GETTING THEM TO SOLVE REAL PROBLEMS IN THE CORPORATE WORLD

Train students to think fast, rather than merely learn facts

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Albert Einstein once said: “Education is not the learning of facts, but the training of the mind to think.” How apt this is, in light of Singapore’s employment landscape, where savvy employers are beginning to differentiate between degrees that “carry their full worth” in knowledge and skills, as Manpower Minister Tan Chuan-Jin described, and those that are mere paper qualifications.

Progressive universities are going one step further by engaging beyond knowledge enhancement and towards critical thinking. In business schools, this means that besides bringing the business world into the classroom through anecdotes and in-class cases, the class should also be brought into the business world.

The latter includes, among others, getting students to relate to the business community through solving real-world cases in competitions. As an extension of in-class case studies, universities are sending students to international business case competitions, where they analyse and strategise actual challenges faced by real firms.

How is this different from in-class case analyses? Not only do these competitions bring students into the business world, they also give businesses an opportunity to appreciate the outcome of classroom education.

First, students are challenged as they pit themselves against top-calibre students around the world. Being the best in one’s local institution is not necessarily being the best at the international level. This keeps them humble and fuels their yearning to learn. Humility goes a long way in moulding our graduates to have realistic expectations when it comes to employment. They realise that there is always room for improvement.

Second, students are tasked to handle issues that are currently faced by a company, unlike historical ones in in-class cases, where solutions can be found by an easy search on the Internet. There is yet no known solution for real-world cases. Students are mentally stretched to get a grip on the crux of the problem and develop their own solutions, all within the usual limit of 24 hours in a case competition. This calls for a sharp mind to quickly discern the circumstances, distil the main issue and develop the strategy, and mental rigour to handle pressure.

Third, they have to present their recommendations to the case company’s top management and be challenged by questions from them. While students are grilled on their thought process, they have to think on their feet and remain composed.

Management gets to see and appreciate the often different perspectives that students offer and marvel at how far business education has progressed.

QUICK THINKING

At a recent international case competition in Hong Kong, the National University of Singapore Business School was the only Asian finalist among 18 top universities from 11 countries and five continents.

The students had to analyse and recommend branding and global expansion plans for the Langham Hospitality Group (LHG). Facing a panel of seven judges — two from LHG including its chief executive officer, two from Citibank and three from consulting companies including Accenture and Oliver Wyman — students were questioned as they presented their analyses and recommendations.

A nail-biting event, the competition not only honed students’ ability to think cleverly during the 24 hours, but also to be sharp and quick as the experienced practitioners challenged them.

Mr. Robert Warman, CEO of LHG, remarked that the students brought forth a consulting-like analysis that many of the judges thought they would never have been able to deliver when they were students.

And this is how enlightened
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tertiary institutions have progressed. Classroom education has to progress to mindful thinking, both in critique and response. It is not merely an accumulation of disparate knowledge, but the integration of such knowledge into a sensible seamless whole upon which insights are drawn.

Some universities are known for students who have the courage to speak up and challenge. Behind this form requires substance. Anyone can deliver a smooth presentation with enough rehearsals; however, the true test is to think on one’s feet.

Mindful critique involves asking pertinent questions, not just any question. Mindful response is responding in a succinct, end-all manner that silences further questions and earns the respect of the questioner. Both call for quick thinking.

As a professor, I have always believed that I owe it to my students to stretch their thinking skills and not mollycoddle them by sugar-coating non-value-added analyses and questions as “participation”. They are trained that whenever they speak, they should have anticipated the questions and be ready to defend what they have proposed.

Similarly, those who ask questions are challenged on how their questions move understanding forward. It is heartening to note that these traits have stood our students in good stead, resulting in employment and internship offers due to their stellar performances at case competitions.

While employers are on the right track in acknowledging differences between degree-holders who are merely paper-holders versus those with more substance, enlightened employers are those who are one step ahead: Differentiating students who have been trained to think from those who are only information-accumulators.