

The Curriculum Jigsaw – studying business@CSU: piecing it together, making it relevant, making it fit ... in a one day orientation!

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Abstract

Twenty four subjects make up the Business degree but how do they 'fit' together? Why have we chosen these 24 subjects? Is there a curriculum 'story-line' or design that brings it all together? The curriculum is the glue to academic and social success, particularly in the first year. The one day orientation to studying business@CSU, during Orientation Week, is one initiative to introduce an integrated approach to studying business. The aim is to have students gain an understanding of core business disciplines and how they interact and impact on each other as well as giving the new students an opportunity to meet each other and work in small groups.

Introduction

Getting space for the academic program in 'O' Week has always been a challenge as the new student is much sought after by various groups (Hughes-Warrington 2010). To the course team, planning and running a full day to introduce the business course program during Orientation Week seemed ambitious and a whole lot of work. Would the students attend? Would they get something useful out of the day? Would we be putting much effort in without any guarantee of the return? The planning discussions raised more questions than answers. According to De Bono (1995), adults will think of reasons why 'it' will not work rather than seeing reasons why 'it' will work. So, riding the wave of pessimism and foreboding we were willing to accept the challenge and the confidence of the First Year Experience literature and have a 'Studying Business@CSU' day for new Business students.

The aims of the Studying Business@CSU Day are to:

- Provide a relevant, involving and social transition to tertiary study that is not overwhelming to the new learner in the discipline
- Assist students transition to the nature of learning in higher education and learning in their discipline
- Provide active and interactive learning opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration and teacher-student interaction

The tripartite of learning about business – the student, the academic and the business manager in the workplace

The very nature of business management education lends itself to the theory being enhanced by the actual practice of management (Bone 2008). The academic assistance in the learning process of the new student is made operational through the notion of praxis. Praxis is learning that occurs through the engagement of the student in a dialectic interaction between real world experience and practice, with conceptual abstract thinking (Eiseman 2001). The tripartite of learning in this case is the students, the academics and the business managers

represented through a case study. This approach recognises the importance of context being relevant in the learning process.

The academic approach: Business as a system (Sustainable Management Model)

Effective business management requires a breadth of skills and knowledge at operational level but also requires the capacity to look and learn beyond the systems level at which the business manager is operating. Thus, it is essential to be aware of the critical influences, both within and external to the business. From the larger systems to which the business is a part, there is a need to identify the threats to the business manager’s position and the potential opportunities available. In practical terms, this requires keeping abreast of what is occurring in the external environment such as the world economy, political issues such as trade policy, environmental and health issues and concerns, trends in consumer preferences etc.

Within the business system the manager needs to be aware of the critical processes for success (i.e. the strengths and weaknesses of the business). ‘Thinking in systems’ mode is a tool which can assist business managers who have to make decisions within a complex and unpredictable environment.

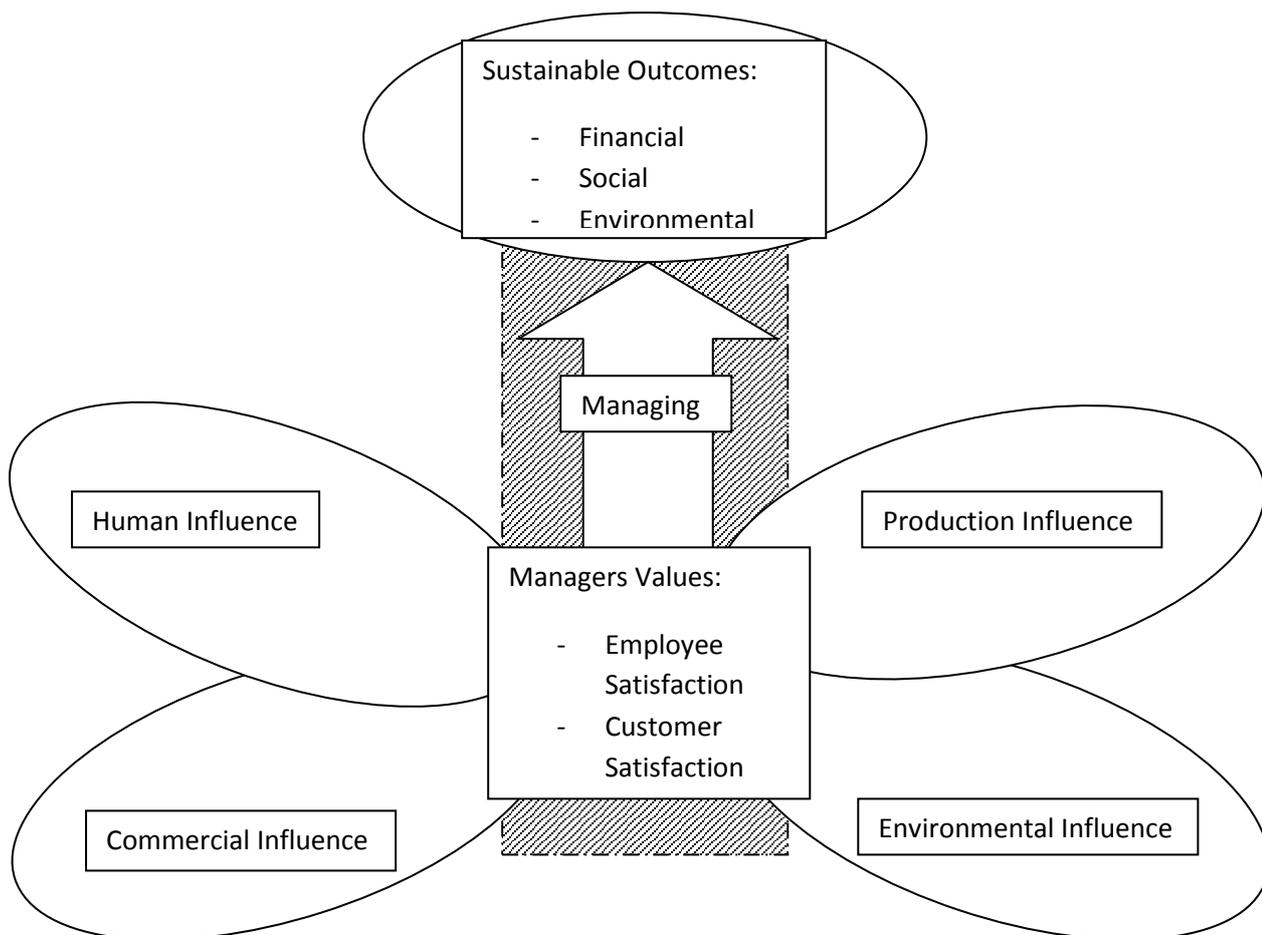


Figure 1: A business as a Sustainable Management Model

The Sustainable Management Model attempts to depict the environment in which a business operates. There are five key elements of the model:

1. The system's boundary
2. The influences (inputs)
3. The business manager's values
4. Processes
5. The sustainable outcomes

In describing a system it is important to understand the nature of the component parts, the interactions between the parts and the behaviour of the whole integrated system.

The Sustainable Management Model introduces the students to values-based business management and decision making:

Values are among the most stable and enduring characteristics of individuals. They are the foundation upon which attitudes and personal preferences are formed. They are the basis for crucial decisions, life directions and personal tastes. Much of what we are is a product of the basic values we have developed throughout our lives (Carlopio, Andrewartha & Armstrong 2005, p.113)

The students and their learning styles

Learning can be a frustrating rather than a joyful process for many people. For students in some learning situations, this frustration can occur because they would prefer to be learning in a different manner. By gaining insight into their learning preferences the students are better equipped to cope with these situations and develop more effective learning strategies to tap their learning potential. The students are introduced to the Kolb Learning Style Inventory (Kolb, Rubin & McIntyre 1979) with the aim of identifying their learning profile and learning style within the Kolb Learning Cycle; and to address their learning strengths and limitations from an understanding of their learning style.

The business manager and the workplace context: A case study of a small family business

Students self-select other new students to work with (in groups of six); preferably with people they have not met before the day. They are given a case study, usually a small family business with six characters. Their brief is to read the case study and then, as a group, decide what the future of the business should be. Each group has five minutes to present their decision, outlining the reasons how and why they arrived at that decision for the business. There is opportunity for the students to take on the role of each of the characters and 'hold' a board meeting to decide the future of the business. Guest academics judge the presentations and prizes are given to the winning group.

Conclusion

We commenced the Studying Business@CSU day in 2010. Therefore, we have run it twice. Student attendance has been high. A record of the group participants is kept and later aligned with students identified 'at risk' (i.e. failing the first assessment in a first year subject or low attendance in tutorials) to see if there is any correlation between the orientation day and

progress in their course. Charles Sturt University has a STAR (Student Transition and Retention) program running in 2011 and we are using the Studying Business@CSU day in orientation week as one strategy to minimise attrition. It is too early to report on the success of the day, in relation to the STAR program, but individual feedback from students indicate that they have found the day useful, engaging and worthwhile. The curriculum is the glue to academic and social success.

References

Bone, Z. (2008). 'The Student, The Academic and the Business Manager: A Tripartite of Learning in Management Education'. Refereed proceedings of 22nd ANZAM Conference. University of Auckland, 2-4 December.

Carlopio, J., Andrewartha, G. & Armstrong, H. (2005). *Developing Management Skills: A Comprehensive Guide for Leaders*. Frenchs Forest NSW: Pearson Education Australia.

De Bono, E. (1995). *Teach Yourself to Think*. London: Penguin Group.

Eiseman, J. (2001). 'Learning to Do and Learning to Be: The Challenges and opportunities of Situated Learning for Educational Design and Practice'. Refereed proceedings of *The Open and Distance Learning Association Forum*. September 24-27.

Hughes-Warrington, M. (2010). 'Which First Year and Whose Transition?: Transforming Academic Teaching Models'. Keynote Presentation at 13th Pacific Rim First Year Experience in Higher Education Conference 2010. Adelaide, 27-30 June.

Kolb, D., Rubin, I.M. & McIntyre, J.M. (1979). *Organisational Psychology: An Experiential Approach*. 3rd edn. USA: Prentice Hall.

Nuts'n'Bolts Session (30 mins)

Introduction: (5 min) Studying Business@CSU day program in Orientation Week. Aims and brief outline.

Icebreaker/Activity: (15 mins) Pairs are given a jigsaw of the Sustainable Management Model (SMM) which they have to put together. The facilitator explains each part and its role in the SMM. Discussion – What subjects within the Business disciplines would 'fit' in each of the four influences of the SMM? E.g. Accounting, Economics, Marketing, Management, Human Resource Management, Finance, Law, Industrial Relations, Communication. Thus, we have the concept of studying business as a whole rather than studying business as 24 separate subjects.

Questions: (5-10 mins)