

# Mustard Seeds as Means for Creative Problem Solving, Ethical Decision Making, Stakeholder Alliance, & Leader Development through Experiential Learning in Management Education

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## ABSTRACT

*Management education is fraught with challenges related to teaching students how to thrive in an increasingly competitive and changing business environment. On one hand, innovation and creativity are essential to the complex problem solving skills often essential to sustainment of strategic alliances and stewardship of shared resources. Simultaneously, new managers may end up stifling their creativity and innovation due to constraints of organizational culture and strategic decision-making. This paper introduces an experiential learning project management model (Mustard Seed) designed to foster creativity, innovation, problem solving, and decision-making that can lead to development of corporate citizenship behaviors. Specifically, Mustard Seed is designed to teach students how to achieve mutually desired outcomes while working with diverse organizational partners in strategic alliances. The paper begins with a description of Mustard Seed and an overview of the project's history. Next, the literatures on project management and experiential learning, as relevant to the project model, are reviewed. Specific attention is devoted to Kolb's experiential learning model, social learning theory, deep smarts, and directed creativity as processes essential to the Mustard Seed model. The importance of intergenerational work teams and diverse stakeholder groups as components of the model is discussed. Mustard Seed's latent effects, including ongoing conversations related to development of stakeholder networks, cultivation of systems thinking, examination of ethical decision-making processes, and continuation of learning in community are considered. Plans for expansion of the project through inter-disciplinary collaboration and college-community-organization partnerships are discussed. The paper concludes with analysis of the project's strengths and weaknesses and suggestions for future research.*

## INTRODUCTION

When students are encouraged to learn and teach as reciprocal processes with diverse stakeholders in community as classroom, learning can become a meaningful

experience. It can have lasting effects on all participants. It can have important impacts on stakeholders and the community. The Mustard Seed project model described in this paper was created to teach undergraduate management students that seemingly small well managed projects have the potential to do great things – and that students can develop their potential to share leadership of the projects with others who share their commitment to success and to community. In addition, releasing students to live up to their potential in community encourages them to experience learning for purposes of solving complex problems through development of creative, innovative strategies. Community based learning can enhance student self-efficacy in a context that assists the students in more fully appreciating the skills imparted in management education. However, development of such skills using a community based learning strategy requires courage, commitment and faith on behalf of an array of stakeholders. It entails learning to work with limited resources, and building relationships, preferably sustainable alliances. Hence the name of the project model put forth here is Mustard Seed.

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Stories related to mustard seeds are numerous throughout history and sacred literature (*Harper Collins Study Bible; Qur'an; Woodward 2009*). Inspired by those stories, some organizations have adopted the name Mustard Seed to demonstrate their commitment to growth or to a mission related to hope and empowerment (e. g., Mustard Seed Market, Mustard Seed Communities, Mustard Seed International, Mustard Seed Boutique, etc.). Mustard seeds are minute beginnings that have often believed to grow into magnificent visions intended to satisfy the needs of numerous stakeholders.

The Mustard Seed project model described herein began as a grant-funded pilot in spring of 2008. It is now going into its third year in February 2010. The project's purpose is to assist undergraduate students in learning how to manage projects, work as teams with diverse stakeholders, make win/win/win decisions as responsible corporate stakeholders, and engage in collaborative alliances with diverse stakeholders in community. The professor who initiated the project believed that in a climate of corporate

scandals, economic, political and social upheaval, and environmental challenges, it is increasingly essential for future business leaders to realize they have power to do good works and remain true to their ethical and spiritual beliefs. It is important for students to realize the impacts of their behavior, relationships, and decisions can have in a global, interdependent environment. And, it is necessary to learn to share resources for the benefit of all.

According to Steiner & Watson (2006, p. 425) *...Involvement in a community project, coupled with mandatory reflection, helps students understand the difference they can make and helps them explore ways they want to and should make a difference as members of a larger society.* The Mustard Seed project model assists students in learning to act as organizational and community stewards. They are positioned to learn and to teach others how to utilize talents, have faith in diverse groups, and in the experiential process.

## PROJECT HISTORY

### YEAR ONE

During the first pilot of Mustard Seed, 25 undergraduate students, 23 of whom were enrolled in an upper level management Corporate Social Responsibility

(CSR) course, and two in independent studies with the same professor participated. All of the students except one (Leadership minor), were Business Administration or Management majors. The professor had secured a budget of \$600 and students were informed that they would work in six groups. Each group was to receive \$100 to assist those served by or in a struggling organization of their choice. The students were informed that they were expected to leverage all resources, including the \$100 and their own sweat equity. They could raise funds to increase their capital and they were to collaborate with community stakeholders. To increase their labor force they could recruit service-learning students from selected other courses. The students were assigned discussant-advisors, life-long learners affiliated with the college, and who would serve as project mentors. Projects were scheduled to begin in February and be completed toward semester's end (February through April).

The six groups were formed based upon students' interests. Each group was matched to a discussant-advisor who shared their interests and/or had similar work experience. Group members continued to attend class regularly, attending lectures and completing other assignments described in their syllabus. Students were informed that they could meet with discussant-advisors as frequently as both parties desired, but mandatory monthly classroom meetings (brainstorming sessions/project

**Mustard Seed Final Evaluation form  
Table 1**

<b>TEN MEASURES OF SUCCESS</b>	<b>Evaluation: How did we do?</b>
(Please evaluate on other sheets of paper – or electronically so you can increase space as needed. Your responses to each item should be at least one paragraph or chart as needed)	
Financial Performance - shareholder value, revenue, operational efficiency, access to capital	
Governance - Ethics, values, and principles, Accountability and transparency	
General - Triple Bottom Line Commitment	
Environment - Environmental process focus, Environmental product focus	
Socioeconomic - Socioeconomic development, Human rights, Workplace conditions	
Stakeholder Engagement -Engaging business partners, Engaging non-business partners	
Construction of Corporate Reputation - Emotional Appeal, Products and Services, Financial Performance, Social Responsibility, Workplace Environment, Vision and Leadership	
Customer Attraction - Great Products, Socially Responsible on multiple levels and to various stakeholders	
Human & Intellectual Capital – What happens to and with the group	
Innovation – Guided by values, Committed to CSR and Sustainability, Transparent, Accountable.	
Final Question – What does it mean to <i>Make 'it' better</i> through CSR?	
Using a scale from 20 to 1, with 20 being the highest and 1 being the lowest (and giving no more than 2 of each number – e.g., 2 @ #20; 1 @ #19, etc., rank each participant from page 1 according to your perception of his or her motives and performance of CSR. Your responses will not necessarily be in alignment with those of the professor nor will they necessarily be reflected in your grade or the grades of others. Briefly explain each of your answers. Elaborate on your self-score.	

updates) with faculty, students, discussant-advisors, and other interested stakeholders were scheduled during February and March. The final project meeting (April) was scheduled as a dinner/reporting session with participants projects in attendance and final Mustard Seed project evaluations due.

As students enrolled in a CSR course, the Mustard Seed participants were introduced to the following models of corporate citizenship:

1. The corporate citizenship model – which exists when strong organizational leadership is connected to a community and grounded in a sense of social responsibility;
  2. The social contract model – which holds that CSR is to respect the rights of an array of internal and external organizational stakeholders, and;
  3. The enlightened self-interest model – which can lead to an organizational strategy that differentiates a company from others in its industry (Hartman & DesJardin 2008)
- Both students in CSR and the independent studies

**Mustard Seed Projects for Years One & Two**  
**Table 2**

<b>Year One</b>	<b>Project Objective</b>	<b>Stakeholders Involved</b>
Group One (\$100 budget)	Fundraising for Pediatric Cancer Org.	Discussants/Advisors Major league baseball and football teams, Parents & Children, Businesses
Group Two (\$100 budget)	Improve marketing for local entrepreneur as part of Midtown economic development project	Campus Center for Applied Liberal Arts (CALA) Discussants/Advisors Local Bakery
Group Three (\$100 budget)	Make contribution to facility that trains working dogs for the visually impaired	Discussant/Advisor Student Parent (mom) Guide dog agency Business (purchase items for dogs)
Group Four (\$100 budget)	Fundraising for fieldtrips for local (k-12) charter school program in economically depressed part of city.	Discussants/Advisors Customers (at spaghetti dinner and carwash)
Group Five (\$100 budget)	Facilitated workshops (crafts) for clients working in a pre-vocational recycling center	Discussant/Advisor Recycling Center Staff and clients
Group Six (\$100 budget)	Leveraged resources to send school supplies to an agrarian village in Africa	Discussant/Advisor Management Club CALA African School
<b>Year Two</b>	<b>Project Objective</b>	<b>Stakeholders Involved</b>
\$500 Budget	Planned and implemented fundraiser dinner to support farmers in large agrarian community in Africa	Students, discussants, community, campus, local merchants.
	Planned and implemented an art show on campus to raise funds to support multiple charitable organizations.	Students, discussants, community, campus, local merchants, local artists.
	Raised funds to support environmental (wildlife) organization.	Students, discussants, community, campus, local merchants.
	Raised funds to support international educational efforts	Students, discussants, community, campus, local merchants.
	Raised funds to support international human rights efforts.	Students, discussants, community, campus, local merchants.
	Refurbished campus bicycles to support local homeless and halfway house agencies (to assist residents in gaining employment and human services)	Students, discussants, community, campus, local merchants.

**Student Assignments for Mustard Seed Project Management  
Table 3**

<b>5-Cycle Project Management Model</b>	<b>Student Assignment</b>	<b>Deliverable</b>
<b>Phase 1: Determine Need and Feasibility</b> - analyze problem, work, market, and overall concept.	Meet with discussant-advisors, community stakeholders.	<b>(Group Assignment)</b> Report to class on project ideas – ask for feedback from all stakeholders in class.
<b>Phase 2: Create Project Plan</b> – complete all activities necessary to complete a detailed plan for the rest of the project.	<b>Project Proposal</b> – include rationale, budget, timeline, and literature review examining what has been done to address the problem.	<b>(Group Assignment)</b> Project Proposal
<b>Phase 3: Create Service Specifications</b> – created detailed flowcharts, blueprints, other documents to provide to experts, stakeholders, and to revise as necessary	<b>Ongoing Maintenance</b> - Maintain budgets, balance sheets, receipts. Complete journals/project updates.	<b>(Group Assignment)</b> Class brainstorming session (February) Ongoing budgets, balance sheets, receipt submission. <b>(Individual Assignments)</b> Complete student journal as assigned.
<b>Phase 4: Create Service</b> – complete all activities to create prototype or mock up.	<b>Manage Project</b> - complete all activities necessary to provide service or product as delineated. This includes recruiting other students (and working with other faculty and administration), as necessary.	<b>(Group Assignment)</b> Class brainstorming session (March) Ongoing budgets, balance sheets, receipt submission. <b>(Individual Assignments)</b> Complete student journal as assigned.
<b>Phase 5: Test and Implement</b> – Organize and conduct tests, make revisions and enhancements as necessary; finalize product.	<b>Complete Project</b> – Reflect, Evaluate, Report. Make recommendations for project improvement.	<b>(Group Assignments)</b> Report on Project Status Ensure all receipts, balance sheet, other paperwork has been submitted. Make recommendations for project improvement. <b>(Individual Assignment)</b> Evaluate project success, performance of self, peers, and other stakeholders. Make recommendations for project improvement.

completed a brief project proposal including rationale, budget, timeline, and literature review examining what had previously been done to address the problem. They were responsible for maintaining budgets, balance sheets, and receipts for project expenditures. Two student journals were assigned as project updates, to be completed as the course progressed. At project's end, students were to complete individual reflections and evaluations for their projects, peers, advisors, and themselves. See Table 1.

## **YEAR TWO**

In Year Two the same ground rules were established, with the exception that students wanted to function as one larger organization (20 students) and form committees to handle various aspects of their projects. As one group, they committed to a semester of projects. The projects from Years One and Two are briefly described in Table 2.

## **WHY PROJECT MANAGEMENT?**

Project management was chosen as the strategy for

delivery of Mustard Seed because it was believed to be a clear way to demonstrate to students that they can share leadership and engage in healthy competition as co-creators of a just society, one project, one community, one student, and one group at a time. Student assignments were designed to be consistent with the 5-phase project management life cycle (Greer 1999, p. 9-10) depicted in Table 3.

To date, Mustard Seed students have been empowered with shared leadership for their projects. This is intended to teach the students the importance of building and sustaining respectful relationships with an array of campus and community stakeholders. It reinforces their accountability for their deliverables and for their learning experience. According to Morris (1997, p. 203), *Every human being needs to be an originator of ideas and a creator of structures*. This is one way to teach and learn stewardship and ethical decision making concerning multiple resources including, but not limited to, human resources, time, and money.

### WHY EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?

Learning takes place when actions, behavior, and thought processes are changed (Robbins 2003, p. 44). Tjosvold (2008, p. 73) asserts that when a researcher gathers evidence, considers ideas, and develops a framework for presenting their position the researcher has engaged in activities critical to learning. When the same researcher is confronted with an opposing viewpoint, the researcher has to double efforts to elaborate their position. The researcher also has to explore other alternatives, remain curious, learn new information and evaluate other ideas. These are constructive controversy dynamics; they are inherent to experiential education in work teams. During experiential learning in community, there is even more incentive for students and other stakeholders to engage in constructive controversy, as the stakes are higher; they will live with their outcomes. Steiner and Watson (2006, p. 425) assert, [that]...*reflective exercises that personalize the linkage between hands-on community activities and students' beliefs, values, and commitments are essential to the development of a civic mindset*. Similarly, Boni, Weingart, and Evenson (2009) effectively use experiential learning as pedagogy for project management with teams of MBA students focused on learning processes related to innovation and entrepreneurship.

With regard to management education, Steiner and Watson (2006, p. 424) posit that experiential learning can contribute to civic education which *is a business school's fundamental moral responsibility, particularly given the unique position of influence and authority that managers hold*. With specific regard to education for CSR, Frederick (2006, p. 212) has asserted that students should be provided with *a broad, general, liberal education...liberating and unleashing the deeper layers of personality and mentality*

*for coping with the problems of business and for understanding the swift pace of social change*. Frederick (2006, 212) further defines liberal as *liberating the student from prejudices and ignorance, shaping an alert, well-informed, mentally aggressive person...interested in the whole person, not just the narrow specialist*.

### KOLB'S EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING MODEL

Kolb's experiential learning model is continuous and has often been considered an ongoing spiral through which new knowledge is generated, and knowledge no longer relevant is discarded. For purposes of better understanding Mustard Seed, as related to Kolb's work:

- **CONCRETE EXPERIENCE** - characterized by apprehension, engagement, feeling, being 'hands-on', gaining direct practical experience with learning opportunities (Atherton 2009). Mustard Seed student participants rely on concrete experience including knowledge gained in life or as a result of introduction to course content to select projects in which to engage. Typically, some students have previously participated in service-learning projects in other courses. Others have had direct personal experience volunteering with charitable organizations. Still others have opted to devote energy to economic development-focused projects in the inner city near where the college is located. Students share their experience with discussant-advisors and community stakeholders for purposes of brainstorming and project development.

- **REFLECTIVE OBSERVATION** - the phase of the learning that transforms experience by concentrating on its meaning to the person or group experiencing it (Atherton 2009). In order to formulate ideas for creating convincing project proposals, complete with rationale, literature review describing if and how their causes were previously addressed, Mustard Seed students engage in reflective observation.

- **ABSTRACT CONCEPTUALIZATION** - is an epistemology that can be traced back to the work of Aristotle (Atherton 2009). During this part of the cycle, the students formulate conceptual frameworks, theories directed toward project implementation and ideas for enhancing their proposals toward solving problems through maximization of shared resources. This prepares them for

- **ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION** - entails thinking about (connotation) how projects address their targets, entails denotation, or using the ideas to test and understand what is being learned in order to continue on with the spiral-like learning cycle (Atherton 2009). As the last part of the first stage of their experiential learning spiral, students test their ideas through project implementation in new situations with community stakeholders and under the advisement of each group's lifelong learner-advisors.

According to Atherton (2009), Honey and Mumford developed a typology of learners from Kolb's experiential learning cycle: the *activist* relies heavily on concrete

experience as their learning preference is based on doing; the *reflector* relies on reflective observation; the *theorist* (abstract conceptualization) wants to understand underlying relationships and ideas, and; the *pragmatist* likes to try things and see if they really work. Importantly, experiential learning enables non-reductionist learning to take place as students gain and apply knowledge in ways suitable to the context of their projects and consistent with their individual and group learning styles.

Kolb and others have asserted experiential learning is an ongoing process (Kolb 1975; Atherton 2009). As an aspect of management education, [t]he ability to learn from experience, both on the individual and organizational levels, is a key skill in a quickly changing business environment (Osland, Turner, Kolb, & Rubin 2007, p. 88). As shared experiences are considered relevant to complex problem solving and knowledge transfer, creativity and innovation become increasingly important aspects of successful learning, and to achieving objectives of all stakeholders. This is evident in the Mustard Seed projects thus far.

## **APPLICATION OF SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY**

Fox (2002) states: *...learning is one of the most spiritual, mystical, and prayerful experiences available to us all...Society and parents alike ought to be making it very clear...how valuable and indispensable and delicious and fun the experience of learning can be* (p. 174-175).

Social learning can be achieved through observation and/or direct experience (Robbins 2003, pp. 46-47). The Mustard Seed project management model provides ongoing opportunities for students and other stakeholders to participate in social learning. With respect to *attentional* processes, or learning from a model that influences one because of its importance, social interaction and the formulation of relationships relevant to shared leadership in solving community problems makes this possible. In terms of *retention*, or remembering after the model after it is no longer available, participation in meaningful work increases the value and importance of the experience. When it comes to *motor reproduction*, or turning observing into doing, students perform activities modeled by discussant-advisors, faculty, and community stakeholders. Finally, *reinforcement* through positive incentives and/or rewards occurs throughout the project – via feedback from diverse stakeholders. It also occurs at the end of the projects when students report their successes – and tribulations – at a dinner/reporting session with social support from both campus and community stakeholders.

## **DEEP SMARTS**

Deep smarts are a combination of skills, emotional intelligence, expertise, and other aspects of knowledge that enable a person to make swift, responsive decisions in

complex situations, and to apply expert, often contextual knowledge to a difficult situation. Leonard and Swap (2004, p. 89) point out that people with deep smarts not only have critical knowledge regarding a specific business or industry, they also know customers, product lines, and environmental drivers overall and in depth. Deep smarts can categorize tacit or explicit knowledge that is gained over time and often not cultivated in many organizations.

As part of Mustard Seed project development, students take advantage of opportunities to observe community needs, reflect on their own previous service, and discuss their ideas with discussant-advisors and community stakeholders. For the students, it means they can access knowledge, and in some cases deep smarts (Leonard & Swap 2004, p. 89) based on the years of experience the discussant-advisors and community stakeholders willingly share with them. According to Leonard and Swap, (2004, pp. 92-94), the central paradox of transferring deep smarts is that experts must be motivated to share their knowledge and novices must have the framework within which to become willing to understand what they are learning. Deep smarts are shared multi-directionally in reciprocal relationships between students and other stakeholders.

Leonard & Swap (2004, p. 90) verify, one learns *to appreciate the importance of deep smarts when studying how novices acquire complex managerial skills*. In the Mustard Seed model, everyone is respected as both an expert and a novice. Thus, each participant is willing to share his or her deep smarts with diverse protégés and to learn from diverse experts. Each participant has different knowledge and perceptions related to subject matter, organizational experience, ideas for complex problem solving, and each has a different relationship with community as laboratory. Participants are reminded that they must willingly share ideas in an egalitarian environment and with an array of diverse stakeholders in order for the project to succeed.

## **KNOWLEDGE AND CREATIVITY**

Creativity is a thinking process that helps in the generation of ideas (Ismail 2006, p. 639). Continuous learning and creative processes are crucial core competencies for employees in most contemporary organizations (Driver 2008, p. 187). Hamel argues that business educators must experiment, innovate, and invent to help students meet the challenges that lie ahead in dynamic organizational environments (Bisoux 2008, p.18). Hamel asserts that present-day students have grown up with the web, blogs, podcasts, wikis, and other *tools of creativity* (Bisoux 2008, p. 20). Consistently, Senge (1990, p. 101) reports that hierarchical organizations where upper management can figure everything out at the top are disappearing; thus, the manager or leader who can harness the collective genius of their organization *is going to blow the competition away*. Creativity is performative; thus, it is understandable that creative processes go hand in hand with

experiential learning (Driver 2008, p. 187). The Mustard Seed projects provide a venue for students to learn from experience in community as laboratory with multiple stimuli for developing creative solutions to complex problems.

The creative process entails [t]he ability to encounter life in its fullest and engage with that part of it which is just beyond our senses as a prime characteristic of the creative act, and individual (Bergquist 1999, p. 10). Creative ideas can be used for project development and/or ongoing problem solving. In 1926 Wallas defined stages of development of creativity as: first, *preparation* or the investigation of potential solutions to a dilemma that constrains individual or group progress; then, one spends time in *incubation* or thinking about alternatives to the current situation; next *illumination* when potential workable solutions, or what Wallas termed *happy ideas* occurs, and; finally, *verification* where solutions are tested so that their logistics can be worked out (Robinson & Stern 1998, p. 50). In terms of the Mustard Seed projects, the preliminary stages of the creative process occur prior to project implementation, as part of the students' proposal development and in conjunction with the experiential learning cycle. Creativity is an ongoing process throughout project design, development, and evaluation.

## DIRECTED CREATIVITY MODEL

Directed creativity means making purposeful mental movements to avoid pitfalls associated with cognitive mechanisms at each step of the creative process (Plsek et al 1997, p. 3). Plsek et al (1997) asserts that creative people live everyday in the world with everyone else, but creative thinking begins with careful observation of the world. Observation leads to analysis of how things work, or not. This curiosity creates a store of concepts and ideas in memory. As necessary, novel ideas can be generated to meet the needs of specific situations as associations are spawned from among stored concepts. Ideas can be harvested, enhanced and/or evaluated. As ideas are implemented, the cycle – which can be perceived similarly to the experiential learning spiral – continues.

- **Experiential Learning + Directed Creativity = Innovation for Mustard Seed Vision:** directed creativity is aligned with experiential learning to turn purposeful mental movements into action for problem solving and creation of knowledge for innovation.

- **Concrete Experience: Preparation + observation:** For the Mustard Seed groups, group interests and actions of group members had to be in alignment with the group's purpose, vision, and goals (Daft 2005, p. 652). This entailed drawing on their concrete experiences from living every day and observing their surroundings. At this phase, ideas could be incubated through research and dialogue with discussant-advisors and community stakeholders. This led to idea generation, or reflective observation.

- **Reflective Observation: Imagination + generation:** Daft (2005) asserts that characteristics of innovative organizations are similar to those of creative individuals (p. 652). To be successful, Mustard Seed groups had to self-initiate creative activity. (Daft 2005, p. 652). The groups had to analyze how things work, draw on their collective imagination, generate ideas, and turn those ideas into generative or creative learning, often utilizing the deep smarts of their discussant-advisors and community stakeholders who, in some cases, became idea champions.

- **Abstract Conceptualization: Development + enhancement:** Diverse stimuli contribute to the development of theories and to the development of innovative solutions. Mustard Seed participants were exposed to diverse stimuli as a result of their unlikely partnerships, and as a result of using the community as learning laboratory. Off-campus projects allowed students to engage in activities that may have felt somewhat unofficial, but this element was critical to the development of creative ideas. Daft (2005) states, *One study of creativity found that in almost every case the essence of the creative act came during the 'unofficial' time period. Dream time is what makes it possible for companies to go where they never expected to* (p. 653). This is one of the reasons students and stakeholders have ongoing conversations. They are encouraged to develop social networks wherein dialogue is not always considered formal and/or structured.

- **Active Experimentation: Action + implementation:** As the groups implemented their projects, they communicated more frequently with each other, with members of other groups, with their professor, discussant-advisors, and community stakeholders. Daft (2005) claims, *Creativity flourishes when there is frequent contact with interdisciplinary networks of people at all levels of the organization* (p. 654). All Mustard Seed participants are encouraged to share information, thereby immersing them in an organizational culture where they know mistakes are part of the growth and development processes. Shalley, Gilson, and Blum (2009, p. 489) assert that an individual's growth need strength, or *desire to grow and develop within his/her job*, is relevant to creative performance and to the desire to learn new things.

## INNOVATION

Plsek et al (1997, p. 4) acknowledge that innovation takes creativity beyond the simple generation of ideas. Generative learning is learning that is creative; it requires one to develop new ways of seeing the world. On the contrary, adaptive learning is learning to cope with a situation that is not expected to change (Senge 1990, p. 101). Innovation is action; often the action which gives creativity value as it is implemented in ways that impact everyday living. In the Mustard Seed projects, innovation is critical to achieving desired outcomes. These small groups are reliant on diverse perspectives, a design-thinking

approach, and open communication so stakeholders can contribute ideas freely and in a nonjudgmental climate.

Boni, Weingart, and Evenson (2009, p. 409) state, *the act of moving from abstract thinking to visualizing ideas and then thinking on top of those visualizations is at the heart of design for innovation*. Mustard Seed students, discussant-advisors, and other stakeholders all know that innovative knowledge is necessary to change the situation that fosters, or minimally does not address, the problem a Mustard Seed project targets. They also know that resources are finite, scarce, and best shared to achieve common goals. This usually requires inventiveness and innovation.

## PROBLEM SOLVING

Each participant in the Mustard Seed projects is recognized as a creative problem solver with a valuable contribution to make to the project vision. According to Driver (2008, p. 188), *creativity is almost universally defined as an individual-level phenomenon...a necessary...input to the organizational-level of innovation*. Problem solving is a skill essential to organizational behavior. Typically, it is taught and/or reinforced formally, through classroom training, and informally, through activities, such as team work experiences. For example, Best Buy made a conscious decision to build companywide expertise in innovation. As part of the training and development goals, company decision-makers included transfer of deep smarts as well as other technical and managerial knowledge among 200 employees. The intention of the training initiative was to develop and sustain a body of profound institutional knowledge that could be shared and transferred among employees throughout the company (Leonard & Swap 2004, p. 90). Best Buy recognized everyone had a contribution to make to the greater vision. Similarly, in the Mustard Seed, students, faculty, discussant-advisors, and community stakeholders are all contributors to a greater vision. They are all part of each other's formal and informal problem solving training. Often, relationships among the partners are developed and/or strengthened. Many of the relationships have led to creative problem solving and other projects that endure long after the students' Mustard Seed experience have ended.

For the Mustard Seeders, group problem solving in a shared leadership climate has other benefits. In Csikszentmihalyi's (1996, p. 201) famous study on creativity, it was found that, *The number of individuals who have run risks in defense of their beliefs is astonishing*. During both facilitations of the Mustard Seed students and stakeholders have begun to share their beliefs (often passionately) about social issues, community problems, and management skills and responsibilities in attempting to resolve those problems.

## DECISION MAKING AND SYSTEMS THEORY

Almost daily Wall Street provides financial reports regarding companies that are failing to perform as previously expected. The average CEO serves in that position approximately 18 months. For every successful new business, 22 new businesses fail. The average life span for a business that does survive the start up process is approximately 11.5 years. On average, 30 companies drop off the Fortune 500 list each year. It is important to understand that one does not make business decisions in an independent environment (Atwater et al 2008, p. 9). Some of the latent effects of Mustard Seed are that all stakeholders can begin to see themselves as part of systems, interdependent and holistically joined as parts of a vision that is greater than any one individual or organization. The beauty of the Mustard Seed is that it provides innumerable opportunities for real-life experience in ethical decision making. It also makes students and other stakeholders acutely aware of the fact that we function interdependently. One Mustard Seed student recently observed, *Throughout the...course, I have learned many different things about my classmates. I have had the privilege to work with almost everyone in the class in some way. Never [before] have I seen the amazing qualities that they produced in this class*.

## INTERGENERATIONAL WORK TEAMS, DIVERSE STAKEHOLDER GROUPS

Participants in Mustard Seed, by nature of its design, engage in dialogue to facilitate problem solving and achieve shared objectives. They work in heterogeneous groups that have goal alignment and share resources. In some cases, this means stakeholders face an ethical imperative to overcome personal prejudices, stereotypes, and ethnocentrism to make the projects a success for all. Fox (2002, p. 175) asserts, *Diversity of all kinds is helpful to set an environment for curiosity, questioning, and therefore learning*. With regard to intergenerational gender, ethnic, racial, or other schemas, students, discussant-advisors, faculty, and community partners have to constantly consider and re-evaluate their mental models for working together. They are constantly developing as individuals and as stakeholders.

Read (1998) addresses the importance of emotions with regard to creative problem solving and self-efficacy. Emotions, *the bridge between the mind and the body* are among drivers of project success or failure (Read 1998, p. 2). Students with little confidence in their problem solving abilities may thwart their own attempts to finding solutions. The intergenerational and otherwise diverse work teams provide an ongoing support system for development of self-efficacy through sharing emotions, concerns, and passions for making a difference through the community projects.

They provide a uniquely blended network of stakeholders aligned in their goals of complex problem solving. According to Bergquist (1999, p. 11), Koestler terms *bisociation* as an ability to join ideas previously thought to be unrelated, possibly conflicting, in new ways for purposes of problem solving.

When unlikely partners come together for purposes of learning and problem solving, new networks are often born. Paul (2008, p. 8) states, *Students accustomed to passive learning in a classroom are stretched to embrace active learning in the community. Faculty too must step outside of the contained classroom to collaborate with many other 'teachers' and to join as learners...all must broaden their learning goals to include personal development.* As a result of the Mustard Seed projects, an unusually high number of students previously enrolled in the course have maintained contact with each other, their professor, and stakeholders in the community – including some discussant-advisors. Perhaps this is a result of the student empowerment that is inherent to the course. Perhaps it is a byproduct of the learned sense of accountability that many of the students express in their course and project evaluations. In any case, it is clear that for some students, the emphasis on continuous learning clearly has an impact. Many of the students continue to stop by the professors' office to discuss solutions to other community problems, beyond the scope of the course and/or their course grade.

## ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

Ethical leadership, in the case of the Mustard Seed projects, is a participative process. Whether leaders operate at a distance or face-to-face basis with followers has implications for the projects and the entire class (Trice & Beyers 1993, p. 289). Face to face leaders can be considerate, democratic, low key, facilitators. Mustard Seed emphasizes students and other stakeholders making things right – and doing so in a way that all stakeholders believe to be right. The ethical dilemmas involved are discussed at length, sometimes in the context of other course lectures, for purposes of achieving resolution. Sooner or later, everyone leads and everyone experiences being a follower.

Neubert et al (2009, p. 159) assert, *most people look outside themselves, at least in part, for ethical guidance...the behavior of managers who have positional and personal power is of particular interest to organizational members.* For students engaged in Mustard Seed projects, there are many opportunities to consider the meaning of moral or ethical leadership. Students engage in conversations with discussant-advisors, community stakeholders, and faculty. At times students are learning, for the first time, about a community issue and how much they genuinely care about the problem.

According to philosopher Martin Buber, there are two primary attitudes toward relationships. These are I-It and I-Thou. People in I-It relationships treat others as objects that

are put in one's path to facilitate personal gain. In contrast, participants in I-Thou relationships treat each other as partners, equals who focus on understanding more than being understood (Johnson 2009, p. 243; Morris 1997). One of the goals of the Mustard Seed projects is to instill empathy in students who may be future be leaders in business and other institutions, such as the workplace and/or families.

## PROJECT UPDATE

Year three of the Mustard Seed is coming up. Thus far, the grant proposal has been approved, one student is engaged in creating a web presence for the project, and an intern is busy assisting the appropriate campus office in institutionalizing the project to assist stakeholders in interdisciplinary collaboration. Conversations between Management and Human Development majors, faculty, discussant advisors, and community stakeholders have begun. Other cross-campus (programs) collaborations are abuzz as Mustard Seed – and student good works – grow on campus and throughout the surrounding community.

Partnerships with local and international civic organizations are in developmental stages. In all of these cases, conversations are occurring between multiple stakeholders for purposes of building and/or expanding, institutional, organizational, and individual dreams. This year Mustard Seed will be facilitated by students in independent studies. They will focus on completing local and international projects, but they will also continue to focus on building capacity for the projects and ensuring they are institutionalized through the Center for Applied Liberal Arts at the college. This way projects can further develop between faculty and students from across discipline.

## OUTCOMES & LATENT EFFECTS OF MUSTARD SEED

Perhaps the most valuable outcomes of the Mustard Seed at this point are that it is teaching groups and individuals to learn, create innovative solutions to problems, share resources, and collaborate for purposes of ethical decision making at a time when these skills are all critically needed in communities and in education. According to Senge et al 2008, p. 257) *productive conversations are marked by high levels of inquiry and high levels of advocacy. People are simultaneously passionate and curious...comfortable sharing their views, but...prepared to look closely at those views and the assumptions that lie behind them.* This has been our experience with the Mustard Seed to date.

Clinebell and Clinebell (2008) caution, business education is in turmoil. Challenges include *lack of relevance to business practice...shortages of qualified faculty with terminal degrees, and the role of business in*

*business education* (p. 99). Experiential learning exercises, such as Mustard Seed, can help students, faculty, and other stakeholders to better understand the importance of continuous learning in interdependent systems. Tension exists not only in the community as laboratory, but in the classroom as a forum for the business practitioner as well; maybe it is time to view the tension as something that can be used constructively and creatively to form alliances that benefit all stakeholders. In some cases, controversy exists over whether evidence exists to substantiate that much management research is influential in actual management practice (Clinebell & Clinebell 2008, p. 100). When students engage in experiential learning with community as laboratory, they may be able to use the knowledge generated from the activity for purposes of better understanding research to practice relationships.

Although additional research is necessary, thus far, Mustard Seed projects appear to have many benefits for all of the stakeholders. First, they enhance the students' learning experience by making their subject matter come alive in the context of community and in light of organizational and individual impacts on real-life complex problems. Second, the students and other stakeholders have continued to engage in conversations. This encourages everyone and it reminds the students that they have the power to make a difference. It also reminds community partners and discussant-advisors that they are appreciated by students, faculty, and the college.

According to Senge (1990, p. 100), *Human beings are designed for learning...unfortunately the primary institutions of our society are oriented predominantly toward controlling rather than learning, rewarding individuals for performing for others rather than for cultivating their natural curiosity and impulse to learn.* Consistently, Anderson et al (2008) discovered similar key points after conducting research on business sustainability. These included: a) dialogue can dissolve assumptions and build understanding among stakeholders; b) stakeholders and firms build understanding when they are transparent and respectful in their dealings, and c) effective community engagement can result in measurable benefits including enhanced reputation, cost savings, and innovation (p. 4). Fox (2002, p. 174) states, *Study opens up a bigger world to us than our personal...story alone...study connects our...story to the bigger story of others. It grows the soul by growing the mind, and it grows the heart in the same process.* In the case of the Mustard Seed, all stakeholders learn new ways to stretch and, for the most part, the exercise adds to their wellness as individuals and organizations in community.

## **PROJECT STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES**

At this time the Mustard Seed is still small. It entails a great deal of planning and facilitation. Its strengths are

primarily in its power to create an unlikely community for purposes of continuous learning and problem solving. Its weaknesses are in its limitations, including limited resources including financial and other forms of support. Also, as in all team scenarios, some students can be social loafers and others will continue to pick up slack. Refinement of course curriculum is ongoing with an eye toward working out these logistics.

## **DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Clearly, business education decisions of today have ramifications for years to come and for multiple stakeholders (Clinebell & Clinebell 2008, p. 106). Experiential Learning such as Mustard Seed provides a laboratory for examining numerous aspects of business, management, education, and community. The first one that stands out is additional research on student project management and its implications for organizational and individual learning. Such experiences provide multiple other opportunities for further research including, but not limited to, exploration of relationships between creativity and scarcity of resources (Driver 2008, p. 195). Another area for study is leadership, which may be more contextual than a matter of situation or style (Ricketts & Ladewig 2008). Leadership may be conceived even more deeply and multi-dimensionally in non-traditional environments (Elliott & Stead 2008). Further studies of Mustard Seed and similar projects can contribute to understanding of the role of social and economic exchanges in organizational research (Song, Tsui, & Law 2009, p. 56). They can also contribute to the literatures regarding experiential learning and student project management.

The Mustard Seed projects described herein have started as small, experiential learning exercises in management education. And, although they have begun on a wing and a prayer, they can blossom into opportunities for student achievement, stakeholder collaboration, and college-community engagement. They can become compelling learning experiences that have empowering results.

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