

**RAISING THE BAR FOR *ALL* LEARNERS: CREATING
SIGNIFICANT LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS**

Michele Simms, University of St. Thomas, Houston

ABSTRACT

“Lead or be left behind” is a mantra that serves us all well, as teachers and as students. Creating significant learning environments changes our role from providing instruction to producing learners. The 2009 Southwestern Business Administration Teaching Conference theme “Raising the Bar: Challenging Students to be Global Competitors” is most timely to consider. Using an MBA ethics course as an example, the taxonomy of significant learning is introduced as a model for class design that promotes entrepreneurial projects and classroom involvement. Creating significant learning environments is a way to ‘raise the bar’ and prepare students as global competitors.

INTRODUCTION

“In a flat world, the individual worker is going to become more and more responsible for managing his or her own career, risks and economic security...(what) workers need most are portable benefits and opportunities for lifelong learning” (Friedman, 2006:369).

In *The World is Flat* Friedman (2006), recognized in 2005 as one of America’s Best Leaders by U.S. News and World Report, gives an essential account of globalization and the role education plays in meeting its challenges. The key is to “learn how to learn” (Friedman, 2006: 302). Institutions of higher education are responding to this phenomenon with a shift in focus on creating learning-centered classrooms and improvement-oriented environments. A number of scholars, practitioners and theorists involved in college teaching have generated new paradigms for teaching where the classroom intent shifts from providing instruction to producing learners. The 2009 Southwestern Business Administration Teaching Conference theme of “Raising the Bar: Challenging Our Students to be Global Competitors” is most timely for us to consider, not only for our students but also for ourselves as business educators.

Fink (2003), a forerunner on how to create significant learning experiences in the college classroom, provides an integrated approach to course design dedicated to learning how to learn. Part I of this paper defines significant learning and introduces the integrated course model for class design. Part II outlines how the model has been successfully applied in a required MBA ethics class, taught for five years as a service learning course, with focus on personal/corporate sustainability, social entrepreneurship and vocation. The conclusion discusses the impact of significant learning on student and faculty personal and professional development as a way to ‘raise the bar’ and prepare students as global competitors.

PART I: DEFINING SIGNIFICANT LEARNING AND INTEGRATED COURSE DESIGN

The new economic imperative of “lead or be left behind” has surfaced in its own way in higher education. In The Futures Project, Newman (2000) cites four major forces driving change in higher education: information technology, globalization of higher education, a changing student profile and new providers (i.e., corporate universities, the University of Phoenix and virtual universities). As a result, a much higher level of competition characterizes higher education (www.futuresproject.org, accessed August 8, 2009). University settings no longer remain the exclusive deliverer of post-secondary education. Such changes require “the need for a new vision of what constitutes ‘good learning’ and the kind of pedagogy that will generate that kind of learning” (Fink, 2003:11). The educational enterprise is becoming more learning-centered with a college education still viewed as “a way to restore global leadership” (Merisotis, 2009: B5).

Several new teaching paradigms have emerged moving away from providing instruction, the conventional teaching paradigm, to one that focuses on producing learning, hence a learning paradigm (Barr and Tagg, 1995). Examples of teaching practices that promote learning include the use of simulation and case studies, small group learning, assessment of learning, service learning, problem-based learning and writing-across-the-curriculum. Academics and practitioners offer any number of resources that explain each of these practices: *Teaching Tips* (McKeachie, 1999), *Tools for Teaching* (Davis, 1993), *Teaching and Learning on the Edge of the Millennium* (Svinicki, 1999), *Changing College Classrooms* (Halpern, 1994), and *Better Teaching, More Learning* (Davis, 1993).

Significant Learning Defined

Broadly defined, learning involves a change in one’s thinking, feeling and acting. Perhaps the most widely recognized learning model is Bloom’s taxonomy (1956), which focuses on the cognitive domain. Learning is assessed using a hierarchal arrangement, from lowest to highest: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. The taxonomy is valuable yet “(i)ndividuals involved in

higher education are expressing a need for important kinds of learning that do not emerge easily from the Bloom taxonomy, for example: learning how to learn, leadership and interpersonal skills, ethics, communication skills, character, tolerance and the ability to adapt to change” (Fink, 2003: 29). The concept of a significant learning taxonomy emerged from this need with three values characteristic of such learning: (1) enhancing one’s individual life, (2) enabling contribution to the many communities of which one is a part (an area particularly salient given this conference’s theme) and (3) preparing for the world of work (Fink, 2003: 7). The four components of teaching are knowledge of subject matter, instructional design, teacher-student interactions and course management. The quality of a student’s learning experience is related to these four teaching components. Hence, the definition of significant learning is the result of integrating the values with the components of teaching.

Six categories comprise the taxonomy of significant learning: foundational knowledge (understanding and remembering information and ideas); application (skills, critical and creating thinking, project management); integration (connecting ideas and people in different realms of life); human dimension (learning of self and others); caring (developing feelings, interests and values); and learning how to learn (becoming a better student, subject inquiry and self-directed learners). Thus, significant learning occurs at the interface of these six categories. (See Figure 1). The taxonomy includes the cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills in a model that is interactive and relational. The power of the taxonomy is that teaching is “no longer a zero sum game. That is, teachers don’t automatically have to give up one kind of learning to achieve another” (Fink, 2003: 32).

Significant Learning Applied

What role, then, does significant learning play and how do we apply this in our classrooms? Two interrelated practices influences what occurs in the classroom: course design and teacher-student interaction. Course design involves determining what goals and objectives will constitute the course and why, and how the course is taught. Teacher-student interaction flows from the design and directly influences how we engage and interact with students. Course design

drives the class and, in essence, raises the bar for what can be accomplished. An integrated course design is the means by which one creates a significant learning experience.

The key components of an integrated course design are Learning Goals, Teaching and Learning Activities, and Feedback and Assessment Practices. Situational factors, such as the teaching/learning context (class size, upper or lower division, frequency of class meetings), nature of subject material, and student, department and institutional course expectations, inform the design. The success of an Integrated Course Design requires that the key components are all consistent with and in support of each other. For example, if a learning goal is to have students learn how to think critically and innovatively given X-content, but the learning and assessment activities are straight lecture and multiple choice exams, then the teaching, learning and assessment activities do not complement the learning goal.

Designing an integrated course requires gathering information and making decisions in a systematic way. The first step is defining the situational factors. At this stage of the process, the teacher uses a backward design; that is, the syllabus is designed with the end of the semester in mind. In effect, the teacher is creating a future reality. This process is followed by decisions involving the first component of an integrated design: establishing the Learning Goals. Questions to guide the teacher include: What do you want students to remember two-to-three years from now? How do you hope students will continue to learn? What application skills do you intend the student to gain from the class?

Once the learning goals are established, the focus shifts to Feedback and Assessment. What will students do to demonstrate the learning goals were met? What activities, in addition to paper/pencil tests, will be used to assess student progress and performance? Finally, the process of course design concludes by identifying which Teaching and Learning Activities are used in the classroom. In essence, what would have to occur during the course of the class for students to excel on the Feedback and Assessment activities? The use of active learning activities is essential. Examples include opportunities for reflective dialogue (oral and written), small group discussions, pair-share, one-minute papers, peer evaluations and case analysis.

The final check for the teacher is to ensure integration occurs across each of these components. Are the Learning Activities consistent with the Learning Goals? Are the Assessment and Feedback activities measuring what the teacher seeks to measure? The result of an Integrated Course Design is what Millis (2009) refers to as deep learning: students have a need to know, therefore motivation is intrinsic; students are actively involved; opportunities for inquiry and exploration are part of the classroom experience; and content is taught in integrated wholes rather than piece-meal.

Clearly the taxonomy of significant learning is asking teachers and students to re-learn their roles in the classroom and to re-define the nature of their relationship where both student and teacher are learners. Put another way, the student becomes teacher becomes student. The Integrated Course Model provides a way to create significant learning experiences where both student and teacher learn how to learn. Part II identifies specific course activities and assignments by applying the model to a required ethics course aimed at educating the whole person and preparing the student for successful performance in a global working environment.

PART II: MBA COURSE APPLIED: LEARNERS ONLY NEED REGISTER

Business Ethics and Society is an MBA core course offered each semester with the goal to provide the student with an in-depth analysis and integrative framework for viewing the corporation as a social system and understanding the role of business in society. Topics cover the ethics and definition of the corporation as a legal person, sustainability, social entrepreneurship and vocation. Seminal management cases and a team community project are used to enhance student recognition of ethical business issues, increase self-awareness, and to develop leadership skills that inform the future ethos and social responsibility of business.

Students self-select groups they will work with throughout the semester and choose their service project(s). In this way, students begin to assume responsibility for their work, recognize their initiative is

pivotal to success and have ownership to their final product at the onset of the semester. The class is designed using an action learning model: all in-class and out-of-class teaching and learning activities emphasize co-learning, co-participating, and co-leading efforts and the service learning project bridges theory with practice.

Each semester, I invite clients from the community and former students to introduce project opportunities. Examples include Habitat for Humanity, Junior Achievement, Bo's Place, and the Urban Business Initiative. Students enrolled in class also introduce current community work/clients in which they are engaged (i.e., Vietnamese Shelter, Houston Food Bank, and Star of Hope) and/or clients they have identified through the university's Office of Volunteer Opportunities. Therefore, the class design invites mutual responsibility in identifying work projects. This format has been successful at the MBA level where the majority of students are working full time and taking evening classes to complete their graduate work. Often, students are already engaged in a community activity through their church and/or as part of their employment. The goal is not to add an additional project but rather provide the student with an opportunity to continue that work with the benefit of an in-class peer group and the reflective process, the latter being a central component to learning in a service learning course. The design follows an adult learning model by giving control to students, many who are professionals in their own right. More importantly, the design invites and encourages students to identify a project they have a passion for, or at least an intense interest in, whereby they must assume leadership in client project management.

Format of class

The class meets twice weekly for one hour and 15 minutes. The 15-week semester is divided into three sections. The first third of the course covers the theories and definitions related to business ethics and society. Seminal cases are used with topics crossing business disciplines (i.e., microfinance and social entrepreneurship; triple-bottom line accounting and sustainability.) All class periods are interactive with small group work and case analysis. Blue books are distributed at intervals for students to comment on a class activity, which is always presented in the form of a question, and completed in that class period.

For example, after analyzing the Nestle Infant Formula case, students are asked: Was the ethical norm of significant choice violated by the stakeholders in the case? Do you have a personal experience where your choice was violated? The second third of the course is dedicated to the project work. Class time is dedicated to applying the concepts directly to their projects. Discussions typically involve questions of leadership, project management, team issues and client concerns. The role of student values and interests begin to emerge at this point, lending to a deep learning of self and others.

Because of student work schedules, I dedicate four class periods where there are no formal class meetings. I make myself available to meet with the groups informally during this time. Many, if not all of us, are working together on the weekends with community clients. The last third of the class is discussion on additional readings/theories, assimilating experiences and final presentations from each of the groups.

Integrated Course Design Applied

The MBA class evolved over a period of five years. Although the focus was on the role of self-awareness and leadership development, the integrated course design helped to codify my teaching practice. I will give one example across each category- Learning Goals, Feedback and Assessment, and Teaching and Learning Activities- applied in the MBA Class.

The first step in applying the course design is giving careful consideration to the situational factors of the class. There are three unique challenges to teaching this course so as to foster significant learning. The first is integration: helping students to connect ideas, people and realms of life. The second is learning how to learn: developing a spirit of inquiry and being self-directed learners. The third is the human dimension: learning about oneself and others. Using the backward design process of syllabus creation (i.e., think with the end in mind) I keep these challenges foremost in mind when developing the goals, feedback and assessment practices and the teaching and learning activities.

On Learning Goals

The key question I focus on is “what do you want students to learn and retain 2-3 years after the course is completed?” After years of teaching at the MBA level I am ever surprised at the number of students who cannot answer the question: Why are you getting your MBA, why here and why now? A key learning goal is for students to be self-aware: to find their voice and to identify the relationship between who they are and what they do. This goal supports my belief that the future of business ethics is in self-knowledge not in creating and/or following more rules and regulations. Therefore, the community project is set-up in such a way that promotes self-directed teams, client choice and project management. The use of questions throughout the semester is intended to develop a spirit of inquiry about themselves, the social issues, and their role in today’s global business world.

On Feedback and Assessment

The key question here is “what do students have to do to demonstrate the achievement of the learning goals?” Fink (2003) uses the term “educative assessment” practices in assessing learning goals. One practice is forward-looking assessment: students need to identify how they will apply *in the future* what they learned in their community project today. Therefore, early in the semester, class time is dedicated to identifying the management and social issues of the day and giving thoughtful analysis of the objective of business. Readings on the normative foundations of business informs this discussion. Once students are involved in their project work and working in groups, they are mentored by their peers and through class activities to “future”: to think proactively and long-term. For example, one group was scheduled to help patients at MD Anderson to access email so they could communicate with loved ones. However, the group quickly surmised there was a greater institutional need to create a patient system that could service several people rather than rely on a limited-time format that relied upon one-on-one help between the patient and volunteer. At the end of the semester, one student was hired as a consequence of this idea. This example highlights significant learning: the students were part of a project that was self-directed (i.e., learning how to learn), allowed them to identify a problem that used their knowledge in a real-

time situation that connected ideas and people (i.e., integration) and resulted in learning about themselves (i.e., human dimension).

Criteria for evaluation are based on how students apply management theories to their project in a final paper and through individual reflective papers. For example, how was triple-loop learning applied? How did the theories of sustainability relate to their community project? How did working with the community shape their understanding of the social entrepreneur? Equally important are student reflection papers: How are you using what you learn? What is the connection of what you learned to your own life? How has this shaped your view of business and its role in society from an ethical perspective? Student projects are assessed using an oral and written presentation rubric and through a Client Form completed by the agency, which documents the student's hours and contributions. Students receive feedback from the teacher, the client and from their peers.

On Teaching and Learning Activities

The question that guides this category rests on "what has to happen during the course to ensure success in feedback and assessment?" To restate, the class design uses an action learning model; therefore, all in-class activities involve some aspect of experiential learning that includes small group break-out sessions to discuss a case; pair-share activities at the close of a class period to further refine "what did I learn today?"; one minute papers in the form of the blue books; and an individual final reflective paper with questions specifically focused on integration, learning how to learn and the human dimension. Outside of class is the service learning project. To date, one student has established a 501C-3 organization, AMOM Charity, which provides health and education services to children in Cameroon. One student was recognized by the Clinton Global Initiative in 2009 for her humanitarian efforts in starting health clinics for Bolivian women. Several students have continued their work service with Avon Walk for Breast Cancer, Star of Hope, MD Anderson Ronald McDonald House and the United Nations/Houston. The self-directed, team-based project develops skills transferable to any industry, private or public; local or multi-national.

To summarize, the MBA ethics class introduces the concepts of the social entrepreneur and sustainability as new business models in a global world that requires forward-looking leadership, knowledge of local and global issues, creativity, new ideas and individuals with ethical fiber who serve as change agents (Drayton, 2005). The integrated course design helps create the type of significant learning environment that fosters sustainable leadership and the characteristics needed to be a social entrepreneur. Student feedback (as quoted from the fall 2008 evaluations) indicates the course is “life changing”; allowed the student “to really think about future generations and my role as a leader and make a difference”; the course “is an experience, not just a class”; “the community service helped me with my company, Shell Oil. I can now talk about being competitive in a global market using the language of sustainability.” Another student remarked: “Finally, I have a professional portfolio I must manage”. Creating a significant learning environment raises the bar: it helps the faculty member focus on what they are teaching and why; it helps the student realize “not everything is about me” and provides opportunity to create and manage a self-led team project, a necessary skill-set needed to be competitive in today’s global market.

CONCLUSION

Raising the Bar, Challenging Our Students to Become Global Competitors

A friend once asked Isidor Rabi, a Nobel Prize winner in physics, how he became a scientist. Rabi replied that every day after school his mother would talk to him about his school day. She wasn’t so much interested in what he had learned that day, but she always inquired, “Did you ask a good question today?” “Asking good questions,” Rabi said, “made me become a scientist.” (Source unknown, Friedman, 2006: 301).

Business educators have both an opportunity and a responsibility to create classroom experiences that promote learning in a globalized world “now shifted into warp drive” (www.slate.com, accessed August 20, 2009). The integrated course design invites teachers to ‘ask good questions’ when designing their courses. The

taxonomy helps teachers produce learners who will also keep seeking to 'ask good questions.' What is the impact of significant learning on student and faculty personal and professional development as a way to 'raise the bar' and prepare students as global competitors?

First, both student and teacher become meta-learners. Both take charge of their own leadership development, their own beliefs, their own thinking, their own performance and their own caring and values. Students do this in relationship to their community project; teachers do this in relationship to how the course is designed and through student-teacher interaction.

Second, both student and teacher become sensitive and informed to the context of the world in which they live. The MBA course cited in this article focuses on social entrepreneurship, the fastest growing industry in the past decade, whose genesis took root by responding to global issues of health, education, and poverty, to name a few areas. Teachers may not fit the pure definition of a social entrepreneur (Nicholls, 2006); however, they are social innovators who shape the lives of students entering society. Their foundational knowledge of the world is important in establishing context but best understood in relationship to the other five components of the taxonomy. Students are challenged to consider how their community work informs their personal and professional ethics, how the services they're providing for the client often translates to the same issues encountered globally and how their project gives them an edge as a global leader/entrepreneur.

Third, both student and teacher are challenged to change their view of themselves. Teachers do not simply provide instruction; students are not simply recipients of another's knowledge. Creating a significant learning experience is risky, requires self-trust and trust of the other to make good on what is a mutual, reciprocal responsibility to classroom success. Both teachers and students are learners in this new model. Both are designers of a future reality for business and both are in the business of creating new business models.

Finally, the AACSB process is often met by students and faculty as a "teach to the test" experience, the complete antithesis to creating a significant learning environment. Whether or not this is 'true' can be debated elsewhere, and would be a healthy discussion. Because the

taxonomy is not a zero-sum game, it helps the teacher design a class with integrity remaining true to AACSB requirements.

“Lead or be left behind” is a mantra that serves us *all* well. Creating significant learning experiences helps us in the global environment precisely because we are all learning how to learn. The design of any course using the taxonomy for significant learning is intentional and gives students the ‘portable benefits’ to become global competitors. What is hoped is that this paper helps move each of us forward in ways that truly raises the bar—as life-long learners in a world forever global, forever flat.

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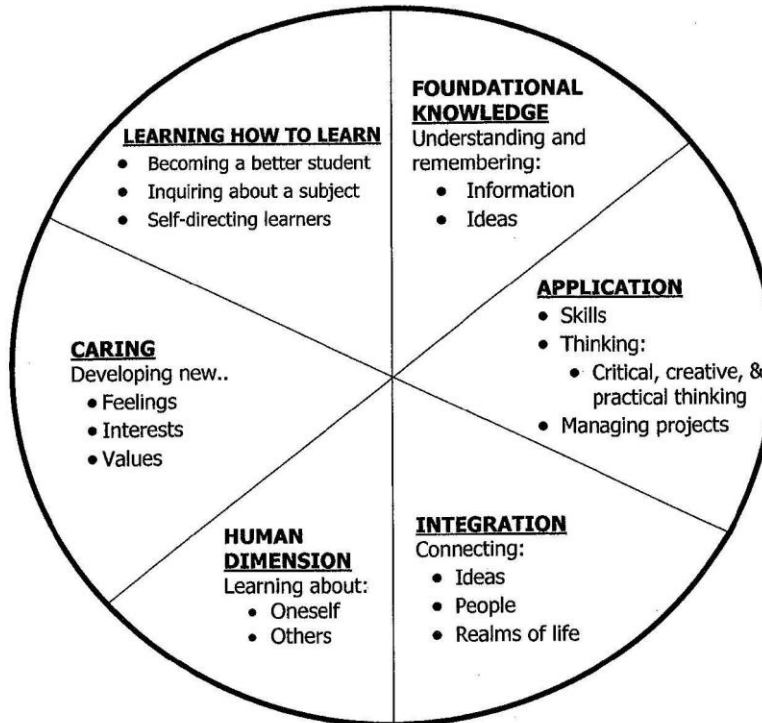
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Figure 1

A TAXONOMY OF SIGNIFICANT LEARNING



About the Author

Michele Simms is associate professor of management and marketing in the Cameron School of Business. Simms embraces the liberal arts tradition of the University of St. Thomas and teaches across the disciplines. Her former students describe her classes as transformative, inspiring and life-changing.

Email: simmsm@stthom.edu