Learning with Storytelling:
A Fairytale Teaching Case for Business Education

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Abstract

Competencies cannot be acquired passively in theory alone, but require practice [1]. Therefore, university education using teaching cases is becoming increasingly popular at business schools [2], [3]. Real company examples are used to act out circumstances and students learn to analyze business situations, apply tools like the business model canvas [4], prioritize tasks, and develop a strategy.

But when studying business administration, more and more young people are deciding to choose an entrepreneurship career rather than join enterprises. Current studies show that 57% of German students can imagine starting their own business instead of taking a corporate job [5]. However, at least two-thirds of all startup attempts are abandoned [6], [7], and most startups fail within the first 24 months [8]. And it is precisely to discuss the initial challenges of a startup that famous names of successful companies are not suitable.

Hence, for the authors of this paper, the question arose how to make a teaching case and its experiential learning even easier and more intuitive to use, especially for undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory entrepreneurship course. There already exist very popular teaching cases using legends like Robin Hood [9]. Submission guidelines for journals welcome these 'fictional cases, especially those with some basis in practice' [10, p. 1]. Consequently, the authors developed a case that puts a typical startup situation metaphorically into a well-known story: 'Snow White, the seven dwarves and the prince: A fairytale about startup challenges' [11]. This short case can be used to introduce students to working with teaching cases, and it forces students to think creatively.

A fairytale as a base for a teaching case might be a bit uncommon. Nevertheless, this opened great possibilities. First, this case included personal experience out of supporting startup businesses, summarizing challenges several companies faced within the first months. Instead of simply changing names, their situations were embedded in one of the most well-known stories of the world – Snow White. It was an appropriate way to combine and, at the same time, keep everything confidential. Second, a fairytale framework made it more interesting and memorable for students. For example, the introduction of protagonists was much easier. Think of many team members, different names, and backgrounds. Everybody already knew the protagonists and the implications that a Prince is rich and powerful. Finally, in fairytales, everything is possible, even a magic wand for example. Using this teaching case in several classes, the authors were surprised by the creativity students demonstrated, it supported student engagement and attention, and the case was awarded by the IMA Educational Case Journal with third place in a case writing competition [12].

Keywords: *Storytelling, undergraduate education, fairytale, teaching case, entrepreneurship*

1. Introduction

This paper is a critical reflection of the author's teaching journey using a fairytale teaching case in university classes. The author (SK) currently has one active course that he is teaching per semester at the *FHWS University of Applied Sciences Würzburg*. The course focuses on online and mobile marketing in the first semester of the postgraduate master's program in brand and media management. In 2019 and 2020 a short case was used in class to encourage students to think outside of the box. It metaphorically embeds a traditional startup situation in a well-known fairytale plot: Snow White. Students must discuss the problems that Snow White faces six months after starting her own company, a new mobile application (The Mirror) in Cloud-Land, and her issues are multiplying as the tale progresses. She must assert herself as a female leader in a rapidly expanding organization. Rivalry among the team members, and debates about The Mirror's potential plan, require her to make important decisions. The technological infrastructure must be adapted to the growing traffic and dangerous situation with external threats. However, sales must be viewed after an initial period of growth potential. Although some of Snow White's dwarf employees advocate for slow but steady growth, others advocate for rapid scaling and new markets in neighbouring countries. Is there a way

out with the wealthy Prince? Instead of a marriage, as in the original fairy tale, the emancipated young businesswoman is confronted with the possibility of a large business angel's investment. Nonetheless, much like a marriage, this choice should be thoroughly evaluated. Snow White would need a strategy for dealing with the future difficulties and negotiations with the Prince investor.

Figure 1. Snow White and The Mirror. Commissioned work from Fiverr.com, by C. Reverie, 2018, Retrieved from https://fiverr-res.cloudinary.com. Copyright Reverie (2018). Reprinted with permission.

This paper is structured as follows. The introduction is one of six main sections. The literature on tools and techniques for creative teaching with storytelling and learning is presented in the following section. The third and fourth section briefly go into the aims of the project and methods used in this paper. After that, the findings and discussions are presented. The final section of the paper concludes with recommendations for future study and lessons learned.

2. Literature review

On the one hand, storytelling in higher education has a long history since a more technocratic approach shifted to the consideration of historical stories of the past for learning in the 1980s [14]. Theoretical awareness about reciprocal mechanisms that bind people together can be forged by storytelling [15], and students can apply theoretical competences in practice [1]. As a result, at business schools, education with teaching cases is becoming increasingly widespread [2], [3].

On the other hand, rather than working for a business, an increasing number of young people are opting for entrepreneurship [5], but they need good preparation to prevent frequent failures [6], [7], [8]. Moreover, studies showed that storytelling in entrepreneurship education can promote entrepreneurial intentions of students, especially when it comes to favourite role model stories and biographies like Steve Jobs [16]. However, Gamito-Marques criticized that 'these case-study approaches are insufficient because they typically focus on the work of one or a few actors and overemphasize the social and cultural contexts' [13, p. 583]. As a result, popular teaching cases based on legends such as Robin Hood have existed before [9]. They mix the experiences and problems of several real people and companies without naming them specifically. This type of teaching case is encouraged by submission guidelines for competitions and journals like the *IMA Educational Case Journal*, which states that fictional cases will be considered, particularly those with real experience in it [10].

Snow White can be considered an illustrative case, according to Lundberg et al. [17]. It depicts a traditional startup situation and asks students to understand business strategies and how to incorporate them in a real-world scenario. The story-telling teaching case is meant to address multiple learning objectives according to Bloom's taxonomy model of learning domains [18]. While traditional frontal education focuses on the first two objectives of information transmission and meaning comprehension, a teaching case requires students to apply their knowledge, which represents Bloom's third hierarchical level. To improve the motivation and recognition of students with a case situation, studies [19] suggested using participants of the same age, same experience, and same educational history, what was aimed with the female protagonist of the teaching case.

3. Aims of the project

A fairytale as a basis for a teaching event opened many doors. First, the teaching case provided personal experience helping startup businesses, as well as a summary of the difficulties that other companies encountered in their early months. Their cases became rooted in one of the most well-known stories in the world. Instead of just changing titles this was a good way to blend and keep everything private at the same time. Second, putting it in the context of a fairytale made it more engaging and memorable for students, and the introduction of protagonists became much simpler. Consider a large group of people of various names and histories. Everyone is familiar with the protagonists and their consequences, such as that a Prince is wealthy and strong, Grumpy is distrustful, and Sleepy is afraid of oversleeping a market creation. Furthermore, famous brand names were not appropriate for a startup in its early stages, Finally, anything is possible in fairytales, including the use of a magic wand.

The authors created the Snow White teaching case to serve as a starting point for class discussion. The paper was based on real-world issues and challenges, and was drawn on one author's experience as a volunteer judge for *BayStartUp*'s business plan competition and work in a German publishing house that offers a variety of location-based services. Nevertheless, the author's opinions were his or her own, and do not necessarily reflect those of *BayStartUp*. Students' learning outcomes were as follows: (1) Use methods like the business model canvas to analyse the business situation; (2) Critically examine the difficulties that entrepreneurs face when beginning a new company; (3) Prioritize activities to plan for an investor conference; (4) Create a broad plan for the company's future; (5) Determine if rapid scaling is a viable option for this strategy; (6) Develop a business plan.

4. Methodology

Since this paper documents the author's experience teaching with the Snow White scenario, critical reflection is used as a tool of investigation to document the author's experience. Despite the lack of a theory, the writers argue that this paper can focus and address problems because it relies solely on the author's personal reflection and experience.

5. Findings and Discussions

Looking at the goals set and choosing a fairytale as the basis for the teaching case, some assumptions were confirmed. Although the fairytale set-up initially caused some amusement among the students, it only served to motivate them to deal with the topic. Especially when it came to the names of the protagonists, the company (The Mirror) and the environment (Cloud-Land), it confirmed that students quickly found their way into the case. It also turned out to be advantageous that no real company names were given, as the students rapidly drew their own parallels to other large and small location-based services, were able to work out differences, and were not influenced and stuck in their strategy from the outset. In the following, accelerated creativity will also be illustrated based on various tools used.

5.1. Platforms and Tools

A SWOT analysis may assist in identifying the most critical decision points of a teaching case and its discussion questions. Students were able to identify strengths like the rapid growth and the many partners of the startup, weaknesses as the missing revenue model, opportunities regarding new markets in neighbouring countries, and threats like competitors and security risks (Figure 2, right side).

But interestingly some students showed as much creativity to bring in a fictional additional antagonist, a poison dwarf (Figure 2, left side). It served as a visualization and starting point for all possible and conceivable attacks that could threaten the startup. In this way, a devil's advocate was created by the students to accomplish the task, deliberately assuming the position of an adversary.

Figure 2. Poison dwarf and SWOT diagram results; own photography of student group work.

The Business Model Canvas is a straightforward blueprint for developing business models. It helps to coordinate operations by visualizing various properties of a startup (Figure 3, left side) and to think about the general strategy. Students used thinking about the structure of the company to assign the different protagonists to the departments in an organizational chart (Figure 3, right side). Because students were largely given freedom to make further assumptions, offered additional turning points, led to more protagonists. Characters such as Puss in Boots and Rumpelstiltskin were brought into play by students as possible financiers. To add better operational management to Snow White's leadership, a team proposed hiring Mulan, the female warrior from a Chinese fairytale. And finally, The Musketeers were also proposed as collaborative partners by students to address challenges with competitors. Maybe this sounds like a wild growth of fairytale characters at first. In fact, the problems of the startup were discussed in detail and solutions were sought. But instead of neutrally describing an urgently needed additional staff position for the slightly overburdened boss, the students jumped on the metaphor bandwagon. And with a persona name like Mulan, it is immediately clear to everyone what qualities the job candidate should bring to optimally complement the founding team.
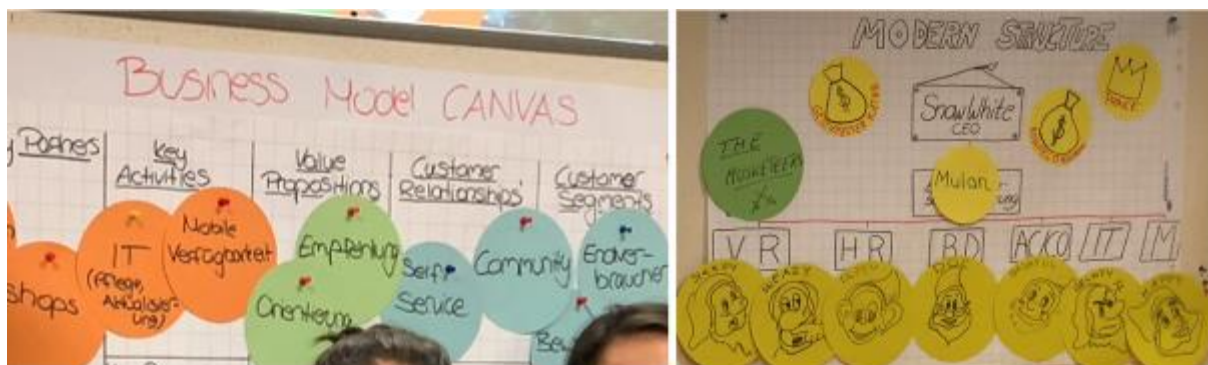

Figure 3. Filled Business Model Canvas and organization chart with other fairytale characters; own photography of student group work.

This creativity and easy adaptation of topics was also evident when applying another tool. Business plans are often used to persuade private or public investors. Consequently, it is not only the written work but also the presentation that matters. In addition to the analytical approach of breaking down a plan for the next three years into individual steps and describing them in detail (Figure 4, bottom left),

the students also worked with elaborately illustrated graphics, used a magic wand as a presentation tool (Figure 4, right side), and practiced presenting to potential investors with amusing allusions or in rhyme form to get the greatest possible attention and to vividly present the development steps.
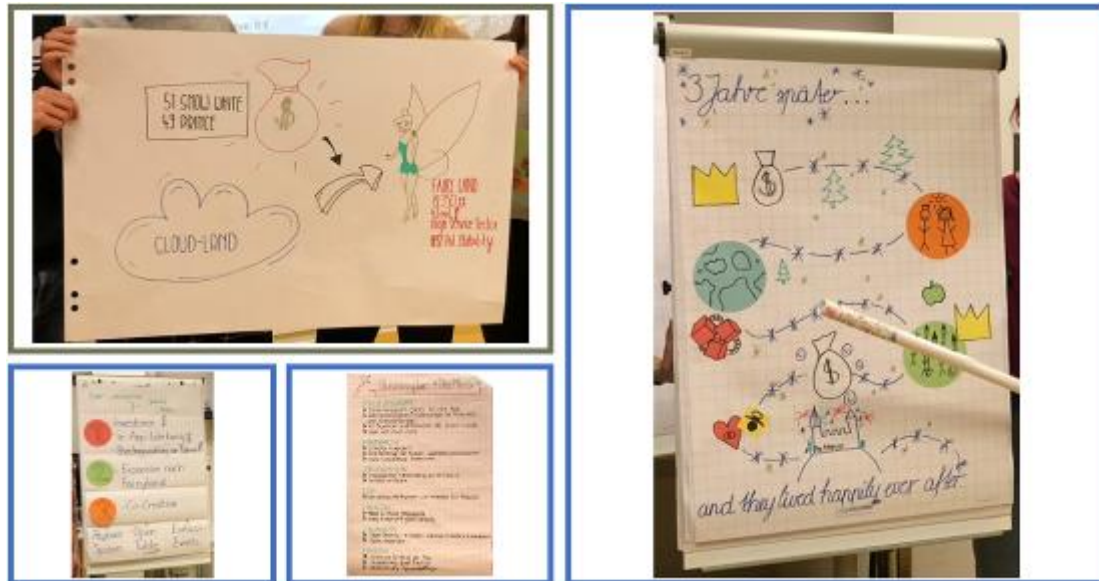

Figure 4. Business plan presentations for The Mirror; own photography of student group work.

5.2. Challenges

It turned out that many student groups placed an excessive amount of emphasis on the product. The team members' rivalry and Snow White's personal situation as a leader could be too brief. It helped when the professor staged a role play to highlight the protagonists' opposing viewpoints. Negotiating with the prince investor, was a beneficial preparation. Observing the culture of real startup companies could help to get a sense of how different systems function. Furthermore, students may be invited to explore various scenarios in groups. It was fun to poll all the participants on whether Snow White should accompany the Prince. The case study also showed its good usability for a written evaluation.

6. Conclusion

The teaching case 'Snow White, the seven dwarves and the prince: A fairytale about startup challenges' has successfully demonstrated its applicability to students in several cohorts. It won an award for embedding a complex issue in a simple-to-understand story. Lessons learned are the quick adaptation of facts and protagonists by the students, the high motivation to creatively deal with solutions and the fun, e.g., in the presentation of group work, to go somewhat unusual ways. Of course, a healthy balance between analytical approach and creative presentation is needed so that the case study does not slip too much into the playful or even ridiculous.

Future research should look even more into imaginative ways of applying case studies. The authors are certain that this already very valuable teaching tool can be further enhanced by exciting stories. To return to the statement mentioned at the beginning of this article, this can be supplemented: Competencies cannot be acquired passively in theory alone, but require practice [1], and practice that is easy and fun leads to even more learning success.

Biography of the Authors

Since 2010, Simon Kiesel, DBA is a volunteer judge for the *Business Plan Competition of Northern Bavaria*, organized by *BayStartUp* and teaches at the *FHWS University of Applied Sciences Würzburg* in the postgraduate master's program brand and media management. He is a consultant and coach for startups and organizes and awards the *Würzburg Startup Prize* each year. Furthermore, the author works in the IT environment as a Head of Marketing and Customer Relationship Management for a German publishing company that has gone through the transition from telephone directory production to various digital service offerings.

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