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Teaching scenario analysis—An action learning pedagogy

Ron Bradfield [a], George Cairns [b,1], George Wright [c]

[a] University of Strathclyde, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates
[b] RMIT University, Centre for Sustainable Organisations and Work, Melbourne, Australia
[c] University of Strathclyde, Department of Strategy & Organisation, Glasgow, Scotland, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we provide an introduction to our teaching of scenario analysis. Scenario analysis offers an excellent instructional vehicle for investigating 'wicked problems'; issues that are complex and ambiguous and require trans-disciplinary inquiry. We outline the pedagogical underpinning based on action learning and provide a critical approach from the intuitive logics school of scenario analysis. We use this in our programme in which student groups engage in semi-structured, but divergent and inclusive analysis of a selected focal issue. They then develop a set of scenario storylines that outline the limits of possibility and plausibility for a selected time-horizon year. The scenarios are portrayed not as narratives, but as vehicles for exploration of the causes and outcomes of the interplay between forces in the contextual environment that drive the unfolding future in the context of the focal issue. In this way, we provide internally-generated challenges to both individual pre-conceptions and group-level thinking.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we discuss a course that was designed to introduce post-experience MBA students to the principles of scenario analysis through an action learning approach. We acknowledge that the students may have previously been exposed to the principles of scenario analysis through the works of Porter et al. (1991), Martino (1993), Coates et al. (2001), Bright (1972) and several others. Whilst these all suggest the basic value of scenarios for forecasting, in particular technological forecasting, in our course we take a different approach.

The first principle underpinning the course design is that students work with a 'wicked problem' or issue (Rittel and Webber, 1973). This is one to which there is no single 'right' answer that renders all others 'wrong'. Rather, it is an issue that is complex and ambiguous and that requires trans-disciplinary engagement and understanding. In line with the concept of 'strategic design' (Helsinki Design Lab, n.d.), our approach introduces the concept of 'reframing' narrowly defined issues in order to place them in a broader societal, economic and ecological context. An exemplar 'focal issue' is: how – and to what extent – will current levels of poverty, infant mortality and educational provision change within a particular country over the next fifteen years? Thus the focus of problem is shifted from forecasting particular levels of, say, income disparities, to understanding the causes of particular future outcomes.

The course named 'Exploring the International Business Environment', has been running for in excess of 20 years, during which time it is has been critically examined, modified and enhanced around the founding principles. The academic team members who design and deliver the course both understand and have contributed to the extant scenario literature, and are additionally, experienced practitioners across a broad range of scenario projects for governments, industries and social organizations in many countries. The course is delivered both in the UK and in international centres in Europe (Switzerland, Greece), Asia (Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, China (PRC)), and the Middle East (United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Oman). It is

E-mail addresses: bradfield@strath.ac.uk (R. Bradfield), george.cairns@qut.edu.au (G. Cairns), george.wright@strath.ac.uk (G. Wright).
[1] George Cairns is now Adjunct Professor at QUT Business School, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.

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made available to students in a variety of modes, including: two week intensive to full-time students; over a ten week term to UK-based part-time students; and three day weekend intensive workshops for the part-time students in the international centre cohorts. The students on the course are post-experience graduates who come from a wide range of backgrounds and cultures, the average age of the cohorts being 34 years of age.

In order to develop the deepest understanding of the chosen focal issue from a trans-disciplinary perspective, students are first directed into a semi-structured investigation of all the political, economic, social, technological, ecological and legal (PESTEL) factors that will drive the future direction of the issues under consideration. Exploration of the expansive wicked problem setting by such diverse cohorts requires that students appreciate and understand the 'broad' stakeholder constituency (Freeman and Reed, 1983) along with the individual and diverse needs and values of these stakeholders. The principles of PESTEL and stakeholder analyses are introduced at a conceptual level through mini-lectures and directed reading. However, it is the students who undertake self-directed investigation of the driving factors and the range of stakeholders that are at play for the specific problem set.

The information and ideas generated from initial context investigations then inform the students' generation of scenarios using the intuitive logics (IL) approach (van der Heijden et al., 2002; Wright et al., 2013). The specific scenario method employed in the course (van der Heijden et al., 2002) provides a framework for exploring complexity and ambiguity in an inclusive and semi-structured way. However, it leaves the students as the active learners in determining the substantive content that will enable them to generate futures narratives that are informed by, and that will enable further consideration of elements of the focal problem.

The overall approach that is promoted and enabled in the course is grounded in action learning. Students are prompted to adopt a critical approach (Rigg and Trehan, 2004), whereby they are required to present the developed scenarios and the supporting research, along with a critical reflection on their own learning experience during the course. From these submissions and from our observations during the course delivery over many years, we have witnessed not only consistent critical reflection on the problem under investigation, but also numerous instances of critical refection on the self and others within diverse student groups.

The structure of our paper is as follows. First, we outline the conceptual framework of our pedagogy for the course. We consider this in relation to a student population with diverse cultural and experiential backgrounds. Second, we present a broad overview of the scenario approach used. Third, we recount and reflect on our own experiences of engagement with a wide range of students taking the course. We then consider the possibilities for incorporating, in part or whole, other scenario approaches. Finally, we provide some general guidance on what we see as the key strengths and limitations of our approach, based on both personal reflection and student feedback.

2. Conceptualizing scenarios—an action learning reflective pedagogy

Having been developed and delivered for over 20 years around the same general principles, this course predated Pfeffer and Fong's (2002, p. 8) criticism of MBAs, in which they called for action learning as an alternative to traditional didactic approaches in which students 'lack any sense of responsibility for their learning'. From its early foundations, action learning has developed to embrace a variety of 'schools' and underpinnings (O'Neil and Marsick, 2011) that range from the tacit to the experiential and the critical reflective, and that include both theory- and practice-oriented foci. We consider the approach that we adopt as aligning with the school of 'critical action learning' (CAL) (Rigg and Trehan, 2004; Trihan, 2011; Vince, 2008), where we bring the social and political context of the selected problem into play, along with the dominant economic context of business.

During the course, students work in problem solving teams, the members of which will have met only briefly at the start of the MBA programme. Across most of the delivery modes, groups will also be ethnically diverse and with varying levels of academic qualification and workplace experience beyond the minimum entry requirement. Students are required to work on a 'real problem' which is complex and to which there is no immediate single right answer, only an array of options to be elicited and considered through wide-ranging research and exploration that crosses many disciplinary boundaries.

The course design challenges students to critically reflect upon the role of management and organization, structures of power and control and, as we will illustrate, to question their own position and individuality (Reynolds and Vince, 2004). In doing this, we do not, however, set management and organization practices in opposition to broader societal or environmental concerns. Rather, we seek to inspire students to bring the former to bear in addressing the latter.

During delivery, the role of the academic team is limited to providing a framework for inquiry and outlining in general the problem for consideration. The academic team provides no substantive content for the analysis and no subjective judgment on any sources being valid, invalid or more valid than any others. As such, we adopt a pedagogy that is primarily problem- and action-learning based. Thrown into the context of the course and the wicked problem at the outset of their MBA studies, students are required to get to know themselves and others, the nature of the micro-level politics of the classroom, and the influences of cultural norms and biases in decision-making – and non-decision-making – within the groups (McLaughlin and Thorpe, 1993).

As they explore the problem, students are required to examine and develop an understanding of an amalgam of contextual driving forces and their substantive and causal and relatedness. They do so in order to gain insight into the long-term dynamics and systemic structure of situations facing organizations. This requires them to make sense of a full range of data, information, ideas and opinions from all sources. This analysis cannot be conducted in a detached and objective way, but requires reflection on how various sources might be accessed, assessed, valued or rejected, and brought to bear on deliberations, decisions and actions by the 'broad' range of stakeholders (Freeman and Reed, 1983). Students are thereby encouraged to consider the different paths by which situations may unfold. They must identify observable patterns and trends in the world at present. They must then develop the logics of multiple, plausible alternative future states that might arise from these.