Thought leadership as an innovative way of teaching

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Abstract

Thought leadership is a relatively new method of teaching, which is closely linked with the critical and synthetic thinking, which is required for the creation of expert strategies and visions of thought leadership in the given area. It is considered to be a pedagogical approach oriented on the student, including learning, solving of problems and making of decisions based on questioning, investigating, exploring, searching, discovering and with that related abilities. Students have the task to synthesize the data and information from various sources (primary or secondary research) with the aim to develop a strategic view of the solved problem. The teacher determines that range of topics that the student could demonstrate his critical thinking and ability to assess and evaluate the information.

The main aim of the present paper is to highlight the importance of the method of Thought leadership and synthesis of information in the teaching process of subjects in the study program of Business Entrepreneurship, its practical application in the solution of specific tasks given by the teacher, to assess the survey conducted by students, to handle the strengths and weaknesses of innovative teaching methods based on the opinions of students and teachers and to recommend proposals for its efficient use.

Keywords: Thought Leadership, synthesis of information, innovative teaching method, critical and synthetic thinking

JEL Classification: I20 I29

1. Introduction

The main task of university education is to train highly skilled specialists, who will be able to assess market situations correctly and make independent decisions, particularly under complicated and uncertain economic conditions. In this context, an important issue is the development of leadership skills of future managers, marketers, etc. To have positive results in this respect, a special training and a quite long period of time are required. Students should have a certain "base", which could help them to advance these special skills and the ability to make their own decisions and to become real professionals in their fields.

Thus, higher education is an important cornerstone, which can provide good opportunities for students to develop problem-solving and independent thinking skills. Giving the importance of this issue, the Faculty of Economics and Management of Slovak University of Agriculture launched a pilot project for the introduction of innovative teaching methods in the framework of the study program of Business Entrepreneurship in the exercises of two selected objects. Particular attention is paid to issues of adaptation of students to such methods, first of all, to the so-called Thought leadership approach. Its various aspects are investigated in order to better understand possibilities for students to improve their leadership abilities and creative thinking, based on this method.

The role of leadership in education and special approaches and methods are discussed in a number of publications. For instance, Burkhardt (2002) argues that the adaptive capacity of higher education is not only rooted in the ability for institutions to change one by one, but in a
systems level capability which depends upon a specific form of leadership. He has the point of view that this leadership process is constructed at the boundary between higher education at large and its interface with society.

Briggs and Raine (2013) state that leadership is best learned not by being “taught” in a traditional classroom context, but by exploration of and reflection on practical experiences and through developing the ability to “internalize” the behavioral processes involved, both positive and negative. They also argue that an approach is needed which offers students opportunities to learn not only through the imparting of theoretical perspectives on the subject but also by impacting upon their self-awareness as a result of a focus on experience of leadership in practice (e.g. the action learning approach).

According to Male and Palaiologou (2015), it is necessary to shift from using models of leadership and instead to view leadership as a praxis that is not merely concerned with the dichotomy of teaching, learning and outcomes, but is also concerned with an integrated conceptualization of the relations between teaching, the learning ecology of the community and the social set of axes in which the educational organization is set. This understanding of pedagogical leadership is thus concerned with the links between desired educational outcomes and the set of social realities that surround the educational setting.

Haber-Curran and Tillapaugh (2015) emphasize the use of student-centered transformative learning which is based on the five-stage model: (1) challenging mental models of learning, (2) building trust, (3) finding freedom and empowerment, (4) deepening commitment to learning and (5) reframing learning and self. Students participating in this experience demonstrated significant development in their relationship to learning. Additionally, the students’ approach to learning changed throughout the course, shifting from dependence/independence toward interdependence.

Eich (2008) proposes the theory of high-quality leadership programs, which is grounded in programmatic attributes that, when enacted, contribute significantly to enhancing student learning and leadership development. 16 attributes of high-quality leadership programs should be organized into three clusters: (a) participants engaged in building and sustaining a learning community; (b) student-centered experiential learning experiences; and (c) research-grounded continuous program development. This model can guide the design of programs and participants’ learning by helping participants grow through self-discovery, personal development, and collaborative leadership with others.

Regarding teaching leadership practice, Yip and Raelin (2011) identified two threshold concepts that had a transformational impact on students: (1) situational leadership and (2) shared leadership. In addition, they found three modalities that supported the learning of threshold concepts: (1) variation, (2) enactment, and (3) reflection.

Another interesting pedagogical technique is the live in-class CEO intervention method. According to Rashford and de Figueiredo (2011), this method consists of a CEO bringing to the classroom a strategic issue that she or he is currently struggling with and addressing it real time with a team of students. In their opinion, this method is helpful in the development of a leadership skill-set. They argue that a by-product of participation in several of these interventions is an expanded ability to engage in systemic thinking and bridge theory and application in an open way.

Powley and Taylor (2014) consider development of critical thinking and crisis leadership based on specific pedagogical methods. They concentrate on two approaches, each designed for critical thinking skill development, to teach graduate management students about leading in and through potential disruption to organizational life:
• a personalized case method that relies on a critical incident approach to examine crises students personally experienced at work;
• a group project involving a poster session in which students collaboratively work on complex crisis leadership challenges and present their analysis to their peers.

Houghton et al. (2012) developed a model of the relationships among emotional intelligence, self-leadership, and stress coping among management students. The model suggests that effective emotion regulation and self-leadership, as mediated through positive affect and self-efficacy, has the potential to facilitate stress coping among students. It has the potential to generalize to the workplace, management students exposed to emotion regulation and self-leadership strategies may be better equipped to effectively manage stress in their future careers.

Rost and Barker (2000) pay attention to the social aspect of leadership education. From their point of view, this education is aimed at producing citizens for a democratic society. They claim that its content in the future will cover three broad categories – the evolution of social change and development, the processes that influence social development, and the dynamics of human nature in change processes.

By that, that Brosseau (2014) characterizes the thought leader as someone who has the ability to inspire others for a new idea, to change the way how the things were done in the past and to establish a new approach or behaviour, he has set the bar a little higher than it was in the case of the normal concept of expert leader, just because he has a higher education and he is more frequently quoted in newspapers as his colleagues. However, the real thought leadership is that the leader has original ideas and he leads people anywhere and not only that, he is better known than the others. Anyone can become a thought leader, although only few people are able to come up with breakthrough ideas. Almost everyone can bring forward his ideas to the world, affect it in matters in which he cares, and leave a meaningful legacy, on which he can be proud. Brosseau (2014), in relation to the mentioned, provides a 7-step model:

1. Find out what is your driving force, which thing interests you more than anything else. Define, which area it is, where is your floor, what will your benefit and in what you want to be known as an "authority".
2. Create your "circles of influence"; talk with those people who have to say something to your thoughts. These interviews will help you to refined over the time your message and to tell a broader story which will appeal to your first followers.
3. Create a group of people who will spread your thoughts below. You need also the people from the outside of your immediate territory, who are confident about your thoughts and are willing to speak about them with others, or they have some experiences with them. You need to find out, what you can offer them, to spread your thoughts, and how to sidestep your potential opponents.
4. Cancel you own limitations. If you want to promote your idea, find out what limits you in the maximum efficiency, and then removed it. In many cases it means to deal with the fear of failure or of public embarrassment.
5. Codificate that, what others have to know. The main difference between the leader and the thought leader lays in the ability to move from his know-how to a mental model, which can be passed on to others so that it will inspire them and build in them the taste to follow.
6. Start your tom-toms. You need it to do some promotion about your idea, so that other will know about you and your idea. You need to be known. Leader, who is not known, is not a leader. You need to be discovered, still discoverable and again discovered by people to whom is your idea close and are following.

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7. Start the (r)evolution. When your thoughts are accepted, you need to learn how to monitor their success and to build for them new and new opportunities for exposition. Young (2013) has conducted a survey in the area of thought leadership – she has followed its roots until the Industrial Revolution, investigated the sources (including “recycled” ideas) and the essential components (e.g. that it is freely shared), as well as analyzed, how the ideas are spread and what mechanisms are used to transform it into a process within the organization.

2. Data and Methods

The main aim of the present paper is to highlight the importance of the method of Thought leadership and synthesis of information in the teaching process of subjects in the study program of Business Entrepreneurship, its practical application in the solution of specific tasks given by the teacher, to assess the survey conducted by students, to handle the strengths and weaknesses of innovative teaching methods based on the opinions of students and teachers and to recommend proposals for its efficient use.

The secondary data, for the processing of the present paper, were drawn from the available literature sources of domestic and foreign authors dealing with the issues of thought leadership, as well as from the materials developed under the National project of the Universities as the Engines of Knowledge Society. To the questionnaire survey aimed at testing of the method of Thought leadership realized in the segment of students of the study program Business Entrepreneurship at the first level of study at the Faculty of Economics and Management, Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra, were involved 28 respondents, who were actively involved the testing of mentioned method in the winter semester of the academic year 2015-2016.

The primary data obtained through the questionnaire survey were processed out in absolute and relative terms.

3. Results and Discussion

Through non-material means, such as the course content, methods and forms, and material means, in the teaching there comes to the process of self-creation and development of student's personality, which consists of the following processes:

- acquisition of knowledge leading to the acquisition of knowledge,
- acquirement of experience from realization of activities, which also lead to the knowledge, but mainly to the acquisition and development of skills and habits,
- acquirement of experience from creative activities leading to the acquisition and development of abilities and interests,
- shaping of attitudes, beliefs and values.

The process of creation of the student's personality starts with the received external quality, which is reflected in the knowledge, skills and habits, continues with the internally transformed quality, inherent in the abilities and interests, to internally shaped quality, which results into the character, volitional, emotional value and personality traits. The learning rescue is the experiencing of the relationship between the people, in which the teacher allows the students to find out in them an inner disposition to self-creation and development of their personality and self-education.

Educators from the Department of Marketing and Trade use those kinds of education, which activate the personal growth of students. They lead them to self-regulation, allow them the self-realization in order to learn them to manage themselves and their own lives. One way
how to help the students in the development of their personality is to create that kind of relationship, in which they will appreciate themselves. A relationship, in which the teacher on the basis of empathy understands and judges the students experiential experience, and in which he gives them a freedom in experiencing their own emotions and the emotions of others without endangering them.

In the study programs Business Entrepreneurship (the 1. stage of study) and Agrarian trade and marketing (the 2. level of study) taught at the Faculty of Economics and Management, Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra, are in teaching of accredited subjects currently used different methods (Table 1).

Table 1: Methods used in the education of accredited subjects in the study programs of Business Entrepreneurship and Agrarian trade and marketing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Description of the method</th>
<th>Application in the practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Collaboration of businesses in supervising</td>
<td>Company employees act as the principals of themes of work, they have an interest</td>
<td>The method is carried out in cooperation with the wholesale Metro Nitra, hypermarket Tesco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>student’s seminary, bachelor and engineer</td>
<td>on their leadership, review or assessment.</td>
<td>Nitra, shopping − entertainment centre Galéria Mlyny Nitra, Agrokomplex − Exhibitions Nitra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>theses.</td>
<td></td>
<td>and others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Excursions in enterprises.</td>
<td>Visits to companies associated with professional lectures of TOP managers.</td>
<td>The method is applied in conjunction with the wholesale Metro Nitra, hypermarket Tesco Nitra,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>shopping − entertainment centre Galéria Mlyny Nitra, companies of food industry − Vino</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Matyšák, Hubert J. E., Ltd. Sereď, Bryndziareň a syráreň, s.r.o., Zvolenská Slatina, Agrokomplex −</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Exhibitions Nitra and others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Teaching by professionals from the practice.</td>
<td>Prominent experts from the cooperating businesses are providing the lectures and seminars.</td>
<td>The method is applied in cooperation with the wholesale Metro Nitra, hypermarket Tesco Nitra,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>shopping − entertainment centre Galéria Mlyny Nitra, leading specialist working in ministries,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>research institutes, the Slovak Agricultural and Food Chamber, farmers, directors of enterprises and others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Individual assignment for students in the</td>
<td>Solving the problems in the form of projects, where the students are forced to seek</td>
<td>The method is applied in conjunction with the shopping − entertainment centre Galéria Mlyny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>form of projects.</td>
<td>for the information independently and consequently to offer custom solutions, to comply</td>
<td>Nitra, Agrokomplex − Exhibitions Nitra, Ing. A. Belaj, PhD., who presents the themes of projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>with the deadline for the project preparation, to present the project in front of the</td>
<td>entered by Czech and Slovak companies, while the sponsors of the projects are participating on the evaluation and selection of the best works.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>teacher and the sponsor of the project.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Team student projects.</td>
<td>Teams are working together on the projects, schedules of</td>
<td>The method is applied in conjunction with the shopping −</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the teamwork are flexible; teamwork can be short-term, but also throughout the whole semester.

6. Working with model assignments (Case studies).

Depending on the aims, the objective may be the analysis of knowledge or skills, or even knowledge and skills.

7. Real projects with businesses (Live Projects).

Live Projects are extensive and demanding. Companies are focusing on a variety of issues – from the design of new products, through new domestic and foreign markets, adapting of products to overseas markets, packaging design, and so on. They may be time limited, or they are missing expertise. Students, either as individuals or as members of teams, in the development of the project in the short term use their knowledge, consultation with teachers and practitioners.

8. Functional role play or simulation.

Role plays and simulations are created and managed by teachers so that they meet specific learning objectives, they approach facts, while the student remains in the educational environment. Students took on the task and play their roles under certain scenarios. Role playing allows students to experience real skills, so that they will take a special role in cooperation with other students. The simulation of actual work situation allows students to experiment and improve their understanding of theories of negotiation and entertainment centre Galéria Mlyny Nitra, Agrokompex – Exhibitions Nitra, in cooperation with Ing. A. Belaj, PhD., who presents the themes of projects for Czech and Slovak companies and others. The method is applied in the teaching of several subjects. Case studies are prepared by teams of teachers in printed form in Slovak and English language (since almost all subjects taught at the department are taught in English) on the basis of real patterns of practice – e.g. Austrian company Zotter, producing handmade chocolates, farms producing organic pork, Fair Trade – coffee and many more.

The method is applied in the teaching of the subject International Marketing.

The method is used in the teaching of the subject Managerial Communication.
9. **Strengthening of foreign language skills.**

   Ability to master at least one foreign language is for almost all employers a clear condition.

   Students during the 3-year bachelor study (Business Entrepreneurship) undergo the compulsory teaching of two foreign languages at the Department of Languages by state examination UNICERT. Their language skills are developed by writing their final works, seminar works and projects. Students can develop their language training throughout their whole study through courses organized by teachers from the Department of Languages. To enhance the knowledge of the language is also possible by teaching vocational subjects in a foreign language, but also through projects realized by foreign colleges and universities, or practice in selected foreign companies, since the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra has official contacts with more than 100 colleges, universities, research institutions and foreign enterprises.

Source: Material for the Etape no.1.1.6: *Metodika pre inováciu: Myšlienkové vodcovstvo a syntéza informácií.* 2015. 18 s.; Material for the Etape no.1.1.6: *Štruktúra popisu implementácie inovatívnej metódy vzdelávania.* 2015. 5 s.; own processing of.

### 3.1 Method of Thought leadership and synthesis of information

This method was for the first time used in the exercises of the subjects of Global Marketing and Retailing and Merchandising. The main objective of its application was to maximize the student’s involvement in solving tasks during exercise, to develop their independence, creative thinking and the ability to bring the given tasks to the end.

In applying the method, there was ensured not just the participation of the teachers of both subjects, but also of an external foreign teacher, as relevant subject expert. The expected benefit of such alternative is that the experts can guide the students after their presentations, clarify or supplement the information necessary to submit a detailed analysis of trends or situations in terms of professional knowledge of solved issues. By making students aware of the participation of experts in the exercises, it is expected that they will be more responsible and better prepared to handle the assignment, but also to prepare their presentation. Such access, as well as the participation of local and foreign experts in teaching is expected not only the quality preparation and presentation of the students, but also the high quality of provided supplement information on the solved problems after the presentation and rich discussion with students. The success of this method is associated with such competence, such as expertise, intellect, information management, problem solving, adaptability, creation of new, organization, communication and master stroke – the ability to make the right choice. The potential of the method is a broad spectrum, that means that it can be used also for the development of other responsibilities in consideration of the variety of options which it offers. When applying this method it is necessary to provide a work in small teams, or assign tasks to individuals.
Because, the method of Thought leadership and synthesis of information was for the first time applied in the teaching of subjects taught by teachers of the Department of Marketing and Trade in the winter semester of the academic year 2015-2016 their effort was to obtain the opinions of students actively involved in the project through a questionnaire survey. Answers to the questions were recorded by the respondents into previously prepared questionnaires. The obtained data were processed into graphic form.

As it can be seen from the figure 1, most of our respondents think that the most important advantages of the method of Thought leadership are exactly the improvement of team skills, the development of leadership skills and the increase of the quality of upcoming projects and presentations.

**Figure 1: Advantages of the method of Thought leadership**

Source: Own research and processing of

To obtain the opinions of the respondents on the problems which were encountered in connection with the application of the method of Thought leadership was important exactly because of the need of improvement of the use of this method and its extension to the exercise of other objects.

**Figure 2: Problems encountered in connection with the method of Thought leadership**

Source: Own research and processing of

As it can be seen from the figure 2, the biggest problem which was encountered in connection with the application of the method of Thought leadership by our respondents was the fact, that
The students have needed more time for the preparation of their presentations, what is understandable because as it was mentioned before, the tasks given to students during their exercises simulate real problems of existing businesses and that is why, they need also more time for their solving and preparation as simple seminar works which are oriented only on the theory.

Very interesting were the answers of the respondents aimed at the evaluation of implementation of the method of Thought leadership, which can be seen from the figure 3 and which shows that most of our respondents think that the implementation of the method of Thought leadership was average (46% of respondents), respectively above average (36% of respondents).

**Figure 3: Evaluation of implementation of the method of Thought leadership**

![Figure 3: Evaluation of implementation of the method of Thought leadership](source: Own research and processing of)

Up to the question of that, even if the exercises connected with the implementation of the method of Thought leadership have met their expectation, most of our respondents, exactly 61% of them have said that rather absolutely (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Fulfilment of expectations connected with the implementation of the method Thought leadership**

![Figure 4: Fulfilment of expectations connected with the implementation of the method Thought leadership](source: Own research and processing of)
What is also a very positive result of our research is the fact that exactly 18 respondents, from the total number of 28 respondents suggests this method also in the future (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Preferred approach to teaching

![Preferred approach to teaching](image)

Source: Own research and processing of

Up to the evaluation of the last formulated question in our questionnaire, the question aimed at proposed changes concerning the use of method of Thought leadership in exercises, it can be said that the most important tasks for teachers are the following one:

- to choose interesting and current topics oriented to practice,
- to specify the task at the beginning of the semester, so that there will be a sufficient time for the development of the project and PPT presentation,
- to reserve more time for presentations of students to make exercise more interesting,
- to spend more time with discussion.

4. Conclusion

The sustainability of the project will be provided at the Faculty of Economics and Management, Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra also by that, that the method of Thought leadership and synthesis of information verified on the subject of Global Marketing and Retailing and Merchandising will be gradually implemented into other subjects taught at the Department of Marketing and Trade. In connection with the creation of the project teams, we expect the generation of smaller, 2-3 member teams, or their handling by individuals. The success of the used method will be determined by the incorporation of the comments of our students.

Among the recommendations for teachers, related to the implementation and improvement of the method of Thought leadership for the future, we can include:

- to prepare a syllabus,
- to plan the exercises, where the method of Thought leadership and synthesis of information will be applied,
- to develop a structure of student presentation and determine its duration,
- to select the recommended literature, which will help the students in preparation of their presentations,
• to choose the domestic and foreign experts, who will participate in the successful process of the course and in mastering of the solved problems, as well as in the development of competencies,
• to develop an incentive mechanism that will encourage students to actively participate in managing selected problem areas through the application of this method.

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References

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