



Drifting Deeper, Exploring Wider

CEIBS MBA Programme Director Prof Juan Fernandez on the Real Situation Learning Method

■ By Lei Na

In recent years, the CEIBS MBA programme has widely applied the school's exclusive innovation – the Real Situation Learning Method (RSLM) – to its courses and, in the process, it has borne remarkable fruit. *TheLINK* interviewed MBA Programme Director Professor Juan Antonio Fernandez about how the school is using the method to take CEIBS' "China Depth" and "Global Breadth" to an even higher level in the context of fusing Chinese and Western cultures.

Read on for the full interview:

TheLINK: Can you introduce some of the curriculum innovations brought about by the CEIBS MBA programme's application of the Real Situation Learning Method (RSLM)?

There are two things that we've been doing: first, we're paying close attention to new technologies, in particular, the digital revolution, because it will have a big impact on various modes of business operations and marketing; second, we're focusing on experience. At present, online MBAs are becoming an increasingly powerful rival of traditional MBA programmes, thanks to their competitive tuition fees and the flexibility they provide to their students who don't need to leave work,

but can instead learn at home. How can we compete with them? I think what they cannot provide is the real world experience.

The RSLM was first put forward by CEIBS Vice President and Dean Prof Yuan Ding. When I came to understand how it worked, I realised it aligned very well with the strategy of the CEIBS MBA programme. In a typical MBA class, students sit in a classroom and discuss the case. Although the RSLM also builds itself on cases, it brings students into cases, into the companies involved, instead of adding cases into classes.

Prof Zhang Yu was among the first professors to adopt the reality-based teaching method. He developed three cases based in Shenzhen; specifically,

cases about Shenzhen's electronics manufacturing hub and marketplace, Huaiqiangbei; Shenzhen-based AI and voice industry innovator, eMeet; and venture capital firm, Sharecapital. The name of the course is "From Copycat to Innovation" and it focuses on the journey of Shenzhen's emergence as China's innovation hub. As part of the course, students travelled to Shenzhen, visited the companies, studied the cases, and met with local people. This kind of experience will never be available in the classroom or online and it is typical of the CEIBS Real Situation Learning Method.

Prof Jean Lee, Director of CEIBS Centre for Family Heritage, has spent years studying the field of family heritage. She has developed cases about Chinese textiles manufacturer, Huamao Group



"It brings students into cases, into the companies involved, instead of adding cases into classes."

“Real Situation Learning Method is highly effective and helps us stand out from the online MBAs and MBA programmes of other schools.”



and kitchen appliance manufacturer, Fotile Group. Her reality-based course is a mixture of two days of teaching at our Shanghai Campus and another two days spent visiting the companies in Ningbo, where students have the opportunity to communicate and discuss with company founders and their successors.

Prof John Cai also teaches a course about medical innovation. The case he uses is titled “Evolving from Traditional Business to Service Innovation – Shanghai Pharma’s Smart Supply

Chain System”. The course is mainly carried out in the classroom, but also has arranged visits to the Shanghai First People's Hospital.

You may have already noticed that there are different proportions of reality-based activities in each course, varying from 100% to 50% to 20%. This October, CEIBS will launch a course called “Globalisation of Chinese Companies”. Under the instruction of Professors Shameen Prashantham and Ginkgo Bai, students will learn about globalised Chinese enterprises in

Nanjing and Kunshan. The course will also be 100% reality-based.

Professors have to put in a lot of effort in developing cases for courses, and the MBA Office staff have to devote themselves to organising the visits. But it all pays off, because the Real Situation Learning Method is highly effective and helps us stand out from the online MBAs and MBA programmes of other schools.

TheLINK: CEIBS’ MBA students make up a very international

and diverse community. Everyone has their own unique cultural background. Can the Real Situation Learning Method cater to the different needs of Chinese and foreign students?

Some RSLM courses are designed for foreign students to get a better understanding of Chinese companies undergoing globalisation; in fact, the companies are actually their potential future employers. Other courses are of equal benefit for Chinese and foreign students. Through the courses, foreign students come to better understand China's management practices, and Chinese students get a deeper grasp of China's innovation. The Shenzhen module is a good example in this regard.

CEIBS offers "China Depth, Global Breadth". Our local courses deliver "China Depth". As for "Global Breadth", we provide Chinese students with various overseas study trips to help them understand how vast the world is. So far we have six overseas modules.

To date, students have learned about innovation in Israel, socially responsible leadership in Malaysia, entrepreneurship and innovation in Japan, manufacturing excellence in Germany and Switzerland, and entrepreneurship ecosystems and networks in the US. Next year, we will launch a new Silicon Valley module featuring topics around new technologies and their impact on

business and society.

As part of the Real Situation Learning Method, students have the opportunity to visit the places where new ideas and new technologies were born, and this is an important part of the experience. We also connect China with the rest of the world through these courses.

Recently, we have started another course in Jinhua in Zhejiang Province. Students travel to Jinhua where they eat and live together with the local people. This is not only about business, but also about experience. It gives students the opportunity to understand another side of China. Shanghai, Beijing, and Shenzhen represent the modern and open side of China, but in rural areas, there is a vaster version of China where there are other people with different values. The course makes students reflect on their own lives.

The Jinhua module is a project focused on developing internal leadership. If you want to lead others, you must lead yourself. You must know yourself – your advantages and disadvantages – you must reflect on your life and find out what is most important for you. These things will have an impact on your leadership style, because leadership starts from the core ability of self-understanding.

Leadership is also about making decisions under various sets of circumstances, and this is something that students learn about in our Gobi programme. As part of this

programme, students have to head for the Gobi Desert and finish a walk of 88km within three days. This is a very arduous challenge.

Leadership also incorporates acting. Actors are usually good at communication, emotional expression, and commanding attention, you can learn a lot from them.

As you can see, these courses also involve learning based on experience, though there is no case involved. I often ask people the question, "How do you learn to swim?" You have to jump into the pool and swallow some of the water. You can't just stand on the bank and learn about it by reading a book.

TheLINK: Why has the CEIBS MBA programme had so much success in implementing the Real Situation Learning Method?

The Real Situation Learning Method is an excellent idea. We are grateful to the professors who have taken pains to develop the courses and cases. In addition, this would not have been accomplished without our alumni, who are among our most precious assets. They keep in contact with the school and share their knowledge, and their companies offer students visiting and learning opportunities. We are very grateful to our alumni who are participating in RSLM and look forward to working with them and others in the years ahead.