Using research informed approaches to Strategic Human Resource Management teaching

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Abstract

There is extremely limited research that specifically examines the pedagogy of teaching Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM). To address this area of neglect we conducted a two-phase research project. The first phase was guided by the question: What teaching and learning (T&L) strategies should be employed in SHRM? This question was investigated using data gathered in three focus groups involving T&L specialists, strategic management and HRM academics, and HRM practitioners. Through a process of successive focussing, potential T&L strategies were initially identified and then tested and refined in the focus groups. Drawing on input from the participants and the literature, we make the case that SHRM can be effectively taught through a combination of primarily case-based and problem-based approaches. We also illustrate how process worksheets can be employed to provide problem solving support to students when they carry out complex learning tasks based on authentic SHRM problems. The second phase focussed on the question: How effective are the T&L strategies? To address this question we analysed data collected from students about the effectiveness of the T&L strategies. We also report our critical reflections on the experience of applying the T&L strategies in practice.

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1. Introduction

In the increasingly competitive and rapidly changing global environment of business, Human Resource Management (HRM) professionals are continually called upon to make greater strategic contributions to their organisations. It is postulated that the effective management of human resources will help organisations achieve sustained competitive advantage (Barney & Wright, 1998; Wright, McMahan, & McWilliams, 1994). Whilst the goal of a more strategic approach to HRM is generally agreed, the necessary change in orientation of HRM practitioners away from the transactional and compliance mindset to a focus on strategic issues is not yet universally evident (see, for example, Bartram & Rimmer, 2011; Kaufman, 2012; Sheehan & De Cieri, 2012). As the HRM profession seeks to develop a more strategic orientation, it is increasingly important to ensure that students graduating with a specialisation in HRM have a sound appreciation of the contribution that HRM professionals can make to achievement of a competitive advantage through the alignment of HRM with the organisation's business strategy. This necessitates a well-developed understanding of the strategic approach to HRM (Chadwick, 2005). However, as outlined below, as academics involved in seeking to develop such an authentic understanding among our students we are faced with two fundamental problems.

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The first problem we encounter is what we should include in our Strategic HRM (SHRM) curriculum. According to respected academics such as Boxall and Purcell (2011) and Marler (2012) the field of SHRM is an evolving discipline that integrates Strategic Management and Human Resource Management. SHRM is a complex area to understand “because of the sometimes confusing array of terminology that is used, the variety of approaches that have been adopted, and the differing levels of analysis” (Truss, Mankin, & Kellner, 2012, p. 86). This complexity combined with the relatively short history of SHRM academic literature (most has been published in the last 30 years according to Lengnick-Hall, Lengnick-Hall, Andrade, & Drake, 2009) creates challenges for academics when we consider what should be taught. Compared to fields such as Management and Marketing, the body of knowledge as to what constitutes SHRM is still not well defined (Chadwick, 2005). However, if academics are unable to provide students with a sufficiently coherent, organised representation of the SHRM literature, SHRM students’ learning and performance is likely to be impeded (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010).

The 'theory-praxis gap' creates additional challenges for us as academics seeking to ensure students acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSAs) that are identified as highly relevant by experts in both the academic and practitioner communities. HRM academics and practitioners often view different topics as important for SHRM practice, according to studies by Deadrick and Gibson (2007) and Rynes, Giluk, and Brown (2007). Since these experts hold differing views on the importance of SHRM topics, they are also likely to have different perspectives on what areas a core SHRM syllabus should comprise. As Ekebergh, Lepp, and Dahlberg (2004) have noted, such a gap between theory and praxis in education “affects the students' ability to develop understanding and professional knowledge that stems from both theory and practice” (p. 622).

The second fundamental problem that we face as SHRM academics is deciding how to effectively teach SHRM. We contend that teaching HRM presents fewer challenges than teaching SHRM and that different teaching approaches are necessary to effectively facilitate students’ learning in the two fields. To illustrate, HRM units of learning typically focus on the traditional sub-functional (or micro) domains of the field, such as recruitment, selection, training and performance appraisal. In Australia (and possibly several other countries) many HRM students, including undergraduates, are working while studying and through their work experiences they are exposed to these operational HRM activities. This means that HRM academics can facilitate students’ learning by relating theory and concepts to students' personal experiences. Furthermore, there is a small body of published research that has examined teaching methods in HRM (see, for example, Herman, 2008; Lovelace & Chung, 2010). This extant research provides some guidance to academics who are involved in teaching HRM.

In contrast, Strategic (or macro) HRM reflects a more organisationally focussed examination of HRM and addresses issues such as aligning ‘collections’ of HRM practices (i.e. HRM systems) with business strategy (Boxall & Purcell, 2011). Furthermore, because SHRM lies at the intersection of the HRM and Strategic Management literatures (Boxall & Purcell, 2011; Chadwick, 2005), students must develop an understanding of strategic management concepts (e.g. resource-based theory, strategic management process) and they must cultivate the ability to think strategically (Schneider & Lieb, 2004). Few SHRM students, particularly undergraduates, are likely to have exposure to strategic issues in their workplaces which can be drawn on to facilitate their learning. Since most students commencing their studies in the SHRM units (particularly undergraduates) lack the depth and breadth of knowledge and experience necessary to provide an adequate foundation for their new learning, SHRM teaching poses a more challenging task for academics than teaching its more functional counterpart. The gaps and insufficiencies in students’ prior knowledge and experience make it difficult to get students to participate in whole class and small group discussions in a meaningful way. The lecturer is unable to tap into students' prior knowledge and experience and employ it as a resource for the learning of others as often occurs with social-constructivist teaching and learning. Additionally, the business and management education literature provides limited guidance on how to effectively teach SHRM since the research specifically focussed on teaching SHRM is extremely limited.

The literature on teaching Strategic Management suggests that there are some similarities to teaching SHRM, but also some significant differences. For example, Strategic Management has traditionally been taught as a capstone unit in business education programmes (Ross & Rosenbloom, 2011; Schneider & Lieb, 2004). Students are expected to integrate and apply their earlier-acquired knowledge from an array of business disciplines (e.g. accounting, finance, and marketing) and adopt a top management perspective. Similarly, SHRM is commonly taught as a capstone unit within the HRM major and students are required to integrate and apply their knowledge of the sub-functional domains of HRM. The learning goals of SHRM also incorporate the development of the student’s ability to adopt a whole organisation view. In terms of differences, there is a fairly substantial body of published research that has examined teaching methods in Strategic Management (see, for example, Greiner, Hambri, & Cummings, 2003; Schneider & Lieb, 2004). Case studies and business simulations are well-established teaching methods in Strategic Management (Ross & Rosenbloom, 2011). The efficacies of these two methods have also been assessed in the literature (e.g. Kendall & Harrington, 2003) In contrast, there is a comparatively modest supply of written SHRM case studies and we are not aware of any SHRM simulations. Furthermore, as previously noted, the literature provides limited guidance on how to effectively teach SHRM. Consequently, teaching methods in SHRM are not yet established in the literature.

Within the context outlined above, the next section of this paper briefly summarises a study that we undertook to identify the core KSAs that SHRM students should acquire (Coetzer & Sotlington, 2014). This prior study addressed our first-mentioned problem: what should be taught in SHRM? Thereafter, we detail a two-phase research project that focussed on our second-mentioned problem: how should we teach SHRM?
2. What should be taught in SHRM?

We employed the Delphi method (Linstone & Turoff, 1975) to address the question: What core KSAs should SHRM students acquire? Three sequential surveys were administered to elicit opinions of 37 leading SHRM academics and senior HRM practitioners located in six different countries. In Round 1 panellists were presented with lists of KSAs derived from literature and asked to indicate how important each is in SHRM and to add any items that they thought were important but missing from the lists. The Round 2 survey listed knowledge and skills that panellists thought were important additions to our lists and they were asked to rate the importance of these additional items. Participants generally agreed with the attitude statements in Round 1, so they were asked to rank them in order of importance. In the Round 3 panellists were provided with consolidated lists of researcher -- and panellist-provided knowledge areas and skills and asked to select their top ten core knowledge areas and top five core skills.

Processes involved in the Delphi study generated 30 knowledge areas, 11 skills and 5 attitudes that panellists confirmed were important in SHRM. The panellists also helped to discriminate among these KSAs in terms of their relative importance for graduates by generating ranked lists of 10 knowledge areas, 5 skills and 5 attitudes. The expert panellists’ ranking gave us a very clear sense of where to focus our curriculum development efforts. The core KSAs that were identified through this Delphi study were subsequently translated into sets of learning outcomes for our undergraduate and postgraduate SHRM units.

3. How should SHRM be taught?

Having gathered expert opinion in relation to what should be taught in SHRM our next challenge was to tackle the how question. To deal with this challenge we initiated a study that was that guided by the question: What T&L strategies should be employed to foster students’ acquisition of the core KSAs identified in the Delphi study? This question was addressed in three focus groups that followed a process of successive focussing to initially identify and then test and refine the T&L strategies.

The focus group is a qualitative research method that essentially involves engaging a small number of people in an informal group discussion that is ‘focussed’ on a particular topic or set of issues (Liamputtong, 2009; Zikmund, 2010). Although focus groups are sometimes referred to as ‘group interviews’ (Morgan, 1997), the person facilitating the discussion (the moderator) does not ask questions of each group member in turn (Wilkinson, Joffe, & Yardley, 2004). Rather the moderator’s role is to facilitate group discussion by actively encouraging group members to interact with each other (Morgan, 1997). This heavy reliance on interaction between research participants, rather than individually answering the moderator’s questions, is a key feature of focus group research and it is this feature which most clearly distinguishes focus groups from one-to-one in-depth interviews (Liamputtong, 2009; Wilkinson et al. 2004).

The focus group was chosen as the research method for this phase of the study for three primary reasons. First, focus groups have been widely used for testing and refining concepts (Zikmund, 2010), including policies being proposed by public organisations, curriculum materials, and different delivery options for higher education in a community (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Through successive focus groups concepts, such as the proposed T&L strategies, can be continually modified, refined and retested until the concepts are deemed to be acceptable (Zikmund, 2010). Second, focus groups have been demonstrated in the literature as a reliable self-contained method for researching a range of topics in the domain of T&L, including enhancement of a curriculum for correctional health care workers (Haley, Ferguson, Brewer, & Hale, 2009) evaluation of a short course designed by university staff for practicing midwives (Alexander, Anderson, & Cunningham, 2002) and assessing the educational needs of the primary care physician for the management of asthma (Davis, Man, Cave, McBennett, & Cook, 2000). Third, the focus group method was preferred to individual semi-structured interviews because group interaction is likely to produce a wider range of information, insights, and ideas than a number of personal interviews would provide (Liamputtong, 2009; Morgan, 1997; Zikmund, 2010).

In designing the focus group study we identified three groups of people who had insight on the topic: T&L specialists, HRM and strategic management academics, and HRM practitioners. Each of the three focus groups would provide information from a different perspective. We adopted the guidelines provided by Krueger and Casey (2009) regarding the composition and size of each focus group. In regard to group composition, with the aim of ensuring that participants would feel comfortable saying what they think, we avoided mixing people who may feel they have different levels of expertise related to the focus group topic. We restricted the sizes of the focus groups to five to eight participants as in the opinion of Krueger and Casey, this is the ideal size of a focus group for most non-commercial topics.

All participants in our study were personally recruited by the researchers from our lists of personal contacts. We contacted potential participants through face-to-face, telephone or electronic mail communications and provided them with an Information Letter that outlined the study. The focus groups were facilitated by the members of the research team, one moderated the discussion (Zikmund, 2010) and the other took notes to support the digital recordings (Liamputtong, 2009). The first focus group comprised T&L specialists (7) and the discussion explored a range of potential T&L strategies that could be employed to help students demonstrate achievement of SHRM learning outcomes. Including T&L specialists who work with academics across all disciplines, we anticipated, would allow some ‘blue sky’ thinking and provide us with access to a wealth of teaching strategies that may be adaptable for use in the SHRM context. These specialists were able to suggest teaching strategies used in fields as diverse as Nursing, Speech Pathology, Engineering, Computing and Counter-Terrorism to name just a few. For example, from this input we identified similarities between teaching ‘soft skills’ needed to diagnose and address organisational problems in SHRM and teaching students to diagnose and develop treatment plans in clinical situations. The input from this focus group broadened our horizons considerably.
The second and third focus groups comprised HRM and strategic management academics (5) and HRM practitioners (5) respectively and they helped us to address issues relating to implementation of the T&L strategy that was distilled from the first focus group. As noted, SHRM integrates the fields of strategic management and HRM and there is scholarly debate about the teaching of strategic management. Accordingly, we anticipated that our colleagues who taught strategic management would be insightful contributors to the focus group discussion. The focus group comprised of strategic management and HRM academics were able to assist us to focus some of the more creative approaches identified with the T&L specialists to the practicality of teaching in a business discipline. The final focus group consisted of senior HRM professionals. This group were able to add value to the proposed teaching strategies by suggesting ways in which the approaches could be developed in order to provide authentic learning experiences and associated assessment tasks that would be of practical benefit to students and their future employers.

The discussion in the focus groups was captured using audio recording, field notes and flip charts. Recording information on flip charts during the focus group afforded the participants opportunities to verify and amend summaries of the discussion. Soon after the focus group the research team compared notes to provide internal checks and balances. Notes-based analysis was employed to discover the core ideas, with audio used as a backup and to clarify any confusing aspects of the notes. We used conventional qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to interpret meaning from the content of the text data. In this approach to content analysis the researchers immerse themselves in the data through a process of reading and rereading the field notes to allow new insights to emerge. Knowledge generated from their analysis is based on the research participants’ unique perspectives and is grounded in the actual data (Hsieh & Shannon).

4. First focus group – a teaching strategy for SHRM

Our analysis of the field notes from the first focus group suggested that a T&L strategy involving a combination of primarily case-based learning and problem-based learning (PBL) would be appropriate for achievement of the SHRM learning outcomes. The case method is heavily used as a teaching tool in business and management education (Currie & Tempest, 2007; Liang & Wang, 2004), including the teaching which occurs within the fields of strategy (Greiner et al., 2003) and HRM (see, for example, Muller-Camen, Croucher, & Leigh, 2008). The general goal of employing the case method is to bring “a chunk of reality” into the classroom which can provide a form of simulated experience (Garvin, 2007). Good case studies describe real business and management situations in contextually rich detail and in a manner that captures the complexity of organisational life (Liang & Wang, 2004). The case study forms the basis of class discussion and students are expected to apply theory and concepts to the specific business and management situation described in the case (Garvin, 2007). Through analysing case studies it is anticipated that students will learn how to solve complex problems in the real world (Banning, 2003).

The case study method is purported to proffer an array of educational benefits, for example, cases: develop diagnostic skills; foster integration of business discipline knowledge; stimulate involvement and motivation of students (Rees & Porter, 2002); provide practical, relevant examples; anchor concepts and theoretical frameworks in accessible, analogous settings; and couple knowledge acquisition to decision making and action (Garvin, 2007). Nevertheless, despite its prevalence in business and management education, the case method has been subjected to significant criticism. Such criticisms include: the approach that is often adopted to teaching cases studies is teacher-centred as opposed to student-centred because the teacher simply enacts “a formulaic progression to a pre-determined conclusion” (Currie & Tempest, 2007, p. 43); the case method typically emphasises theory and analysis, while development of behavioural skills and the ability to take action is often neglected in teaching (Greiner et al., 2003); and teaching cases tend to depict a rationalistic (and thus simplistic) reality and downplay other aspects of organisational life, such as political and emotional issues (Liang & Wang, 2004).

Given that the research team were already using case-based learning, a decision was made to explore implementation issues relating to PBL in the subsequent focus groups with a view to employing PBL as a complement to the case study method. As part of our preparation for the focus group with the HRM and strategic management academics we developed sample process worksheets to support PBL approaches. The notions of PBL and process worksheets are discussed in the work that follows, thereafter we summarise findings of the focus groups with the HRM and strategic management academics and the HRM practitioners.

A review of literature on PBL (see, for example, Savery, 2006; Strobel & van Barneveld, 2009; Jonassen, 2011) reveals that the origins of PBL in higher education can be traced to medical schools and suggests that its key characteristics are well-known among proponents of PBL. Three frequently mentioned characteristics of PBL are: (1) learning is problem focussed – a complex and authentic problem embodied by alignment to professional practice is the focus of all learning; (2) student-centred – the teacher takes on a facilitative role that allows students the freedom to learn independently; (3) self-directed – students determine what they need to learn. Advocates of PBL (e.g. Strobel & van Barneveld, 2009) often contrast PBL with the traditional learning approach which is characterised as being large class, instructor-driven, lecture-based deliveries. Several studies have been conducted to investigate the effectiveness of PBL compared to lecture-based approaches (see, for example, Sungur, Tekkaya, & Geban, 2006; Walker & Leary, 2009). However, the available evidence offers little support for the superiority of PBL over traditional approaches to date (Savery, 2006). Nevertheless, PBL has been used successfully for teaching in a wide range of domains such as medicine, engineering, science and economics for several decades (Savery, 2006; Strobel & van Barneveld, 2009). These are all domains where students need to apply theoretical knowledge and understanding to address specific problems in the workplace, for example diagnosing illness, developing treatment plans, designing building specifications and so on. SHRM students similarly will need to utilise their theoretical knowledge and understanding and apply this to people and business problems they will encounter in their organisations.
The process worksheet is an effective method of providing problem solving support to students when they are required to carry out complex learning activities that are based on real life tasks (Hummel, Paas, & Koper, 2004; Nadolski, Kirschner, & Van Merrienboer, 2005; Van Merrienboer & Sweller, 2005) and may actually increase learning. Such realistic whole learning tasks often require problem solving skills (Van Merrienboer & Sweller, 2005). The process worksheet describes the phases that students should go through when solving a complex problem. Students can consult the process worksheet as they are working on the whole learning task. While the process worksheet provides supportive process-oriented information and a systematic approach to problem solving (Hummel et al. 2004) it does not guarantee a correct solution (Van Merrienboer & Sweller, 2005). Splitting up the whole learning task into a number of smaller steps or task assignments also affords opportunities to provide formative feedback on the quality of the individual task assignments (Nadolski et al. 2005) while leaving the essence of the whole task intact (Van Merrienboer & Sweller, 2005).

The efficacy of process worksheets has been empirically supported. For example, using law students as their participants Nadolski et al. (2005) examined the effects of process worksheets on the whole learning task of preparing and pleading a case in court. They found that the availability of a process worksheet with the optimum number of steps to guide the learner through the problem-solving process of the whole learning task had positive effects on the content and coherence of participants’ plea performance. Furthermore, learners who received guidance through process worksheets outperformed learners who were left to discover the appropriate problem-solving process for the whole learning task themselves.

5. Second and third focus groups – PBL implementation issues

As noted, the focus group with T&L specialists helped uncover a T&L strategy for SHRM that involved a combination of primarily PBL and case-based learning. In the subsequent focus groups with academics and practitioners we explored implementation issues relating to PBL. The HRM and strategic management academics in our focus group identified several potential educational benefits of the proposed problem-based T&L strategy. These include: (1) learning tasks based on real-life tasks are the driving force for learning; (2) the process worksheets provide problem-solving support; (3) the provision of formative feedback after each sub-task should enhance the quality of students’ whole task performance; and (4) the approach fosters a student-centred and self-directed learning environment. However, the participants also identified implementation challenges, in particular, determining the most appropriate level of scaffolding necessary to support: (1) students’ learning to solve different kinds of problems; and (2) different kinds of learners. Scaffolding involves providing guidance and support to students only when it is required during problem solving to ensure that their learning progresses and then gradually removing the support as students’ competence increases (Fitzgerald & Larkin, 2008).

Members of the HRM practitioner focus group maintained that at postgraduate level SHRM students should be exposed to a significant component of practice-related learning and that the whole learning task(s) should be based on an actual organisational problem or opportunity in HRM as an authentic form of assessment. SHRM students could therefore work in small groups to produce consultancy-type project reports developing a persuasive business case for HR investment. In this context, the individual task assignments in the process worksheet should parallel the stages of a problem-solving process towards development of a business case. In response to the practitioner suggestions a combination of process worksheets and team-based learning was developed to support an authentic consultancy-type project with the post-graduate student group.

According to Michaelsen, Knight, and Fink (2004) the team-based learning approach deepens student learning by requiring pre-class preparation and application of course concepts to a specific problem. In this case the problems were at the progressive stages of the whole task, as outlined in the process worksheets. Michaelsen et al. suggest that for team-based learning to be effective permanent groups should be formed, students should be made accountable for both individual and group work, tasks should not be such that they can be divided up amongst the group and completed individually and students should receive frequent, timely feedback. Additionally, groups should work on the same tasks at the same time, with groups being required to make a specific choice that is reported simultaneously by all groups.

6. Actual implementation of PBL

In this section we outline how PBL was implemented in both an undergraduate and postgraduate SHRM unit and reveal the process worksheets that were used to afford problem solving support to students as they worked to demonstrate achievement of selected learning outcomes. These selected learning outcomes relate to employees as potential source of sustainable competitive advantage, strategic thinking in SHRM and developing a persuasive business case for HR investment. The learning experiences that we designed to assist students in acquiring the knowledge and skills associated with these learning outcomes were also intended to shape their attitudes, as we explain below.

In order to demonstrate how a problem-based approach supported by process worksheets can be used to make students’ learning of complex whole tasks more effective, three process worksheets have been incorporated into this paper. One focusses on a whole task designed to foster a desired core attitude of SHRM, the second shows a task that is intended to develop a core skill in SHRM, and the third forms the basis for an authentic major assessment drawing on the range of learning covered through the unit.

Process Worksheet 1 (Appendix A) is designed to address the learning outcome: Students will be able to demonstrate a belief in, or appreciation of, employees as a source of sustainable competitive advantage. This learning outcome comprises a cognitive outcome as well as an affective (attitudinal) outcome. Thus, to foster the learning necessary to accomplish this learning
outcome, a combination of PBL and role play is employed. The learning experience is initiated by presenting students with an authentic assessment around the problem: How would you persuade a company board of directors that employees and the ways in which they are managed are a potential source of sustainable competitive advantage? The process worksheet is designed to bring this complex whole task within the reach of the learners’ capabilities by segmenting it into five meaningful task assignments: (1) develop conceptual arguments; (2) develop empirical (evidence-based) arguments; (3) develop arguments using information from ‘real world’ high-performing organisations; (4) prepare a persuasive presentation; and (5) give a persuasive presentation. Students receive formative feedback after completing task assignments 1, 2 and 3 and summative feedback after completing task assignment 5. As indicated in the process worksheet, in the final task assignment students give an oral presentation (as part of a small group) in which they address the problem statement. Each student group has an opportunity to play the role of a HRM team, while another student group takes on the role of a company board of directors. There is empirical evidence that certain types of role playing experiences can facilitate the acceptance of new beliefs and opinion change (see, for example, Janis & King, 1954; McGregor, 1993). Thus, involving students in a role playing experience has the potential to positively shape their attitudes toward viewing employees as potential source of sustainable advantage.

The task ‘develop empirical (evidence-based) arguments’ (task assignment 2 in Process Worksheet 1 and task assignment 3 in Process Worksheet 3) is likely to be the most challenging assignment for students. This is because, as Truss et al. (2012, p. 146) have noted, “the SHRM-performance literature is one that is beset with problems and controversies”. Nevertheless, there are at least two fairly uncomplicated evidence-based arguments that students could employ in their presentations. The first type of argument is that there are a substantial number of studies that correlate high levels of employee engagement with positive outcomes for employees and organisations (see, for example, MacLeod & Clarke, 2009). A second type of straightforward argument would involve drawing on the service profit chain model which in brief proposes that employee satisfaction has a positive effect on service quality which leads to customer satisfaction and thence to shareholder financial returns (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 2008). On the other hand, it would be reasonable to expect postgraduate students in particular to be able to develop evidence-based arguments that draw on the High Performance Work Practices (HPWP) literature. However, in their presentations students should also be expected demonstrate an understanding of the limitations of HPWPs research (see, for example, Combs, Liu, Hall, & Ketchen, 2006; Kauffman, 2012). An understanding of most of the research limitations (e.g. wide variation in the practices that have been examined and in the performance measures used) does not require an advanced knowledge of research methods.

Process Worksheet 2 (Appendix B) is designed to address the learning outcome: Students will be able to employ systems thinking to identify and analyse a range of key factors that will influence management choices in HRM. To foster the learning necessary to accomplish this learning outcome, primarily PBL is employed. This learning experience is initiated by presenting students with the problem: What key internal and external factors are likely to have shaped the HRM systems that are currently being employed in a selected organisation or across a selected sector? To make students’ learning more manageable, this complex authentic assessment has been split up into five steps: (1) build the theoretical and conceptual foundation; (2) identify and analyse relevant internal subsystems; (3) identify and analyse the organisation’s (or sector’s) key stakeholders; (4) conduct a scan of the organisation’s (or sector’s) external environment; and (5) identify, analyse and report on the key factors that potentially influence management’s choices in HRM in a selected organisation (or sector). Students receive formative feedback after completing task assignments 1, 2, 3 and 4 and summative feedback after completing task assignment 5. To complete the final task assignment students work as part of a small group to conduct a written review of the factors that might affect HRM in a selected organisation, or the HRM model that is generally employed within a specific sector.

Process Worksheet 3 (Appendix C) presents the more complex requirement for postgraduate student groups. It is designed to develop students’ strategic thinking capabilities and address the learning outcome: Make a persuasive business case for HR investments. This learning outcome was expanded in developing the Process Worksheet to ‘Make a persuasive business case for organisational investment in HR strategies that align the workforce with organisational goals’ (refer Appendix C). This is to clarify what ‘HR investments’ means in the organisational context and the reference to alignment with organisational goals is intended to keep students focussed on the ultimate role of SHRM within organisations as they apply the Process Worksheet to their assessment task.

To foster the learning necessary to accomplish this learning outcome, a combination of PBL, team-based learning and role play is employed in an authentic assessment designed to complement formal material delivered throughout the teaching semester. The unit is designed around providing structured team-based learning experiences that are supported by each stage of the process worksheet. Development and implementation of strategy, particularly HR strategy, involves translating the overall direction and focus of the organisation into HR strategies to enable employees to fulfil the organisation’s strategic objectives (Cascio & Boudreau, 2012). In order to be accepted by organisations, development and implementation of HR strategy requires the HR team to work collaboratively, consulting with affected stakeholders such as senior management and employees, in order to develop a business case for the necessary investment. The SHRM unit is structured around a combination of problem-based and team-based learning approaches to provide an opportunity to replicate the collaborative effort required to build a persuasive business case.

The team-based learning approach proposed by Wright (2012) was used. This approach comprises regular structured debates within each student group at key points during the semester. These require each group to reach consensus on three key questions that drive development of their business case development. The first debate relates to which of four proposed companies will be the focus of the group’s business case development. Once the company has been agreed, students spend out of class time independently investigating the company and industry in order to ascertain the likely threats it faces.
Following lecture sessions covering the subject of business risk and HR’s contribution to its mitigation, student groups propose key business risks faced by their company. Through the team-based learning process, each group then comes to consensus on which risk area is the most crucial for their company to address.

Further into the semester when lecture material has covered discussion of HR strategy design and implementation, the student groups identify approximately four HR strategies that may effectively address the business risk previously identified. Through the team-based learning process groups reach consensus on one strategy for which they will develop their persuasive business case for HR investment. To make students’ learning more manageable, the six steps of the complex authentic assessment are split into: (1) research the goals and current performance of the selected organisation; (2) identify and analyse possible HRM initiatives that could be effective in improving alignment between the workforce and organisational goals; (3) identify and gather data about ‘real world’ examples to demonstrate how the proposed initiative has previously been effective in achieving alignment; (4) develop targeted arguments to influence key stakeholders; (5) build a logical, balanced argument to support the implementation of the preferred initiative; (6) present the business case to the company board of directors. Students receive formative feedback after completing task assignments 1, 2 and 3 and summative feedback after completing tasks assignment 5 and 6. To complete the final task each group of students act as the company board of directors to whom another group presents. After ‘board deliberations’ groups provide feedback on whether the business case is deemed adequately persuasive to be accepted.

7. Evaluation of the teaching and learning strategies

The second phase of the research project involved evaluating the T&L strategies outlined above during and immediately after the semesters in which we employed the strategies. As part of this process, two cohorts of undergraduate students and one cohort of postgraduate students were asked to complete a survey designed to gather their opinions on the effectiveness of the T&L strategies employed in the unit. Students were provided with a list of eleven items comprised of learning activities and learning resources and asked to indicate how useful each activity or resource had been in their learning. They rated each item on a five-point Likert scale (not at all useful; extremely useful). The questionnaire was completed by 59 (of 82) undergraduate and 17 (of 17) postgraduate SHRM students. Table 1 shows the three most useful and the three least useful learning activities or learning resources in the opinion of each student cohort. It also shows the outcome when results for the two groups are combined.

The results indicate that case study analysis and the associated in-class discussion and feedback between student groups were perceived as the most useful learning activities. In contrast, in the opinion of students, reading the prescribed text and the readings located by students themselves made the least useful contributions to their learning. Compared to other long-established fields in the business and management discipline (e.g. Marketing, Organisational Behaviour), few textbooks are available on SHRM, thus affording instructors very limited options. We concur with Boxall and Purcell (2011) that many books that are titled SHRM merely carry on the preoccupation of the personnel administration literature with the classical sub-functions of HR practices (e.g. selection, appraisal, training) “with the word ‘strategic’ slipped in front” (p.xii). Furthermore, very few, if any, of the small stock of SHRM textbooks that show sufficient concern for integrating the two fields of theory and practice (i.e. Strategic Management and HRM) provide a pedagogically rich resource when compared to textbooks in other long-established fields. The finding that students perceived the readings they located themselves as not very useful learning resources is also not surprising. As noted, SHRM is a complex area to understand and the body of knowledge as to what constitutes SHRM is still not well defined. Moreover, SHRM’s boundaries with the fields of Strategic Management and HRM are fuzzy. These characteristics of SHRM make it difficult for students to navigate the terrain and locate useful readings on their own.

Table 2 shows the numbers of undergraduate and postgraduate students who rated the process worksheets as either very or extremely useful. The results for undergraduate students show a majority (44/59) perceived the process worksheet for preparing the group oral presentation as either very or extremely useful. Similarly, a majority (47/59) rated the process worksheet for preparing the group report as either very or extremely useful. Results for postgraduate students are similar, with a majority (13/17) perceiving the process worksheet for preparing the group oral presentation as either very or extremely useful and a majority (12/17) also rating the process worksheet for preparing the group report as either very or extremely useful. The combined results show that about 75% of students rated each of the two process worksheets as either very or extremely useful.

Table 1
Perceived usefulness of learning activities and resources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranked</th>
<th>Undergraduate</th>
<th>Postgraduate</th>
<th>Combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most useful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Analysing cases in class.</td>
<td>Analysing cases in class.</td>
<td>Analysing cases in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>The feedback you received on your work.</td>
<td>In-class discussion and feedback between groups.</td>
<td>In-class discussion and feedback between groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Readings provided by the lecturer.</td>
<td>Lectures on SHRM topics.</td>
<td>Lectures on SHRM topics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least useful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th</td>
<td>Reading the prescribed text book.</td>
<td>Reading the prescribed text book.</td>
<td>Reading the prescribed text book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>Readings you found in the library.</td>
<td>Readings you found in the library.</td>
<td>Readings you found in the library.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>The process of writing your group report.</td>
<td>The process worksheet for preparing the group report.</td>
<td>The process worksheet for preparing the group report.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interestingly, the results suggest that the undergraduate students found the process worksheets for the group oral presentation and the group report to be somewhat more useful than the actual associated learning tasks. Anecdotal evidence suggests students’ ratings of how useful they found the two group learning tasks may have been negatively affected by the problems typically associated with student group work. One potential implication for teaching staff is that more should be done to ensure that students have a positive group learning experience by implementing suggestions for improving student group work (see, for example, Hansen, 2006).

In the case of the postgraduate group, the process worksheet for preparing the group report was rated one of the least useful despite 12 out 17 students rating it as very/extremely useful. This suggests that, at least amongst this small sample, the difference between items rated as ‘least’ and ‘most’ useful was minimal, with the ‘least’ useful still being considered to be of benefit to students. The difference between undergraduate and postgraduate groups in this regard may be attributable to the team-based learning approach used with the postgraduate cohort, which proved successful in developing group cohesion and mutual responsibility. The structure of the team-based learning debates replicated the steps in the process worksheet, which meant students may have had less need to refer to the worksheet directly. They were clear on what was required for preparation of the report from the structured team-based learning activities and may therefore not have realised that these aligned with the process worksheet stages.

We acknowledge that there are limitations associated with our approach to evaluating the T&L strategy. For example, the evaluation results are based on a modest sample drawn from three cohorts of SHRM students. Moreover, there are limitations associated with relying on students’ reactions to the T&L approaches, as opposed to collecting data about the quality of students’ learning under different T&L approaches (Holton, 1996). Further studies that employ quasi-experimental research designs should provide more definitive evidence about the efficacy of alternative T&L strategies in SHRM.

### 8. Reflections on our teaching practice

We employed the experiential learning model of Kolb (1984) as a framework for structuring our reflections on the teaching and learning strategies in practice. According to Kolb, learning involves a four-stage cyclical process. In brief, the cycle begins with the learner’s involvement in a specific experience (concrete experience). In the second stage of the learning cycle the learner reflects on this experience from several perspectives in an attempt to find its meaning (reflective observation). Based on this reflection the learner draws conclusions (abstract conceptualisation). These conclusions guide the learner’s future decisions and actions (active experimentation) that lead to new concrete experiences. Our reflections on our teaching practice and the conclusions we generated were informed by data from a range of sources, including the university’s centrally administered survey that seeks student feedback on the quality of their units and teaching within those units and from students’ reflective reports.

We make three main observations regarding delivery of the SHRM undergraduate unit. First, the provision of formative feedback did not materialise as intended. As illustrated in the two process worksheets (Appendix A and B), students are supposed to be given formative feedback after completing sub-tasks that comprise the whole task. We assumed that the opportunities to receive formative feedback would encourage most students to complete sub-tasks sufficiently early to enable them to receive and respond to formative feedback. However, a majority of the students did not take up this opportunity, presumably because they completed the sub-tasks too close to the assignment due date. Consequently, in future offerings formative feedback will occur in scheduled workshops and marks will be awarded for student participation in formative feedback processes. Second, most student group presentations on the topic ‘making the case for employees as a potential source of sustainable advantage’ lacked persuasiveness. While most groups effectively used facts and logical arguments in persuasive presentations (e.g. watch a persuasive presentation being modelled) and ‘persuasiveness’ will be given a greater weight in the marking scheme. Third, although the SHRM literature emphasises aligning HRM with business strategy (i.e. vertical alignment), most students’ reports on the topic ‘identify and analyse the array of factors that might influence management choices in HRM’ omitted business strategy as an influential internal contextual factor. Such an omission may be entirely consistent with the ‘processual’ perspective on strategy, that is, there may be no clearly articulated business strategy with which to match HRM policy (Legge, 2005). Nevertheless, given the prominence that is afforded to vertical alignment in the SHRM literature, in future reports students will be required to assess the extent of vertical alignment in the organisation or sector they studied and support their analysis with references to literature relating to perspectives on strategy.

Similar issues were evident with the postgraduate cohort. In order to address alignment with business strategy this group were required to develop a persuasive business case for HR investment for an identified local company to provide students with a realistic context and access to real company strategy information. Students were provided with companies to select

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**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Undergraduates (very/extremely useful)</th>
<th>Postgraduates (very/extremely useful)</th>
<th>Combined (very/extremely useful)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The process worksheet for preparing the group oral presentation.</td>
<td>44/59</td>
<td>13/17</td>
<td>57/76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The process worksheet for preparing the group report.</td>
<td>47/59</td>
<td>12/17</td>
<td>59/76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
between by the lecturer. The companies identified all met requirements of being locally based and therefore deemed to be accessible to students, had comprehensive web presence which was considered to be a suitable source of company information and represented a broad range of industries that students were likely to have some familiarity with, for example, local not-for-profit organisations, common franchise businesses, well known food outlets and so on. Whilst these companies were intended to provide a diverse range of choice to students, the most difficult aspect of the authentic learning task undertaken by the postgraduate group was reported by most students as gaining access to sufficiently insightful information about the company in order to correctly assess the key risk to be addressed. This formed the starting point of the task and was therefore a crucial aspect of the project.

This difficulty may have been overcome by encouraging students to select one of the group member’s own organisations as the focus of the assignment. This was initially discounted for a number of reasons, including concerns that this may give the employee member of the group undue influence and power in the group, giving other group members little voice. Additionally, whilst company knowledge is important it was hoped that ‘externals’ would bring fresh eyes to current practices and challenge accepted norms. For example, groups were required to thoroughly research the industry and external environment their company operates in, in order to demonstrate how their proposals align with the company’s vision, mission and strategic direction. A current employee may provide this information to the group without critical reflection and may be too immersed in the company culture, ethos and accepted ways of doing things to critically assess their organisation. Finally, it was anticipated that the current employee may undertake a disproportionate amount of work compared to other group members because of superior company knowledge and that this inequity would damage group cohesion. Groups were advised however they could select a group member’s company if they considered these issues would not cause a problem for them. In future, the benefits of company and industry knowledge may outweigh these concerns.

Similar to the undergraduate group, the business cases presented by the postgraduate cohort did not demonstrate the standard of persuasion anticipated, despite the process being generally well done and the standard of reports and presentations being appropriate to this level. When presented to their colleagues, each group’s suggestions were considered sound. But the delivery of both the written reports and the class presentation would not have been sufficiently convincing to a non-HRM audience as the focus was generally on the benefits of the proposed strategy to employees with little emphasis on how the proposed strategy would overcome the identified risks and be of strategic benefit to the business. To overcome this limitation, accessing an industry partner from each company to mentor the groups and act as a sounding board for their ideas would perhaps give them greater insights into the level of persuasion required for their proposals to be accepted. This approach would also be aided by the selection of companies from amongst the student’s current employers.

9. Conclusion and implications

After database searching it seems that extremely limited research has specifically examined the pedagogy of teaching SHRM. We contend that it is important to address this area of neglect. This is because, as we have argued, HRM graduates should have a well-developed understanding of the strategic approach to HRM. However, as noted, for many students SHRM is a field that is difficult to understand. This paper makes a contribution to this area of neglect by sharing knowledge about the teaching of SHRM. More specifically, our contributions are as follows. First, we make a research-informed case for a particular T&L strategy in SHRM and present an evaluation of the strategy from the perspective of SHRM students. Second, we illustrate how process worksheets can be employed as a pedagogical technique in SHRM to bring complex whole tasks within the reach of the learners’ existing capabilities. Third, we contribute tacit knowledge and practical suggestions about the teaching of SHRM. These two contributions were generated through critical reflection on the concrete experience of applying the T&L strategies in practice. Our reflections were also informed by data from a range of sources (e.g. students’ reflective reports). We hope that our research and the resultant contributions will stimulate and inform further research that also involves generating and evaluating T&L strategies in SHRM.

A key implication of our research findings is that complementing the case study method with guided PBL constitutes a potentially effective approach to teaching SHRM. We anticipate that case studies are already widely used in teaching SHRM. However, as we have noted, the case study method has been subjected to significant criticism (e.g. Greiner et al., 2003; Liang & Wang, 2004). Furthermore, Chadwick (2005) has argued that in SHRM there is “a dearth of instructional materials that emphasize strategy integrated with HRM” (p. 206). In our view a lack of suitable SHRM instructional materials is still evident today; including a dearth of strategy infused HRM case study material. Given the general limitations of the case study method, and the lack of suitable case study material in SHRM, our preliminary work suggests that guided PBL tasks can play an important complementary role in a constructivist approach to teaching SHRM. In regard to guided PBL tasks, a further implication which stems from student feedback is that process worksheets are a useful pedagogical technique for bringing complex authentic SHRM tasks within the reach of the learners’ existing capabilities. Finally, for those who feel encouraged by our work to employ a teaching approach which involves students engaging in authentic PBL tasks that are guided by process worksheets, there is an array of fine-grained implications contained in the section of the paper that discusses reflections on our experiences of applying such an approach in practice.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on this study.
## Appendices

### APPENDIX A

**Sample Process Worksheet 1**  
**Whole Learning Task:**  
Make a case for viewing employees as a potential source of sustainable competitive advantage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task assignment 1</th>
<th>Task assignment 2</th>
<th>Task assignment 3</th>
<th>Task assignment 4</th>
<th>Task assignment 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Brief task description:**  
Students must identify, analyse and summarise relevant conceptual arguments (e.g. resource-based theory, distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge, organisational culture as a source of sustainable advantage).

**Note:** Students receive formative feedback after completing task assignments 1, 2 & 3 and summative feedback after completing task assignment 5.


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### APPENDIX B

**Sample Process Worksheet 2**  
**Whole Learning Task:**  
Identify and analyse the array of factors that might influence management strategic choices in HRM.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task assignment 1</th>
<th>Task assignment 2</th>
<th>Task assignment 3</th>
<th>Task assignment 4</th>
<th>Task assignment 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Build the theoretical and conceptual foundation.</td>
<td>Identify and analyse relevant internal subsystems.</td>
<td>Identify and analyse the organisation’s key stakeholders.</td>
<td>Conduct a scan of the organisation’s external environment.</td>
<td>Identify and analyse the key factors that potentially influence management’s strategic choices in HRM.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Brief task description:**  
Students must analyse and summarise relevant theories and concepts including open systems theory, contingency theory, stakeholder theory and the Harvard framework.

**Note:** Students receive formative feedback after completing task assignments 1, 2, 3 & 4 and summative feedback after completing task assignment 5.

### APPENDIX C

Sample Process Worksheet 3

**Whole Learning Task:**
Make a persuasive business case for organisational investment in HR strategies that align the workforce with organisational goals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task assignment 1</th>
<th>Task assignment 2</th>
<th>Task assignment 3</th>
<th>Task assignment 4</th>
<th>Task assignment 5</th>
<th>Task assignment 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Brief task description:** Students research the goals and current performance of the nominated organisation and identify, analyse and summarise evidence for any lack of alignment (or potential for improved alignment) between the workforce and organisational goals.

**Brief task description:** Students identify, analyse and summarise some key HRM initiatives that could be effective in improving alignment between the workforce and organisational goals (e.g. value-based HR initiatives such as employee health and well-being, cost saving HR initiatives and IHR initiatives that have the potential to increase revenue i.e. the service-profit chain).

**Brief task description:** Students identify and gather data about ‘real world’ examples of how the proposed initiative has been effective in achieving alignment in other organisations (e.g. empirical studies involving culture change, employer engagement, organisational change as well as specific case studies that support the literature).

**Brief task description:** Students consider key stakeholders whose support is necessary for implementation of the initiative. Students analyse and demonstrate the potential benefits and drawbacks of the initiative from the key stakeholders’ perspectives, including explanation of how they can be managed or overcome.

**Brief task description:** Students build a logical, balanced argument to support the implementation of their preferred initiative. The case should highlight how the initiative will increase alignment, emphasising benefits and management of any negative aspects. The case should indicate how its effectiveness can be evaluated, how costs can be monitored and managed etc. in order to demonstrate the initiative is achievable within budget, on time etc.

**Brief task description:** As the HR team recommending the strategy, students present their business case to the company board of directors. Students also take on the role of key stakeholder decision makers for another HR team as that company’s board. Board member / stakeholders are required to review the case following initial presentation, develop insightful questions and respond to the presenting HR team.

**Purpose of each task assignment:**

- To understand what the company’s goals are and where there are current problems, misalignment or improvement opportunities.
- To research possible strategies that might be useful in achieving improved alignment.
- To research evidence of what will assist in ‘selling’ the proposal by showing how the proposed strategy has been effective elsewhere.
- To ensure students are able to identify and acknowledge potential issues or concerns that might need to be discussed and develop plans to overcome them.
- To ensure students are able to convince the board that their strategy can be implemented effectively within company parameters and to explain how effectiveness can be measured/demonstrated.
- To give students the opportunity to present and defend their proposal. As the board, students are in a position to understand how such a proposal might be received by the board.

Note: Students receive formative feedback after completing task assignments 1, 3 & 4 and summative feedback after completing task assignment 5 & 6.

**References**


