



THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

COCREATING HIGHER EDUCATION WITH BUSINESS PARTNERS IN TIMES OF CRISIS

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE BSC
RETAIL PROGRAM



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This is a preprint from the book "Sweden Through the Crisis", to be published in the fall by SIR, Stockholm School of Economics Institute for Research.

Even before the new Coronavirus entered as a force of change in early 2020, the pedagogical model of contemporary business schools was under pressure. One key challenge has been the need to provide students not only with theoretical insights and frameworks, but to also combine academic learning with practical understanding and skills. Several pedagogical tools were employed to attempt to bridge the gap between business education and practice. Common ways to increase the practical relevance of education is to invite companies to give guest lectures and feedback on assignments or involve them in live-cases and internships and to employ games and simulations. In the bachelor program in Retail Management at the Stockholm School of Economics, we have taken a different route. More specifically, we have met this challenge through the development of an Applied Retail Track (ART) and the *Antonia Ax:son Johnson Tutorial program (Tutorials)*. These two program-unique courses aim to bridge theory and practice and create “well-rounded” students who experience deeper learning than is achievable within individual courses.

The unique setup with ART and Tutorials also enables faculty to work innovatively with pedagogy and various ways of learning (Lange et. al 2018). Both rely heavily on situated learning, with a key feature being physical meetings meant to take place in specific physical spaces (e.g. company sites, retail stores, faculty offices, and campus meeting rooms). When COVID-19 hit Sweden in mid-March 2020, SSE decided to move to distant learning and online pedagogy. In this paper, we discuss the challenges that we faced in ART and Tutorials as well as key pedagogical takeaways from the adjustments that we made. We also describe how we used COVID-19 as a case on science mindedness and empathy in Tutorials.

The need for situated learning in higher education

Both ART and Tutorials run parallel with traditional courses throughout the three-year program and address weaknesses in traditional business educations when it comes to situating individual cour-

ses in a business (ART) and academic (Tutorial) context. A key strength in ART and Tutorials is also that they run over three years allowing for student reflection, progression, and deeper learning over time.

The ART pedagogy builds on experiential and situated learning and is co-created with partner companies. The overall aim is to achieve a *win-win-win* situation for students, company, and faculty. Students participate in workshops on business challenges, make company visits, attend theme lectures, participate in career discussions, and conduct company projects. Fifteen to eighteen bachelor students and one faculty member are assigned to each partnering company for a year, approximately one third of the students comes from the different academic years in the program. The pedagogical set-up of ART is described in detail in Lange et. al (2018).

Tutorials use situated learning in the academic context and are based on one-on-one conversations and small group conversations between students and faculty. They are focused on SSE’s pedagogical mission FREE (cf. Strannegård in this report) to ensure that students develop a Fact- and Science-based mindset and the ability to communicate to others about their learning during their time in the program. The tutorials allow students to reflect on learning within the RM program both when it comes to integrating subjects across courses and the individual responsibility for getting the most out of their studies. Topics cover aspects such as science mindedness, self-reflection and empathy, sustainability in retailing, and peer learning and these thematic courses are also run in parallel with traditional courses (see Lange et al (2019) and www.bhs.se/cfr).

ART challenges and experiences

As mentioned, a key facet of ART is the situated learning taking place on company sites outside the business school. To enable this for 10 different partners, we have developed a standardized format for all activities. Before COVID-19, workshops and career discussions were all held at the offices of the retail firms and were run as half-day activities

with a company representative as host. Students, one faculty member, and a small number of company representatives were present at the activities. The SSE transition to online learning and a general shutdown for external visitors at retail firm offices challenged the entire ART format. When an essential aspect of the situated learning, the shared physical context, is no longer in play, we feared that pedagogical quality would suffer.

Nevertheless, a joint decision by faculty and companies to move as many activities as possible online was made. The hope was that current students had sufficient experiences in offline meetings and workshops so that the essence of the ART format would transfer to the online context. Zoom meetings were used.

Generally, ART worked relatively well online for all parties. *Students* participated typically from home and made concerted efforts to create calm surroundings and avoid distractions. When students prepared and held oral presentations, they were asked by faculty in advance to adjust their presentations to the new format (e.g. integrating digital presentation tools with speech and clear division of responsibility among group members). Presentations were generally more planned and structured and a but the lack of spontaneity and less dialogue afterwards were the major perceived drawbacks. *Company representatives* understood their roles, they presented challenges clearly, and provided relevant feedback to students. Interestingly, several of our corporate partners also expressed how the digital workshops in ART allowed them to learn about new digital meeting formats – something that they too were under pressure to make work internally. One workshop was successfully changed into an online Q&A session which was a pedagogical format not used before in ART. The students, company representatives, and the faculty had an engaging conversation and *faculty* have ideas to use this format also in the future. Moreover, a combination of online and on company-site workshops as well as company visits has been proposed as a flexible solution in upcoming years.

Tutorial challenges and experiences

The *tutorials* shared the ART COVID-19 challenges when it comes to face-to-face interactions in shared physical space. When the tutorials were developed, faculty spent a lot of thought and effort in creating relevant physical learning spaces and opportunities for students to build personal relationships with faculty. Note that when the tutorials were held during COVID-19, both faculty and students had gained experience and confidence in online learning from previous ART interactions and traditional courses earlier during the semester.

In the tutorials, faculty decided to use COVID-19 as a topic of conversation with the students. In particular, the first-year students had a group discussion on classical scientific papers from Economics and discussed how the theories presented there could help us understand business and society in 2020, and make predictions for the future where COVID-19 had changed society. The second-year students were given the task to analyze a retail firm's response to COVID-19 from a sustainability perspective for employees and customers. The analyses were the foundation for the online discussion (one-on-one).

The online format was not an issue at this initial stage. Faculty and students had various types of Zoom experiences (e.g. lectures, seminars, group discussions, breakouts), Zoom started to be perceived as one part of the SSE learning experience. Interestingly, the Zoom context often created a new type of interaction between students and faculty as the participated typically from home. Several students and faculty members have mentioned that they appreciated the less formal context for the conversations. The tutorials are supposed to provide students with deeper knowledge about enduring concerns in the academic world. We realized how well these points come across when you relate them to a contemporary experienced crisis such as COVID-19.

Key pedagogical takeaways from situated learning during COVID-19

Overall, the transformation from physical to digital went surprisingly well for ART and Tutorials. This is likely due in part to the awa-

renewal among students, faculty, and corporate partners that this need was necessary, but also in part to the fact that students had previous experiences with the pedagogical formats (students always start at SSE in August every year). Knowledge about essential aspects of each activity could be transferred to the online format. Over time, we believe that we will not be able to keep the critical benefits of situated learning if ART moves to a full online format. However, we would also like to emphasize that the new situation provided opportunities to reassess current practices and to test new ones (e.g. Q&A's and ensuring a less formal context for tutorials). It also opens up for ART activities with companies and departments not situated in near proximity to SSE.

When it comes to tutorials, we argue that physical meetings are not critical. Tutorials may be conducted online in the future as students and faculty gain experience and a certain comfort level with online conversations. We also think that COVID-19 will be a great case to use in discussions on human behavior, on retail management practices and on economic trajectories across retail firms and sectors.

In both ART and Tutorials, the adaptability was greatly improved by the fact that learning outcomes that are more focused on skills and competences rather than on specific learnings – allow more flexibility for adapting as we move forward. In fact, this has been by design in both these program components and is something that we think will be important to integrate also in traditional courses at business schools in the future.

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