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Bringing Experiential Learning into the Classroom: “Fireside Talks”

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1. Introduction

Background

Several years ago, on a one-year MSc International Business programme at Leeds University Business School, we trialled interactions with guest presenters from industry on an elective module called “The Economy of China”. The module leader Hinrich Voss, with the help of Giles Blackburne (at the time working at China-Britain Business Council), invited several company executives with international business experience to sit on a panel, share their views on China and engage in a discussion with students. We found, however, that this format, along with similar kinds of guest lectures, suffers from three problems. Firstly, students tend to attend such interactions with little to no preparation. Secondly, it is usually not possible to inform students about detailed content before the session or to make any presentation slides available in advance. Thirdly, the relevance of the talk to the students’ assessment is not clear. As a result, students tend to economise their time and focus on other assessment related tasks. The interaction between the students and visitor ends up being ad-hoc and unstructured. As a consequence, whilst the students enjoy the change of pace and perspective offered by an external speaker, they are not able to take full advantage of the opportunity. And for the company executives, the visit bears little value because of the limited and low-level interactions with the students. These challenges are symptoms of the tensions Clinebell & Clinebell (2008) identified business schools as having to address in order to provide meaningful and relevant education. In response to these shortcomings, Hinrich Voss developed “Fireside Talks” with the main objective of creating a rich, interactive learning environment, in which students could not only learn and practice their subject, but also fully capitalise on the opportunity to engage with a business leader (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, 2009).

Fireside Talks

This chapter presents a highly resource-effective experiential learning activity called 'Fireside Talks'. As a student-business co-curriculum interaction, Fireside Talks can expose students to real-life business challenges and also allow them to experience face to face meetings with senior managers.

Businesses are first identified by the module leader and invited to share a current challenge they are facing in doing business with one or more overseas markets. Such challenges have included, for example, 'given the rising labour costs, how long can I still manufacture in China? The challenge along with a brief about the business and its industry are posted in the course's virtual learning environment. Working in groups, business school students are given up to two weeks to conduct research into the company, its industry and the matter at hand, in order to find a solution to the challenge. They must also prepare and host a 90 minute meeting with a senior manager from the company, the Fireside Talk, to take place either at the Business School or at the premises of the business. One preparation and one practice session are scheduled into the students' timetable for these purposes. During the preparation sessions, the challenge is discussed and evaluated together with the students, along with access to data and the scope to apply theories and concepts from the module. Students are then given tasks that address particular aspects of the challenge. One group of students, for example, may collect statistics on labour costs while another is becoming familiar with the industry. The students are given two weeks to collect material and present it internally for feedback. The formative feedback from the lecturer focuses on the materials collected, its reliability and relevance; on how well the material is related to and supported by theories; and on how the material presented can make a difference to the business. In terms of theory, the students are free to use the theories taught on the programme and are not restricted to theories from this module.

The Fireside Talk is then delivered in the form of a student hosted roundtable at which the students present their research and possible solutions and discuss these with the senior manager in attendance (the module leader observes from the side and takes a passive role). The senior manager is briefed to engage with the students as if they were consultants and to ask follow-up questions and give feedback after the presentation. This format allows all participants to critically reflect on the challenge set by the business, and on the material the students have collected, interpreted, and applied to the business case (Gray, 2007). At the same time, the usage of the term 'Fireside Talk' is intentional, to induce an atmosphere of easy flowing conversation around a topic of mutual interest. Indeed, a digital image of a fire in a hearth, as a backdrop for the Talk, reinforces the general idea. In line with such an environment, students are instructed not to present with the support of visuals, e.g. PowerPoint, but rather communicate their arguments and recommendations verbally. They are, however, permitted to share limited and relevant hard copy hand-outs.

The Fireside Talks take place in addition to the lecture plus seminar structure of typical modules at Leeds University Business School. Designated on the timetable as ‘Practicals’, the Talks are scheduled to take place at an unusual timeslot for students, from 18:00-20:00, in order to accommodate the availability of the business community. Presently, the Talks are integrated into an optional MSc International Business module that covers developments in the Chinese and Indian economies.

11-week module: China and India in the Global Context				
Pre-sessional	Recruitment of businesses for the Fireside Talks and agreement on the particular challenge to be discussed.			
Week 1	Lecture			
Week 2	Lecture	Seminar		
Week 3	Lecture	Seminar		
Week 4	Lecture	Seminar	Practical: Fireside Talk Briefing	
Week 5	Lecture	Seminar		
Week 6	Lecture	Fireside Talk Practice Session	Practical: Fireside Talk Delivery	
Week 7	Lecture	Seminar		
Week 8	Lecture	Seminar		
Week 9	Lecture	Seminar		
Week 10	Lecture	Seminar		
Week 11	Lecture	Seminar		

Box 1: Indicative timeline for Fireside Talks

Outside the formal briefing and practice sessions, student groups are encouraged to meet informally, in their own time, in order to appoint presenters and prepare their contributions. The seminar slot before the delivery doubles as a practice session to ensure coherency and avoid overlap between groups.

Motivation

As mentioned above, the main motivation for introducing this innovation is that the outcomes of other commonly used forms of student-business interaction, such as business panels and guest lectures, have not been found to be very satisfactory for students or businesses. When relying on such methods, the actual engagement between the student and business is often somewhat one-way and superficial. Furthermore, the businesses themselves do not gain any practical benefit from their interaction in terms of, for example, student insight and knowledge exchange. As a result, businesses can feel reluctant to support the module on an on-going basis and to return the following year. This risks threatening those links to industry that study programmes must demonstrate in order to increase the employability of their graduates and to fulfil accreditation requirements.

With Fireside Talks, a business can benefit from firm-, industry- or country-focused research that is directly related to its own circumstances and information requirements. The student cohort on this module typically has a good representation of Chinese and Indian students who have access to resources in their native language that are inaccessible to most local businesses. They can therefore interpret political and business developments from an emic perspective (Buckley & Chapman, 1997). During the session, the business can also challenge the students' recommendations, provide constructive feedback and request clarifications. Indeed, the business can request that further research be conducted and for findings and final recommendations to be shared at a later date. This kind of 'win-win' format has so far been highly appreciated by both students and businesses.

As students become ever more concerned with employability prospects within an increasingly competitive job market, employers also regard evidence of real world experience and problem solving skills as being amongst the key criteria for selection. Teaching methods that are able to imbue students with practical insights and develop their ability to understand the challenges faced by businesses are therefore seen as valuable by both students and employers.

2. Learning objectives

Viewed through the lens of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives (1979), by participating in the Fireside Talks students will be able to recall contextual data and theoretical knowledge gained from classroom lectures and recognise their relevance for understanding the reality faced by a firm engaged in international business. They will then be able to apply this knowledge to a problem or challenge faced by the firm, and in doing so, determine which elements of classroom knowledge are most useful and relevant, supplementing, where required, with research of their own. Finally, they will prepare their 'findings' and use their judgement to make recommendations to the company.

Overall, the Fireside Talk exercise strengthens the students' understanding of and ability to apply theory. This is reinforced by an opportunity to interact directly with business leaders (often for the very first time for the students). Such an experience raises the commercial awareness and confidence of students, and tests their ability to engage in critical thinking.

3. Experiential learning cycle

The engagement offered in the Fireside Talks covers the breadth of the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984; Cassidy, 2004). It does so first by facilitating an opportunity for students to test out what they have learned in the classroom ('active experimentation'); and then, by experiencing a real-life interaction with a company in which they can be an active participant ('concrete experience'). Students can enjoy the benefit of constructive feedback and discussion with a company executive ('reflective observation'); and finally they can learn from an overall interaction which is likely to influence their future behaviour and perspectives ('abstract conceptualization'). In this sense, Fireside Talks can be regarded as an effective teaching tool for the purpose of 'learning by doing'. The experience is capped, in the current iteration of how the Fireside Talks are run at Leeds, by the students having to write a reflective essay about the Fireside Talk as part of an assessed coursework essay (See Box 1). This ties the students' engagement with the Talks directly to their performance on the module.

Your reflective note will be marked using the following criteria

1. Have you shown an understanding about the specific problem/task presented by this firm or organisation?
2. Have you situated this problem/task within the context of opportunities and challenges arising from developments in China and India?
3. To what extent have you shown that you have applied content from this module and from your own research to this practical case?
4. Have you clearly conveyed the outcome or recommendations to the firm or organisation of this Fireside Talk?
5. What role did you play in this Fireside Talk and how did you benefit from taking part?

Box 1: Guidelines for Fireside Talk Reflective Essay

4. Feedback from students

Now in their sixth year, Fireside Talks continue to receive exceptionally positive feedback from students in end of semester module evaluation surveys. The student feedback we have received supports the positive findings by Paul & Mukhopadhyay (2005) and Chavan (2011) on experiential learning in international business education. One short-term benefit is the external stimulus to engage with course material, through a real, tangible case study. One student expressed,

> "The Fireside is good for us to practice [our knowledge about China and theories learned across the programme] and have a chance to communicate with business people."

Furthermore, because we invite managers and decision-makers who have lived in China or India (or who are regular visitors to these markets) to participate in the Fireside Talks, the Talks are viewed as being 'fresh' and "better than regular case-based discussions" - this is to say paper based case studies (see also McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006). The close encounter with experienced managers is regarded as being "really interesting and inspiring" for the students. As one student commented: "Through having meetings and discussions with employees from companies, we learned a lot - it's a significant experience."

Students have also acknowledged that the Fireside Talks go beyond the immediate goal of satisfying module assessment requirements. One student commented that "the Fireside Talks were really helpful. I feel it is useful for developing my practical skills in the future." This is because "it helped me gain industry exposure while learning a lot about the business techniques used in China." and "how companies approach the Chinese market in real life." Moreover, understanding how managers collect and interpret similar data to those collected by the students can give the students an insight into how managers make sense of complex and evolving environments in the real world. This is further enhanced through feedback during the student manager interactions. A student commented, "I like the feedback which came from the company's manager during the Fireside Talk." According to Hattie & Timperley (2007), feedback is effective when it is 'clear, purposeful, meaningful, and compatible with students' prior knowledge' (p.104). We view such feedback from the business managers as being highly valued by the students, not least because it difficult for the module leader to replicate it with authenticity.

Students hosting Fireside Talks and, later, alumni also highlighted the soft skills, confidence, and sense of empowerment they received by participating in the Talks. Students were typically interacting for the very first time with 'real' managers and business owners and were therefore uncertain about how to engage with them and what to expect. Frank and constructive comments directed at the students' work by the managers can give students the confidence that they are able communicate with superiors, raise their views, and defend their perspectives using valid underlying data.

The company and manager selection is also very important for addressing any misapprehension from students, such as "the experience gained (from the Talks) is quite limited as it is a very artificial environment." A meeting between students and managers beside a digital fireside video is indeed an artificial environment. The real value, however, is the interactions between these two groups and the knowledge the students can gain from discussing their views with managers. Managers are briefed to treat the students like internal staff or consultants – and can therefore be very quick to identify holes in their arguments or destroy their carefully researched and crafted arguments! There is nothing artificial about this facet of the Fireside Talk and this is an aspect that should be emphasised to students.

For completeness, we also need to report that the businesses themselves are finding the Fireside Talks useful - for both airing ideas with students and also for identifying potential interns and employees. Despite having less firm- or industry-specific insight, students often demonstrate that they can offer an independent, objective perspective to an issue raised by the company – especially foreign students who are familiar with the target markets. To our knowledge, four students have been invited to company placements, of which one has been employed. Finally, the Business School itself also appreciates the Talks because they support its corporate engagement and accreditation agendas.

5. Challenges and Best Practices

Corporate participants – Identifying and securing business involvement can be challenging and time consuming. The business needs to possess expertise suitable for the module, have the right senior manager available (not only in terms of expertise but also in terms of his or her willingness or capability to engage with students) and also have a task that students can feasibly work on. To date, businesses have been mainly sourced through the personal relationships of the module leaders established while working in industry or running a 'China business club'. In order to be sustainable, however, the recruitment of businesses needs to go beyond relying on personal relationships alone.

We have explored this challenge and believe we can rely upon four alternative strategies to identify businesses:

(a) Alumni are an important bridge into industry and have an interest to support their alma mater or return to it. While in the first instance this often means alumni from our International Business programmes (where we have existing relationships), this opportunity is by no means restricted to these. Both the Business School and the University as a whole have dedicated alumni offices that can support the identification of relevant alumni and reach out to them. Alumni offices can be very receptive to finding contributors for educational activities as this provides them a tangible offer with which to approach alumni and to manage relationships. An advantage of identifying speakers through the University alumni office is that this goes beyond mere Business School alumni and can identify alumni from any degree working in relevant positions and businesses.

(b) The International Business division at Leeds University Business School has established its own Advisory Board in order to advance its pedagogy and research agenda. Board members range from entrepreneurs and micro MNEs to large MNEs and represent the kind of businesses that could be invited to a Fireside Talk. Indeed, three of the board members participated in the Talks before being invited to become advisors to the division. Other board members have expressed a strong interest in contributing to teaching activities, as well as in reaching out to their own networks to recommend suitable businesses.

(c) Government bodies with an agenda to foster international trade and investments can be allies for Fireside Talks. Their mission is to strengthen the international business activities of the national or local economy and they are therefore seeking ways to engage with the business community and support it. An important consideration is also their extensive business networks. Government bodies that are of interest include local actors like the city council, the local enterprise partnership and inward investment agencies. At a national level, the Department for International Trade, which has local representations, is the main actor. Relationships to these bodies typically exist at the business school and/or university level.

(d) Advanced professional service providers such as law firms, accountancies, or consultancies could sponsor the Fireside Talks. The service provider could identify and invite clients to the Fireside Talk as part of its client engagement strategy. In return, it would gain access to University research capabilities and expertise. This model could also involve an element of consultancy training by the service provider for the students.

Confidentiality – Businesses are asked to share a challenge which they are currently facing. These challenges typically relate to a strategic decision concerned with business expansion or development. As such, the challenge itself, as well as the subsequent discussion during the Fireside Talks, could give rise to confidentiality concerns (though to date no business has raised such concerns). We have tried to avoid confidentiality becoming an issue by working with the businesses to craft a challenge that is specific, yet generic enough to not reveal any sensitive information. Furthermore, the students only receive the firm's name and industry sector, as well as the particular challenge. No further internal information is shared with them.

In case any concerns about confidentiality persist, a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) between the business, the students and the professor could be signed. The legal department of any university would have a template NDA that could be adapted to the Fireside Talks. If an NDA is deemed necessary then it would have to be agreed and shared very early with the businesses and the students would also have to be informed about the meaning and consequences of the NDA.

Evaluation – Evaluation of the engagement with the business through formal assessment can potentially give rise to problems. Businesses participate in the Fireside Talks voluntarily and we try to organize the session at the most suitable times for the businesses. Nevertheless, managers may need to cancel at short notice should an urgent matter arise. Contingency plans are therefore needed to permit formal assessment to still take place.

The least risky approach would be to evaluate students through the end of semester examination and explicitly state that students may use the Fireside Talk as exemplary material to substantiate their answers. However, in this case, students may end up not referring to the Fireside Talks at all. When we first established the Fireside Talks, we adopted this approach to ensure that we were not dealing with too many uncertainties.

As the Talks become a more established feature in the curriculum, assessments could be designed to be more closely related to the Fireside Talks. For example, the problem or challenge provided by the business could be abstracted and presented in a more *generalised* form. Students could then use the research they conducted for the Fireside Talks to inform their assignment. Since this would then not be an assignment directly related to a named business, the assessment would be safeguarded in the event that the business was not able to attend the Fireside Talk.

Ensuring relevance to teaching content - Whilst companies are asked to bring their own challenge to the Talks, there is a risk that the task might be viewed by students as not being directly linked to module teaching content. Selection of the 'right' company and the fine-tuning the Fireside Talk task through discussion with the manager can help to address such concerns. The links between the Talk and teaching content can be highlighted during the preparation sessions and in debriefing sessions after the Talk. Comments and concerns raised by the business can also be incorporated in subsequent lectures to highlight the connection to the module.

Regularity – In order for students to gain positive insights from the Talks, it is necessary that they are given sufficient time to conduct research and to prepare well. An earlier arrangement of weekly or bi-weekly Talks was viewed by the students as being too onerous and made worse by our selecting different companies from different industries for each Talk. In response, we reduced the number of Fireside Talks (to two per semester). We also asked, where possible, for the manager to attend the Talks twice in order to extend or deepen the interaction. These changes addressed student concerns successfully - and for us, also reduced the burden of identifying suitable organisations.

Resources –To create the atmosphere suggested, we are simply using a YouTube video (or Vimeo, Dailymotion etc.) of a fire in a hearth. To facilitate the meeting and conversation, place names can be positioned on the tables. The businesses appreciate receiving a full list of students attending the Talks in order to take note of better performing students. No further resources are required.

Funding – Funding may be required for two aspects of the Fireside Talks. Firstly, businesses may expect to receive reimbursement for travel or even to be paid for attending. Secondly, funding may be required to invite the business and student representatives for dinner after the Talk, as a means to show gratitude or even to continue the discussion. With regards to paying businesses, we do not mention the possibility of fees when contacting companies and reasonably expect that they will agree to become engaged with the activity without charge because they see some potential benefit (e.g. free consultancy, exposure to potential employees) or because the opportunity fits in with their social and corporate outreach activities. We have not needed to pay businesses so far. The latter expenses are paid out of divisional teaching funds and the costs controlled by limiting the number of dinner attendees to six people maximum.

Governance – The running of the Fireside Talk is in the hands of the students rather than the module leader's. This structure addresses Tomkins & Ulus (2016) critique that classroom-based experiential learning can be focused on and constrained by the lecturer's own business experience. For an effective running of the event and in order to portray the kind of expertise and professionalism we would like to show to the invited guests, a suitable student needs to be selected to run the proceedings and should be coached on how to organize the session. All students need to be instructed on how they should engage and contribute to the session. This includes making them aware of cultural expectations when participating in a business engagement (e.g., dressing smart-casual, wearing name badges, taking off jackets and hats for the meeting etc.).

Class size - A potential challenge for Fireside Talks is class size, but this can be overcome by dividing the company's challenge into smaller tasks and allocating to groups. For example, in a 30 strong class on the module 'The Economics of China and India', we broke the task into China and India sections, with three sub-questions. In six groups of five students, each tackled one sub-question and presented their finding in 10 minutes (see Box 2). The largest class size to date has been 44, with sub-tasks distributed across 7 groups. With one student representative giving introductory remarks, and the final group given the responsibility of summarising and wrapping up, a large session can still be productive. However, in view of the intimate atmosphere promised by Fireside Talks, smaller class sizes of up to 10 students are more desirable.

Fireside Talk Topic Example: the outlook of the economic, political and regulatory environments in China and India relevant to Company X

1. **The economic, political and regulatory environment for international business in China**

   Groups 1, 2 and 3 will prepare provide the following: (i) economic outlook (ii) key political developments (iii) trends for regulatory change - relevant for Company X in China.

2. **The economic, political and regulatory environment for international business in India**

   Groups 4, 5 and 6 will prepare to provide the following: (i) economic outlook (ii) key political developments, and (iii) trends for regulatory change - relevant for Company X in India.

Box 2: Fireside Talk Topic and Student Groups

Transferability and replication

This experiential learning activity is based on the simple premise that the business has a challenge that it willing to share with students. So the general idea is transferable across cultural contexts, geographical locations, or subject areas. Fireside Talks can therefore be applied to any course in a business school. They may also be adapted to enhance company visits or field trips in order to ensure that students benefit fully from off-campus activity (we have trialled visits to local companies successfully). Likewise, the external visitor does not necessarily need to be a senior manager from a business. Local government officials who are responsible, say, for inbound tourism or for attracting inward investment can also provide the focus for a Fireside Talks. For example, they can discuss marketing strategies and public policy considerations with students.

While the Fireside Talks at Leeds are currently assessed and marked as a reflective essay, the Talks could also become part of a larger group project, where students develop their presentation into a full business report, or even a dissertation, which is then assessed. For students, the advantage of contributing to such a report is that they not only have something tangible to hand to a company, but they can also refer to the whole experience in their job applications.

The Fireside Talks can also align with a number of objectives within the university. For example, invited guests could be required to be university alumni, or to be a member of a school or divisional advisory board. This helps to strengthen ties with important stakeholders who often seek opportunities to be actively involved. Career Services may also be engaged to provide generic presentation skills to help students make a good impression at a Fireside Talk, as well as to discuss with students how best to utilise their Fireside Talk experience in curriculum vitae and job applications. Considering the effectiveness and potential of Fireside Talks from a more holistic, university perspective, can therefore highlight the wider potential of a simple and straightforward, but nevertheless highly resource effective idea.

So far, we have only run face-to-face Fireside Talks. We view these as being most effective, since the business and students can interact with each other in person. However, if sophisticated online teaching arrangements are available, then it is also possible for businesses to join the Talks remotely via Skype, Zoom, Adobe Connect, or similar.

6. Contribution and Implications

Fireside Talks deepen the learning process. After engaging in self-directed research resulting in findings and recommendations, students must present their findings directly to businesses, and by doing so become more immersed in and actively engaged with their subject (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, 2009). The fact that the challenge has been set by a business rather than by an academic shows the students that their course content is relevant and, moreover, that it can be applied to real life issues faced by business, rather than just be consigned to theoretically abstract scenarios (Clinebell & Clinebell, 2008; Paglis, 2012). Students who have experienced the Talks have commented to the lecturers that "what you teach is actually correct!" and this has led to greater engagement and attention in subsequent lectures.

Typically, students have limited work experience and will have experienced few if any business meetings with senior managers from business. The Fireside Talks also equip students with an understanding of how to be engaging within a professional environment, how to gain and retain the attention of senior managers and how to sell their ideas to them (Paglis, 2012). They also instil confidence within students that not only are they able to communicate with senior managers, but also that their views will be listened to – meaning that ultimately they have something to offer. Alumni have commented that this is the major positive impact that Fireside Talks can bring. In this respect, this teaching method also supports students' employability. Students with less work experience now have a 'consultancy story to tell' on their CV when they apply for jobs. Such a differentiator may allow them to secure a job more easily.

Overall, we believe that Fireside Talks, or versions thereof, can offer business schools a flexible, relatively easy to set up, resource friendly, yet highly valued method of experiential learning. The benefits may accrue not just to students and businesses, but also have potential to dovetail into a variety of other university priorities, such as the employability agenda, industrial liaison, alumni engagement and accreditation.

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