Abstract

The experience of some professors of Strategic Management showed that there were different kinds of students, which goals and needs were very dissimilar, which resulted in problems in the development of practical sessions. In the academic year 2018/2019, two different classes were given the chance to choose between three different evaluation methods: Non-continuous Evaluation, Continuous Evaluation and Business School Model, focused on the discussion of freshly prepared case studies about Business Management. The marks of the students who chose the Business School mode in theoretical multiple-choice tests were significantly higher than the ones achieved by the rest of the class, showing that case study discussion helped them to reinforce the acquisition of theoretical knowledge.

Keywords: business school; case studies; evaluation methodology.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The teaching of Strategic Management at Universidad Rey Juan Carlos

Strategic Management is one of the main subjects included in the Degree in Business Management at Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, due to the number of academic credits (12, which means 120 hours of class, divided into two different subjects, Strategic Management I and Strategic Management II), its trunk character and its obvious relationship with the main contents, and even the name, of the Degree⁴. It is placed in the third year (first and second term), as long as it requires a previous background of both instrumental subjects and basic knowledge. The subject deals with the main competitive and corporate decisions which managers have to make in real life, so it has an important practical nature.

In the academic year 2017/2018, the subject was taught to 28 different groups, combining four different campuses (Vicálvaro, Fuenlabrada, Móstoles and Aranjuez), two modes (face and on-line), two languages (Spanish and English) and the aforementioned division between Strategic Management I and II. All the students of the subject are expected to achieve a similar knowledge regardless all these aspects, so a pocketful of coordination mechanisms is used:

- All the groups use the same Teaching Guide, a document which details the contents of the subject, the handbooks and references that are used, as well as the guidelines of the evaluation methodology.
- There is a person in charge of the coordination of all the groups of the subject, and some coordination meetings of all the professors who teach the subject take place regularly, at least twice a year.
- Some resources, such as case studies and illustrations, as well as a collection of slides, are available for these professors.

The evaluation of the students is divided into three different parts, as specified in Table 1. Each of the parts has to be passed in order to get over the entire subject.

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⁴ Strategic Management is also taught in other Degrees, such as Degree in Marketing, but the number of hours, and so the contents, may be slightly different.
Table 1. Evaluation methodology of Strategic Management

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTIVITIES</th>
<th>% OF FINAL MARKS</th>
<th>MINIMUM MARKS REQUIRED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multiple-choice theoretical questions</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>1,5 above 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical part: individual assignments, groups assignments, case study discussions and/or practical exam</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>1,5 above 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual theoretical exam</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>2 above 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In the academic year 2017/2018 there were two main ways to take the subject, which were called CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT and NON-CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT, amongst which students had to choose at the beginning of each term. In the CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT, both the multiple-choice tests and the practical activities take place along the term, while in the NON-CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT, mainly intended for students who cannot attend the classes regularly, the three parts are taken in the final exam date.

Inside these guidelines, each professor has some flexibility to adapt the methodology to the specific needs of the different groups. For instance, the number of students included in each of them varied from less than 20, in the less populated one, to more than 150 in at least three of them. This obviously requires different strategies to deal with the practical part, which normally results into different combinations of individual and group assignments, and specific ways to work with the case studies.

1.2 Facing the challenges

Many authors agree about the different proposed advantages of the use of case-based learning, stressing the participation of the students in the process of learning and getting them involved in the solution of real problems about a specific subject (Carlson and Schodt, 1995; Tillman, 1995; Erskine et al., 1998). As the title of his paper stated clearly, Bonney (2015) found out that "case study teaching method improves student performance and perceptions of learning gains". Nevertheless, some of the researchers have stressed the importance of the discussion groups in the achievement of the learning goals (Flynn and Klein, 2001).

One of the professors, who dealt with two especially large groups, realized that there was a malfunctioning of the methodology, mainly when it came to case study discussions. More than one hundred students in each group, who had chosen CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT, had to prepare each discussion, but the individual probability of been asked and participating was close to zero, due to the limited time. So, opportunistic free-riding behaviors of some students, who just aimed at passing the subject, lived together with the frustration of some others who wanted to, but couldn't, get deeper into the bellies of real-life management decisions.

The kind of teaching materials used did not make it easier. The case studies discussed came from a collection shared by all the professors which is updated each 3/4 years. So, when they were discussed in a specific group, some of the business situations analyzed belonged to the past, and so the decisions and alternatives taken by the firms were already known. Also, some students asked their colleagues of the previous years for the "solutions" of the case study, as it had been discussed the year before.

In the summer coordination meeting of that year, that professor expressed the need to adapt the evaluation methodology in the case of the large groups, where neither the basic nor the profound expectations of the different students were being satisfied. Though the majority of the professors agreed, it was also stated that any change should lay within the common guidelines for all the groups. So, if a new way of evaluation was created, it had to fit the following needs/rules:

2 Traditionally, the vast majority of the students choose CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT, as it is normally easier for them to divide the contents of the subject into more tests (both multiple-choice tests and assignments) than to take just one single final exam.
3 In fact, the triggering event which led to the design of the Business School Mode was the discussion of a specific case study close to the final exam dates, for which more than 70 students had just copied the ideas discussed the previous year, without even reading them, so in spite of a massive class presence, just a few students were able to effectively discuss the case study.
• It had to be offered to all the students included in a group, so that they could voluntarily chose to take it or not instead of the previous evaluation methods. This way, different needs could be met at the same time.

• It had to fit the conditions of CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT, including the partial multiple-choice tests.

• It couldn’t be massive, in order to allow the evaluation of each one of the students based on his/her individual performance and participation. So, if many students decided to take that option, the class had to be divided into smaller groups somehow.

• Both the materials and the dynamics of the group had to prevent from the use of previously established solutions, either coming from real life or from previous discussions.

As the solution had some aspects in common with a case study discussion in a Business School, it led to the creation of what has been called the Business School Mode.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 The Business School Mode. Rules and conditions

At the beginning of the academic year 2018/2019 two groups of students, one of them taught in Spanish and the other in English, both of which clearly outnumbered the hundred, were offered for the first time not two but three different ways to take the subject, which practical part evaluation is summed up in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTICAL PART</th>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>SPECIFICATIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NON-CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT</td>
<td>Final exam</td>
<td>1 to 3 questions about a case study proposed, with limited time and paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT</td>
<td>The specific rules of each assignment are published two weeks before the deadline</td>
<td>The student has to send the professor four individual assignments, prepared according both to the GENERIC RULES (for all the assignments) and the SPECIFIC RULES (for each one of them)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BUSINESS SCHOOL</td>
<td>The set-up of each case study is published two days before its discussion</td>
<td>Public discussion of five case studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source.** Evaluation methodology published for the students

Some additional specifications were made to describe the Business School Mode:

• It was available for any student, though it required a regular attendance to the classes and a continuous work on the subject, including the attendance to the BUSINESS SCHOOL CASE STUDY DISCUSSIONS, set on a sessions’ schedule published along with the rules. So, the students who chose this evaluation method had to attend all the case study discussions, though they could miss only one of them because of an acceptable reason.

• It required an adequate participation in the discussion of the different case studies, which would deal with the situation of a specific industry and/or the strategy followed by one/different firms.

• The case studies set up would be published 2-3 days before each Business School session at Aula Virtual.

• No free-riding would be admitted, so in case a student would not participate adequately in the discussions, preparing them beforehand and presenting/discussing his/her ideas, he/she could be expelled from the Business School Mode, becoming a NON-CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT student, losing the marks achieved in any partial multiple-choice test.
All these aspects, as well as the rules of the other two evaluation ways, were thoroughly described at Aula Virtual, a Virtual Campus accessible to all the students, who were asked to choose between the three alternatives available during the first month of the term. Meanwhile, the class sessions dealt with the theoretical background needed both to discuss the case studies (in the case of the Business School Mode) or to prepare the assignments (in the case of the Continuous Assessment Mode).

### 2.2 The development of the subject

The group taught in English was a very huge one, composed by 156 students, most of them being exchange students coming from foreign universities. This circumstance resulted in an unfrequently high choice of the non-continuous assessment, which was the option for 69 students, representing a 44,2% of the class. The Business School Mode was chosen by 11 students, which barely meant a 7,1% of the total, but respected the condition of allowing personal discussions and fostering participation.

![Graph 1. Students’ choice of the group taught in English. Source. Own Elaboration.](image)

The group taught in Spanish was composed by 112 students. The balance between continuous and not continuous evaluation was more traditional, with a majority of the students choosing the continuous assessment. The Business School Mode was selected by 20 students, a 17,9% of the total, a group that could be easily controlled in a case study discussion dynamic.

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This group was familiarly called by their Professor “Tony’s Eleven”, a reminder of a popular film.
The term took place between the 3rd of September and the 14th of December of 2018. The schedule of all the sessions was published before the start of the classes though, as established, the specific rules for the Business School case studies were published just two days before each discussion, and the rules for the assignments of the Continuous Assessment mode were published two weeks in advance of the deadline of each one.

For each of the discussions, the students were given a set-up of the case study, some references and a breakdown of the aspects that would be discussed. They were asked to look for additional information in order to be ready to debate about that facts.

The calendar of the case studies is reflected in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CASE</th>
<th>DATE (ENGLISH GROUP)</th>
<th>DATE (SPANISH GROUP)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 LIME</td>
<td>11th October 2018</td>
<td>18th October 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2 FOOD INDUSTRY</td>
<td>8th November 2018</td>
<td>25th October 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3 EL CORTE INGLÉS</td>
<td>15th November 2018</td>
<td>15th November 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4 I-SANTA</td>
<td>29th November 2018</td>
<td>29th November 2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Different techniques were used in the case study discussion in order to foster the generation of structured conflict. Particularly, the general dynamic of the discussion was similar to the Elevator Pitch, starting with a first talk in small groups of 5-6 people randomly chosen, followed by a pooling of the ideas and conclusions reached. Also, some other tools, such as brainstorming, devil’s advocacy and dialectic inquiry were also used.

## 3 RESULTS

In order to evaluate the results of this new methodology, we initially compared the marks achieved in four partial multiple-choice tests by the students who chose the Business School Mode with those who took the traditional continuous assessment. These tests are an objective way to evaluate the progress
of the students, as well as their achievement of knowledge, as long as it is not affected by any potential subjective factor.

The results of the group that studied in English are shown in tables 4 and 5. The first of them shows the evolution of the average marks of the students who took each of the four partial tests.

**Table 4.** Average marks achieved by the students in multiple-choice tests. English group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MODE</th>
<th>TEST#1</th>
<th>TEST#2</th>
<th>TEST#3</th>
<th>TEST#4</th>
<th>AVERAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continuous</td>
<td>5,69</td>
<td>7,02</td>
<td>7,41</td>
<td>9,17</td>
<td>7,32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. School</td>
<td>5,75</td>
<td>8,38</td>
<td>8,25</td>
<td>9,00</td>
<td>7,84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source. Own elaboration based on class records

Two aspects can be remarked from this comparison. Firstly, as the average marks show, business school students outperformed by more than 0,5 points above 10 their colleagues who took traditional continuous assessment. There can be different reasons that can explain this difference, but they can be summed up in two main causes: either the students who chose case-study discussion were more interested in the subject beforehand, and they studied harder; or the methodology required them a deeper knowledge of the subject to be able to discuss the case studies, so they had to get deeper into the subject.

Though it is not easy to know if the first or the second cause are more important, a deeper look at the data can give us a clue. As it can be seen, the difference in the first test was scarce (0,06 points). This first test took place before any of the case studies had been discussed. From then on, though the average marks of both groups increased clearly (probably all the students realized about the difficulties of the subject), the gap between Business School students and Continuous Assessment students widened to 1,36 points (Test #2) and 0,84 points (Test#3).

**Table 5.** Number of students who took each partial test. English group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MODE</th>
<th>TEST#1</th>
<th>TEST#2</th>
<th>TEST#3</th>
<th>TEST#4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continuous</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. School</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source. Own elaboration based on class records

It can be stated that, unexpectedly, continuous evaluation students took the lead in test#4 by 0,17 points (having both groups increased their average marks more than 3,5 points from the beginning). Table 5, which accounts for the number of students who took each partial test, can shed a light on this. The evaluation system establishes that a student who fails two partial multiple-choice tests can’t take any additional one, requiring a global multiple-choice retake in the final exam. As the table shows, just one of the Business School students failed or missed more than one partial test (9,1%), while 20 students (30,3%, roughly one out of each 3) under continuous assessment did. So, the group of continuous evaluation finally equaled the average marks of the business school students, but it happened after a hard self-selection process.

**Table 6.** Average marks achieved by the students in multiple-choice tests. Spanish group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MODE</th>
<th>TEST#1</th>
<th>TEST#2</th>
<th>TEST#3</th>
<th>TEST#4</th>
<th>AVERAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continuous</td>
<td>5,74</td>
<td>6,36</td>
<td>6,91</td>
<td>8,77</td>
<td>6,95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. School</td>
<td>5,47</td>
<td>6,06</td>
<td>8,40</td>
<td>8,81</td>
<td>7,19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source. Own elaboration based on class records

The data about the group taught in Spanish draw similar ideas, even more clearly. E.g., the initial difference in favor of the Continuous Assessment student in tests #1 and #2 is clearly reverted in test#3. So, probably the methodology helped the students to understand the subject and/or to take the best of themselves. As for the early failure ratio, it is clearly lower in the case of Business School students
(15%) than in the Continuous Assessment ones (29.9%, from a peak of 77 to the final number of 54 who took test#4).

Table 7. Number of students who took each partial test. Spanish group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MODE</th>
<th>TEST#1</th>
<th>TEST#2</th>
<th>TEST#3</th>
<th>TEST#4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continuous</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. School</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source. Own elaboration based on class records

To get a deeper knowledge about the impressions of the students, two focus groups (one in English, another one in Spanish) were carried out after they had their final marks of the subject. All the Business School students of both groups were invited to take part in them, and in both cases six of them were selected randomly amongst the volunteers. Though we are dealing with the ideas expressed by the students, in order to improve the methodology, a first draft of the conclusions of this qualitative analysis shows the following ideas:

- The students are unanimously satisfied with the methodology. They consider they have achieved a deeper knowledge, both theoretical, due to a higher level of pressure, and practical, searching for information to discuss real life stories.

- The moderating role of the professor, using the different techniques to generate structured conflict, is very important. Nevertheless, the professor needs to keep a balance between helping the students and explaining himself the solution of the case study.

- The higher the number of students included in the Business School Mode, the higher also the risk of a potential free-riding behavior. So, this technique should never be massive, and in case many students decided to choose it, they should be divided into smaller sub-classes.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The high number of students is something that professors occasionally have to deal with. Along with this situation normally come some potential pitfalls, such as the diversity of previous knowledge, experience and even learning goals, which may lead to the appearance of dysfunctional conflict, free riding behaviors and frustration. In order to deal with it, the creation of the Business School Mode, a third way of evaluation, gave the students the chance to choose a methodological path more adjusted to their needs and goals.

Based on the analysis of both the evaluation data and the impressions expressed by the students in focus groups, we can consider that the creation of this evaluation path, a Business School inside a bigger class, has fulfilled the expectations of the most demanding students, while not diminishing the attention on the rest of the class. The students who chose to join it increased clearly their performance in the multiple-choice tests along the term, getting more interested in the subject.

This methodology has been used in three groups in the second term, as another professor joined the experience. Also, the number of students who chose this path has grown in both the English and Spanish groups described in this paper. Some more professors, dealing with potentially big groups of students, have expressed their interest on trying it in the next academic year 2019/2020.

Also, some alumni, as well as Erasmus students of the first term who have come back to their home Universities, have expressed their interest in having the chance to either prolong or try this experience. So, a virtual version of the Business School, called T Business School, has been created as a closed group of LinkedIn, where people can ask to be admitted in order to discuss fresh case studies about Business Management.

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6 There are some obvious differences between the original format and this virtual version, starting from the lack of an evaluation goal.
This analysis must be complemented with new data coming from the experience of the second term, as well as the complete exploitation of the information collected in the focus groups. Also, some additional research should be carried out amongst the students who did not chose the Business School Mode, in order to have a deeper knowledge about their reasons, needs and goals, so that the methodological offer can be improved and complemented.

REFERENCES


