

Collaborative Strategic Thinking: A War-Room Pedagogy for Teaching the Strategic Management

Ahmad Syahmi Ahmad Fadzil¹, Muhammad Zulqarnain Hakim Abd Jalal², Amir Imran Zainoddin³, Nur Amalina Aziz⁴, YM Raja Amir Ashraf Raja Zainalabidin⁵, Nur Ain Syazmeen Ahmad Zaki⁶

Faculty of Business and Management, University Technology MARA

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

Strategic Management is widely recognized as a capstone course in business education, designed to prepare undergraduates for decision-making in complex and uncertain environments. Yet, in many classrooms, teaching methods remain rooted in lectures, case studies, and group projects that often result in task-splitting rather than genuine collaboration. As a result, students may leave the course familiar with analytical tools. Yet, they remain less prepared for the messy, adaptive nature of real strategic work. This paper proposes the War-Room Pedagogical Framework (WRPF) as an alternative approach to teaching Strategic Management at the undergraduate level. Inspired by the intensity of organizational “war rooms,” the framework positions the classroom as a dynamic space where students formulate strategies, respond to shifting scenarios, and engage in structured debates with peers. Four guiding principles underpin the design: immersion, adaptation, debate, and reflection. By moving beyond static group work, WRPF encourages students to think collectively, challenge assumptions, and refine strategies in real time. The paper argues that this approach not only deepens engagement but also cultivates higher-order skills such as strategic agility, critical analysis, and collaborative leadership. It contributes conceptually by extending experiential learning into contexts of uncertainty and practically by offering educators a flexible model that can be adapted to case studies, simulations, or industry-based projects. In doing so, the WRPF provides a pathway for preparing graduates who are not only competent in using strategic frameworks but also capable of working together to navigate the unpredictable realities of business.

Keywords: WRPF, War-Room Pedagogical Framework, Strategic Management, Pedagogical Innovation

INTRODUCTION

The Strategic Management Course is often regarded as the capstone course in business schools, serving as the culmination of students’ learning across various disciplines such as management, marketing, finance, operations, etc. The primary objective of this course is to equip students with the holistic understanding and integrative skills necessary to formulate, implement, and evaluate organizational strategies (David et al., 2021). This involves not only an understanding of theoretical frameworks but also the practical application of these concepts to real-world business challenges and opportunities (Costigan & Hennessy, 2024).

However, traditional pedagogical approaches, often reliant on static case studies and individual assignments, frequently fall short in fostering the dynamic, collaborative, and adaptive thinking essential for navigating complex strategic landscapes (Samaras et al., 2021). While group work is widely employed to encourage teamwork, it often falls short of its pedagogical intent. Students tend to divide tasks among members and work in isolation, resulting in final outputs that are aggregated rather than co-created. This form of collaboration does little to mirror the real-world dynamics of strategy formulation, which are inherently collective, iterative, and adaptive. Consequently, students often graduate with theoretical knowledge but lack the practical experience in collaborative problem-solving necessary for effective strategic leadership (Onwuzulike et al., 2024) (Albert, 2020).

The gap between theory and practice, particularly concerning the development of genuine collaborative strategic thinking, necessitates a re-evaluation of current pedagogical models in business education (Lim, 2020). The professional reality is particularly demanding, requiring graduates who can not only analyze complex situations but also synthesize diverse perspectives and negotiate solutions within a team environment. This often involves intense, high-stakes discussions where participants must collectively identify problems, generate solutions, and adapt strategies in real-time.

Hence, the practice of the War-Room Pedagogical Framework (WRPF) offers a promising alternative, aiming to bridge this gap by simulating the dynamic, high-pressure environments where strategic decisions are genuinely forged (Veldyaeva et al., 2024). Inspired by the organizational practice of “war rooms,” the framework transforms the classroom into a dynamic, simulation-driven environment where students collaboratively formulate, adapt, and debate strategies in real time. The WRPF emphasizes immersion, adaptation, debate, and reflection, thereby aligning teaching practices more closely with the realities of strategic management in practice. This pedagogical innovation addresses the limitations of conventional methods by fostering an environment conducive to developing critical 21st-century competencies, such as critical thinking, effective communication, and collaborative problem-solving, which are crucial for navigating complex business landscapes (Perusso & Baaken, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategic Management Course

The strategic management course is widely recognized as a capstone course that integrates knowledge across functional areas of business to develop students’ ability to think holistically and make informed decisions under uncertainty (David et al., 2021). Traditionally, the pedagogy of Strategic Management has relied heavily on lectures, textbook-driven learning, and the use of static case studies. These approaches allow students to apply analytical frameworks such as SWOT, PESTEL, Porter’s Five Forces, and VRIO, but often stop short of fostering higher-order skills such as adaptability, judgment, and collaborative problem-solving. The over-reliance on individual assignments and simplified group work in these traditional models frequently fails to simulate the complexity and interpersonal dynamics inherent in real-world strategic decision-making processes (Samaras et al., 2021).

Group projects are a common instructional method designed to promote teamwork and peer learning. However, research has shown that students frequently approach group assignments through task division rather than co-creation, which limits opportunities for collective engagement and integrative decision-making (LaBeouf et al., 2016; Moxie et al., 2025). As a result, while students may demonstrate technical competence in applying frameworks, they may remain underprepared for the dynamic, iterative, and often ambiguous nature of real-world strategy formulation. This has prompted calls for more innovative, experiential approaches that emphasize active participation, problem-based learning, and collaboration under simulated conditions of uncertainty. This shift is particularly salient given the evolving demands of the global business environment, which increasingly values agile thinking, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the capacity to adapt strategies in rapidly changing markets (Neubert et al., 2020).

Strategic Management War-Room Pedagogy

The concept of a “war room” in organizational practice refers to a dedicated space where managers collaboratively analyze information, debate alternatives, and make strategic decisions under conditions of pressure and uncertainty (Chussil, 1996). War rooms are characterized by high levels of interaction, rapid adaptation to new information, and collective ownership of outcomes (Werro et al., 2025). Translating this idea into education, the War-Room Pedagogical Framework (WRPF) proposes reimagining the classroom as a simulated strategic command centre.

Within WRPF, students engage in immersive simulations where they formulate strategies, receive evolving information updates (such as competitor moves, regulatory changes, or economic shifts), and adjust their

decisions in real time (Winardy & Septiana, 2023). This dynamic environment contrasts with traditional case teaching, where scenarios are static and outcomes predetermined. Four guiding principles underpin the framework: immersion (situating students in realistic, high-stakes contexts) (Alzate et al., 2024), adaptation (responding to evolving scenarios) (Ober et al., 2023), debate (engaging in structured argumentation with peers) (Åge & Eklinder-Frick, 2025), and reflection (examining both decisions and group dynamics) (Lin et al., 2022).

Conceptually, WRPF extends the tradition of experiential learning by embedding conditions of uncertainty and requiring iterative strategic responses (Werro et al., 2025). It also draws on collaborative learning theory, which emphasizes knowledge co-construction and interdependence among learners (Berri, 2025). By combining these elements, WRPF aims to bridge the gap between classroom pedagogy and professional strategic practice, offering a structured yet flexible approach to cultivating strategic agility, critical analysis, and collaborative leadership in undergraduate business students.

DISCUSSION ON THE CONCEPT

The proposed War-Room Pedagogical Framework (WRPF) builds on the metaphor of the organizational “war room” and reimagines how group work can be conducted in the Strategic Management classroom. Rather than treating group assignments as a collection of divided tasks, WRPF emphasizes co-creation, real-time adaptation, and structured debate. This approach is designed to better reflect the realities of strategic decision-making, where managers must work collaboratively, interpret evolving information, and make timely judgments under conditions of uncertainty.

The conceptual model for the War-Room Pedagogical Framework (WRPF) is presented in Figure 1, outlining a process that transforms traditional group work into an agile, adaptive learning experience. The model is composed of four distinct yet interconnected phases. The journey begins with Immersion, where students establish an initial strategic foundation. This is followed by Adaptation, where new information forces real-time strategic adjustments. The process culminates in a Debate phase, encouraging a public defense of strategies, and a final Reflection phase, where students consolidate their understanding of strategic thinking and collaborative dynamics.

At the heart of WRPF is a process model that unfolds in four interconnected phases. First, students engage in initial strategy formulation, drawing on familiar tools such as SWOT, PESTEL, and Porter’s Five Forces. This stage provides a foundation for structured thinking but it is only the starting point. Subsequently, teams are presented with dynamic, unfolding scenarios that introduce unforeseen challenges or opportunities, necessitating real-time strategic adaptation and iterative refinement of their initial plans (Lewis et al., 2023).

The second phase introduces dynamic data updates, in which the instructor delivers new information such as competitor actions, regulatory changes, or sudden market shifts. These disruptions require students to revisit and adjust their strategies, simulating the unpredictability of the business environment. This will foster agile thinking and responsive decision-making under pressure, mimicking real-world strategic challenges. This iterative process of analysis, decision-making, and adjustment mirrors the adaptive strategy-making modes identified in organizational theory (Andersen et al., 2023).

The third phase involves a strategic debate arena, where groups present their revised strategies and respond to challenges from peers. This element of constructive confrontation mirrors the negotiation and argumentation processes that often shape strategic choices in organizations. This public defense of strategic choices cultivates not only refined analytical and communication skills but also the ability to anticipate and counter potential criticisms, thereby solidifying their strategic rationale. The fourth and final phase, integral to the pedagogical framework, is dedicated to structured reflection, where teams critically assess their strategic decisions, the evolving nature of the problem, and the effectiveness of their collaborative processes, fostering a deeper understanding of strategic agility and team dynamics (Fahey & Saint-Onge, 2024).

Finally, the fourth stage, students participate in a reflective debrief, analyzing both the quality of their strategic decisions and the dynamics of their group interactions. Reflection ensures that students internalize lessons not

only about strategy tools but also about leadership, teamwork, and cognitive biases. Additionally, the reflective debrief process will help the students to consolidate their learning by linking theoretical concepts to their practical application within the simulated war-room environment, thereby reinforcing the development of adaptive strategic thinking and collaborative problem-solving skills (Hou, 2022; Meganathan, 2024).



Figure 1: Conceptual Model of WRPF in Strategic Management Course

Through these phases, WRPF shifts the focus of learning from the application of frameworks to the development of higher-order capabilities. This framework encourages students to move beyond rote memorization, promoting a deeper understanding of complex strategic challenges and cultivating their capacity for adaptive problem-solving (Daff et al., 2024). Through these phases, the WRPF shifts learning from simply applying strategy tools to building the kinds of higher-order skills that students will need when they step into the workplace. Instead of memorizing frameworks or producing neatly divided group reports, students are asked to grapple with the uncertainty, disagreement, and constant change that define real strategic work. The classroom becomes less about “getting the right answer” and more about learning how to *think, adapt, and lead* when the answer is not obvious.

Implementation of the Concept

The War-Room Pedagogical Framework (WRPF) begins with team formation and scenario design. Students self-organize into teams of five and nominate one “Manager” as the team leader, fostering ownership and sustained collaboration throughout the exercise. Each team selects one established company as its focus:

- Local firms must be publicly listed on Bursa Malaysia.
- International firms must establish MNCs with sufficient public disclosures.

Teams then gather information from credible sources such as Forbes, Bloomberg, The Edge, financial reports, and local newspapers, ensuring their analysis is grounded in current realities. Students are encouraged to draw on their programme expertise e.g., finance students may use tools like MooMoo or BURSAMKTPLC, while marketing students may emphasize branding and product development. This ensures that WRPF becomes not just an exercise in applying strategy frameworks, but a multidisciplinary, practice-oriented learning experience anchored in live business contexts. The exercise runs from Week 1 to Week 5 during Tutorials, corresponding to the first five topics of the Strategic Management syllabus (overview, vision/mission, external environment, internal environment, and strategies in action), thereby embedding WRPF as the pedagogical backbone of the course’s early phase.

Phase 1: Immersion (Week 1 – 2)

WRPF aligns with Topic 1 (Overview of Strategic Management) and Topic 2 (The Business Vision and Mission).

At this stage, students establish a strategic baseline by defining the vision, mission, and broad objectives of their selected company within a war-room setting. This exercise mirrors how real firms begin with a clear sense of direction before engaging in detailed analysis, thereby grounding students in the fundamentals of strategic thinking. To ensure relevance and realism, students are required to immerse themselves in up-to-date information about the chosen company. Each team is then tasked with proposing a new mission statement that incorporates the nine essential components and positions of the company for the future. Their work is uploaded to the class Padlet platform, where it is open for peer review and discussion. To close the cycle, the instructor provides a star rating (out of five) not merely as an evaluation, but as a motivational feedback tool helping students gauge the clarity, creativity, and completeness of their work while encouraging healthy competition and continuous improvement.

Phase 2: Adaptation (Week 3 – 4)

WRPF corresponds with Topic 3 (The External Environment) and Topic 4 (The Internal Environment). At this stage, students are not yet formulating strategies but are developing the analytical foundations necessary for strategy-making. Working in teams, they conduct internal and external audits of their selected company using the External Factor Evaluation (EFE) and Internal Factor Evaluation (IFE) matrices. These audits are guided by the AQCD criteria (Actionable, Quantitative, Comparative, and Divisional), which ensure that factors identified are practical and measurable. To simulate the unpredictability of real-world environments, instructors also introduce shocks—such as competitor moves, regulatory changes, or supply chain disruptions that require students to revisit their audits and adjust factor weightings or scores accordingly. Each team then uploads its EFE and IFE results to the class Padlet, where comparisons across groups reveal how interpretations of the same company may differ. This peer-to-peer exchange reinforces two key lessons: first, that situational awareness is critical in strategy work; and second, that companies must craft strategies within the limits of their actual capabilities and environments, rather than beyond their means.

Phase 3: Debate

WRPF is mapped onto Topic 5 (Strategies in Action), where students are introduced to a broad set of strategic options, including diversification, integration, aggressive, and defensive strategies. At this stage, each team is assigned with “Brilliant Strategist”, which requires the team to propose three concrete strategies that their selected company should implement within the next year. These proposals must be grounded in the earlier audits (EFE and IFE) and aligned with the company’s vision and mission developed in Phase 1. The process culminates in a structured debate arena, where teams present and defend their recommendations while rival groups actively critique, challenge, and question their choices. Unlike the earlier phases, which emphasize analysis and diagnosis, this stage is intentionally more intense, pushing students to justify their proposals with evidence and logic while considering the risks of alternative paths. The debate mirrors the high-stakes reality of strategic decision-making, where a single misstep can alter the trajectory of a company. By subjecting their ideas to peer scrutiny, students come to appreciate that strategy is not about one “correct” answer but the outcome of competing perspectives, negotiation, and compromise. To heighten engagement, debate outcomes are documented on the class Padlet platform, while the instructor provides star ratings in the following week to sustain excitement and motivation.

Phase 4: Reflection

Phase 4 draws together learning from Topics 1 to 5. Students critically reflect on the entire WRPF cycle from defining vision and mission, to analyzing external and internal environments, to formulating and defending strategies. By linking practical experiences back to theory, such as the risks of misalignment between vision and strategy or the importance of environmental scanning, students consolidate their understanding of strategic thinking, teamwork, and adaptive decision-making before progressing to the more advanced topics of the syllabus (Topics 6–10). The reflective process is strengthened by the star ratings received from the instructor in Phase 3, which serve as feedback and a benchmark for improvement. Teams use these ratings, alongside peer critiques, to refine their insights and identify areas where their strategic reasoning can be sharpened. The outcome

of WRPF is captured in a group report (50% of the course assessment), where each team conducts a comprehensive company review and formulates a strategic plan. A central feature of this report is the refinement of the three proposed strategies from the debate phase, integrating feedback and reflection to justify why these strategies represent the best path forward for the selected company. This ensures that WRPF outcomes are not only experienced in the classroom but also formalized in a structured deliverable that demonstrates both analytical depth and practical relevance.

Outcome Assessment

The outcome assessment is made through observation of the students' Pre-Work (Week 1 -5) and of the students' Post-Work (Week 12). The effectiveness of WRPF is assessed through a summative evaluation in Week 12, when students deliver their final group presentations and strategic reports. Although the framework is implemented during Weeks 1–5, its outcomes are best demonstrated later in the semester, once students have been exposed to the full syllabus (Topics 1–10). This allows instructors to observe how the early foundations of WRPF vision and mission setting, environmental audits, and debate-driven strategy formulation translate into mature, integrated strategic thinking.

Observation on the Students' Pre-Work (Week 1 -5)

The figure below illustrates samples of student pre-work, compiled from three groups, focusing on the selection of strategies for Dutch Lady Green Tea Flavored Milk. At this stage, students were required to propose their three best strategies, supported by initial analyses such as mission statements and EFE/IFE audits. However, the strategies presented tended to remain broad and generic, reflecting the early stage of their strategic reasoning.

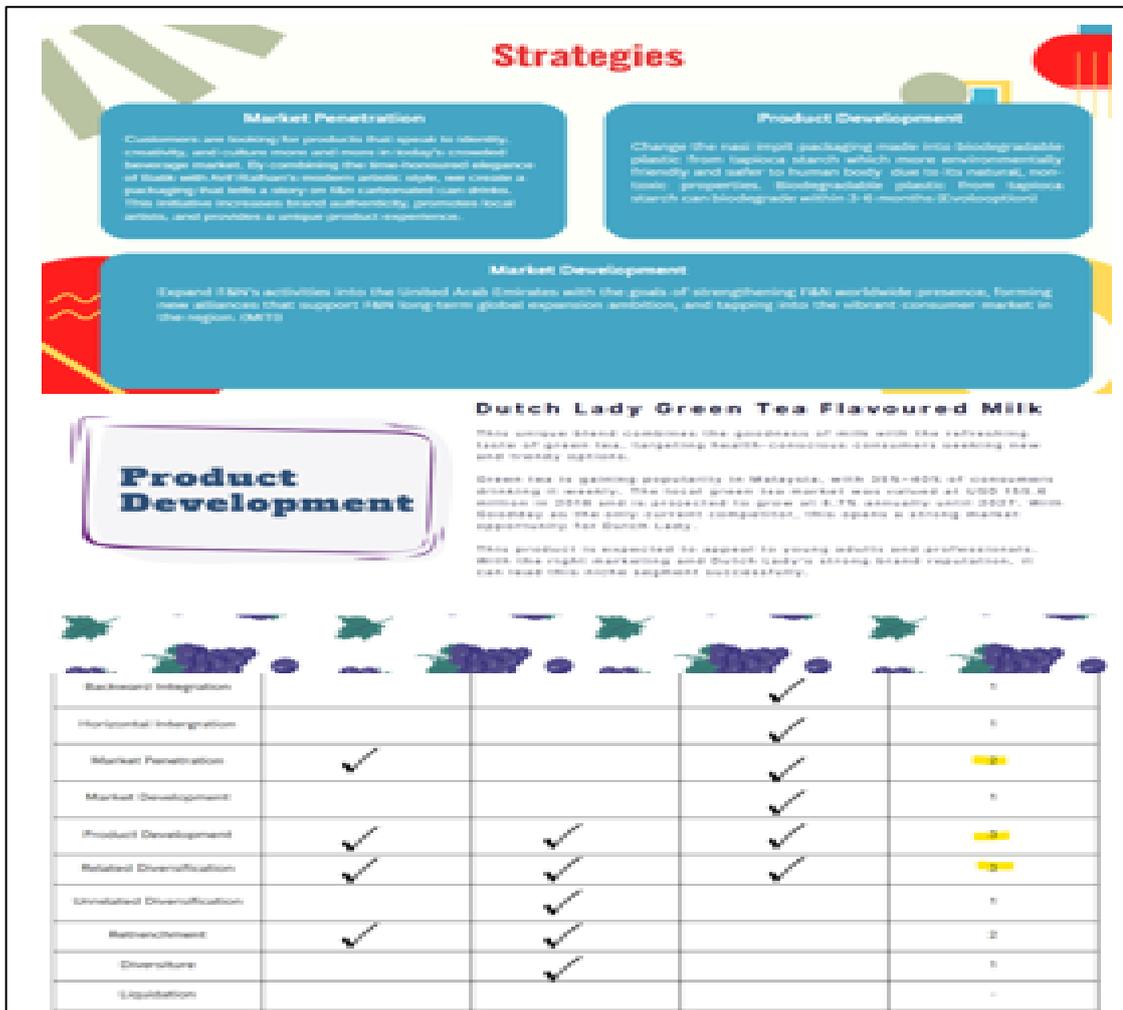


Figure 2: Observation of the Student's Pre-Work on the Three Best Strategies (Source: Authors' Padlet)

For instance, categories such as market penetration, product development, and market development were selected, but the articulation of specific, actionable initiatives was often missing. Instead of spelling out targeted actions such as new product variants, distribution partnerships, or pricing strategies, most groups simply identified the strategy category without fully connecting it to concrete measures that could realistically help the company win market share. In some cases, students attempted to provide examples (e.g., biodegradable packaging), but these were limited in scope and lacked alignment with broader company capabilities and market conditions.

This outcome highlights a common challenge in the early stages of strategic learning: students can correctly classify strategies within established frameworks (e.g., diversification, integration, penetration), yet struggle to translate these categories into specific, practical actions that are both feasible and aligned with the firm’s internal strengths. Such observations reinforce the pedagogical value of WRPF, as later phases (debate and reflection) are designed precisely to push students beyond broad categorizations toward evidence-based, context-specific strategies.

Observation on the Students’ Post-Work (Week 12)

The Week 12 group reports and presentation illustrate a marked improvement in students’ ownership and articulation of strategic options compared to their pre-work submissions. Whereas the early stages (Weeks 1–5) often displayed broad categorizations of strategies, the outcomes demonstrate a clearer ability to contextualize, specify, and visualize the chosen strategies in ways that are both practical and aligned with company realities.



Figure 3: Observation of Students’ Post-work on the Three Best Strategies (Source: Authors’ Padlet)

For instance, instead of simply stating “product development” or “market penetration,” students were able to propose more concrete initiatives such as introducing biodegradable plastic packaging, launching matcha-flavored milk variants, or collaborating with convenience stores through Dutch Lady Go outlets. These refinements show that students had progressed from merely identifying categories of strategy to articulating actionable moves that reflect market conditions, consumer preferences, and organizational resources. Moreover, the inclusion of visual representations such as product mock-ups, packaging designs, and store concepts demonstrates stronger engagement and a deeper sense of ownership over their proposals.

This progression highlights the importance of the pedagogical value of WRPF: by engaging in iterative phases of immersion, adaptation, debate, and reflection, students internalized the need to link abstract frameworks with real-world feasibility. By Week 12, their “three best strategies” were not only theoretically sound but also communicated in a way that resembled boardroom-ready recommendations, bridging the gap between academic analysis and managerial practice.

CONCLUSION

The real world of strategy is messy, uncertain, and rarely straightforward. Managers seldom deal with situations where the information is complete or the options are clear. Instead, they must weigh imperfect data, listen to competing viewpoints, and make tough calls knowing that circumstances could change overnight. By introducing unexpected twists and requiring students to adjust their thinking on the fly, WRPF mirrors this managerial reality. Students come to appreciate that models like SWOT or Porter’s Five Forces are valuable entry points, but not substitutes for judgment, creativity, and foresight. Equally important, WRPF highlights the social nature of strategy. Strategy is never crafted in isolation; it emerges from conversation, argument, and negotiation. When students challenge one another’s ideas in a war-room setting, they are not simply learning about strategy; they are experiencing how diverse perspectives sharpen reasoning and how collective problem-solving leads to stronger solutions. This builds a sense of collaborative leadership that is difficult to achieve through conventional group projects.

The evidence from student work reinforces this point. In the pre-work phase, many groups could only identify broad categories of strategies, such as product development or market penetration, without linking them to concrete actions. By Week 12, however, the same students were able to refine these ideas into specific, evidence-based initiatives, supported by visual mock-ups, market insights, and implementation pathways. This transformation demonstrates how WRPF moves students from abstract categorization toward actionable and boardroom-ready recommendations. In the end, what students take away is more than technical know-how. They gain confidence in working through ambiguity, resilience in the face of setbacks, and the ability to pivot when circumstances demand it. These are the hallmarks of strategic agility, qualities that separate those who can merely apply frameworks from those who can truly lead in unpredictable environments.

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