



The W. E. Mayberry Center for Quality and Performance Excellence

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Business Education Integration: A Performance Context

by Dr. Curt Reimann

Introduction

Business education comes under a lot of criticism compared with parallel education programs in medicine, law, science, and engineering. Such criticisms range from what is taught to delivery. In a recent *HBR* article entitled “No, Management is Not a Profession,” the author (Barker) affirms such criticism, but goes further, saying that “some business skills can’t be taught in a classroom. They have to be learned through experience.” The article goes on to say that “business education is more about acquiring the skills of integration than about mastering a set body of knowledge” and “the key is to recognize that integration is learned rather than taught: it takes place in the minds of MBA students, who link the various elements of the program.” Moreover, Barker emphasizes that “business education is not one-size-fits-all.” Barker’s *HBR* article also cites McGill’s Henry Mintzberg’s belief that MBA programs straitjacket managers by encouraging development of narrow functional expertise rather than the integrative skills that define effective management.

Although critics of business education point to a variety of indicators and consequences, weak integration appears to be the most common and far-reaching of the criticisms. On the other side of this continuing examination, it should also be acknowledged that, over the years, business schools, business education leaders, texts, etc., in recognition of the breadth and depth of the integration challenges, have created a variety of tools and approaches to address them. Instruments such as multi-student projects, team teaching, visits by business leaders, internships, case studies, simulations, community projects, etc., often emphasize better integration of discipline knowledge as a key objective. In addition, many schools use “capstone” courses, such as strategy

or special projects, in large part, to pursue better integration. Overall, it appears that critics and defenders of business education agree on both the importance and the difficulty of integration. This speaks to a continuing need to explore mechanisms to improve, support and evaluate integration. However, it should be noted that academic practitioners and those who employ business graduates might not necessarily agree, except in very broad and general terms, on what integration means in practice.

Discipline Linkage: The Problem or a Symptom?

Often, the criticisms of integration and proposed remedies appear to translate into the view that academic discipline linkages are themselves the meaning of integration and/or the main purpose of integration. We suggest an alternative view here: that students’ purported weak understanding of discipline linkages may actually be a symptom of poor integration, but not its primary cause. The larger issue we perceive is inadequate contexts or frameworks for students’ acquiring and “making sense” of facts, knowledge, and opinions. Such sense-making, or ongoing construction of understanding, is the essence of experiential learning. We believe that efforts to improve integrative learning by better focus on discipline linkages would not be as effective as focusing on contexts in which such linkages occur as means, not as ends. Within such contexts, understanding discipline linkages should still be an important objective, but would need to make clear the purposes of such linkages and their varieties. We believe that the most appropriate questions to pose in response to the valid criticisms and acknowledged challenges are: (1) What curricular and experiential learning (bodies of knowledge and related bodies of experience) should be used or created that not only promote understanding and

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acceleration of integration but also appropriately illustrate meaningful applications of disciplines?; and (2) How do we more directly seek to build students' *capacity* for experiential learning, so that it persists beyond formal education? Making explicit what is implicit in these questions: greater attention is needed to develop curricular and school-based mechanisms for accelerating student integrative understanding and building capacity for life-long learning.

Integrating Contexts

The common view of business disciplines is that each comprises a set of concepts, practices and tools sometimes called "bodies of knowledge". They lend themselves well to academic specialties, texts, courses and grading. They are also amenable to focused case studies that illustrate discipline bodies of knowledge but which also might help "stretch" understanding and show linkages across disciplines. However, such cases might also unwittingly reinforce specific, and perhaps narrow, bodies of knowledge and/or linkages. Our view is that the value of case studies or other "real-life" educational exercises and tools depends greatly upon their underlying context(s). We believe the appropriate questions are:

- How are contexts selected or designed to avoid narrow focus or "partial" or "contrived" integration?
- If disciplines are linked in courses or cases with the view to enhance integration, how is context chosen or structured so that linkages used do not appear to define *the way* that the disciplines "connect"?
- How might case study and curriculum designers anticipate and enable creative uses of disciplines, and of discipline linkages, without primary focus on such disciplines themselves?

Such questions shift the focus from discipline linkages to effective integrating contexts.

Integrating Context: Characteristics

In our attempt to shift the focus from discipline linkages to integrative contexts, we begin by seeking criteria that might help guide the development of such contexts.

Integrating contexts should be:

- **Authentic:** Contexts should relate directly to relevant, important and enduring organizational purposes and requirements;
- **Experiential:** Contexts should have high experiential content, revealing key aspects of organizations that business students and business graduates actually experience, and should be cognizant of, in their studies, subsequent work lives, and as consumers and citizens;
- **Systems oriented:** Contexts should help students develop holistic views of organizations' larger purposes, strategies, objectives, requirements, and operations. This orientation should help promote the view that applications of business disciplines are varied and dynamic, not "cut and dried" or "packaged" routines;
- **Broadly applicable:** Contexts should span across all sectors of the economy that employ business graduates - manufacturing, services, government and non-profit organizations;
- **Open and Dynamic:** Contexts should readily accommodate changes in organizations' goals, business models, strategies, practices, technology and discipline applications;
- **Tied to well-defined bodies of knowledge:** Contexts should be "building blocks" of business education; and
- **Easily adapted to business education tools:** Contexts should lend themselves to texts, cases, projects and other pedagogical tools and mechanisms.

The above characteristics are intended to help focus on what we seek from broad integrating contexts - to aid in their selection, design, use, and evaluation. A central part of the "logic" underlying this set of context characteristics is that contexts accommodate all business disciplines, but that such disciplines arise as means, not as ends.

Performance as a Context for Integration

In previous newsletters, we have discussed topics in performance and performance management, including content, trends, and business education applications and coverage. Below

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it is not derived from the former. Systems thinking and performance goals “drive” integration and “drive” applications of business and other specialty disciplines. Changes in organizational goals and strategies can have major influence on applications of discipline knowledge.

Broad Applicability

Organizations in all sectors rely upon performance indicators of many types. Although organizations in different sectors might have quite different missions and goals, there are close parallels in their PM systems. This includes all aspects of efficiency and effectiveness.

Open and Dynamic

All elements of PM noted above are inherently open and flexible, because they are tied to real-time indicators used in decision-making. New areas of emphasis such as energy use, sustainability and innovation are easily accommodated. The availability of measures and comparisons accelerates the spread and diversity of PM practices. Because basic knowledge in business education is slower to evolve than applications of such knowledge, and performance drives applications, performance is an effective vehicle to capture organizational dynamics.

Meaningful Body of Knowledge

PM is a rapidly emerging body of knowledge. It is gaining in use and taking shape largely outside the academic arena. The elements of PM outlined above are common to most uses. However, PM is not yet an academic mainstream discipline. As a result, how it relates to other disciplines is not yet well described, even though in practice, PM relies upon all organizational subunits and their discipline-based bodies of knowledge.

Adaptation to Business Education

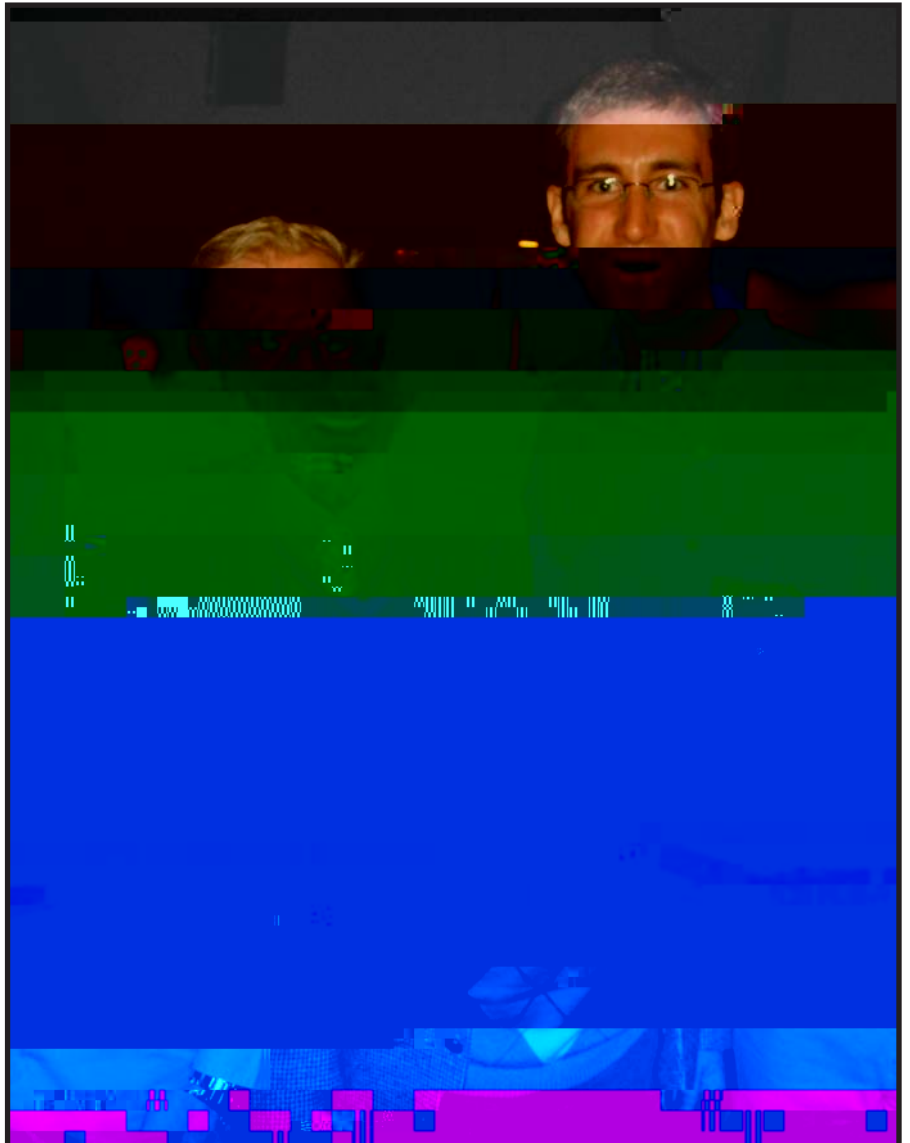
PM lends itself to holistic and to “before-after” cases. Students’ and graduates’ experiences as consumers and employees should be “awakened” via a performance outlook. Also, diagnosing “causation” is an important component of critical thinking. Such diagnosis can be applied to discipline performance and roles, and related to strategy. Of particular importance is the application of PM to understanding

varieties of business models, business model selection and evaluation. This is critical to bridging across strategy, goals, metrics and operations.

Summary and Conclusions

Business education tends to receive more criticism than other types of professional education. Inadequate integration of discipline knowledge appears to be the most persistent and far-reaching of the criticisms. However, overall, critics and defenders of business education seem to agree on the importance, difficulty and long-term experiential nature of integrative learning. Some argue that better treatment of discipline linkages is the key to improving understanding of integration. We pose an alternative view -

that inadequate understanding of discipline linkages is a symptom of the integration problem, not its cause. Moreover, we believe that building students’ capacity for “sense-making” of business disciplines and of varieties of organizations, in school and beyond, would be enhanced via better integrating contexts, learned in school. Based on this view, we outline a set of characteristics we think contexts should have - ones that should strengthen such capacity building. Then, using organizational performance as a context, we make brief comments on how this context responds to each of the proposed context characteristics. Overall, a context based on performance would appear to be an effective choice for building capacity for long-term integrative learning.



Dr. Reimann and Mayberry Graduate Assistant Tyler Hodge at the Quest for Excellence Conference

Activities and Accomplishments

controversial is the monitoring of actions of employees in the workplace with the intent of improving productivity. It is one thing for businesses to apply these tools for, say, optimizing inventory levels in the supply chain to improve the bottom line but quite another in terms of their implications when they are being used to drive behaviors of employees. Workforce management software is used to identify and reward productive workers. At IBM, complex productivity models are used to minutely analyze how a particular consultant's skill sets and experience matches with the requirements of a project. Like a basketball coach deciding which particular player best matches up against the other team, the consultant is either assigned to the project or "stays on the bench." What about employees performing more routine and mundane jobs that do not require high skills? They do not have the luxury of staying on the bench while being on the company payroll. Assigning people to jobs is not an issue here. Their jobs are considered as commodities which can be performed by other, interchangeable employees. Service and office jobs are often treated like the ones in an industrial assembly line.

In one sense, all this is a continuation of what was started about a hundred years ago by Fredrick Winslow Taylor and Frank and Lillian Gilbreth with the application of the principles of the scientific management school in industry. The trend in going to extreme lengths to boost efficiency also continues from those days. Frank Gilbreth, a founder, along with his wife Lillian, of the field of industrial engineering, discovered that you could cut the time it took to shave if you used two razors at once-but gave up on the idea when he found that it took an additional two minutes to bandage the resulting wounds! These days, in Japan, some companies monitor how often their employees smile at customers! These ideas were lampooned in cartoons and movies of those days by efficiency expert characters running around with stopwatches. That tradition continues as well with jokes like "Which 18 hour shift do you want to work?"

The impetus for all the minute measurements and modeling comes not only from considerations of traditional bottom line but also from the recent emphasis on performance measurements in both the private and public sectors. It has manifested itself in organizations developing detailed metrics to produce what are variously called scorecards, report cards and dashboards, to measure performance. Popular performance improvement methodologies like Six Sigma emphasize data-based decision making. Increasingly, these measurements, especially in the field of education and healthcare, are focused on outcomes. For example, The Tennessee Board of Regents has changed its basis for funding its member schools from student enrollment to student graduation and retention. While the for-profit sector always had very clear-cut outcomes like profits and earnings and accepted accounting standards to measure them, it is not always clear if outcomes can be meaningfully defined and measured in education and healthcare. In the field of education, one can question the validity of metrics like graduation rates. Also, such metrics encourage the tendency to measure what is easy to measure e.g., number of diplomas handed out or number of patients treated rather than measures that matter i.e., long term effects of improved learning or health.

In K-12 education, this measurement and modeling movement has gone one step further. Shrinking budgets have often meant that the funding for the school systems has to be justified by numbers. Now, additionally, teacher pay and promotions are also being determined by the numbers game. Typically, the key metrics used are student test scores. In the field of education that is unaccustomed to rigorous performance measurements, all this is causing stress, turmoil and controversy. In the Atlanta school district, targets are set for test scores of students. School staff members (teachers and administrators) achieving the targets are rewarded bonuses which are tied to high test scores. Teachers have to submit detailed weekly reports on how their pupils are doing in practice tests and assignments. Goals are ratcheted up as schools that meet targets are given tougher goals to meet in the following year. Schools live or die by test

scores. The schools that meet the targets are recognized in an annual event. High performers are given more visibility, literally, with teachers from such schools seated close to the front while their counterparts from the schools that did not meet the targets are seated in the back of the hall!

In Los Angeles school system, a different method is being used to measure teacher effectiveness. While it is based on test scores, unlike the method used in Atlanta, Los Angeles is not measuring the achievement relative to set goals. At the heart of this evaluation is a controversial statistical model that measures the value-added by a teacher. The data for variables such as child's family income and background are plugged into the model to project test scores. The value-added or value-subtracted by the teacher is the difference between actual test score and the projected test score.

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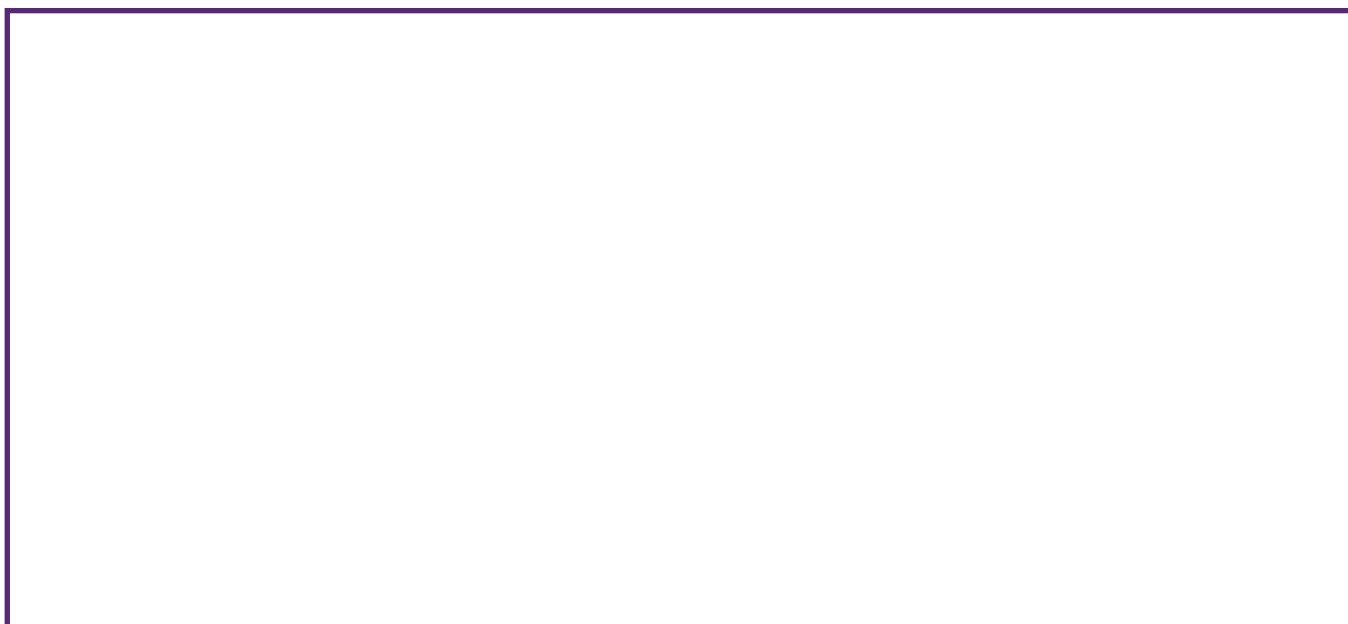
other demonstration projects which are backed by statistical modeling of the data, we have learned a lot more about what works and what does not work in improving patient safety.

Discovering what effective teachers do requires learning more about the cause and effect relationships between student performance and teaching practices. Such studies can be expensive. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation invested \$45 million to develop “fair” and “reliable” measures of teacher effectiveness. In its two-year national project 3,700 teachers are being evaluated on multiple measures. The data includes, among others, videos of teachers interacting with students, student surveys, examples of students’ work, number and frequency of tests and assessment of a teacher’s ability to judge students grasp of the material.

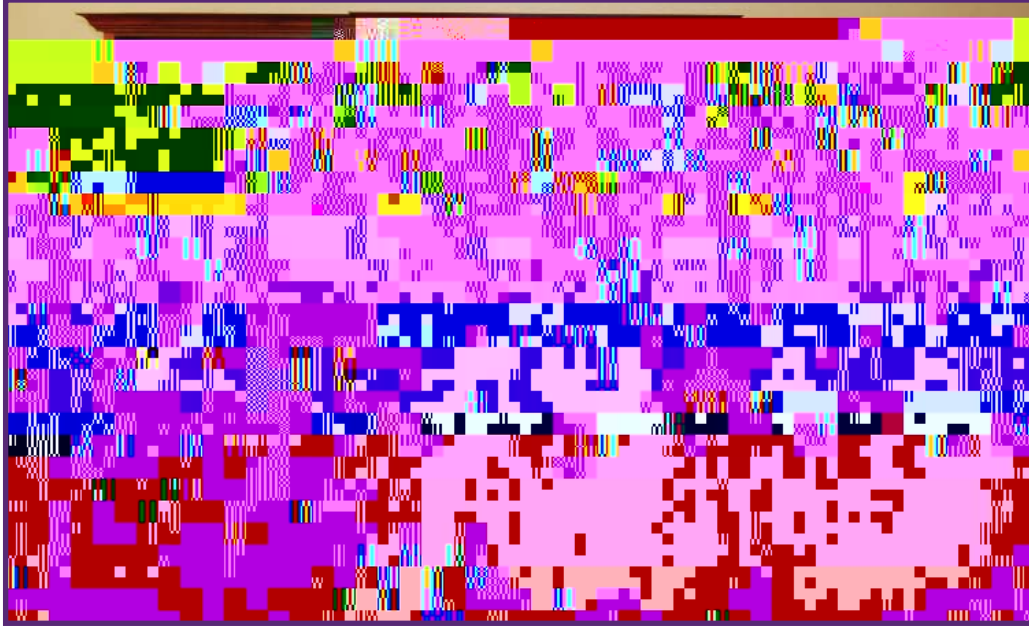
A deeper concern about the use of measurements and modeling to justify bonuses and rewards is the incentive effect that comes into play. If one does not make the numbers and the stakes are high, there is an incentive to “make up” the numbers. Researchers Brian Jacob and Steven Levitt found that minor shifts in teacher incentives affected cheating in the Chicago school district. According to the study, the higher the

incentives, the higher the level of manipulation. In Atlanta, 13 of 22 schools that received bonuses for meeting testing targets were also on the state’s “severe” list of schools with high numbers of suspicious erasures of test answers!

Perhaps there are some lessons to be learned from the life of Robert McNamara, the U.S. secretary of defense during the Vietnam war. He was the quintessential numbers man, the archetypal rational manager, the whiz kid who pioneered the use of the quantitative approach in business. This approach worked brilliantly for him at Ford Motor company (where he was a senior executive before joining the government) in part because in those days, at Ford, there were hardly any systems, measurements or accounting procedures to speak of. The idiosyncratic Henry Ford did not believe in accounting and had fired all the accountants. But it was a very different story when McNamara applied systems analysis to decisions concerning the



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Newsletter prepared by Dr. Nat Natarajan and Dr. Curt Reimann. It is also available on the Mayberry website: www.tntech.edu/mayberry Your comments are welcome.

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