Enabling quality conversations: Building reflective mature age business graduates through the use of a facilitative instructional model

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Abstract: *The ultimate goal of education is to enable the development of informed, reflective and articulate graduates. However, the more heterogenous the student group, the more challenging the building of good learning opportunities. Mature age graduate business students provide a good example of the challenges which can face tertiary educators. These students require special guidance during as they seek to upgrade their qualifications and professional expertise. Their backgrounds tend to be very diverse and extensive, resulting in diverse opinions and depth of understanding of topics. This prior knowledge can be particularly influential when it matches their course of study, where formal qualifications in their current work field are being obtained. For the instructor, this knowledge can be both useful and a barrier to learning. Conversely, some students will enter their course of study without relevant prior skills. The challenge for the tertiary educator is to therefore create learning and experiential opportunities to both review current perspectives, and to build new learning bases. This paper explores one means of building a common experiential base across students, and then describes a range of additional learning strategies which enable strong competency building in such students. .*

Keywords: *reflective learning; instructional methods; graduate students*

Professional graduate courses are an essential component of any university's academic offerings, and provide an important mechanism for existing professionals to develop new skills in their current or future work roles. Graduate students pay large sums of money to attend their courses, and expect to be taught effectively and efficiently in their chosen areas. Course brochures and marketing information generally claim that students will be provided with appropriate learning opportunities to become reflective, informed and competent practitioners in their chosen field. This can be quite challenging, when many of these courses operate in concentrated blocks of time, and, in the case of business courses, are often structured around evening and weekend attendance schedules. While the goal of business courses is to create professionals who can conduct quality and informed conversations on best business practice, the reality can quite different, given the compressed and content driven nature of these educational programs (Rossett, 1997).

An additional challenge facing course developers and presenters is the diverse experiential base of mature age graduate business students. The diversity of experience and qualifications can be quite substantial. For example, a business unit may .include students who have twenty or more years experience in that particular subject area, as well as those who are recently

graduated with their first degree in an unrelated area. Other students may be drawn from overseas, with very different experiences of work, political and economic structures, and cultural values within the workplace.

The breadth and impact of the experience may also be influenced by the nature of the business knowledge which has been constructed by each student. For example, business contexts vary enormously, depending on their organisational culture, history and vision, and the economic stability of the firm. The stage of development of the company also leads to variations in systems, processes and philosophies. Thus, each student with a background in business may draw on very different experiences to create the prior learning set of business knowledge. These experiences may be drawn from best, worst or mediocre practice, thereby creating a danger of situating new learning on shaky foundations. .

To develop effective graduates who can successfully perform in a range of situations, it is necessary to move students away from this initial knowledge and experiential base. The old frameworks, traditions and pre-conceptions need to be recognised, explored and deconstructed, while new critical, creative and evaluative theoretical understandings are built instead. Students need to be offered opportunities to apply their newfound understanding of good business principles and practices into new settings and challenges. Further, they need to be encouraged to develop adaptive decision strategies which prepare them effectively for the complex business world in a rapidly evolving setting (Harrison, 1999; Payne, Bettman & Johnson, 1993).

Business students need to construct and apply models of good practice. It is anticipated that they will return to their work setting with a sound understanding of the processes to be implemented, and the theoretical justification for doing so. A greater awareness of the likely pitfalls and errors which may occur also enables better construction of good processes. Thus, the outcomes of the graduate learning experience needs to be broad in the grounding it provides.

Business schools have become well-honed educational vehicles, using a range of instructional tools to achieve these requisite outcomes. A major industry has sprung up around the use of case studies, with many educators purchasing the rights to use published cases, and many new journals and web-sites being offered for case study publishing. Case studies are commonly built around the examples of real companies, and provide illustrations of the key concepts, within a tightly structured framework (e.g. Bruce, 1999). While they are educative, challenging and generally entertaining, their capacity to act as facilitators of new models of business practice have not been well proven. The separation from the student's own experiential base may result in different degrees of transference back into the student's own knowledge framework (Hesketh & Ivancic, 1999). Thus, despite the great support for commercial case studies, this may not be the best means of building better practitioners.

This paper describes a different instructional model which has been successfully used to build these outcomes. It offers an alternative approach to the traditional case studies, and explores the ways in which good practice may be progressively constructed, using a range of different learning approaches. The described methods build on the individual student's experience, rather than through the use of published case studies. Examples will be drawn from a particular topic, in which the principles of developing effective performance appraisal instruments are explored. This is taught within a performance management unit, in which Master of Human Resource Management students explore performance appraisal, training and development over a thirteen week trimester. Teaching sessions are four hours long, enabling

the use of workshops and other experiential activities to be integrated into a sequential learning process. This form of teaching is very common to most graduate business courses. The programme of instruction which is outlined has been tested over four years, across several Masters level units. The described strategies have been used with both large and small graduate cohorts across several different units. Students within these units have regularly rated the units very highly (3.8 on a four point scale), and have cited the instruction as evidence of excellent teaching over several years. Thus, there is strong support for this style of learning from the student population.

The model of teaching to be outlined incorporates four core stages. The first stage, exploratory learning aims to examine and build a range of experiences from which students may draw first hand knowledge. The second phase, reflective learning, builds on these experiences, in conjunction with the theoretical grounding which must be understood. Following this, students move towards a third level of understanding, in which a model of good practice is constructed and tested. In the final learning stage, these models are applied back into concrete settings, and tested for suitability and sufficiency.

Stage 1: Exploratory Learning

Exploratory learning enables students to examine their own prior knowledge and experience. This is an important and crucial first stage in the experiential learning model, since it provides the student with the opportunity to deconstruct and analyse the preconceptions, past experience, opinions and prior responses and residual stance relating to that area. However, prior knowledge can also be a barrier to new learning. For those who have worked extensively in one work setting, or who have created certain processes, this may be a very well defined and thoroughly embedded cognitive perspective which is hard to change and shift. A common problem with graduate students is the tendency to regard their own prior experience as good practice, and to draw from their own prior knowledge to shape new understandings. This can lead to inadequate construction of new theoretical standpoints and understandings, since only the accepted perspectives are attached to the initial understandings. Conversely, the students without prior experience lack the resources to construct some initial realities. Thus, the discussion of prior knowledge and values needs to be carefully structured to raise issues, rather than invite opinion and further embed past knowledge. An effective mechanism is to pose very targeted questions about past experiences, and to ask students to consider how effectively the systems really were. In the case of performance appraisal instruments, for example, a question might be “How well did the appraisal instruments you have used capture the real work that people were doing?” Discussions soon reveal that there were major deficiencies in both role definition and performance measures used to assess work outcomes. Thus, this process serves to deconstruct those pre-conceptions. Student start to see the fallacies which are embedded in their prior knowledge. However, this method is of limited value for those without that previous knowledge.

A second method of achieving this is to explore common experiences which all participants have undertaken and passively accepted, and to then deconstruct their perceptions of this process. For example, using this teaching emphasis, students are asked to review the teaching evaluation instruments they respond to for every unit. They discuss how they answer it, what they think about, and whether the questions are really the important ones which should be answered. This common experience helps to raise their awareness of gaps in their knowledge, and also serves to build some common experiences which may be discussed by all participants. The involvement of the individuals as real participants, rather than case study readers, enables a much stronger awareness of the issues to be developed.

A third, very powerful source of experiential building is to create an opportunity for an in-depth error experience (Debowski, 2001). The value of errors as learning facilitators has been increasingly recognised in a variety of settings (e.g. Cornell & Sheras, 1998; Day & Sharp, 1993; Drake, 1993, Frese and Altmann, 1989). These learning opportunities are designed to provide experiences which are heavily skewed towards erroneous practices. As participants, the students are emotionally connected with the task, as they are exposed to many of the errors and problems which may occur. This thoroughly engages the students, and provides a rich and fruitful avenue for discussing and reviewing the reasons for the errors which were experienced. In the case of the performance appraisal instrument teaching session, for example, students are provided with an instrument to assess the lecturer, and are asked to complete it fully. However, the instrument includes poor measures of performance and inappropriate scales – typical performance appraisal problems. A number of issues can be drawn from this experience, including the willingness of the students to appraise a person on aspects they cannot know (e.g. *The lecturer is very experienced in research*), or which have not been directly experienced (e.g. *The lecturer answers phone calls within four hours*.) The recency of this error experience provides a constructive, uniform environment to build new learning experiences.

To summarise, the first stage of graduate learning needs to explore and expose a number of preconceptions and erroneous practices which can limit new learning. This can be accomplished through an exploration of past learning, common practice and error experiences, all of which help to explore these common bases and underlying misconceptions. This then enables the building of new, better practice based on current theory and examples from different organisational settings.

Stage 2: Reflective Learning

Reflective learning combines the understanding of past and recent experience with the prior knowledge and theoretical reading which should be reviewed and reconstructed into better practice (Bright, 1996; Lyons, 1999). Open discussion of issues enables the sharing of insights, and critical reflection. At this stage, it is very important to recognise that these students are learning partners. They are informed participants as a result of their theoretical reading, prior knowledge and recent (orchestrated) experiences. Thus, the instructor is more facilitator than teacher, encouraging the students to become reflective, critical thinkers who seek to amalgamate these various influences into a more complex schema. This leads to more effective model building (Hogan, Hakel & Decker, 1986). The focus of this reflection can take two forms. It might focus on the deconstruction of the previous common experiences. For example, using the previous appraisal activity, student might re-evaluate the scales and consider how they should be improved. They might also examine the described performance measures, and consider the reasons for their likely inaccuracies or unsuitability. Thus, this deep reflection and sharing of insights sparks a greater understanding of the issues they must understand and explore in their own professional sphere.

A second instructional strategy may be used to reinforce the theoretical perspective of the learning experience. This is created through guiding the students to focus on the reasons for the problems they have identified. Students might, for example, be provided with a list of the key theoretical challenges which must be reflected in good practice. This framework offers a more structured means of reviewing the theory vs practice dichotomy. In the case of the instrument analysis, students are asked to identify the nine errors which are to be found, and to then consider how these might be removed. This is the commencement of the process of model building, which needs to take place to enable learning transfer.

Stage 3: Model Building

Once students have participated in both experiential and reflective learning, they are fully primed to commence their construction of their own models of good practice. This learning stage entails the provision of a new context in which students will need to consider the key principles to be followed, and the contextual issues which will also need to be recognised. The building of context is an important issue for business students, since they must create relevant best practice within a real working community. This necessitates adaptive decision making, in order to match the organisational mission, outlook and culture with the most effective theoretical basis. For example, if a graduate is asked to design an appraisal system which needs to work in a very cooperative and flexible work setting, these qualities need to be reflected in the system which is developed. Thus, students need to develop sound models which are also flexible and reflective.

These are complex skills to be inculcated, and require opportunities to test and redevelop the basic constructs which have been established. Effective model building opportunities require sufficient discussion and development time. For example, students take between one and two hours to create a new performance appraisal instrument for a new context. In the process, they are also learning other skills relating to group dynamics and interpersonal relationship building. However, the model building and testing phase also requires significant facilitation to ensure that the key principles are firmly embedded and understood. Thus, this is a critical period in enabling students to move from a theoretical understanding to a more complete model which will lead to better business applications.

Stage 4: Applying and Testing the Model Fit

Business courses need to ensure that students do take their knowledge back to their own communities, and to consider how their learning can lead to better processes and systems. This needs to be encouraged within the units of study students undertake. The reliance on case studies about unfamiliar companies can reduce the capacity of students to apply their understanding effectively. In this particular unit, for example, students are required to develop their own case studies, and to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the existing performance appraisal systems. More importantly, they are asked to then build a better system which would work in that context. Thus, they are developing context-relevant solutions which build better practice. The outcomes of these case studies are then presented to fellow students as poster presentations, to enable a comparison of the overall issues which were identified and addressed.

Many courses regard the presentations as the finale of the unit. Students present, and the unit concludes. However, this is a very rich time for reviewing and reconsolidating the overall models which have been constructed and tested. Thus, the model review becomes the final emphasis of the instructional programme, thereby reinforcing the key principles which have been emphasised throughout the process.

Some overall Issues

Graduate students have special needs. They expect to be offered classes which are highly interactive, challenging and thought provoking. However, they also need to be provided with relevant learning experiences which build and reconstruct their prior learning. The intensive nature of business program teaching schedules and the focus on employing subject experts has tended to result in a reliance on business cases to structure learning sessions. However, it can be argued that this is limiting the potential learning of the students, since it fails to

provide opportunities for experiential, reflective and model building learning opportunities. Students need opportunities to critique and build good models which they modify within a business setting.

The skill of the instructor in facilitating these processes is a second, allied issue. The facilitator should build suitable learning experiences, and offer a range of opportunities to build both understanding and models. The capacity to fully involve the students as partners in learning, and to encourage them to contribute to the quality outcomes is a key function of the facilitator. Most importantly, the facilitator is a necessary critic and listener as students work toward constructing durable and workable models based on their past realities and theoretical foundations. This role is critical for the process to work.

While the knowledge base and model development are critical outcomes of the instructional process, students also need to develop other skills and competencies. They need to acquire high level skills in analysis and writing, the capacity to present and argue their case for a course of action, and to effectively outline how their chosen option will benefit an organisation. Class activities need to target these process outcomes, as well as the content goals. Opportunities to critically analyse other student proposals, and to present developed proposals are other important forms of learning. There is much room for the use of simulations and role play in these programs. For example, other class members may adopt the stance of senior executives who need to be convinced that the proposed solutions are viable and desirable. This exercise has two key benefits. First, it provides the presenter with an opportunity to build skills in presentation under pressure. Second, it enables the students to consider the perspective of key decision makers in organisations. These types of strategies hold great potential for business courses, however, they also need to be tested and explored in more settings. The initial trialling of these indicates that they have potential for building better practice.

Of central concern is the degree to which the learning outcomes are transferred into the business setting. There is little evidence of research which explores the level of learning transfer back into the work setting after graduation (Hesketh & Ivancic, 1999). However, this is an important issue that educationalists need to explore. This would enable a better evaluation of the degree to which different forms of learning facilitate better business practice. An examination of program and learning strategy impacts would be valuable sources of guidance on how best to structure future instructional programs – within and beyond universities (e.g. Wexley & Latham, 2002).

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Conclusion

Business courses are big business for universities. However, they are in danger of becoming formulaic and routine in the way in which learning is packaged and dispensed. There is a strong need to review how these courses are taught, and whether the desired outcomes are really being transferred back into the workplace. The described instructional programme aims to develop student understanding into a comprehensive and responsive model which will be carried back and applied into various work settings. More importantly, the integration of theory, personal experience and business context enables the building of better and more reflective practice by these graduates. Building quality conversations within the class settings, and translating these into quality practice needs to become a much higher priority for those involved in facilitating graduate business student learning.

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