



Real Situation Learning Method: Case teaching gets an upgrade

■ By Charmaine N Clarke

When CEIBS Vice President & Dean Ding Yuan visits a company or factory floor, he often sees a *lot* more than the average person does. Where others may just see swanky offices or a noisy, messy workspace, he sees the potential for case studies that can cover multiple topics taught by various CEIBS programmes.

"You can look at a Swiss watch company as just a watch company. But if you take a different angle, you can

always dig out interesting insights; and then you can see the suitability for our students and our courses. You have to be very open-minded to do that. It's difficult," he says. In fact, for him, a watch company might be turned into an ideal classroom for discussing the financial hedging strategy for volatile precious metal costs or exchange risks for non-Swiss Franc sales; or into the perfect learning ground for brand acquisition and multi-brand management strategy.

We're in his office, and he's explaining CEIBS' trademarked Real Situation Learning Method (RSLM). It's a high-end approach to teaching, a bit of a luxury good that's offered in limited quantities – and there are strict guidelines that have to be followed before a project can earn the RSLM label. Dean Ding sums it up as "case teaching plus", an "upgraded" version of the traditional Harvard-style approach that's enhanced by a theory-driven, focused company visit where students engage directly with the firm's top executives.

Without giving away too many trade secrets, the essence of CEIBS' unique RSLM is that it makes case studies come alive. There is a structured approach to designing the entire experience to ensure that both sides – students & faculty as well as companies

– benefit. Instead of simply sharing pre-packaged company presentations, executives are faced with questions from fully engaged students who have not only read the case about their firm but have also seen their organisation in action through a company visit. Students are not just wading through pages upon pages of voluminous case studies filled with dry, abstract data. Instead, they have a chance to ask questions such as those posed to the CEO of Victorinox, the fourth generation head of a company best known for producing Swiss army knives, "What was the rationale behind the decision to run the company through a Foundation that holds 90% of its shares? How does your father treat you now that you've taken over the company? How do you grade yourself as a leader?" The discussion was on corporate governance.

Participating companies that open their doors to CEIBS students and speak frankly with the school's faculty about their operations benefit from having fresh eyes look at their organisations. As part of class projects completed by students with diverse backgrounds and nationalities, there may be useful solutions to challenges companies are facing; their cases may even be featured in top-of-the-line academic journals. "We recognise that, for the companies who offer us this opportunity for learning, there needs to be something in it for them in return," says CEIBS Associate Dean for Europe, Professor Katherine Xin. "Maybe they are interested in the China market, or they have business in China already. Or maybe they just want to get feedback and have a discussion with a group of Chinese executives. That's a very nice return



on their offer of opening their doors to us, spending time with us, sharing their insights with us."

Getting a foot in the door

In the early days, RSLM was only offered to participants of CEIBS' European Exchange of Excellence programme, a continuous learning opportunity for senior executives who had likely already completed at least one CEIBS degree programme. It began with visits to European companies like Victorinox and, back then, it took a fair bit of convincing for some companies to open their doors to a contingent of Chinese business executives and their professor who wanted a lot more than just the standard look around their office.

"We have pretty high demands of these companies, because we need to write the case. It's not just a study tour. It's not a touristic thing. It's very content driven," explains Prof Xin. "When writing a case, we need to focus on an issue that is of interest to our students or course participants. And the executives need to be willing to spend time with us to answer the questions and take a deep dive into the issues. So all those tasks are not that easy to do when we just knock on the doors of some of the best companies in the industry."

It helps that CEIBS is a business school, so that eases some of the fear that there is a danger of sharing too much technology, for example. It helps even more that CEIBS has strict

guidelines on what students can and cannot do during company visits. Participants are carefully selected and companies can screen them to avoid conflicts of interest. Companies are also integrally involved in designing the case study, working closely with CEIBS' academic staff throughout the process.

With the RSLM's success in Europe, and an increasing number of CEIBS faculty eager to try the new approach, it was soon expanded to include Chinese companies and offered to degree programme students. Subject areas have so far included topics such as family heritage, supply chain, industry 4.0, strategy and more – all within the framework of ensuring that the quality and integrity of the

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RSLM is maintained. Faculty who want to do a RSLM course need to submit a proposal for consideration. If approved, they have to implement the project within clearly defined guidelines. None of this has dampened their interest. One of the reasons the RSLM is so popular among them is because they can also teach the cases they develop for RSLM as part of their normal classes. And though this doesn't include company visits and meeting with executives, it boosts the school's overall teaching standards as it provides the advantage of having access to fresh content, across a wide range of industries in Europe and Asia.

In fact sometimes companies have links to both locations.

There was one memorable company visit/lecture, for example, in the Zotter Chocolate Theatre in Shanghai. Zotter is an Austrian brand that worked with a Chinese partner – CEIBS alumna Amy Fang – to successfully launch in Shanghai. For his first ever RSLM experience, Associate Professor of International Business and Strategy Shameen Prashantham lectured not from a typical classroom but from the Zotter auditorium. He was thrilled with the experience of lecturing from inside the very company whose case he had co-authored and was sharing with students from CEIBS Global EMBA Zurich cohort. “The RSLM is a wonderful teaching tool, and using it was a fantastic experience for me, and

I am sure the students enjoyed it too. What better way to learn than in a chocolate theatre!” he said a few days after the visit.

Other RSLM projects inside China have included working with Ningbo-based Joyson Electronics, one of the top component suppliers for global automotive manufacturers. Associate Professor of Strategy Chen Weiru and a group of 60 CEIBS alumni and entrepreneurs visited the company’s headquarters for a session that focused on the significant impact that globalisation is having on corporate strategic planning, organisational structure, culture and the value chain. “We spoke with senior executives from Joyson Electronics and learned about their successes and failures, and we were inspired by their stories. We also had an opportunity to discuss how to combine theory and practice,” said participant Jin Li from GEMBA 2015 after the course. At the time, she was working on an acquisition in a large privately-owned company, and she was able to use aspects of what she learned during the RSLM course in successfully executing that project.

Company executives also spoke of the benefits of their interaction with the group. “Their suggestions provided great inspiration for our future plans,” said Joyson’s HR Director Crystal Zhao who joined the discussion along with company CFO and her GEMBA 2015 classmate Lucy Lu.

Another memorable RSLM experience took Professor of Marketing and Associate Dean (Executive Education Programme) Wang Gao and his students to the race track. In between the serious business of going through the case study on a car racing company run by a CEIBS alumnus, participants donned racing gear and took to the track. It was all capped off with winners being drenched with champagne as they proudly took the podium.

Fun moments like these are the perfect complement to the hard work that goes on behind the scenes – both by the companies and CEIBS faculty. “Our faculty are developing, through this process, as thought leaders in different areas,” says Prof Xin. “And it certainly helps to build our reputation as a school that is on the cutting edge. It also shows that we are really a school with a global mindset and global practices.” She hopes RSLM will eventually cover topics such as blockchain, engaging experts, innovators, executives from around the globe. “I also hope we can do more RSLM projects in China that see us reciprocate and open our doors to engage international participants who would like to visit Chinese companies, to understand China,” adds Prof Xin. “We can be on the receiving side, helping to facilitate a conversation – with global participants – about China. With RSLM we can be continuously innovative!”