledge gathered in previous semesters. They use their knowledge to develop a product idea, make a business plan, conduct market research, set up a marketing plan, and draw up a financial plan. Goal is to generate profit up to at least the break-even point. Many Mini's are really successful, making considerable profit, which is then returned to the shareholders at the end of the academic year. A lot of Mini companies decide to donate their profits to aid organisations or others in need.

The product ideas that students come up with are really diverse and include product likes self-made wine shelves, candles, plant pots, kitchen cutting boards, bracelets, natural body lotion, wallets, key hooks and many many more. The appendix includes examples of Mini company product ideas and their promotion material.

To help assure the success of this process, the company is prescreened and validated. Otherwise real problems can occur. For example, we don't want our students being sued by

other companies for infringement of patent. Validation thus gives students a zone in which to be responsible for their product. Clearly, the university will only interfere if there is a problem that students cannot resolve themselves.

Mini has a clear framework to keep a good thing from going wrong. Practice simulations are only feasible within a secure environment. To create this environment, Fontys collaborates with Jong Ondernemen, a national foundation which supports universities and schools with setting up practical entrepreneurship programmes. Student companies also compete with each other nationally. They strive to achieve “the Best Mini Company of the Netherlands” award.

Our experience with these projects is that students appreciate them. Especially the Mini company project, where students are responsible for their own company and its result, provides great learning opportunities. When asked about the most valuable parts of their study, students often refer to the Mini company. It is a great chance to show entrepreneurial spirit and to try things out in a safe environment. Please feel free to contact us to learn more about these and other example projects for interactive learning and playful teaching.

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Video Canvas:

Business Model Canvas Explained;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QoAOzMTLP5s>

Appendix Example promotion material Mini companies

Shelfmade: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9zq0S_gqlhs

Smell Bee: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCBIjtCTUWg>

Walley: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wS6wJIW4unY&feature=youtu.be>

ReBottle: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0oK2SBefMbU>