TEACHING BUSINESS COURSES AT EXTENDED CAMPUSES

by
William S. Sachs, PhD

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University
Extended Campus
Cannon AFB, NM Resident Center
April, 1999

ABSTRACT

Writer: William S. Sachs

Title: Teaching Business Courses at Extended Campuses

Institution: Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

Year: 1999

Teaching business courses at extended campuses raises three main problems: a shortage of time available to students; the quality of academic skills of the student body; the relevancy of course material which syllabi and course outlines make mandatory. The author makes several recommendations to alleviate these problems.

Lastly, the role of professors is viewed from the perspective of a communication model. As experts in their respective fields, PhDs act as knowledge-transmitting mechanisms. Students play the role of receptors, which are the creators of individual learning. To facilitate this communication process between teachers and students, the paper suggests systematic research into learning behavior at extended campuses.

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on undergraduate business courses taught at extended campuses. In accordance with the theme of the symposium, the emphasis rests on the role of the teacher, specifically one who holds a PhD. The reason is because most business schools maintain teacher quotas calling for a majority of PhDs.

There are several ways of approaching the issue. The one used here is the well-known managerial approach, which is used by most business schools, including Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. This approach also forms the foundation of Goals 2000: Educate America Act. Though the law deals primarily with secondary schools, it has significant implications for higher education.

The managerial approach to any problem begins with goals and ends with results. It measures success or failure of teaching efforts by feedback, in this instance, by evidence of how much students actually learned. The method evaluates teachers not by their input, but by student output - a seemingly practical method. But this apparently straightforward model presents a number of problems relating to objectives, implementation, and monitoring. Let us examine some key issues at extended campuses.

DEFINING PERFORMANCE GOALS

Performance objectives determine the goals of a course. Given these objectives, an instructor is supposed to select those parts of a text which support the goals. However, the selection process is easier said than done. It raises several concerns, primarily those which relate to 1) the time factor 2) student quality 3) relevancy of reading material in the assigned text.

The Time Factor and Student Quality

The performance objectives, together with sample course outlines, virtually cover an entire textbook, and more. These mandates severely limit instructor selection of reading material.

Courses run for nine weeks, with one or two sessions per week totaling 42 hours of class

instruction. In effect, military exercises and exams often shrink actual classroom instruction by 22%. Be that as it may, courses at most business schools also last 42 hours a semester. But they stretch over a longer period - normally 14 weeks. We cannot assume that 42 hours is 42 hours is 42 hours, regardless as to how the hours are distributed. The more a course is compressed, the less actual time students have to read and absorb the course material.

Our students' first obligation is full time military duty. They pursue their education on a part time basis. Many also have family responsibilities. Assuming a student spends two hours reading, doing assignments, and studying for every hour of class time, two courses per semester translates into at least 28 hours of academic work in addition to 40 some hours taken up by military tasks. And that makes for a very long workweek.

Moreover, textbooks are not noted for ease of reading. Most use technical language, even when not absolutely necessary. They are commonly written in a dry, overly pedantic style, with ponderous, elephantine sentences which can only be deciphered, not read. The few easy-to-read texts "dumb down" the content. Lastly, our student body consists of enlisted personnel, most of whom never enrolled in a college. A goodly number began courses at Embry-Riddle years after being out of school. Instead of time compression, time expansion would be a more appropriate policy for military personnel. Business Week, in a completely different context, suggests letting recruits go to college first and serve the military later (Crock). This would not be a bad idea to upgrade the quality of education among enlisted men, though this is not a decision to be made by Embry-Riddle.

Some 30% of college entrants today take remedial courses in basic English and mathematics (Wessel). The proportion for service people needing such aids to repair past deficiencies probably exceeds 30%. Most enlisted personnel have never applied to enter a college. They also come from poorer neighborhoods, where high school education lingers below the national average.

Literacy of our current video generation has become a national concern. Various studies by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicates no evidence of improvement among 21-25 year olds of any during the last decade. The ETS study of 1993 entitled "Adult Literacy in America," reported close to 50% of our population read at the 8th grade level or less (Educational Testing Service). These stark statistics raises serious questions about our students' ability to read and understand 600 pages or more of text in the short time they have for studying. But teachers must work with the material at hand. Given student quality, how can we improve it? Consider a few alternatives.

Instructors at extended campuses can reduce the student work load by cutting down on reading assignments. They probably do this already in many instances, simply because the performance objectives are impractical and cannot be attained. This is probably the worst course of action. For one thing, it negates uniform academic standards from campus to campus.

Are there better options? Yes. Here are several which might be considered:

1. As presently outlined, performance objectives have an equal weight. However, it is doubtful whether each goal is of the same importance. Why not rank objectives in order of importance? In this way, if an instructor cannot cover everything in a textbook, he would be able to omit the least important topics.

2. Give students a literacy test to determine their level of comprehension at a given reading speed, but not as a requirement for college admission. Such research should allow us to set more realistic assignments in our course outlines. Knowing what deficiencies exist better enables us to improve our students' reading skills.

3. Conduct experimental studies. For example, we might vary reading or assignment loads among classes, while giving them the same exam. Such experiments would show the effects of reading assignments, if all other factors are held constant.

Such tests might be carried out with students taking the same courses at different extended campuses. Since classes are normally small, it may take some time to accumulate data to yield statistically reliable results.

4. Analyze test grades of independent studies, which may yield some indication of how students perform when left on their own. Such analysis may provide insights about students' comprehensive abilities as well as differential effects of preparation time.

These suggestions are not mutually exclusive. They are presented only as possible options for trying to understand learning variables. Without doubt, there may be other research ideas which may turn out more efficacious. But without a systematic approach to probe into learning processes, we will remain stuck at square one.

Relevancy of Subject Matter

Since Embry-Riddle specializes in aviation and aerospace education, it is understandable that sample outlines call for professors to utilize current aviation examples to illustrate business principles. The trouble is that business texts may devote one out of 600 pages to an aviation example. Why? For many reasons.

Undergraduate business texts are broad-based, emphasizing basic principles and common practices. The subject matter itself is of various kinds. Some are highly structured, such as statistics or accounting, and students learn by doing. For example, probability theory and practice remain the same, regardless of application. The calculation of a probable outcome is the same for estimating airline traffic to the Caribbean, projected sales of Ivory soap, or the amount of defects in a production line. Similarly, corporate financial statements must follow standard accounting principles, no matter if the P&L and balance sheet reports are those of American Airlines, Intel, or Walmart.

Other business courses are not as structured as statistics or accounting, but their subject matter, in varying degrees, is not company or industry specific. Corporate finance concepts, such as risk analysis, present

value, zero working capital, cash management, current accounts financing, securities valuation, and capital budgeting, are common to almost all business enterprises in our economy. Basic marketing functions, such as sales promotion, pricing, personal selling, and advertising, similarly enjoy a universal business practice. Textbooks seldom use aviation examples because they address the mainstream of business, not any specific company. The examples they employ usually illustrate common trade practices. The advertising budgets of the largest airlines, United and American, for example, pale to insignificance when compared with those selling mass produced goods, like Procter & Gamble, General Motors, Ford, and Philip Morris, the nation's marketing leaders. Why should a text bother with illustrations which represent followers, not leaders, of current practices?

Sometimes, course outlines look strained when delegating a certain amount of hours to aviation issues. To illustrate: performance objectives for Macroeconomics stress demand-supply analysis, national income measurements, and fiscal and monetary theories our central banking system employs to promote economic stability and growth. Yet the sample outline recommends 30% of the first eight hours to be spent on such subjects as "counter-cyclical growth of start-up airlines and ATC privatization." None of these topics is even remotely related to the performance objectives.

Or again, take our politically correct course on business ethics, which is required for completion of some degree programs. Does it matter whether an aircraft manufacturer or a brokerage house violates antidiscrimination or employee privacy laws? In both cases the penalties and potential legal liabilities are the same. Then why waste precious, niggardly-rationed time on peripheral subjects? We should use aviation examples - but only where highly appropriate and where we do not stray from the main road.

Our teaching should be relevant. But relevancy is a many-sided thing. For purposes of this paper, I will only deal with its utilitarian aspects.

From a utilitarian perspective, relevancy should be related to our students' current tasks as well as what they will do when military service is over. Relating current jobs with courses is relatively simple. To assess the after-service relationship between jobs and academic courses may prove more difficult. Many business schools follow the careers of their graduates, and seek to find out whether jobs after graduation are related to their field of academic studies. These periodic surveys cover such topics as the industries which graduates enter, the positions and salaries they attain, and the extent to which courses helped them in achieving their goals. ERAU might follow this course of action. It makes a huge difference to a school's program whether graduates end up as computer programmers, repair mechanics, processing supervisors, or systems analysts.

THE ROLE OF A PROFESSOR

What role should a professor play in our educational scheme of things? PhDs are usually trained in research, not teaching. Most of them never took an education course in their lives. They are experts in their respective field. Administrations reward them with promotions and tenure for publishing, consulting, participating in academic conferences and business conclaves, and making appearances on media. These activities enhance a school's reputation, bring in revenue, and sell endowment funds (Anderson). The AACSB also gives these acts high grades when accrediting business schools. In recent years, AACSB schools have relaxed the publishing-research standards, giving credit for teaching contributions. But the elite B-schools require professors who select a teaching track to conduct research on educational theory and techniques, and to publish the results of their work.

Often business schools run conferences and special classes for business people. Recently, Columbia University signed a contract to provide UNEXT.com with educational material for corporations. In exchange for its services, Columbia is to receive royalties in the form of company stock (McGeehan). Faculties of the top business schools assume high government

posts, such as positions on the President's Council of Economic Advisors and his cabinet. Professors also serve on federal and state agencies, and testify before Congressional and state legislative committees. The fact is that a university serves many publics. Such actions, many critics assert, turn faculty attention away from a commitment to teaching.

Another issue today is what is taught. Top business schools, the practices of which are widely emulated, emphasize vague, theoretical concepts, which have only a tenuous relationship to the real world. In this respect, opinions differ greatly. Some argue that business education has become so specialized that is has lost its meaning in day-to-day business operations (Lynch). Others accept courses which stress economic theory, but fault business schools for failing to ingrain future managers with ideas for carrying on practical business operations (Samuelson). Yet another group thinks that B-school programs should eshew theoretical, blue-sky concepts and focus exclusively on job training (Scribner).

There is no ready answer for these problems. But we can start with a basic question. Can professors sporting PhDs contribute to the quality of education? Definitely yes, unless we accept intellectual Ludditism. Their expertise is necessary if we are to impart knowledge. We certainly cannot expect improvement in our educational fare by entrusting the conveyance of information to people having no competence in a subject. Too many schools suffer from this deficiency already.

Nevertheless, any human communication system depends not merely on the sender, but on the receiver. Do professors really teach? No, I don't think so. They organize, select, and explain course material. They accomplish only the first part of the communication process. In this sense, they are tantamount to a knowledge transmitting-mechanism. They guide the learning process.

The second part of the system - that of learning - depends on the student. Unlike purely mechanical systems, human receptors are frail things. They

have faulty recording, storage, and retrieving attributes. To learn, students must have a desire to learn. Moreover, what is desired to be learned is dependent on previously acquired knowledge.

Schools of higher learning often assume that their students have the ability to learn at prescribed levels of instruction. This presumption is probably correct, if students are prescreened before admittance, such as by SAT and GMAT scores. But this heroic assumption may not hold for schools with open enrollment.

On the basis of ERAU brochures, we regard students at our extended campuses as mature men and women who enrolled in a university to better themselves, to take advantage of opportunities that education might offer them. But here lies the rub.

* Do our graduates get jobs in the field of their majors? The implications are quite different, depending on the answer. An affirmative implies a broadening of the curriculum. A negative suggests greater specialization.

* Do students take courses to achieve excellence in their chosen field? Or do they attend classes just to get a degree? If we cater to the latter desires, we are acting like the legendary Wizard of Oz, who satisfied the scarecrow's wish for a brain by giving him a university degree.

* Do students actively bend their energies to acquire knowledge? Or do they learn passively, hoping that knowledge will flow to them from the teacher in the classroom, as by osmosis? The latter situation may involve either a workload-time relationship, or it may be a case of mistaken "rational expectations."

Some answers may be readily forthcoming, others may not. But all professors who take education to heart would want answers to these questions - and more. I can only suggest, in accordance with the discipline in which I was schooled, to conduct research into study and learning habits. At least, that is a start to a better understanding as to how we, as educators, can improve our educational offerings.

REFERENCES

Anderson, M. (1996). Impostors in the Temple. Stamford, CA: Hoover Institute Press.

Crock, S. (1999, March 8). Pushing the Pay Envelope. Business Week, pp. 92,94.

Educational Testing Service. (1993). Adult Literacy in America. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton.

Lynch, P. (1994). Beating the Street. New York: Simon & Schuster.

McGeehan, P. (1999, April 2). Columbia University's Business School Signs On With Internet Education Firm. The Wall Street Journal, pp, C1, C9.

Samuelson, R.J. (1990, May 14). What Good Are B-Schools? Newsweek, p. 49.

Scribner, C.M. (1993, July 19.) Marketing News, p. 17.

Wessel, D. (1998, November 9). Who Will Teach Johnny to Read? The Wall Street Journal, p. 1.