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A "LIVE-CASE" APPROACH TO THE BUSINESS AND SOCIETY COURSE¹

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Nearly every collegiate school of business has a course which generally revolves around business and society topics. In addition, an increasing number of schools are beginning to require a course in this field of all of its students, as well as beginning to expand their programs in this area with majors and minors at both the graduate and undergraduate level. All of these trends indicate that the faculty of our business schools are increasingly interested in exposing their students to the complex relationships of the business organization with its social environment.

This paper is directed towards those educators in the business and society area who are struggling with the presentation of this diverse and rapidly changing body of knowledge. This author contends that an experiential approach to teaching this body of knowledge greatly facilitates student learning of the issues and concepts basic to the field. The business and society course can be called "Social Responsibility of Business", "Business and Environment", or may include more specific titles such as "Business and Government", "Marketing and Society", or even "Ethics and Morality in Business". The content of these courses involves incredibly diverse subject areas such as economics, marketing, philosophy, management theory, organization theory, legal practices, social and cultural phenomenon, historical approaches, etc., etc.

This author believes that the content of the particular business and society course is a function of 1) the particular professor's interest, 2) the background of the student, 3) the range of complexity of course offerings in the area, and 4) even the topical events which may occur before or during a particular course. Rather than focusing upon content issues, this paper will 1) address alternatives to the teaching of the Business and Society course, 2) present some supporting data and the rationale for an experiential approach.

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The Lecture Method: Tried and True

The most obvious and perhaps common approach to most college level courses involves the lecture format. I will not expound upon the problems of one-way communication, lack of feedback, and the lack of student involvement which comes for the lecture format. However, I will point out that students, especially in the value-laden area of Business and Society relationships, will not take “answers”. Students often say that sole reliance on the lecture format only leads to more “theory about theory”, or that “It is not real to me”. The reason for this type of sentiment is simple - the dynamic and exciting topics of the Business and Society course can be “killed” by the basically static and often dull nature of the pure lecture approach. Lectures should only be a part of a well-integrated teaching, especially in a course such as Business and Society.

The Use of Personal Contracts

I feel that it is very important in the Business and Society area to focus upon personal relevance for the individual student. A first step in this direction is the use of personal contracts which are agreed upon at the beginning of the semester. These contracts should be genuinely mutual, for they should involve both the individual student’s and the professor’s learning goals for the course. The contracts include 1) the sets of behaviors necessary for certain grades, 2) the learning goals relevant to the course and its content, 3) the amount of work to be devoted to projects (discussed later), and 4) any other data which are relevant to the learning involvement of the individual student. This personal contract approach is especially useful at the beginning of the Business and Society course, for it immediately 1) establishes differences among individuals, 2) highlights the complex sets of differing values which refer to business, society, and their interrelationships, and 3) sets out the “parameters of action” for any subsequent “live case”/experiential work the student is to undertake.

Debates: An Adversary Format

A series of staged debates can be used to “liven up” the often dull student report format. The debate format essentially puts the student in an adversary relationship, and the friendly competition and conflict generated can produce a greater level of student attention and interest. Because the students know they were going to be facing “prepared” adversaries, they also come to class better prepared, and dug into their topics with more enthusiasm and to greater depths. To heighten interest and to keep the observing class involved, the rest of the class can function as a panel of judges. The “judges” will always manage to split their vote on well-chosen debate topics, further highlighting the diversity of opinion and degree of ambiguity associated with

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many Business and Society topics. These debates can be kept relatively simple and informal without reducing their effectiveness or impact.

The debate format does have some possible perils. An overindulgence in this practice, like a student report format, can begin to wear thin over time. Nonetheless, the ambiguous and value-laden nature of many of the topics of the social responsibility/business and society area lend themselves readily to the debate format, for it is often easy to pick at least two sides to almost every issue. Even relatively “dated” topics such as the SST, “Is there really an oil crisis?”, and even the profit vs. social responsibility controversy can be successfully adopted. The reader can undoubtedly think of several topics of current interest which could lend themselves readily in the debate technique.

Cases

The most pervasive methodology in the business and society course has to be the use of cases, which I am defining here as “cognitive cases”, i.e., cases that deal with facts or information in a report or written case format. This is, of course, an excellent way to present many of the topics and concepts of the business and society area. But, like the formats already mentioned, cases can be overdone, and students may thus have a tendency to “bog down” in the face of excessive information, facts, and decision alternatives. While the case format is essential to the business and society course, I feel that it is best used when mixed with a combination of debates, reports, and “live cases”.

The Experiential Learning Approach

When I refer to “live cases”, I am describing what I call the experiential learning of social responsibility. The basic rationale for experiential learning is “learning by doing”. That is, the learning individual is involved, personally involved, as a whole learning person. In addition to the cognitive aspects of the learning event, the individual is also involved emotionally and behaviorally, because he is engaging in an actual set of behaviors and experiences. Cognitive learning may develop only intellectual and perceptual capacities. Experiential learning also has the capacity to develop and reinforce cognitions, as well as to impact upon emotions and attitudes and to function in developing capacities to behave consistently with the insights of these learning processes and experiences.

To accomplish this “learning by doing” format in the Business and Society course, I have the students contract for “socially responsible” projects in the “real world”. In other words, they must:

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1. Define social responsibility, and business, and society for themselves.
2. Define some problems or deficiencies or need for action in these areas.
3. Produce a “best” solution for the problem.
4. Take action on this solution outside of the classroom.
5. Implement change attempts as independent, autonomous decision makers.
6. Assess the impact of these change attempts.
7. Relate these experiences to sets of “personal learnings”.

While using this social responsible project technique, I have found that it is desirable to have the students devise their own projects. The slightest hint by the professor will immediately produce a mental set as to the types of actions and projects which the professor deems “appropriate”. The truly appropriate project is the one that is appropriate for the individual student. After all, it is the student’s learning experience, and he should design it. Students may resist such instructions and ambiguity at first, for they are not conditioned to make decisions for themselves related to personal learning environments. I feel that if I can get my students to function without me, even on this limited assignment, that functioning is a valuable experiential learning experience in and of itself.

Listed below are some general headings and examples of specific projects undertaken by students. This list gives the flavor and possible range of this experiential learning approach. Close examination of some of these topics will also suggest the learning impact and amount of effort required. These topics are drawn from two different classes and involve both individual and group projects:

Conducting Seminars, Developing Programs

1. Career Opportunities Seminar and Job Placement Center for minorities - opportunities with the City of Lubbock.
2. Seminar for businessmen and citizens on topics of “Does Downtown Lubbock Have a Future?”
3. Job placement for mentally retarded.
4. Job placement and community education program -handicapped workers.
5. Obtaining diabetes detection hints and setting up an educational and distributional program for the general public.

Community “Drives”

6. “Let the Children Read” - a community drive collecting books and reading materials suitable for the Lubbock State School for Mental Retardation.

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7. City-wide alley clean-up campaign.
8. University-wide blood drive. Helping Those “In Need”
9. Expansion of Lubbock Big Brother Program and recruitment of Big Brothers and Big Sisters.
10. Development of transportation service for mentally retarded using idle church buses.

Consumerism

11. Provide more and better warranty information for heavy machinery company.
12. Provide more product information in a do-it-yourself hardware store.
13. Produce more “socially responsible” television servicing policies and practices in the community.

Systemic or Procedural Changes

14. Establish a Division of Minority Education in the Department of Continuing Education of a small college.
15. Have charges to campus events the same for students and their non-student spouses.
16. Install “pay typewriters” in the university library.
17. Put a “Weekly Events” column in the university paper.

These projects reflect the diversity of the Business and Society course, but, more importantly, they also reflect the commitment and learning of Individual students (See Figure 1). These “learning by doing” projects have added a whole new dimension to my Business and Society courses and a different kind of learning challenge to my students. It is important to point out that students are not penalized for either their successes or failures on their social responsibility projects. Rather, they are evaluated in terms of the learning which they derive from these experiences.

The use of experiential projects gives students a first hand appreciation of the frustrations, complexities, and ambiguities involved in dealing with the business and society area. I readily admit that such projects are not the same thing as really “getting your feet wet” in the economic realities of business. However, I do argue that such programs do allow students to at least get their feet “damp” and to begin to examine their own personal philosophies and values related to business and society, not from detached theories, but from personal experiences combined with theoretical and intellectual alternatives.

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Summary

The Business and Society course covers a complex and diverse body of knowledge. I feel that this body of information and conflicting points of view is best processed by the student on a personal basis. Such “personalized” learning requires a high level of student involvement and commitment to learning. I have had my best success in this sense by using an experiential learning methodology (characterized by social responsibility projects), combined with the development of personal philosophies and values.

In addition, I feel that the Business and Society course should be characterized by a careful mix of methodologies. In addition to “live case” projects, I have used cognitive cases, debates, reports, personal contracts, and lectures with varying degrees of success. The particular mix which should be used by an individual professor is a function of his strengths, the student’s backgrounds, and the resources available in the specific learning situation. However, regardless of situational specifics, the Business and Society course should use a combination of educational methodologies and formats to tackle the diverse and rapidly changing body of knowledge which it embraces.

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Summary of Satisfaction Measures
for an Undergraduate Business
and Society Course

ITEM (Likert Scale, 1-7)	Pretest Mean (other Business Courses)	Posttest Mean (The Business and So- ciety Course)	Level of Significance (t-test)
1. Interesting	4.26	6.43	.000
2. Satisfying	4.16	6.43	.000
3. Informative, packed with pertinent knowledge	4.32	6.00	.003
4. Applicable to the "real world"	4.11	5.14	.001
5. Helped to develop managerial skill	4.53	6.00	.007
6. The learning process was pertinent to my self-development	4.53	6.29	.003
7. I felt I could express myself easi- ly and freely	4.42	6.43	.005
8. Exercises and "out- side work" assisted in integrating course material	4.37	6.86	.000
9. I felt the courses challenged me	4.78	5.36	.264 (NS)
10. I felt active and "involved"	4.05	6.71	.000
11. My courses helped me to develop my per- sonal philosophy a- bout business	4.47	6.57	.000
12. I felt the courses required me to exer- cise a great deal of initiative	4.47	6.14	.008
13. I felt the courses required me to exer- cise independent judgment in evalu- ation textbook theories	4.00	6.00	.001
14. The instructors met the objectives that they had set for their courses	4.89	6.86	.000
15. I was glad I took the courses when I finished	4.58	7.00	.000

Figure 1 is an illustration of the level of student satisfaction with the experiential approach described in this paper. This data represents two different classes of undergraduate students taught by two different instructors (n=52). The pretest mean (Likert scale from one to seven) describes the Students' satisfaction with their previous courses in business and the posttest means measure the level of satisfaction with the just completed course in Business and Society. The reader will note that fourteen of the fifteen items improved significantly, indicating a very high level of general student satisfaction with the course (also pinpointed in #15). Of special note are items #4, #8, and #11. These are especially important course objectives for the Business and Society instructor.