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Preparing for a SWOT exercise

Anastássios Perdicoúlis
Assistant Professor, ECT, UTAD (http://www.tasso.utad.pt)
Senior Researcher, CITTA, FEUP (http://www.fe.up.pt/~tasso)
Visiting Researcher, Oxford Institute for Sustainable Development, OBU, UK

Abstract

The 'classic SWOT' exercise separates assessment statements into four pre-defined categories. A proper SWOT list set requires a preliminary analysis and annotations to turn reasoning explicit and provide understanding of the situation. Even so, the utility of the SWOT exercise in subsequent phases of the planning process remains questionable.

1 Introduction

With an existence marked by popularity as much as by debilitating shortcomings (Perdicoúlis, 2012a), SWOT analysis remains a popular planning technique and its requisition is still to be expected in administrative environments. Some of the inherent shortcomings of the technique can be mitigated by a system analysis[1] with assessment mark-up, referred to as 'graphic SWOT' (Perdicoúlis, 2012b,c).

To produce a 'classic SWOT' set of lists, when requested, one of the first things to determine is *what* is to be assessed — i.e. elements of the situation such as objects, states, or actions (Perdicoúlis and Gonçalves, 2016). Then, the *references* for the assessment must be chosen — for instance, international norms or traditional practice. The thorough resolution of these two important issues is capable of producing *assessment statements* for the requested SWOT lists, which in principle could suffice administratively.

However, while for the 'SWOT team' of executives the task ends with the delivery of the set of lists, the strategic team that will receive the assessment statements will have to process them into objectives and then conceive the appropriate action — i.e., produce a strategy or plan (Perdicoúlis, 2012b, 2017). Indeed, the SWOT statements may turn into objectives once apparent conflicts are resolved, but concealing the dynamics of the situation — namely, causal relations — compromises the conception of action (e.g. not distinguishing between root causes and superficial issues) and hence the whole strategy or plan.

[1] Analysis (from ανά- [Gk], up + λύειν [Gk], to loosen, undo) refers to the decomposition and/ or separation of a substance into its constituent elements, and has many metaphoric uses in various contexts. In the case of SWOT, analysis refers to the *separation* of assessments into four pre-defined categories.

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2 Dynamics and assessment

Let us consider a fictional scenario regarding the assessment of an academic degree at a mid-sized public university as an abstracted case study. The main concern of 'teaching quality' is placed at the centre of a dynamic network of interactions between efforts, states, and qualities pertaining to different stakeholders such as instructors, students, and the institution — Figure 1.

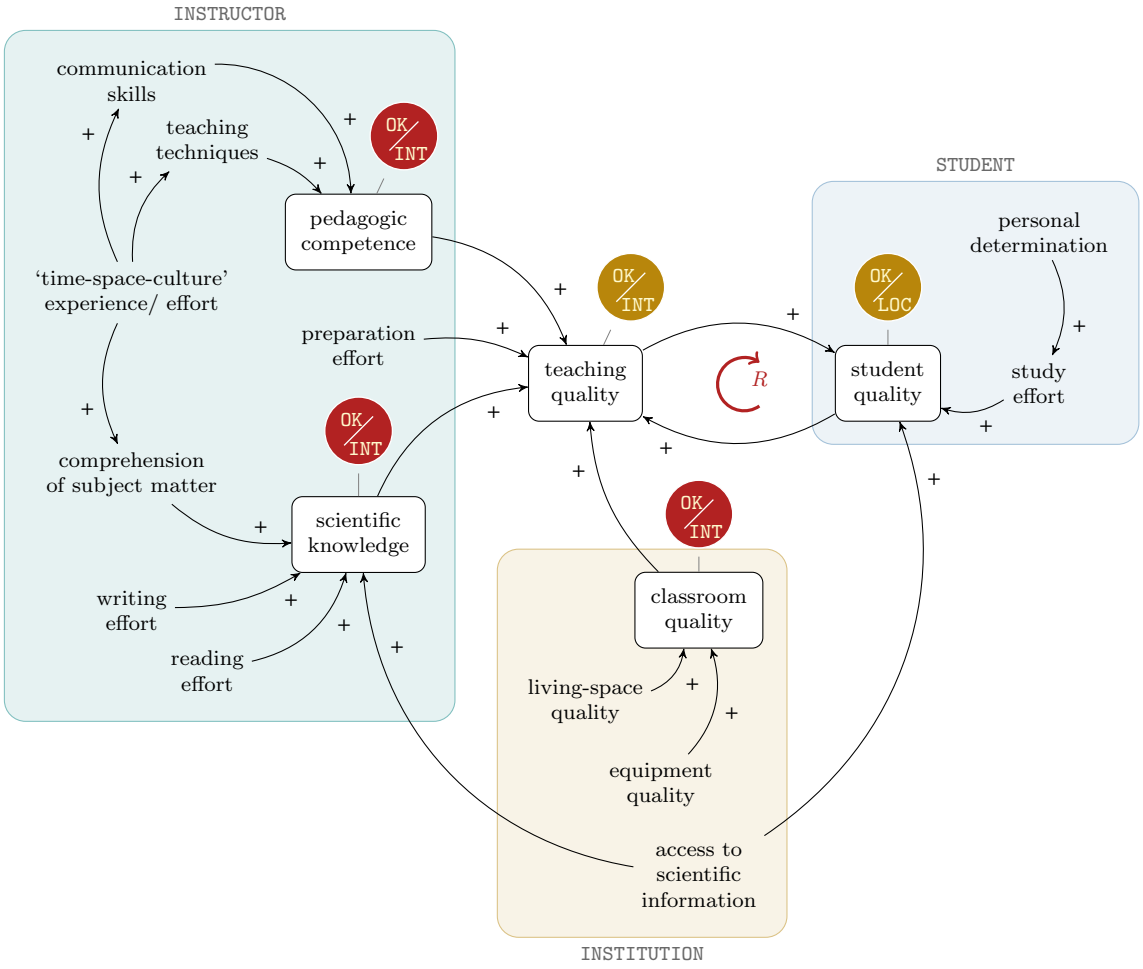

FIGURE 1 The dynamics of teaching quality and selected assessments in an appropriately marked-up reverse blueprint (RBP)

The factors to be assessed are determined as the teaching quality itself and the key factors that relate directly to it, presented as white rectangles in Figure 1. The assessment references are 'international practice' (INT) or 'local practice' (LOC), with undisclosed content and assessor. Classification options are binary, pass ('OK') or fail ('F'), with an additional parameter as 'clear' (●) and 'tainted' (●), to help connect with the SWOT categories.

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3 SWOT logic

As explicit relations are not permitted between the statements of the SWOT lists, the task of coordination of the information — including the resolution of conflicts and repetitions — is in the care and competence of the processing team. In addition to the original assessments (Figure 1), it is a good idea to establish a 'SWOT logic' (Figure 2) that explicitly relates the statements to appear in the final SWOT lists.

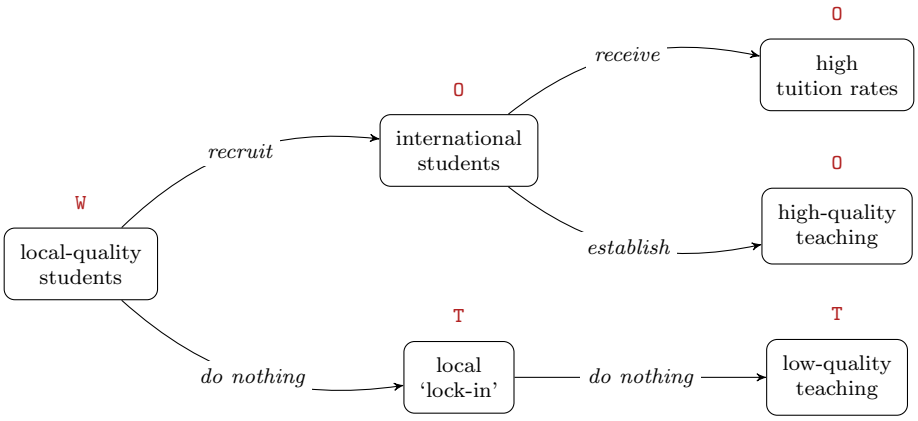

FIGURE 2 'SWOT logic' explicitly defining the relationships between the elements of a complete set of lists by means of an appropriately marked-up concise process diagram (CPD)

Figure 2 helps explain the relationship between opportunities and threats, as well as their relationship with a particular weak point. Such information may exist in the minds of the SWOT team, but there are no provisions for it in the classic SWOT set of lists (Table 1).

4 Compilation of the SWOT lists

With the assessments prepared in Figure 1 and the 'SWOT logic' exposed in Figure 2, the four standard 'S-W-O-T' categories are populated in Table 1. To facilitate the connection between Figure 1 and Table 1, the bullets of the SWOT lists maintain the colour of the 'clear'/ 'tainted' trait.

STRONG POINTS	WEAK POINTS	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
● pedagogic competence ● scientific knowledge ● classroom quality	● local-quality students	● international students ● high quality teaching ● high tuition rates	● local 'lock-in' ● teaching quality drop

TABLE 1 Parallel SWOT lists categorise the assessments of Figure 1 with the logic explained in Figure 2

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5 Discussion

A fair amount of preparation is necessary to support a SWOT exercise, including causal diagrams (e.g. RBP) to describe the dynamics of the situation and convey the assessments as annotations, as well as process diagrams (e.g. CPD) to explain the logic of the SWOT classifications and the relations between the assessment statements destined for the list set. After all this preparation, a proper SWOT list set can be produced — yet always dependent on the support diagrams (e.g. Figures 1 and 2) — to satisfy an eventual administrative request.

Exclusive use of the SWOT list set prevents the use of otherwise advantageous information (e.g. Figure 1), capable of conveying the situation factually (e.g. dynamics), assessed, and marked-up for relevance to the planning problem (Perdicoúlis, 2017). Hence, if the SWOT information is intended as 'standalone', as it often is, then it constitutes a quality risk for the planning process as well as for its products (Perdicoúlis, 2011).

6 Conclusion

Classic SWOT exercises may be carried out if expressly requested, but they are not capable of existing away from their preparatory material (e.g. dynamics, logic). In fact, the preparatory material itself can be more informative than the SWOT content, and thus more valuable for the subsequent planning phase of creating an action plan. This predicament prompts for a re-consideration of the purposefulness of the SWOT exercise in the context of planning.

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