

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 8, 1981

SUGGESTIONS FOR INTEGRATION OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION CORE

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the need for integrating business core courses. A matrix approach is discussed, and ways of overcoming some of the inherent obstacles are investigated.

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of every quarter, I begin my Business Policy class by discussing the objectives of the course. Generally, my objectives are to allow the students to integrate as much as they have learned in their Business School experience through the analysis of cases and participation in a Policy Game. At the same time, I tell them that the prerequisites of the course are Statistics Accounting, Management, Marketing, Economics, Finance, and other core courses, as well as an ability to use all tools previously learned. Also, I explain that I will expect them to actually exhibit same level of competence in those concepts learned. Suddenly, a hush falls over the class and I get looks that seem to say: Gee, did I have that or did it have me?, What was regression?", "What was Managerial Accounting?", "What was linear programming?", etc. Shortly thereafter I lose 20-30% of the class. Either they have forgotten or they did not learn the materials in the required business core. Also, the course requirements may appear to be too stringent. Those that stay in the course experience a great deal of pain and frustration. Some eventually do reach a moderate level of understanding, but most come and go somewhat untouched. Generally, at the end of the course, some of the people who have managed to complete the course come to me and say, "You know, that was a very interesting course, I wish we had participated in some kind of game or other integrating activity all along." I say, "Well, gee, this course is supposed to do that." And they say, "But that's a lot to require of one course, isn't it?" This dialogue is followed by a weak feeling in the pit of my stomach.

When my students start telling me that there should be some integration within the basic framework of the curriculum, I listen. I listen because that, quite frankly, makes sense. In other words, the proposal made by Gordon and Howell is a great deal to demand of a course:

The capstone of the core curriculum should be a course in "business" policy which would give the students an opportunity to pull together what they have learned in the separate business fields and utilize this knowledge in the analysis of complex business problems.

Without the responsibility of having to transmit some specific body of knowledge, the Business Policy course can concentrate on integrating what has already been acquired in developing further the student's skill in using that knowledge. The course can range over the entire curriculum and beyond. [3, p. 206]

Problem with Goals

Now, why should a single course do this? It makes very little sense that one course could cause all of those concepts previously taught to come together at one time under the tutelage of some teacher who may or may not have the capacity to integrate competently himself. Initially, it assumes that the students have mastered the concepts that have been presented in previous courses. All too often, the course becomes remedial in nature. Secondly, It assumes that the teacher is competent to guide students through this maze. This requires that the teacher has studied four or five disciplines in depth and is able to function competently in each of those disciplines. Sometimes, the instructor emphasizes his primary specialty to the exclusion of others. Thirdly, it assumes that all students have had the same material in the core courses, that they will be able to retain and use this material during the Policy course, and that one course will provide a sufficient amount of time for students to integrate materials from their previous courses. So, we have a great deal required of the course; we have a great deal required of the instructor, and we have still more required of the student.

Response to the Environment

It is of little wonder that many academicians have recognized the need for integration of the basic core, and have started a new paradigm of strategy, policy, strategic management, etc. Although this Integration has been attempted, there is no agreement to the best integration strategy [7]. This is evolutionary in the sense that it is primarily an eclectic discipline with its intended focus not necessarily only in the management area. This evolutionary paradigm represents the process of organizational learning. For while the basic structure of the College of Business Administration (COBA) has remained relatively static, the environment has changed. Therefore, those portions of the COBA that have recognized this environmental shift and have been able to respond, did! Thus, more and different courses in strategy requiring integration of the various disciplines have emerged. But, the evolution has occurred not only in the Department of Management, but all departments have built empires in highly specialized and diverse sets of topics in response to the changing environment.

The first of these changes has been significant increases in the rate of change of the environment in which businesses must compete [6]. Moreover, the environment is much more interdependent than it ever has been before, leading to further complexities in the management of the firm. With regard to the presentation of undergraduate core activities, the Colleges of Business have either not recognized this, or have discounted the relative feedback. Thus, we have a variety of core courses being offered which could be integrated but fail to do so because the faculty does not interact effectively. The second major change motivating the recognition and the need for integrative strategy has been the growth in the size and complexity of Colleges of Business. Such growth requires an elaboration of the basic concepts of the functional academic disciplines. Most Colleges of Business are currently in a Type 4 environment [1]. Colleges of Business have not

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recognized this, have not planned for it, and have not put together a core curriculum which is integrative in nature and provides the business student a foundation from which he or she is able to leap to the specialized fields studied. It is of little wonder that the Students taking the Policy course experience the amounts of frustration associated with integration attempts. They have not been asked to previously. Generally, the students take Business core requirements in a random fashion from the various departments.

Inhibiting Factors

There are several reasons why this has not occurred. First, the notion of academic specialization or the degree of labor specialization that exists in academia today is a contributing factor. There are separate departments, core areas within each department, specialties in departments and each feels compelled to dictate more specialization. A second issue is that there is little extrinsic reward in academia for integrative behavior. That is, why should someone from accounting consult with someone from management or vice versa? A contributing factor is the specialized nature of academic journals. The third reason concerns academic freedom. Academic freedom allows discussions concerning whatever is desired in class so long as it relates vaguely to some catalogue course description. But, rarely, does the specialized nature of the course integrate effectively with other core business areas. Fourth, what kind of person is attracted to academia? Is it the kind of person who is action-oriented, or introspective and at ease with students in the classroom but perhaps not with his peer group? Finally, the feedback that exists from the environment to the classroom and the CUBA is either discounted or is completely ignored. (This is probably due more to the loose coupling that exists between colleges within the university and between the environment and those colleges.) However, this can be corrected.

Corrective Procedure

At least two mechanisms should be set in motion in order for this problem to be solved. First, each CUBA would structure itself into a project/matrix organization consisting of integrated teaching teams. Secondly, in the delivery of the core subject matter, a set of continuing experiences and simulations would be employed.

Matrix

As a result of the massive amount of information descending on the CUBA, the hierarchical organizational form is ineffective. There is far too much vertical (specialized) information and communication. The amount of horizontal interdisciplinary communication is minute in comparison. Therefore, the students do not get the necessary perspectives on the interdependence and interaction between the academic disciplines.

While some projects currently exist in the CUBA (faculty committees), the faculty members suffer from a diminished perspective similar to that of the students. A matrix organization of teaching teams (product teams) overlaying the functional structure of the CUBA would solve the problems of increasing complexity, both internal and external, to the CUBA. If properly designed and managed, a matrix can offer or induce characteristics which neither the project nor the functional organization develops. Flexibility, learning and responsiveness to individual differences are typical of these characteristics.

According to Knight [4], some of the main advantages of such a design for the COBA are:

1. Efficiency. Resources can be used more efficiently in a matrix because of the reduction in duplication. For instance, in each course some overlap does occur relative to others, e.g., the management science portion of the Principles of Management course and the Managerial Accounting course. Several other areas also overlap. Recognition of the overlap could lead to a reduction in the number of core hours required or an increase in the depth of coverage of the overlapping subject by the team.

2. Flexibility. As conditions in the environment change, a matrix allows for rapid transmittal of this information to reach the people who need it. Decisions concerning the particular approach to be taken on a subject can modify that approach in light of recent research in the various disciplines.

3. Technical Excellence. Educational institutions are not known for rapid innovations. However, a matrix structure would provide the field for innovative actions, based on cross-fertilization of the various academic disciplines and departments. At the same time, the specialists would maintain contact with the various members of their own discipline.

4. Development. Within the COBA, the specialist has a tendency to study and research only within that specialty. A matrix enlarges their experience and broadens the various member outlooks. Thus, the behaviorist broadens his horizons when interacting with the accountant.

A suggested project/matrix design of the CUBA appears in Figure 1. The CUBA is pictured as an input-process-output system with influence diagrams employed as feedback loops. The departments provide personnel in order to form faculty teams. The processes are instructions, examinations and experiences. The outputs are the knowledgeable students and research about the proper way to educate future managers.

Implementation procedures would allow for the various teams to participate in a redesign of the COBA core courses into a two-semester or three-quarter academic year. Each team would begin and end each year with the same set of students. Using Marquis [5] guidelines, the team members would work half time on the team and half time in their areas of specialization. Each team would consist of a set of individuals with one or two areas of academic concentration, so the size of the team might vary. Additionally, the team leader position would be required for promotion to advanced ranks.

The overall core program could reflect the suggestions of Flowers [2]. He offers an excellent analysis of a flow/functional approach implemented in two phases. In Phase I, the teaching team would make every effort to present topics and problems of the overlapping concepts in the functional areas acting as the boundary of the organization, but train an inward-oriented perspective. The topics would stress the decision analysis and flaw analysis of the conceptual areas. Phase II would stress the external perspective of the boundary spanning units. Such concepts as goals, strategies, controls, etc., would be examined with respect to the organization/environment interface. (For more on this discussion, see the Flowers article.) All concepts presented would reflect the American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accreditation requirements. Additionally, a year-end examination would provide a set of standards for go/no-go decisions (student pass-fail recycle decisions) relative to student integration and performance.

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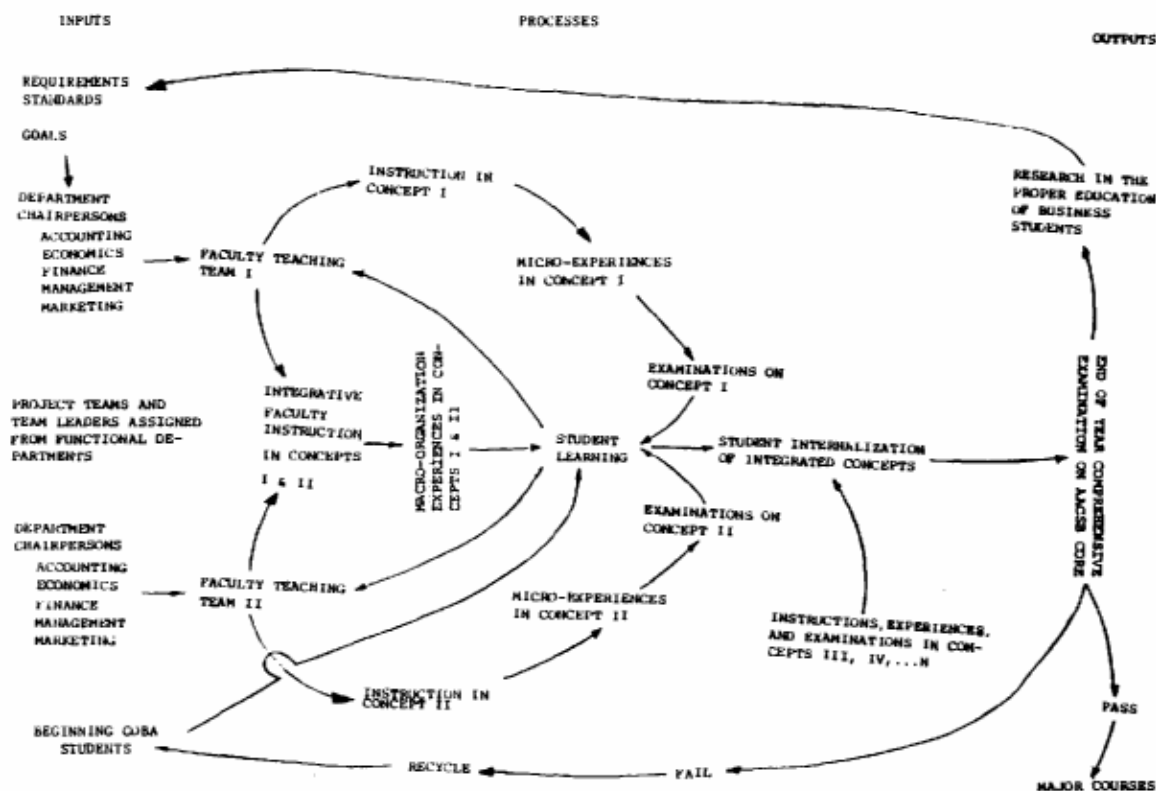


Figure 1. Flow Diagram of a Project/Matrix College of Business Administration, Employing Integrative Processes

Continuing Experience

The attempt for more course integration in the classroom would not only rest on a team-teaching approach, but also on a task (or continuing experience approach) which induces the student to integrate the various differentiated subjects to which he is exposed. Beginning in the junior year, each student would be a member of "the organization" (a multinational corporation with many divisions, many products, and many employees). Although Wolfe [7] couldn't show that computer gaming was a superior knowledge-generating agent, he discussed the need for integrating the core courses.

"The organization" would consist of a set of relatively enduring experiential exercises. Each curricular topic would be processed separately (in phases), but would be integrated in an applied manner within the context of the organization." The experience would be both short and long in duration. Micro-experiences would reinforce specialized curricular topics, while macro-experiences would allow for integration of several specialized areas in the analysis and solutions to complex problems. All data, both quantitative and qualitative, would remain consistent with "the organization." Random events would be generated by the teaching team which would change the nature, analysis and solution to the problems of "the organization."

The membership in the student organization as well as the teaching team would remain constant throughout the year. Concepts and theories delivered by the teaching team would in turn become problems for analysis and solution by the students. And, as it happens in classrooms, not only would the problems be associated with

the concepts discussed by the team, they would also be associated with the continuing experience, and linked to other core subjects. The problem-solving effort would be further compounded by the multiple membership of students in various hierarchies, matrices, and committees. Thus, synergy and equifinality would ensue.

Problems

There are significant but not insurmountable problems with this approach. Initially, the faculty may be skeptical about the benefits of rearranging itself. Second, after achieving a positive mind set from the faculty, the burn-in" time would require extra time and effort to manage. Third, the matrix must be built with the proper set of evaluations and rewards as underpinnings. The performance of the student teams on a year-end examination would provide one input into the faculty evaluation. Also, rewards for team leaders, such as premium assignments, reduced loads, etc., could induce desired results. Fourth, the teams must be built with care. There are techniques available for team building which might prove appropriate for this purpose. Fifth, the creation of the organization will require some effort. Inputs from a wide variety of sources would be required and the final integrated product would reflect a consensus of the various sources. Sixth, designing the courses necessary to integrate instructors and "the organization's" problems would require designing the core syllabus which includes the various integrated disciplines and the organizational experience. Finally in the year-end examination over the AACSB core would require considerable consensus on the parts of the various departments.

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CONCLUSION

Some (but not enough) pedagogical innovation has occurred in the COBA at a time when the environment described by Emery and Trist [1], and later by Schendel and Hoffer [6], has been changing. The time appears appropriate for the CUBA to apply the theory of matrix organization and team teaching to solve problems associated with this changing environment. This goal is not evolutionary. Rather, it is revolutionary. But, only a small revolution is required.

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