Deal with it! An Add-in Assignment for Ambiguous or Messy Real-life Class Projects

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Abstract

Employers repeatedly complain that even the brightest business school graduates lack skill in dealing with ambiguous, real-life situations. Real-world projects can help develop that skill, but they are difficult to design and deliver, and frustrating for students who need support for dealing with ambiguity beyond the instructor's reassurances. Yet instructor interference erodes the inherent value of dealing with that ambiguity. This session provides information on an effective, easy-to-use assignment including student reactions, sample responses to the assignment prompt, and room to discuss where and how this ambiguity "add in" can be implemented in other courses.

Keywords: tolerance for ambiguity, real-life projects, managerial skills

Introduction

Real-life or community-based business projects offer students high-value, high-level experiential learning opportunities. Working with real organizations provides students with a chance to apply in practice what they learn in the classroom and from their textbooks. It also responds to employers' criticisms that recent graduates lack business skills critical to their success. Therefore, such projects meet important pedagogical and practical imperatives as students graduate with real experiences that enhance their understanding of abstract concepts applied to their chosen field and that create immediate and marketable value for future employers. Yet there still remain some missing skills, one of which this assignment addresses.

One skill involves the ability to operate under conditions of imperfect or even missing information and complexity where not only are answers to important questions not readily available, but finding which questions to ask is an accomplishment itself. In business, there is often no right answer or multiple correct responses to the same question, which is not true of most disciplinary knowledge found in course texts. This pushes many students far beyond their comfort level.

I created and implemented the chaos and ambiguity assignment in response to great student discomfort in several undergraduate business courses (business planning and project management) taught using a project-based learning approach. Students spent the semester developing real projects for real-life client businesses from the community. While I provide examples from two specific courses at the undergraduate level, the assignment itself is neither discipline-specific nor limited to undergraduates. The assignment is simple, flexible, and designed for use in any course where the topic of ambiguity, chaos, or complexity plays a pivotal role, which often occurs in projects, problem-based learning activities, or other assignments

where information is not perfectly mapped out. The course delivery mode is flexible; the first course I used the assignment in was an online-only course and the most recent a flipped classroom model.

The appendix to this proposal contains instructions for "Chaos and Ambiguity" (Table 1) as well as course description and learning objectives for project management (Table 2) and business planning courses (Table 3). The chaos and ambiguity assignments took place at the beginning of the semester just after basic introductory work had been completed for either class.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

The approach taken by this assignment and described in this session is best described as connectivism (Siemens, 2014) which its author defines as "the integration of principles explored by chaos, network, and complexity and self-organization theories" (p.5) in learning environments composed of shifting, rather than static, knowledge. Siemens describes connectivism-based learning as guided by value for diverse opinions, connecting information sources, capacity for knowing rather than current knowledge, and the ability to see connections, just to name a few. See Table 4 for a full list of Siemen's principles.

Learning Objectives

The objectives of this assignment, no matter where it occurs, are to:

- Understand the role managers play in managing complexity and ambiguity.

- Articulate their preferred manner of dealing with complexity and ambiguity.

- Express how an attitude of personal agency in dealing with complexity and ambiguity creates value for co-workers, colleagues, and organizations.

Separate course learning objectives listed in Tables 2 and 3 not related to this assignment's learning objectives, but those course learning objectives and descriptions should intimate a context appropriate to the assignment's learning objectives.

Exercise Overview

A complete copy of the assignment exists in Table 1 of the appendix. Summarized, students are provided with the philosophy behind the assignment in the background that states, "Chaos and ambiguity are often seen as bad things. Something that many people overlook is that: 1) these are natural states and, 2) managers are paid big bucks to create order out of chaos and to make sense out of ambiguity."

The assignment is simply an articulate response to the prompts:

1. How do you deal with [chaos and ambiguity] yourself?

2. Find a couple quality resources and list some best practices or things you would like to try.

The instructor assesses the quality of students' responses to these prompts whether they be in-person, written out, or posted online. For my courses, I require written responses using quality resources that are posted to a public forum. All students have access to every post and we discuss these after the assignments are submitted. I bring the use of these techniques up in class with the following questions:

- Has anybody experimented with their ambiguity techniques?

- Has anybody tried to use somebody else's posted technique?

- What did you think?

- Have you tried helping others in your group or your client deal with ambiguity in any way?

Session Description

Most of the time should be spent discussing complexity, ambiguity, chaos, and confusion in different contexts brought up by session attendees.

10 min – presentation of the course contexts and introductions around the room. What do you teach? What brought you to this session?

5-10 min – brief description of the assignment and presentation of student responses to the prompts and to using the ambiguity management techniques they were to experiment with.

10-15 min – discussion of observations, comments, questions about implementation, and alternatives throughout the group. My own preference is to lengthen this at the expense of shortening discussion surrounding student responses, which I can provide links to.

References

Siemens, G. (2014). Connectivism: A learning theory for the digital age.

Appendix

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Table 1
Written Instructions
Chaos and Ambiguity Assignment

Module #2 Individual Post #1, Chaos and Ambiguity
Background.
Chaos and **ambiguity** are often *seen as bad things*. Something that <u>many people</u> *overlook* is that:
  1) these are <u>natural</u> states and,
  2) <u>managers</u> are <u>paid big bucks</u> to ***create order out of chaos*** and to ***make sense out of ambiguity***. It's part of the job and many employers complain that new graduates have not been properly trained in dealing with them.
Post.
1. **How** do you <u>deal</u> with these yourself?
2. **Find** a couple <u>quality resources</u> (remember Purdue OWL quality criteria from past assignments) and **list** some best practices or <u>things you would like to try</u>.
Star.
Once you can see other people's posts, please **rate** those <u>ideas you especially like</u>. You have 15 stars total to distribute however you want, from 5 stars to one person only or 1 star only to five different people. As long as they add up to 15 stars total. <u>Contact me</u> if you have any questions!

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Appendix, Continued

Table 2
Catalog Description and Learning Objectives
Project Management Class

Course Description; Prerequisites include an introduction to business course.

This course introduces the project management discipline and focuses on critical success factors in achieving project success. The roles managers and technical professionals fulfill in the project development process will be explored with emphasis on the skill set demanded for successful project participation, contribution, and completion. Current trends in project management will be analyzed with emphasis on the impact of globalization. Key learning outcomes include: an understanding of standard project management processes, analytical techniques used in project management, and the different roles and responsibilities in projects.

Overall Course Objectives:
Upon completion of the course, you should be able to:
1. Describe standard project management processes.
2. Identify critical success factors in project management.
3. Explain the different roles and responsibilities in projects.
4. Identify analytical techniques in project management.
5. Understand and apply project management concepts to a project.
6. Apply elements of a decision-making model to problem solving in project management.

Appendix, Continued

Table 3 **Catalog Description and Learning Objectives** **Business Planning Class**
Course Description Prerequisites include sophomore standing and completion of basic accounting, business information systems, business law, finance, management, and marketing courses. The course provides an intermediate integrative framework between [intro to business] and [the strategic management capstone courses] for continued development of analytical and decision-making skills in the business environment. Focused on the development of a new business venture or a new product in an established firm, the course integrates core concepts from each functional area covered in introductory coursework as a means of understanding the dynamic interplay between functional areas. Students will develop a full business plan as an element of course pedagogy.

Overall Course Objectives:
Upon completion of the course, you should be able to:
    1. Understand the principal elements of a business plan.
    2. Describe the business plan development process.
    3. Recognize the impact of a proposed product or venture on functional areas of a firm.

Appendix, Continued

Table 4 **Principles of Connectivism Learning Theory by George Siemens**
1. Learning and knowledge rests in diversity of opinions. 2. Learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources. 3. Learning may reside in non-human appliances. 4. Capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known. 5. Nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning. 6. Ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill. 7. Currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of all connectivist learning activities. 8. Decision-making is itself a learning process. Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality. While there is a right answer now, it may be wrong tomorrow due to alterations in the information climate affecting the decision.