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Design for a Real-world Relevant “Introduction to Business” Course: Students Learning to be Players Instead of Spectators

Abstract

Business faculty, librarians and instructional design specialists at Memorial University of Newfoundland have partnered together to design a new Business 1000 course. The new course design addresses concerns from the corporate sector that business graduates lack real-world relevant knowledge and skills.

This paper describes traditional “orthodox business school management education” which teaches students to look at contexts and situations, creating what we call management Spectators. We go on to describe a new model for management education which would put students into the here-and-now realities of business management and encourage situational analysis, creating what we call Players.

The new model fosters critical thinking and information literacy skills in students to help them become more real-world relevant. In the new course design assignments and activities are structured as learning experiences rather than mere testing tools. In order to reflect the real-world environment students work in teams on business analysis and planning projects that may lead to a business plan. Through a “discovery learning” model, each team will necessarily learn about functional areas of business (accounting, finance, marketing, and organizational behaviour) in the course of completing the projects. Students will also hone their information literacy skills as part of the projects, learning how to identify information needs, where to get relevant and timely information, and how to critically analyze/evaluate the information they find.

Introduction

Since at least the early 1980s, concerns have been continually expressed that university business schools, their programs, and their graduates lack relevance to real-world business and management situations and practices. It therefore appears surprising that business corporations have continued to hire these business school graduates. In resolving this seeming contradiction we suggest, first, that managers and human resources professionals who have been doing the
hiring must have perceived these graduates as relevant to the jobs that they were hired for. Second, we suggest that it is later on in their corporate careers, perhaps as they move into positions that are managerial rather than technical, that business school graduates begin to demonstrate their lack of relevance to the real world of managing the business. It follows that business schools have focused on producing graduates that business corporations have continued to hire.

The North American business school management education “industry” through its accreditation body, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSBI), has made collective responses to the expressions of concern (See Porter and McKibben, 1987; Management Education at Risk, 2002; Eligibility Procedures and Standards for Business Accreditation, 2003). Also, and perhaps for competitive reasons, many so-called top-ranked business schools have been advertising program initiatives towards relevance, often including communications and interpersonal, or so-called “soft,” skills, and teamwork and leadership developmental activities. Although producing “relevant” graduates may not have been necessary in the past, it appears that business schools are now facing “intense criticism for failing to impart useful skills, failing to prepare leaders, [and] failing to instill norms of ethical behavior” (Bennis and O’Toole, 2005).

We believe that it is not difficult for teachers to potentiate, or even to develop, in business school students, the real-world relevance to managing the business that has always been needed. Hence, in this paper we are proposing a design for a real-world relevant “Introduction to Business” course – as a means of starting students in their business program as we would mean them to go on. We begin with an overview of the current state orthodox business school management education, and its role in teaching the reality of managing a business in today’s world. We then discuss “typical” business students, their needs and learning styles, and the ways in which we capitalize on their strengths in the proposed course. We conclude by outlining a sample learning activity and course schedule.
Organizational Management Spectators vs. Players Managing the Business

We perceive that, in practice, taken-for-granted Organizational Management is power and politics. Talking publicly about the practical exercise of power and politics is, however, socially unacceptable and can be damaging to one’s position. Organizational Management discourse, i.e., what organizational managers (can) talk about publicly, is therefore the socially acceptable, politically correct, and unreal mask for what managers do privately in exercising power. Orthodox business school management education (OBSME) is an important component of Organizational Management discourse, with all of its characteristics as a socially acceptable mask for power. OBSME discourse rationalizes power as legitimate, i.e., as authority, and as necessary for direction and coordination of the organization. It also provides organizational “safe-talk,” including normative and prescriptive content on leadership and teamwork – but what managers say publicly need bear no connection to what they do!

This discursive content has been the stuff of OBSME curricula, pedagogy, and ideology. In line with its role as a masking discourse, OBSME would not be expected to include critical thinking and situational analysis regarding here-and-now realities of managing the business. Instead, students must have been taught only to look at the context or situation, and not to put themselves as acting in the here-and-now reality of the situation and carrying out relevant critical thinking and action. As well, business school management courses are textbook courses; because textbook theory is suitably normative or prescriptive, saying only what should be done generally at all times and in all situations.

Organizational Management is perceived as “Spectator” management because, being primarily concerned with organizational power and politics, it only looks at the business reality. Accordingly, it must be non-relevant to the real world of the business (even though it may be very relevant to the world of organizational power and politics). OBSME programs have been, and continue to be, the means for producing Organizational Management Spectators. These are the business school graduates who go on to perpetuate the ranks of Spectator management in business corporations.
Accordingly, we define Managing the Business as the activities and processes that are the purposeful business enterprise of the corporation or organization, and its activities and processes are primarily concerned with accomplishing desired results in business situational reality. “Players” Managing the Business are critical thinkers acting in the real world situational here-and-now, and are those who can create and deliver valuable results.

Only decisions and actions made by Players acting in situational reality can be real-world relevant. We therefore suggest that educating Players in Managing the Business should be straightforwardly based on real-world information and on situational critical thinking. As Matthew Stewart (2006) suggests, “intelligence, common sense and problem-solving skills are what really matter, and…‘management theory’ is no science at all”.

Recognizing Real-World Relevant Students

High-school graduates in 2006 were born in 1988. They appear to be more self-aware and involved in determining what they value and want as individuals. They are more self-reliant and pragmatic in spending time and effort in getting what they want. We believe that such individuals are highly real-world relevant in their personal lives.

More mature individuals who have been working for some time in the real world can only be more real-world relevant. They are experiencing the realities of organizational management power exercised over them. They know what it is like to be “bossed around”.

Students leaving high school in 2006 have grown up with information technology and the Internet. They are highly information-aware even if they may not be “information-literate”1. These individuals are accustomed to using the Internet to find real-world information using Google and other search

1 “To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000).
engines. Indeed, they can perform an information search at the click of a mouse that not too long ago took months or years of library research. Such individuals, even as first-year students, are likely to find textbook theory-based business school education restricted and unreal.

We believe that students’ own real-world relevance can be harnessed for learning. Their self-awareness and self-reliance can be used to break away from textbook theory, find information on business realities, and practice situational analysis and critical thinking – as Players asking what, why and how.

Student interest and critical thinking can be stimulated by asking them to find information by searching secondary sources, and by observing and analyzing businesses in operation, as customers, as visitors, or as employees.

Further evidence of students’ self-reliance is seen in the popularity of online university courses among students today. Students want to manage their own time, and are willing and able to balance work, lifestyle, and learning style. Online courses give students more flexibility than traditional classroom-based courses. We believe we can capitalize on student’s self-reliance as learners by offering our course in an online environment.

Furthermore, through the creation of authentic activities that immerse students in the business environment, encouraging them to become ‘players’ rather than merely ‘spectators,’ we are in fact engaging them in significant learning experiences. These powerful learning experiences not only supply students with the foundational knowledge of how to successfully run a business, but also provide them the opportunity to apply this knowledge through engagement in these authentic activities, to integrate this knowledge with prior ideas so as to create connections, and to discover the personal and social implications of what they have learned. This in turn changes the degree to which they care about the subject at hand and, in addition, teaches them how to learn (Fink, 2003). This type of learning environment will ultimately bring about significant and lasting changes that continue after the course has ended: enhancing the individual’s life, enabling him or her to contribute to their communities, and successfully preparing the individual for the world of work (Fink, 2003).
Aims and Means for Student Learning

Real-world Knowledge Content

Knowledge content and pedagogy must move away from looking at or being applicable to the context or type of situation (students taught to be Spectators) to being derived from or applied in the situation (students learning to be Players). Real-world business enterprise practicalities and processes must be the bases for content.

It follows from the critical thinking approach that there must be standardization of terms and definitions, and consistency in their use.

It also follows that textbook information would be used largely to provide basic business concepts in terms of frameworks, items, terms and definitions, and some illustrative examples.

Real-world Situationalization and Critical Thinking

Relevant business education should explicitly focus on the real world of managing the business, recognize the power and political realities of organizational management, and promote learning of critical thinking with here-and-now situationalization.

The course will introduce the realities of business enterprise, including business processes and the situational realities of managing the business. To be real the course must be down-to-earth in focusing on the fundamentals of “the business” and on the business processes that drive and accomplish these essentials. Accordingly, business is seen as identifying customers, realizing what they value, selling and delivering to customers what they value, and getting paid and making a profit, all in competition with other businesses that may be seeking the same customers and other resources. Other factors and considerations, such as morality, social responsibility, legality, and technology, can be discussed relative to the effects they may have on these fundamentals. The course would demand critical investigation and thinking about business and organization realities and about what to do in managing them for results.
The course would take a business strategic and operational process approach to delivering customer value, profitability, and overall competitiveness. This would be fundamentally different from the OBSME functional approach that is traditionally taken.

**Information Literacy**

Information search and evaluation is a fundamental first step in critical thinking. Students must learn to find and create data and information, and they must learn to evaluate and validate it – in short, they must become “information literate.”

Many academic libraries have adopted the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* published by the Association of College and Research Libraries (2000). Librarians understand how to effectively navigate today’s information management and retrieval systems, and often teach students how to find, evaluate, and use information. As information specialists, librarians are important collaborators in the design of a course and its research assignments and activities.

For the purposes of the real-world relevant “Introduction to Business” course in question, these Standards would be incorporated as guiding principles for student learning activities and assignments. Students will become real-world relevant as they carry out information searches to find their own examples for illustration, application, and analysis. Students’ library and Internet search skills, and their overall information literacy, would be developed and improved.

**COURSE DESIGN**

**Real-world Knowledge Content**

We conceptualize four Business Connection Processes to customers and for making money. These would form the knowledge content of the course, and will serve as topic headings in the course schedule as follows:

1. **Customers buying value:** What are customers buying and what do they want to buy, what do customers value and how do we make money on it?
2. **Communicating, selling, and customer purchasing:** How are we selling to customers, and how do we make money doing so? (Here, selling includes marketing or at the very least communication or promotion of the product or service value package to the target customer).

3. **Making, assembling, storing, transporting, and delivering:** How are we making/assembling and delivering the product or service value package to the target customers, and how do we make money doing so?

4. **Getting paid and making money:** How are we getting paid and how are we controlling working capital liquidity, costs, and investments, and how are we making money doing so?

**Real-world Situationalization and Critical Thinking**

Each of the above four Business Connection Processes would be analyzed systematically in five areas:

1. Preliminary business connection identification (as a place to start the analysis)
2. External analysis (including customers, market and competitors)
3. Business connection (for customer value and for making money)
4. Company business operations and organization
5. Company financial performance and financing

We use the analogy of the detective or crime scene investigator (CSI). The fundamental questions are always: What? When? Where? Why? How? and Who? A business connection involves two actors, i.e., the customer and the company, on either side of the connection, and both actors must be kept in mind when asking the questions.

To illustrate this systematic analysis, we take the example of restaurants. We look at Business Connection Process 1 (Customers Buying Value) and begin analyzing that process in a preliminary way (according to preliminary business connection identification above):

Consider restaurants, the many different types that exist and the different customer user segments that they are targeting, and competing
for. It is useful to consider the restaurant “value package” based on functionality, quality, and performance specifications along with price. There is a continuum from high functionality, etc. at a high price, to restaurants with lower service specifications at a lower price. An evening meal at a fine dining restaurant may cost approximately $100 per plate, but at Swiss Chalet it may cost $20 per plate. At McDonald’s and other competing fast food outlets there are no plates, and the cost of the meal may be around $10. It follows that there are many more restaurants targeting the lower prices segments simply because there are many more people who only want to, or can only afford to, pay lower prices. (You get what you pay for, and you pay for what you get!)

Clearly, these different restaurants are targeting different customer or market segments. It needs to be recognized, however, that individuals can fall into more than one segment. For example, we might go to a fine dining restaurant for a special occasion such as a romantic dinner for two on Valentine’s Day, but eat at Swiss Chalet because we simply cannot face cooking a meal on a Saturday evening. Alternatively, we may choose an ethnic restaurant (e.g., Chinese, Thai, Italian, Indian) simply for the different food experience.

As well, there are many different specific types of customer who fall into one segment. For example, the fine dining customer segment will contain specific customers who may be special occasion diners, business entertainment diners, and gourmet diners.

Each and every restaurant is aiming to cause potential customers falling into its target user segment to value its service offering over and above that of other restaurants competing for that same segment. Only if the restaurant gets sufficient numbers of customers to cover its costs and make a profit will it stay in business.
Learning Activities and Assignments

Students today are assignment-focused. After all, students earn grades by completing assignments, not by reading supplementary materials or simply attending classes. We believe assignments and activities can be learning experiences themselves, rather than mere tests of classroom learning. To that end, the assignments and activities we have developed are inquiry-based. “Inquiry-based learning refers to teaching and learning that is active and problem-driven, rather than primarily passive and lecture-based” (Sandhu and McDonald, 2007). Given an example such as the restaurant scenario above, there are many sources of information a student might consult to flesh out the problem and find a solution:

- talk to local restaurant owners directly
- visit a restaurant’s Web site
- read restaurants’ annual reports (especially for chain restaurants)
- find government statistics on consumer spending on food
- find secondary scholarly research in this area

Our information literacy objectives for the activities and assignments are that students:

- determine their information needs
- discover the most effective way of finding the needed information (e.g., interviews, observations, searches)
- evaluate the information for relevance, authority, accuracy, and currency
- manipulate and interpret data to bear on the specific situation or problem
- make findings from that data and information
- draw situational conclusions based on findings

In the course of activities and assignments students will be given some information sources to explore, will be taught how to use key library resources, and will be expected to brainstorm and use some information sources on their own.
Figure 1. Example Learning Activity

Click on the following link to view Canadian spending patterns for the year 2003.


1. Seek out the average expenditure per household on food purchased from restaurants.
2. How does this number compare with the average expenditure per household on such services/products as communications or transportation?
3. Discuss on the Forum if and how you would use this data if you were a restaurant owner. How would it impact your business decisions?

This activity would teach students the potential usefulness of government statistics as a resource, the free availability of such statistics online, give students experience reading large tables of numerical data as well as drawing conclusions from such data, and would encourage students to think critically about the data and share ideas with fellow students.

Possible Course Schedule

This is for a 13-week distance-learning on-line course.

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<tr>
<th>Module</th>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Business Environment and Information Sources for Managing the Business</td>
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<td>Measuring Financial Performance and Financial Position</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>Business and Society, and Managerial Morality and Ethics</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>5 &amp; 6</td>
<td>Business Connection Process (1): Customers Buying Value</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>7 &amp; 8</td>
<td>Business Connection Process (2): Communicating, Selling, and Customer Purchasing</td>
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Conclusion

We believe that the proposed course design fosters real-world relevance in students. The course design is based on business processes rather than “functional silos”. The assignments and activities are inquiry-based and help develop crucial information literacy skills, which are largely missing from traditional OBSME approaches. Online course delivery takes advantage of students’ self-reliance as learners, and gives students greater flexibility in balancing school, work, and life commitments. With this course design, we provide a foundation for students to find and incorporate real-world relevance in all the courses that will follow in their business school programs.

References


