

Climate Change, Covid-19, and Curricula:

How Should Business Schools Address Wicked Problems?

Abstract/Introduction

Come discuss how business schools and departments might teach about wicked problems like climate and covid-19. Hear what others are doing, share your aspirations, and offer your local initiatives. We will open with a presentation of data on how climate change is being taught in business schools and how one network of professors is addressing complex problems that transcend traditional business school boundaries. We then discuss key questions raised by the presenter and the audience, such as: What do we know about wicked problems? What can be known? What areas of the curriculum lend themselves to integrating wicked problems?

Key Words : climate change, covid-19, wicked problems

Theoretical Foundations

The covid-19 pandemic and the climate change crisis are both “wicked problems”—society-wide disruptions in which many problems are interconnected and about which knowledge is unclear and incomplete. Such problems have no obvious solutions. They involve a large number of diverse decision makers and often have significant economic consequences. They create *risks* for individuals, communities, and businesses. Generally, risk is defined as “the possibility of loss or injury” (Merriam-Webster, 2020). More precisely, and from a psychological

perspective, a risk is an anticipated punishment to which one can assign a probability. It can be measured and priced. Generally, humans attempt to manage risk by accurately assessing the probability of its occurrence and adequately planning for its effects, a practice that is termed “risk assessment.”

The most important difference between risk perception in the covid-19 pandemic and the climate change crisis is that the latter feels remote in place and time. Meanwhile, experiencing a pandemic is all too immediate. Nevertheless, there are many parallels between these two wicked problems, and what we learn from our experience of the pandemic should help us to address climate risk. Our job as researchers and educators is to delineate the risks and then, perhaps, find a place for them in the management curriculum.

Humans attempt to manage risk by accurately assessing the probability of its occurrence and adequately planning for its effects, a practice that is termed “risk assessment.” Since it is evidence-based and ostensibly value free, risk assessment is widely seen as a science. Risk “management” is defined as the making of policy decisions by applying values to decide among multiple goals as analyzed by risk assessors (Hardy & Maguire, 2016).

“Carbon risk” is the term policymakers use to describe particular bad things that can happen to the planet if we pump too much carbon into the atmosphere. Most importantly, over time climate scientists have observed the increase in carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere, and, by evaluating the trend line in the data, have decided that the increase is likely to continue. Scientists have also established that there is a significant relationship between the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere and a dangerously warming planet. Similarly, covid risk is a summary term for the harm that can come to individuals, organizations, and societies from exposure to a novel and widespread pathogen. In both cases, society’s attempt to use cooperative fixes has

failed to solve the problem. In the case of carbon risk, the Paris accords have led to discussions but not plans and requirements, and political actors have failed to effectively implement carbon fees. In terms of the covid risk, we are seeing states and countries forced into competition for crucial resources, with severe limits to the effectiveness of integrative organizations (the United States, WHO, EU).

These are crucial developments in the history of humankind. It is imperative that they play a major role in university curricula.

Design of the Session

This roundtable discussion session runs 60 minutes.

The session includes: 1) a 20-minute presentation of how climate change is being integrated into business curricula (André, 2020; Landrum, 2018; Landrum & Oshowski, 2017, 2018) and how other systemic problems are being addressed (Walls Project, 2019). 2) a 40-minute discussion by participants about how they would like to see wicked problems like climate and covid developed and integrated into their local curricula.

After the 20-minute presentation, the presenter will solicit a list of topics that the audience would like to discuss. Depending on the nature of the topics elicited, the presenter will be ready to structure the discussion with related questions, such as:

What do we really know about wicked problems? What can be known, through risk analysis and other methodologies?

What should our students know?

What areas of the curriculum lend themselves to integrating knowledge about wicked problems in general? About the climate change crisis in particular? About the covid crisis in particular?

As takeaways, participants will develop together an appreciation of the nature and importance of wicked problems in a global society with interconnected economies. The idea of teaching about wicked problems in business schools is novel but compelling. The thoughts shared and developed in this seminar may help prepare participants to lead such initiatives back home in their institutions, and to develop pedagogical theory going forward.

Resource Needs: Zoom.

Previous Related Sessions: This session builds on and extends my work on climate leadership and injecting strong sustainability into the management curriculum by working with the emergent concept of wicked problems. What we learn from the covid experience may help us to better address climate change. The proposal is not under review elsewhere.

Relation to conference theme: If Team Humanity is not very good at cooperation and collaboration, it had better be darn good at creativity and innovation. Studying and experiencing wicked problems helps us see the realities.

References

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