

EDUCATION

business ethics in paradise

The International Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility has been teaching CSR for seven years, but it has now established a novel way to engage students in sustainability issues – by letting them apply textbook theory in real-world roles

In a comfortable, well-ventilated room in England's east Midlands, two groups of students sit opposite each other. 'I'm not having the media saying this bank invests in exploitation and drug use,' says the leader of one team: 'Your mass tourism development may be profitable, but that's not our only criterion for lending.'

The students are not beneficiaries of generous work experience placements: the scene is part of a university's innovative corporate responsibility exercise in which postgraduates engage in a role-play situation where a tourism developer seeks investment from a bank under pressure from the media and non-governmental organizations.

The International Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility (ICCSR) at Nottingham University Business School launched the stakeholder relations exercise, called Paradise Island, three years ago in partnership with the UK-based teamwork and leadership consultancy Tony Hare Communications. The concept has been written up as a European Academy for Business in Society project as an example of innovative approaches to CSR education.

The 'experiential learning' activity is based around a projected tourist development on a small self-sufficient island. Students are allocated roles as: the development company, Paradise Developments; the bank; or as members of civil society. Paradise Developments is seeking investment from the bank, but the company has a poor track record on corporate responsibility in the region, so the local community is strongly against the business coming to Paradise Island at all.

The role-play exercise, which lasts around four hours, requires 20 to 30 students to resolve the situation to the satisfaction of all three teams. Three or four teaching staff are on hand to offer help, as well as hindrances. Students are given specific roles within their group — meaning they can end up as a marketing director of Paradise Developments, an investment banker, a local fisherman or a spokesperson for an NGO.

Proceedings end with the bank either backing or turning down the developer's proposal, although in some cases partnerships between Paradise Developments and civil society have also emerged from discussions. Finally, an assignment requires

debates have been so spirited that protests have been staged by students in the middle of role-play talks

the organization

The International Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility (ICCSR) was founded in 2002 as part of the Nottingham University Business School. The centre now has seven full-time academic staff, and:

- provides two highly regarded specialist taught programmes – an MA and an MBA – in CSR, in addition to supervising specialist research degrees in the subject
- leads modules in subject areas including business ethics, ethical finance, corporate governance and social accountability, CSR, sustainable management, economics and social entrepreneurship
- is involved in a wide range of research activities and projects — ICCSR has recently published studies on CSR in Asia, corporate community investment, corporations and citizenship, business

students to reflect on what they have learned and on how a company might manage conflicting stakeholder interests.

ICCSR says the exercise is intended to 'develop skills like initiative, leadership, teamwork, communication and creativity', as well as critical business skills such as negotiation and the ability to develop flexible business models that go 'beyond CSR'. One student said in feedback about the session: 'It was very similar to a real-life setting in terms of the time pressure and forcing people to be decisive.'

Students also get an experience of engaging with the media, and some useful tips on how to safeguard their reputation. Midway through the exercise Tony Hare, a former journalist, stirs things up by playing a local reporter and asking for interviews, producing live radio broadcasts – and making or damaging reputations in the process.

Deputy director of ICCSR Wendy Chapple, who has been involved in both running and supervising Paradise Island, says the exercise 'gives students an exposure to thinking about themselves as managers and gets them used to the experience of making strategic decisions'.

The exercise has been so successful because of the level of engagement and passion it arouses in students. Some of the debates have been so spirited that protests have been staged by students in the middle of talks between the two other parties. In an assessment of the exercise, Roger Murphy and Namrata Sharma from the Institute for Research into Learning and Teaching in Higher Education concluded



■ on Paradise Island: students get to grips with the prospects of development in their imaginary setting, building leadership skills by working together and in competition with each other

that Paradise Island ‘tends to bring out strong feelings and emotions among the participants, depending upon the roles that they are given, and it is evident that these can trigger powerful learning insights’.

The activity is usually introduced to students mid-term, after they have learned plenty of CSR theory that they can apply to the role-play situation. ICCSR maintains that Paradise Island’s success is built on ‘the firm foundations of high quality teaching of CSR at Nottingham’.

Last year 120 students participated in the Paradise Island programme on both MA and MBA courses at the Nottingham University Business School, and this year ICCSR will use the concept on a larger scale by building one of its core MBA modules around it. Called ‘Sustainable Decisions and Organizations’, it will build on the success of Paradise Island and will include more substantial experiential learning exercises, including staged press conferences with real journalists.

Hare, the inventor of Paradise Island, explains the providence of the approach: ‘The principles of sustainability are often shared in a theoretical way and people find them inspiring and can immediately see why it matters,’ he says. ‘But I felt that this needed to be complemented by something practical. The sound theoretical grounding of sustainability only has meaning when it’s applied to something concrete. When students understand the principles they then need to ask, “what does it look like?” in the real world and apply the theory.’

The exercise is also used by Hare outside of Nottingham as his company, Tony Hare Communications, takes it around the world. Paradise Island has been particularly popular in banks, including HSBC, and at NGOs, where WWF was the first organization to participate in the activity. In the corporate context, the value of Paradise Island is in achieving buy-in to (and understanding of) CSR initiatives across the enterprise. Hare says his model is

particularly exportable because its ‘non-didactic approach’ means participants essentially lead the activity themselves. It also requires no hardware, and its focus on universally important business skills such as leadership, decision-making, communication and understanding complex CSR issues make it especially versatile. What’s more, says Hare, ‘one of the attractive features of Paradise Island is that it goes beyond CSR. It is also about personal growth and development.’

These advantages, however, would have meant little if the students themselves had not taken to the idea so quickly and enthusiastically. And the proof is in the pudding. ‘Paradise Island helped me to understand the importance of stakeholder roles in business better, to make decisions more efficiently and to be an expert at whatever I do by doing it right and ethically,’ says one student. That’s just the kind of outcome that ICCSR was looking for when it first began to set foot on Paradise

■ Further information: Dr Wendy Chapple at ICCSR at wendy.chapple@nottingham.ac.uk and Tony Hare at tonyhare@tonyharecom.com

ICCSR

The ICCSR is raising the bar when it comes to corporate responsibility in education. This innovative teaching tool, which uses the simple medium of role-play, not only brings academic theory to life – it helps develop the moral compass of future professionals. In doing so it goes beyond CSR.

Features of note include:

- the extension of the use of ‘Paradise Developments’ to banks and other corporate settings
- the exercise provides an opportunity for students and staff, in a safe environment, to experience the need, in a dynamic way, to make a practical ethical decision
- participants are able to develop leadership and stakeholder management skills.

PHILIPPA FOSTER BACK OBE, INSTITUTE OF BUSINESS ETHICS

ibe comment