

Building a Better Jigsaw Puzzle: Using a Corporate Partnership as the “Missing Piece” in the Introduction to Business Course

Paulette McCarty, D’Amore-McKim School of Business, Northeastern University,
Boston, MA, USA

Edward G. Wertheim, D’Amore-McKim School of Business, Northeastern University,
Boston, MA, USA

ABSTRACT

For decades, the Introduction to Business/Management course has been a central, introductory component of most business education undergraduate programs; yet this course continues to be problematic for both students and faculty. This paper describes an innovative approach developed for this course. Our challenges were threefold: to better integrate course concept areas, strengthen the pedagogical foundation of the course, and more effectively link content and delivery. The key piece in our course design, the piece that helps address the various challenges, is a partnership that we developed with a locally headquartered corporation. The partnership model has helped us achieve the course educational goals and support the central role the course plays in the curriculum.

Keywords: Introduction to Management, Introduction to Business, Emerging Adult, Corporate Partnership

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes an innovative framework for the Introduction to Business/Management course, which has been well received by students and faculty. We describe the major features of the course, with special attention given to the role of our corporate partnership, a relatively unique and critical component that has proven, at our large, urban university, to be the key missing piece in addressing many of the traditional introductory course’s challenges.

The Introduction to Business course our faculty had been teaching, doggedly and to most observers, unenthusiastically, was organized like an unassembled jigsaw puzzle, with each piece dedicated to one of the functional areas of business. Students received these functional pieces “out of the box,” with no superstructure or scaffolding to help them integrate the various pieces. They often struggled to integrate the various parts, so they did not readily develop a view of the big picture, not could they appreciate the overall meaning of the course. These results troubled the faculty because this introductory required course is fundamental to the student’s study of any business discipline and is likely to have one of the largest student enrollments in the university. Consequently, it has the potential to impact a significant number of students, shaping how the student thinks about the academic study of business, his or her management career, the choice of a major within business, as well as critical areas such as ethics and values (Amann, Pirson, Dierksmeier and Von Kimakowitz, 2011; Wright and Gilmore, 2012).

Despite the critical importance of the course, it was often avoided by senior and tenure track faculty as an assignment with little professional reward (Dyck, 2017). At the authors’ university, the course has been staffed almost exclusively by adjunct faculty. Until recently, with a call for papers by Christopher and Laasch for the *Journal of Management*, and several articles by educators sharing their experiences in revamping the introductory course (Mancuso, Chlup and McWhorter, 2010; Pavlovich, Collins and Jones, 2009), little attention has been directed at its pedagogy, design, and delivery. We find this growing attention focused on the introductory business course encouraging. Our paper’s goal is to add to this evolving literature and to contribute to our colleagues understanding of this course.

One of the significant issues with this course has been that course design and desired educational outcomes were not aligned. We have learned that such alignment is an easily invoked ideal that is often hard to enact and, our experience suggests, rarely pursued in an intentional way. In *Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education*, Colby, Ehrlich, Sullivan, Dolle and Shulman (2011) argue that, in the educational arena, learning outcomes must be matched with appropriate pedagogies: “...choices faculty make about *how* to teach are at least as important to student learning as *what* is taught” (p. 88). Our redesign work included rethinking the intellectual and pedagogical foundations of the course.

Historical Background

The freshman business class had for years followed a model based on a series of modules that addressed the functional disciplines of business. Professors from each business discipline would deliver a summary of their academic area. The topics (management, marketing, accounting, supply chain management, organizational development, finance, international business) remained “separate and distinct with no complementary strategy or incentive to put Humpty Dumpty back together again” (Shulman, forward, Colby et al., 2011). The model excited neither faculty nor students and ignored the opportunity to reinforce student interest in business and to generate excitement that might inform a choice of major. Further, it was ineffective in teaching students the targeted course goals. In our revision, we sought ways to address the cross-functional nature of modern management and possibly model it in our course. The course needed to create student engagement and satisfy the educational objectives discussed below.

A Pedagogical Model for the Introductory Management Course

In planning the freshmen course re-design, we drew on the work of researchers who looked at the “emerging adult,” and the particular ways emerging adults learn in the current environment. Much of this research started with the work of Malcolm Knowles and his collaborators who developed a stream of adult learning, andragogy, theory (from the Greek, “leading the man”) (Knowles, 1968; Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 2011; Forrest and Peterson, 2006). A number of educators have elaborated on the andragogy model (Dachner and Polin, 2016), which focuses on the basic assumptions underlying the learning behavior of adults. The following four andragogy principles were incorporated into the current course revision.

1. *Emerging adults prefer problem-focused learning or knowledge that is applicable in the present time.*
2. *Emerging adults are capable and seek out opportunities for self-directed learning.*
3. *Emerging adults have a strong readiness to learn if the content seems to be relevant to their lives.*
4. *Emerging adults need to understand what they will learn and why.*

In addition, we wanted to address issues raised by the Carnegie Foundation Study (Colby et.al, 2011), which critiqued undergraduate business education as narrow, failing to challenge students to question assumptions, and failing to motivate creative thinking. The Carnegie Foundation Study held that, in order for students to make sense of the world and their place in it, four central dimensions needed to be evident in the curriculum: analytical thinking, reflective exploration, multiple framing, and practical reasoning (Colby et al., 2011).

Our commitment to andragogy as an approach and to the inclusion of the intellectual skills recommended by the Carnegie Foundation Study evolved during our discussion of possible models for the course. We are a university with a strong commitment to experiential education and to cooperative education, so the habit of looking outside our institution for solutions was part of our organizational culture.

BENEFITS OF A CORPORATE PARTNER

The key course innovation was to build a partnership with a local corporation that would provide a reality touchstone beyond the classroom. This partnership introduced what might be seen as an experiential education aspect to our course. The corporate partner participated throughout the semester to provide students a context for the concepts they were learning and a forum in which they could address application of these concepts in a real business context. The specific activities developed with our corporate partner included:

- Analysis of a company through the lens of the annual report
- Observational store visits
- Consulting assignment for the design of a possible new venture for the corporate partner
- Participation in an executive speaker series with top management members of the corporate partner.

Each of these areas is described below, along with a review of their impact on two important student skills, teamwork and presentation skills.

Referencing the Annual Report

In the introductory course, students encounter their first experience of looking at business from the inside out via a review of the corporate annual report. Rather than regarding the company from a consumer’s perspective, they now must now put themselves inside the mindset of a corporate employee who is responsible for satisfying multiple constituents in a highly competitive marketplace. In order to make this mental transition, students must have a clear understanding of the major functional business areas (e.g., accounting, finance, HR, marketing, supply chain management) and an appreciation of how these dimensions interrelate.

Rather than read about each business function as an independent topic in a text, students begin their exploration of the essential business dimensions by digging deeply into the workings of the corporate partner, guided by faculty-led sessions. This is the beginning of analytical learning, defined as “the key condition that must be met for a course or program to be considered academic in nature” (Colby et al., 2011, p.61) and corresponds to mastering the technical aspects of any educational area. Reading the annual report is a novel activity for most students, and they are intrigued to see how a company talks to its stakeholders and how that conversation relies on information from different business disciplines. For example, human relations issues are expressed in the company’s statements about its commitment to employees, vendors and the larger community; financial information is reported in the 10-K; discussion of global distribution networks highlights supply chain logistics.

Throughout the term, as we explore functional areas in more depth, students refer back to information in the annual report to make analytical comparisons with other retailers. For example:

- When exploring the topic of finance, they use the company’s data to calculate financial ratios and then contrast those results with numbers calculated for a major competitor, in order to make conclusions about which company has performed better. Instead of studying formulas in a vacuum, students (even those who may be dealing with math anxiety) learn to appreciate the value of numbers in telling a specific story about a business.
- When discussing human resources, students look at how the corporate partner describes its social responsibility initiatives and compare that to what other retailers report, debating issues around the depth and the authenticity of the printed messages. They may also see how the words stack up against on-line ratings found on Glass Door, or the Forbes and Fortune magazine ratings of “Best Places to Work.”

Store Visits

According to Kuh (2008), learning occurs most effectively when concepts are experienced through realistic situations rather than in the abstract. As such, we assign students to teams and ask them to apply their knowledge of business functions and then develop business plans for new ventures that could support or enhance some aspect of the corporate partner’s retail model.

As a first step in generating ideas, student teams visit the partner’s stores in order to get a sense of the merchandise offered, the layout, pricing, and so on. The objective here is to build on what students have learned in the annual report, to show how a business translates its mission into a physical space, and to provide students with an opportunity to think through innovative ways to create value for the organization.

While the store excursions are independent activities, we give student teams creative and open-ended questions to consider during their fieldwork. For example:

Imagine you are the CEO or one of the top corporate executives from HR, Marketing, or Information Technology. Given what you see and experience at the store, what might you be worried about? What seems to be working well? Could it be improved? What would make the store a favorite shopping destination for you?

New Venture Development

Student teams are engaged in a semester-long assignment to develop a business plan for a new venture to benefit the corporate partner. Due to our large freshman enrollment [600+], we do not have the resources to seed actual start-up projects, which would be the ideal. These business plans are presented to the class, and the best of them have been showcased in a pitch-a-thon event held at the end of the semester.

Students have developed both high tech and low-tech ideas for their ventures: flash mob campus marketing, dressing room improvements, introduction of a personal shopper service, flash on-line sale sites, store apps that alert shoppers to new merchandise, subscription boxes for men’s dress shirts, mobile merchandise trucks, in-store coffee shops, and recycling initiatives.

Each proposal has to be supported by a value proposition that identifies how both customers and the corporate partner would benefit.

- a) Teams must justify that there is a need for their proposal, an unmet customer need that it would satisfy. (e.g., a mobile merchandising truck proposal would need quantifiable evidence that students lack the time to shop and would be interested in having clothes available for purchase on campus). These primary data are gathered through surveys conducted by each team once they have read articles on effective survey methodology. The team develops the questionnaires, which are distributed through Facebook, Google Forms, Qualtrics and Survey Monkey.

- b) Teams use secondary data from the U.S. Census site or other databases to show the potential of their idea (e.g., college enrollments will rise by 15% through 2022, indicating continued growth opportunities for on-campus mobile merchandising; students spend \$80 million annually on clothes, signifying a lucrative target market).

Today, when many business people skip the plan and go straight to the market with a product or service a business plan may seem like a relic of a by-gone era. It's true that, as Abrams noted (Zimmerman, 2014), "You may not need a business plan if you're six Stanford engineers in Silicon Valley who have an app that's got a million followers, because you're going to be acquired so you can be hired." But if you're starting a small restaurant or a graphic design business, "you really want to plan. It doesn't have to be a big document, but you get to make your mistakes on paper, rather than in real life." Completing a business plan gives students a rich understanding of the complexity of issues that businesses face (e.g., analyzing target markets, identifying competitors, anticipating threats to supply chains). Students have to validate their ideas, often in the face of unavailable or contradictory data. They learn to appreciate the energy and tenacity that is required to shepherd their idea from inception to fruition and to defend their decisions. The project prepares students to expand their knowledge and skills "to engage with complex problems, formulate judgments and to take actions in situations that often involve considerable uncertainty," which is the basis of teaching for practical reasoning. (Colby et al., 2011, p.82).

Students recognize the value of the business plan, as some of their comments drawn from course evaluations suggest.

- *This course helped open my eyes to the world of business. Prior to this course my idea of business was limited by what my father had told me about work. However, with that narrow view, I missed everything that happens behind the scenes, seeing all the parts that connect to make the business gears mesh.*
- *One thing that most surprised me was the depth of the business plan. Growing up watching Shark Tank, I thought what these entrepreneurs were doing was easy. In hindsight, I now understand how much effort was behind their business ideas. If you haven't done the work, you can't answer investor questions, and when you can't answer the questions, you go home without getting the deal done.*
- *The great part of the course was the time and effort spent on successfully developing the longest and by far the most challenging project I have ever come across in all my academic years. It was only possible because we completed it piece by piece throughout the semester.*
- *...having our final project focused on something related to (the corporate partner) makes it more realistic because we are making a product to fit an existing successful company.*

The value of the business plan goes beyond having the finished product in hand. A byproduct of the assignment lies in having students realize that university-level business study is complex, and it draws on a wide range of disciplines. As well, we faculty recognize that this complex assignment can set the tone for the student's approach to learning, and we want to encourage entering students to be proactive and independent learners. This is a typical student reaction:

- *I value the (business plan) project for foreshadowing how my future classes will work in the business school. If all my classes entail this level of commitment, I know I will have to put in much more time and energy than I did in high school.*

Team Work Skills

An emphasis on teams or groups in this course is persuasive. The new venture assignment for our corporate partner requires flexibility and resilience beyond what a single student could muster. When students discover aspects of a plan that are less doable than first imagined, the team can offer support and approach the problem from different points of view. Using teams is also a way to increase the concept of multiple framing, "a mode of thought that enables one to perceive and deal with fundamental inconsistency and contradiction" (Colby et al., 2011, p.60). Much like the tale of the blind men and the elephant, students may initially see their proposed business through a distorted lens, one often associated with their intended majors. Such an approach not only distorts an accurate picture of business but limits the opportunity to "work intellectually with fundamentally different, sometimes mutually incompatible, analytical perspectives" (Colby et. al, 2011, p.60).

Since teamwork is crucial to success in the course, we invest time in creating equitable learning teams. In the work world, group composition may be pre-determined by virtue of who holds a given position. However, in the classroom, we are committed to exercising procedural justice by trying to distribute both talent and diversity among the teams. Thus, we assign students across groups based on demographic factors (gender, English fluency,

international background, intended major, as well as self-reported skill levels in Excel and Power Point). In addition, we take into account other relevant courses in which students are enrolled (e.g. accounting) as well as variables such as observed participation rates in class.

Requiring freshmen to mesh with “untested” group members from diverse backgrounds requires patience, trust and respect that can arise only over many weeks of interaction. Based on student responses, the teams have provided a powerful learning experience that highlights the value of multiple perspectives.

- *The lessons that I learned that took me by surprise were those based around human interaction and collaboration. Without the collision of different mindsets, it is impossible to transition from “garage to global.” Had I been required to work alone on this project, it might have been less confrontational but I would have failed miserably.*
- *(International student): I have never worked with people of different cultures, as back home, we would work with individuals with similar race and ethnic background. Starting off was tough but I learned many things about my partners. In the end, I know I can handle the way Americans work.*
- *By getting assigned random partners for the project, I learned what it was like to work with really different people in order to make an idea come to life. It took time but the ends justified the means.*
- *I hadn't had very many opportunities to work on a project of this caliber in high school and, if I did, I chose to work on it alone. This project gave me a chance to experiment and learn more about how I work with others. Midway through the project I felt as if our team was finally running like a well-oiled machine.*

As Surowiecki observes, “Small groups make everyone work harder, think smarter and reach better conclusions than they would have on their own” (2004, p.176). Other research suggests that ventures launched by teams are more likely to become sustainable businesses than those launched by individuals. One study found that over 83% of companies that achieved sales of \$5 million were started by teams (Zacharakis, Spinelli and Timmons, 2011, p.119).

Presentation Skills

Students develop their ideas with awareness that they will be pitching their business plans to the corporate partner as a likely first investor. Student groups present their proposed venture several times over the term. Each performance builds on its predecessor in depth and development, culminating in a final graded presentation. This part of the course design contributes to reflective exploration, namely learning to interpret text material by presenting an analysis of its significance in public (Colby et. al, 2011). Students are demonstrating their understanding of how to incorporate functional aspects of business effectively into their own business ventures and, simultaneously, practicing one of the “major business lessons of 2014,” namely the art of telling a compelling story (Cospers, 2014). According to the Harvard Business Review, “Data can persuade people, but it doesn’t inspire them to act; to do that, you need to wrap your vision in a story that fires the imagination and stirs the soul” (Monarth, 2014).

Students receive feedback from faculty and peers immediately after each presentation and, in addition, they record and review their own performance, critiquing both style as well as content. If groups see that their audience is disinterested or continually asks for clarification, they need to reconsider how to deliver their message more effectively. Since the presentations are cumulative, if groups have not addressed issues raised in previous sessions, the classroom audience will ask them to explain why. And if groups have revised their plan based on new information, they must present the rationale behind their changes.

Executive Speakers

The final activity of the corporate partner relationship in the introductory business course is the speaker series. Over the course of the term, five of our partner’s top-level executives speak to the freshmen class in special evenings sessions about their area of expertise and answer questions from the audience. This is an opportunity for students to see, first-hand, the daily life of a corporate manager, the problems they address, the pace of their work, and, most importantly, how their roles rely heavily on other functions within the business. Students often engage the executive in an extended dialog about the job, its responsibilities, the ways the functions collaborate, the impact of the specific specialty on career development. Again, these responsive comments below are solicited from student evaluations.

- *I was surprised to hear from the financial speakers how they have to work with every single other department within the company. By literally showing the sheer amount of communication that is necessary for even just the financial department to function, I was truly able to understand how everything has to fit together to ensure that a company is successful.*

- *Working with a (CP) changed my perspective on business. Before the class, I had thought that business was mainly having one leader bark orders at their subordinates in a meeting at the beginning of the day and then everybody goes off separately to complete their tasks. Now I understand that in order to complete a project (especially a large scale project such as those that are common within businesses), constant communication is necessary between many different people not only within one department but also interdepartmentally.*

A less obvious but valuable additional benefit of the speaker series is that students have an opportunity to recognize the culture of a company as it becomes visible through the words and actions of its employees. Students comment frequently on the similarities between value statements made by the speakers from different disciplines, thus validating that all departments are part of a unified entity.

CONCLUSION

Our major challenge in revamping the course was to make sure that students not only understand the functional areas of business (i.e., the basic puzzle pieces) but also, more importantly, recognize how the various disciplines interconnect to create an integrated system. Students are now introduced to the fundamental course material through a concentrated focus on our corporate partner's business model. Exploring one company in depth through both its annual report and a coordinated speaker series where company executives highlight the synergy between departments, allows students to appreciate the kind of connections that flow across functional units. This knowledge is enhanced when students are asked to build and defend their own unique business venture for possible implementation by the corporate partner.

Our second challenge in the redesign was to make a conscious effort to introduce recognized educational dimensions into the pedagogy. Colby et. al (2011) remind us that few students come to college with well-developed capacities in any of the four dimensions of liberal learning. An introductory business course that offers opportunities to build these skills is thus ideal. In the current course, students are tasked with mastering the technical aspects of the introductory business curriculum [analytical thinking] and exposed to different perspectives through extensive time in team discussions [multiple framing]. Through the development of an original business plan, they are engaged with complex problems that involve uncertainty [practical reasoning] and, finally, through multiple presentations, they must publically demonstrate their understanding of material [reflective exploration].

The final challenge in our course redevelopment process was to link content and delivery. According to Colby et al. (2011), teachers should be focused on a simple principle: "*teach students what you want them to know and be able to do*" (p.89). For freshmen faculty, this statement has implications beyond knowledge and intellectual skills. We often feel a unique obligation to set the tone for the "college experience" by delivering an introductory class that is rigorous but also exciting and rewarding in ways that makes freshman enthusiastic about their choice of major. One way to achieve this result is to acknowledge students as emergent adults who should be actively involved in the learning process. In keeping with this philosophy, the course offers many activities that satisfy four of the tenets of andragogy:

1. *Emerging adults need to understand what they will learn and why*
Focusing on one corporation helps students recognize the "whole" of business. They are learning how a business operates and developing a business mindset that will set the stage for future courses.
2. *Emerging adults are capable and seek out opportunities for self-directed learning*
We give minimal guidance to students regarding start-up ventures that might be attractive to the corporate partner. It is their responsibility to develop and sell their idea. They create their own surveys, research their own suppliers, set HR policies, etc.
3. *Emerging adults prefer problem focused learning or knowledge that is applicable in the present time.*
Students are analyzing a current Fortune 100 company, whose stores they can visit on multiple occasions. They are also being exposed to practical skills [e.g., effective presentations] that will be highly valuable in all their classes, and future job settings.
4. *Emerging adults have a strong readiness to learn if the content seems to be relevant to their lives.*
Since students have matriculated into the business school, they are likely committed to the content and we build on that attraction by giving them opportunities to pursue business plans that appeal to the interests of their own demographic cohort.

CAVEATS IN CLOSING

The Introduction to Business course this paper describes has been well received by faculty and our academic colleagues. However, there are some cautionary aspects that should be noted.

1. The association with our corporate partner has practical advantages that may not be easily replicated. Retail is a business sector with which students interact daily. Their clothes, coffees, watches, computers, phones, and textbooks are all part of the retail economy. Potential partners from other business sectors may be less “real” to a student population and may not offer the benefit of physical store visitation, which adds depth and richness to the learning experience.
2. The administrative oversight for such a course, with many sections and staffed mostly by adjuncts, is significant. Since freshmen are particularly sensitive to equity issues across the sections and for continuity, we have developed a standardized syllabus with uniform guidelines and required assignments. While there is some leeway for professors to substitute material, the core of the course is consistent. We are fortunate to have instructors who are committed to our corporate partner model. They consider themselves a teaching team and meet every two weeks to address logistical issues (e.g., store visit schedules) as well as to share their suggestions on supplemental activities that may enhance learning. This level of involvement might not exist at other institutions where adjunct faculty may be in flux.

REFERENCES

- Amann, W., Pirson, M., Dierksmeier, C, and Von Kimakowitz, E. (2011). *Business schools under fire: Humanistic management education as the way forward*. New York: Palgrave, MacMillan.
- Christopher and Laasch: Retrieved from: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/journal-management-education-jme-special-issue-call-new-christopher>.
- Colby, A., Ehrlich, T., Sullivan, W.M., Dolle, J.R., and Shulman, L.S. (2011). *Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education: Liberal Learning for the Profession*. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. New York: Jossey-Bass.
- Cosper, A. (2014). Why 2014 was the year of the story. *Entrepreneur*. November 18, 2014. Retrieved from: <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/239142>
- Dachner, A. and Polin, B. (2016). A Systematic Approach to Educating the Emerging Adult Learner in Undergraduate Management Courses. *Journal of Management Education*. 40(2), 121-151.
- Dyke, B. (February 13, 2017). Reflecting on 25 Years of Teaching, Researching, and Textbook Writing for Introduction to Management: An Essay with Some Lessons Learned, *Journal of Management Education*. 1-18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562917693381>
- Forrest III, S., and Peterson, T. (2006). It's called andragogy. *Academy Of Management Learning & Education*, 5(1), 113-122. doi:10.5465/AMLE.2006.20388390
- Knowles, M. S. (1968). Andragogy, not pedagogy. *Adult Leadership*, 16(10), 350–352, 386.
- Knowles, M.S., Holton, E.F. and Swanson, R.A. (2011). *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development* (7th ed.). Amsterdam; Boston: Elsevier, Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Kuh, G.D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Mancuso, D. S., Chlup, D. T., and McWhorter, R. R. (2010). A study of adult learning in a virtual environment. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 12(6), 681-699.
- Monarth, H. (2014). The Irresistible Power of Storytelling as a Strategic Business Tool. *Harvard Business Review Digital Articles*, 2-5.
- Pavlovich, K., Collins, E., and Jones, G. (2009). Developing students’ skills in reflective practice: Design and assessment. *Journal of Management Education*, 33, 37-58.
- Surowiecki, J. (2004). *The wisdom of crowds: Why the many are smarter than the few and how collective wisdom shapes business, economies, societies, and nations*. New York: Doubleday.
- Wright, A.L. and Gilmore, A. (2012). Threshold concepts and conceptions: Student learning in introductory management courses. *Journal of Management Education*. 36: 614–635.
- Zacharakis, A., Spinelli, S., and Timmons, J.A. (2011). *Business plans that work: a guide for small business*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Zimmerman, E. (2014). Retrieved from: https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/04/business/smallbusiness/business-plans-for-start-ups.html?_r=0.

Paulette McCarty, Ph.D. is an Academic Specialist, Management at the D’Amore-McKim School of Business, Northeastern University, Boston, MA. She coordinates the Introduction to Business course.

Edward G. Wertheim, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor, Management, D’Amore-McKim School of Business, Northeastern University, Boston, MA. His teaching and research is in the area of negotiation and mediation.