Practicing What We Teach, Teaching What They'll Practice: Developing "Reflective Practitioners" Through A Capstone Business Course

James Grinnell, Merrimack College, USA
Cristina Muise, Merrimack College, USA
Deborah Litvin, Merrimack College, USA

ABSTRACT

Business education is failing to prepare undergraduates for success in the 21st century workplace. In this paper we contribute one example of a course specifically designed to confront and close this gap between what we know and what we do as business educators. Our example is an innovative, student-centered, senior-level capstone course developed at the Girard School of Business and International Commerce at Merrimack College. To develop the course, Strategic Analysis and Decision Making, faculty drew from the time-tested pedagogical traditions of Oxford University's tutorial system as well as from the recent movement toward a pedagogy of peer-assisted learning. They conceived and implemented the course as a structure within which students—as individuals and as team members—formulate appropriate questions for themselves in order to rise to the challenges they face during each weekly seminar with their faculty.

Keywords: Business Education, Peer-Assisted Learning, Tutorial Learning

INTRODUCTION: TEACHING THE WRONG THINGS THE WRONG WAY

In the century and a quarter since Joseph Wharton founded the nation's first business school, business education has been an institution under continuous scrutiny and in perpetual search for its soul. The first round of critical self-examination culminated in 1959 with the publication of what have become known as the "foundation reports." Surveying the needs of mid-twentieth century organizations, The "Gordon and Howell Report" (1959) proclaimed that business needed a new kind of manager, and hence a new kind of management education. As elaborated in the report: "Today's student who will be tomorrow's businessman must be flexible of mind and adaptable to change. He needs not so much a specialized knowledge of present business practice as the qualities of mind and the kinds of basic knowledge that will permit him to understand and adapt himself to the kind of world in which he will live and work in the years ahead" (16). The "Pierson Report" came to a remarkably similar conclusion. The report argued cogently that functional content knowledge was but a tool to develop analytical thinking skills. The report elaborated: "… the chief value of college or university work for business careers [does not] lie in any specific matter which may have been learned, since the rate of obsolescence of such knowledge over the individual's lifetime tends to be extremely high. Rather it lies in developing those qualities of mind which can be used to resolve difficult problems in different contexts and at different levels of a firm's operations" (1959: 157).

Almost fifty years after both foundation reports targeted this problematic disjuncture, twenty-first century critics charge contemporary business education with stubbornly persisting in an educational model developed—and already discredited—in the mid-twentieth century. Contemporary critics echo those of the previous century: Business education is not designed to foster students' development of the skills necessary for success in today's

business environment. Mintzberg (2004: 41), an outspoken critic of business programs, offers both explanation and condemnation of this failure to focus on the right thing, the development of the soft skills:

The soft skills simply do not fit [into the curriculum.] Most professors do not care about them or cannot teach them, while most of the younger students are not ready to learn most of them… So rather than teaching the soft skills, the business schools have tended to "cover" them, in the two meanings of the word: review them and obscure them. They have courses on the soft skills, develop theories about them, and use cases to illustrate them. They just have not embraced them, internalized them.

The remainder of the paper details one course model that we offer to our business faculty colleagues as a viable alternative to the ineffective (but familiar and far too comfortable) role of sage on the stage. This model has been developed for a senior-level capstone course at the Girard School of Business and International Commerce of Merrimack College. As we will explain below, its design and methods of implementation are grounded in the time-tested methods of Oxford University's tutorial system, as well as in the recent movement toward the pedagogy of peer-assisted learning ("PAL"). The course, Strategic Analysis and Decision Making ("SADM"), has been crafted to facilitate graduating seniors' development of the skills required to become professional, reflective practitioners (Schon, 1983).

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

To facilitate students' development of the skills necessary for reflective practice of the business profession, the design of SADM is grounded in two learning frameworks, both of which focus upon active student learning facilitated by faculty: the Oxford Tutorial and peer assisted learning. Oxford University's 500-year-old tutorial system replaces traditional class time with one-on-one discussion sessions between students and faculty. Under the tutorial system, faculty facilitate student learning, as opposed to lecturing. This highly interactive and personalized method requires students to engage actively with course readings, which in turn enables faculty members to help them delve into the learning material far more substantially than would be possible in a lecture-based course. The overarching expectation is that students add a significant amount of their own thinking to the subject matter under discussion.

For SADM, the tutorial approach was modified to utilize team discussion sessions, rather than individual tutorials. This enabled the course design's compatibility with the second guiding framework, peer-assisted learning. PAL is a student-centered methodology in which participants shift seamlessly between the roles of student and teacher. It is in the latter role, alien to many students, that they derive the most significant learning benefits of PAL. To date, there have been few investigations of the effectiveness of PAL at the college level. Nevertheless, the evidence of its benefits at the primary and secondary levels is overwhelmingly positive. PAL has been found to enhance social interaction, learning motivation, knowledge retention and transfer, and learner self-esteem and self-efficacy. Moreover, as many have suggested, learning by teaching is also one of the most effective methods for knowledge acquisition (e.g.,Topping & Ehly, 1998). PAL provides an opportunity for all participants to take on the role of teacher. Student learning is further enhanced, as participants expose one another to new patterns of thinking that challenge their assumptions and learning schemas. The result is richer, more holistic learning.

Taken together, the two learning approaches construct SADM as a framework well-suited to students' development of the capacity for what Schon (1983) calls *reflective practice.* According to Schon, the *reflective practitioner*

…allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behavior. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation (1983: 68).

SADM distinguishes itself from courses designed as a medium of information transfer and dissemination. Such designs, which aim to cultivate students' ability to practice "technical rationality," grow out of a more traditional, positivist epistemology that "construes professional knowledge to consist in the application of science to

the adjustment of means to ends" and professional activity as "… instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique" (Schon, 1983: 21, emphasis added). Therefore, courses designed to develop technical rationality seek to steep future professionals in the facts, leading theories, and hard and fast rules of their intended profession.

As Schon notes, however, belief in technical rationality as the substance of management practice has an unfortunate effect upon management practitioners. Faith blinds them to the inadequacy of the premises upon which they operate, prevents them from engaging in reflective thinking, and so forces them into the ineffective—and untenable—position of claiming that they are in control of the situation, even when they are not:

Many practitioners… become too skillful at techniques of selective inattention, junk categories, and situational control, techniques which they use to preserve the constancy of their knowledge in practice. For them, uncertainty is a threat; its admission is a sign of weakness (1983: 69).

The epistemology and methods of SADM lead students in a different direction, to practice their profession reflectively, as artful doers, prepared and competent to deal with the mess, confusion, and ambiguity of real-world situations. With the conviction that the real world offers only limited technical rationality, Girard School faculty created SADM as a reflective practicum in which they, together with their students, develop reflective thinking skills as they burrow down into the muddy, unclear, and uncomfortable world of the decision making swamp. In the context of the SADM practicum faculty assume the role of facilitators/coaches. Having explained the epistemological and pedagogical foundations upon which SADM was constructed, we turn now to a more detailed description of its design and course facilitation methods.

COURSE DESIGN AND METHODS

As we have argued, contemporary business education is designed to imbue students with knowledge appropriate for the hoped-for (if rarely encountered) technical-rational practice. Thus, it is largely antithetical to the mission of assisting students to develop the skills of reflective practice necessary for their survival and success. In contrast, the innovative application of the Oxford Tutorial and PAL models in SADM creates an environment that nurtures and cultivates just such a skill set.

During their weekly tutorial sessions, teams have twenty minutes to present their analysis of the assigned readings or cases. (Course reading materials will be discussed in the following section.) Based upon their assessment of a team's presentation and its members' understanding of the subject matter, the teaching team poses follow-up questions. They then leave the room for approximately ten minutes in order to confer with one another and agree upon a strategy for coaching the members of the team to develop a deeper understanding of the week's concepts. Meanwhile, back in the classroom, the students discuss their responses and prepare for a collaborative discussion. When the professors return to the classroom, all participants spend approximately 30 minutes exploring answers to the follow-up questions and collaboratively analyzing the assigned materials.

One of the precepts of the course is that each student is responsible for mastering all the course material, not just the portion that they present. Accordingly, during the discussion session, the faculty team will frequently address questions to participants without regard to what they actually presented. In this way, students are discouraged from applying the divide and conquer strategy to the course material. (Although there were instances in which it was clear that a participant had not read the material, the general observation was that most students did appear to have read all assigned readings. This, in itself, represents a significant benefit of the SADM model.) Instead, they are encouraged to behave in ways appropriate to the realities of team work within today's organizations. Each team is expected to work as a cross-functional, self-directed team, where participants must not only bring their particular expertise to the task at hand, but also complement and extend the expertise of their team mates. This can only be accomplished by moving the individual's focus beyond his or her personal domain to develop an overview and understanding of the overall task at hand

It is most likely that these intensive 30-minute analytical discussions are the first time that these undergraduates have been required to demonstrate such a significant level of reading comprehension and

synthesizing to develop complex understanding within an ambiguously structured learning context. The format does not focus on the specific reading content, but rather explores the analytical foundations of what the teams presented. Accordingly, participants are required to elaborate and justify the underlying assumptions of their analyses, or to consider implications that may have gone unrecognized. Since the nature of the questions begets sophisticated responses, participants become adept at thinking on their feet, both as individuals and as parts of a team. The teaching team persistently asks follow-up questions, further developing students' ability to craft cogent responses. In many instances faculty adopt the role of Devil's Advocate in order to test the depth of students' conviction in their stated positions and conclusions. Thus, over the course of the semester students become more comfortable either with standing confidently behind their positions or, when warranted, acknowledging the errors in their assumptions or analyses that led to shaky conclusions. They achieve this personal growth while maintaining the collaboration and respect necessary to the continuing development of their team.

Course Reading Materials

SADM utilizes two types of reading materials: practitioner journal articles and strategic management case studies. (The course syllabus is available from lead author upon request.) The course alternates between these each week in a cumulative fashion, with the article concepts being used to analyze the cases and the cases reinforcing the article content. Hence, by the end of the course, students have a rich repertoire of strategic tools and a broad range of examples of how they can apply these tools in practice.

Practitioner Journal Articles

The practitioner articles are drawn primarily from *Harvard Business Review*, *Sloan Management Review*, and *Strategy & Business*. (It is worth pointing out that the sophistication of these readings generally limits their adoption at the undergraduate level.) Readings cover the following topics: (a) industry analysis, (b) strategic innovation and disruption, (c) vision and values, (d) models of competitive strategy, (e) strategy execution, (f) corporate-level strategy, (g) strategic leadership, and (h) the strategic benefits of corporate social responsibility. For each topic, two or three related practitioner journal articles are complemented by popular business press articles (e.g., *Business Week*, *Fortune*, *Wall Street Journal*, etc.) demonstrating the strategic concepts.

For instance, the strategic innovation and disruption topic is based on Bower and Christensen's (1995) seminal *Harvard Business Review* article "Disruptive technologies: Catching the wave" and Charitou and Markides' (2003) *Sloan Management Review* article "Responses to Disruptive Strategic Innovation." These articles are accompanied by several articles discussing Apple's introduction of the iPod and iTunes store. Teams are required to develop a brief presentation relating concepts from the practitioner articles to the introduction of the iPod and iTunes. While students are initially inclined to summarize each article, the intent of the article presentations is to synthesize the articles into a coherent and succinct narrative. Hence, students are instructed to only present concepts if they relate to specific examples and instances depicted in the popular press articles.

The article presentations represent an important departure from the predominant model of undergraduate business education. As shall be elaborated in a latter discussion of the overall benefits of the course design, the format of the article presentations circumvents one of the most common criticisms of business education, that being the lopsided emphasis on content over the development of the cognitive processes needed for successful business decision making. As noted throughout this paper, the rote learning model is antithetical to developing these skills (Forrest & Peterson, 2006; Gardner, 2006). Ultimately, the PAL model puts students in the position of taking ownership over the learning process. Thus, the true benefit is that the students develop the confidence that they can indeed master complex material on their own or through the help of their peers.

Strategy Case Studies

The second type of readings utilized in the course is strategic management case studies drawn from traditional strategy textbooks. These case studies focus on large companies with which students are readily familiar (e.g., Starbucks, eBay, Jet Blue, etc.). In most traditional capstone courses, emphasis is placed on applying the SWOT framework to ostensibly develop strategic recommendations. In practice what happens in most

undergraduate strategy courses is that students develop functional level strategies, which are far more operational in nature than they are strategic. What students typically learn in a capstone course is how business functions integrate, not how firms develop a strategic posture within their respective industries. Thus, a true strategic orientation remains elusive in most business school curricula.

In SADM, students leave the SWOT framework behind, and thereby move beyond the functional integration level of analysis. In fact, students are admonished when they delve into functional level of analyses or make operational recommendations. During presentations, teams (a) identify the primary strategic problem(s)/issue(s) facing the firm, (b) justify their choice based on their application of relevant strategic tools to information presented in the case, (c) provide strategic recommendations that will resolve/minimize the problem(s), and (d) discuss what top management should consider in adopting recommendations (i.e., what are the implications of the strategic recommendations).

For most students, this is the first time that they are asked to conceptualize business issues at the strategic as opposed to the functional/operational level. This level of analysis deviates in a significant way from the analytical skill set students hone in their prior core and concentrate coursework. This can be a daunting level of analysis to approach for MBA student, let alone undergraduates who typically have no "real world" experience. Notwithstanding this, our experience suggests that with constant and consistent coaching, students readily make the transition. By the third case, most teams begin to self-correct their tendency to provide recommendations for the more apparent operational issues and begin to identify and concentrate on the relevant strategic issues posed in the assigned cases.

Team Composition and Peer Assessment

Katzenbach and Smith (1993: 44) define a team as such: "A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable." Team-based structures are becoming increasingly commonplace in the contemporary workplace, thus it makes sense that businesses demand that business schools be at the forefront of team-based learning. Fink (2002: 3) points out: "… colleges are getting feedback from employers saying that they want college-educated employees who have important human-interaction and problem-solving skills as well as content knowledge." Notwithstanding calls for more team-based learning by business practitioners, Fink (2002) asserts that the majority of college students view such experiences in a negative light. Common criticisms include experiences of disproportionate efforts and skills, different outcome valences, and difficulty meeting outside of class. Michaelsen (2002: 25) offers four principles for creating effective learning teams: "groups must be properly formed and managed; students must be accountable for their individual and group work; group assignments must promote both learning and team development; [and] students must have frequent and timely performance feedback." SADM was designed to reflect each of these guiding principles.

Determining the optimal team size and composition is of crucial importance. The research on the appropriate learning team size offers a range of recommendations, though teams of 5-7 members appears to be generally acceptable (Fink, 2002). The benefits of small teams are that members tend to be more cohesive, there is less interpersonal conflict, and opportunities for social loafing are minimized. Large groups in contrast better lend themselves to the division of labor and there is a tendency toward higher innovation and creativity (because of the diversity generally accompanied by larger size). Based upon faculty deployment constraints and the size of a typical senior cohort, the teaching team set up teams of seven to eight students who worked together for the entire semester. Ultimately, this decision was driven by the need to accommodate 150 students within a team-teaching context (there were two faculty members in each section). Based on the experience with SADM, the teaching team found the size to be generally functional, but would ideally opt for teams of no more than six (and no less than four) members.

With respect to team composition, the teaching team adopted a different methodology from that utilized in the predecessor capstone course. Historically teams were constructed to reflect the diversity of student concentrations, the goal being to have someone from each concentration on every team. This cohort of seniors was the first to go through the school's new integrated curriculum. One of the precepts of the core curriculum is that students should develop base knowledge, skills, and abilities in all the functional areas. Hence, it was no longer

necessary to assign teams based on background. Instead, the teaching team opted to assign teams based on student cumulative grade point average. The intent was to match students based upon their motivation and capability. Our experience is that high GPA teams achieve the desired level of performance more quickly than "average" teams, but by the end of the semester most teams reach a comparable level of achievement.

Given that 80% of the final course grade is based on team deliverables, it is imperative to carefully assess individual contributions. During the semester, grades are assigned at the team level, with the team grades posted online on a weekly basis. One of the problems in assigning team grades is that lower performers may hide behind stronger contributors. In large part, this problem is mitigated by the previously mentioned assignment methodology. In order to further reinforce the importance of individual initiative and accountability, the teaching team makes it clear to students that individual performance will determine final grades. As the syllabus points out:

Your grade in the course depends on how well your team works together. When you enter the work world, you will find that much of what you do will be done in teams. Rarely will you have the opportunity to choose your fellow team members— you will have to adapt to the skills, capabilities, and personalities of these diverse individuals. Such is also the case in the course. During the semester, you will all have an opportunity to evaluate your peers for their contributions to your team. Students who feel that working in a team entitles them to a free ride should be aware that we will prorate group grades on an individual basis. If at any time during the semester you feel that there is a problem with your team, please see us immediately. We will not be very accommodating if you wait until the end of the semester to bring up any group problems you may have.

The centrality of individual performance is reinforced by the end-of-semester peer assessment mechanism utilized in the course. Upon course completion, each student performs an online peer evaluation for each team member. Based on the pooled data, the teaching team identifies individuals who contributed either significantly more or less than their peers. In both instances, the group grades are prorated, sometimes substantially, to better reflect individual performance. In addition to this method of assessment, the teaching team engages in discussions with the teams throughout the semester regarding how the team is performing. In many instances, it is obvious when a team is suffering from dysfunction. In general, the experience in the course suggests that the teams perform cohesively, with rare exception. Regardless, constant vigilance is an important ingredient to making this team-based format work.

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The epistemological foundation and design of this course differ radically from courses designed as a content delivery mechanism. As a reflective practicum, SADM's innovative course design suits an age when technology increasingly routinizes knowledge (Topping & Ehly, 1998). To practice as professionals, managers must have gone beyond basic factual recall, comprehension, and application of business theories and concepts. Schon (1987) paints a vivid picture of the real-world dilemmas faced by professionals:

In the varied topography of professional practice, there is the high, hard ground overlooking the swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution. The irony of the situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or society at large, however great their technical interest may be, while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern. The practitioner must choose. Shall he remain on the high ground where he can solve relatively unimportant problems according to prevailing standards of rigor, or shall he descend into the swamp of important problems and non-rigorous inquiry?

To succeed as reflective practitioners, business graduates must continually draw upon their higher level thinking skills (i.e., analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) in order to evaluate and make use of knowledge in creative, innovative, and self-evaluative ways. SADM immerses soon-to-be-graduates into the discomforts and threats of a realistic, swampy, confusing, and complex world, where few problems have clearly correct solutions, and important decisions must be taken despite uncertainty. At the foundation of such practice is *deep* learning and thinking. The SADM course design presented in this paper offers one way for business educators to help their graduates develop

the deep-thinking and teamwork skills demanded by the 21st century organization. Overall, the design has proven effective in preparing students to think on their feet, engage in analytical thinking, work collaboratively to deepen their understanding of conceptual material, and to develop the reflective, self-assessment capabilities necessary for professional practice, as well as life-long learning.

Although SADM provides numerous benefits for learning, its adoption in business education will likely be hindered by the pressures it places on faculty. The "chalk-and-talk" lecture method promotes a controlled—and thus safe—learning environment. The professor enters the classroom with great confidence that he or she *knows* what will transpire (especially after having spent years perfecting the course). In contrast to this faculty-controlled, safe domain, SADM-style discussions range freely and widely. Facilitating such sessions can be quite taxing to a faculty member, as Bok (2006: 124) recognizes: "Because the conversation can move in unexpected directions and raise unanticipated points, professors must prepare anew for every class regardless of how long they have taught the course." In the case of SADM, faculty must prepare anew for each learning session. Thus, the faculty member must take on more of a role as a coach or facilitator rather than as the focal point in the knowledge creation and transmittal endeavor. And in this capacity he or she must themselves become facile reflective practitioners.

There is a related factor that will hinder some business educators from adopting a SADM-style class design. This is the discomfort—and even fear—that they feel with the prospect of having to face the possible consequence of being revealed to students as not knowing. Undoubtedly, such individuals will face a more difficult challenge to succeed as coaches in the reflective practicum context. While training and practice in the necessary facilitation/coaching skills will help to prepare faculty for this role, there are probably some individuals who simply won't feel comfortable or willing to participate in the course. The personal teaching styles of others might also render them poor candidates for the role of coach.

Despite the care necessary in the selection and preparation of faculty coaches, the benefits the SADM reflective practicum model offers argue for its adoption in business education. It provides a means through which business educators can teach the right things in the right way. Through the probing, prompting and encouragement of faculty coaches, students work actively as members of a team to develop the critical skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. They achieve this, because within the world of the practicum, they can venture into the "swamp," reassured that they can experiment, reflect on the results, and try again, "cheaply and without great danger" (Schon, 1987b) to their self-esteem, or financial health. Indeed, this pedagogical framework does empower business educators to practice what we teach and teach what our students will practice.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dr. Grinnell's research has focused broadly on gender and leadership and the transformation of business education. He has presented his scholarship at national and international conferences and has published his work in Psychological Reports and Advanced Management Journal. Dr. Grinnell presently serves as the assistant dean of the Girard School of Business and International Commerce at Merrimack.

Dr. Muise held positions as Chief Financial Officer and Chief Operating Officer, with responsibility for strategic business planning, finance and operations of a company with global operations. She remains active in the professional sector through consulting for small to mid-size companies as well as participating in real estate investment activities. Her research has focused on the effects of corporate social responsibility on firm valuation.

Dr. Litvin teaches courses in organizational behavior, diversity in the workplace, international management, and women in business. Dr. Litvin has published in *Organization* and *The Journal of Management Education*, and contributed chapters to *Casting the Other: The Production and Maintenance of Inequalities in Work Organizations* and *The Handbook of Workplace Diversity*. Her current research interests are in the areas of workplace diversity, Critical Discourse Analysis, intercultural communication, leadership, emotional intelligence, and management education.

REFERENCES

1. Bok, D. (2005). "*Our underachieving colleges: A candid look at how much students learn and why they should be learning more.*" Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
2. Fink, L.D., (2002). "Beyond small groups: Harnessing the extraordinary power of learning teams." In Michaelsen, L.K., Knight, A.B., & Fink, L.D. (Eds.) "*Team-based learning: A transformative use of small groups*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
3. Forrest lll, S. P., Peterson, T. O. (2006). It's Called Andragogy. *Academy of Management, Learning & Education*, 5(1), 113-122.
4. Gardner, H. (2007). *Five minds of the future*. Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press.
5. Gordon, R.A., & Howell, J.E. (1959). *Higher education for business*. New York: Columbia University Press.
6. Katzenback, J.R., & Smith, D.K. (1993). *The wisdom of teams: Creating the high-performance organization.* Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press.
7. Michaelsen, L.K. (2002). "Getting started with team-based learning." In Michaelsen, L.K., Knight, A.B., & Fink, L.D. (Eds.) "*Team-based learning: A transformative use of small groups*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
8. Mintzberg, H.A. (2004). *Managers not MBAs: A hard look at the soft practice of managing and management development.* New York: Barrett-Koehler.
9. O'Neil, D.A. & Hopkins, M.M. (2002). The teacher as coach approach: Pedagogical choices for management educators. *Journal of Management Education*, 26: 402-414.
10. Pierson, F.C., (1959). *The education of American businessmen.* New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co.
11. Schön D.A. (1987a). *Educating the reflective practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
12. Schön, D. A. (1987b) Educating the reflective practitioner. Presentation to the 1987 meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Washington, DC. (transcribed by Jan Carrick, January 1998) Retrieved 8/4/2008 from http://educ.queensu.ca/~russellt/howteach/schon87.htm.
13. Schön D. A. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner. How professionals think in action*, New York: Basic Books.
14. Topping, K., and S. Ehly. 1998. *Peer-assisted learning.* Mahwah, NJ, & London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.