Bringing the "Big Picture" into Intro to Management classes: A Roundtable Discussion

Abstract

Despite pedagogical innovations, the "theory-practice" gap persists in business education. In the Introduction to Management class, educators face dual challenges of content relevance and student motivation, which perhaps can be addressed by bringing contemporary management issues into the classroom. Numerous attempts have highlighted relevant contemporary issues, yet the field lacks collective reflection and systematic approaches to create course connections, specifically regarding *what* big-picture issues should be included and *how* to integrate them with other course objectives. In this roundtable discussion, we invite participants to discuss the issues, directing conversation toward mapping alternative approaches to the Intro to Management class.

Key words: contemporary issues   Intro to Management   relevance

Introduction

Introduction to Management class (or Organizational Behavior class in some programs) is often a required management class for all students in the business school. For students who do not major or minor in management or a related concentration (e.g. human resource management or hospitality), this class may be their only management class. Therefore, critical consideration should be given to the core learning goals of such a class. Given the limited time available in a semester on the one hand, and the countless number of potential subjects on the other, the choice of topics to cover is a crucial matter for course instructors. The issue is increasingly made salient as educators continue to grapple with the "theory-practice" gap in management education (Christopher, Laasch, & Roberts, 2017; Donovan, 2017) and the lack of student motivation in these classes (McEvoy, 2011).

One pathway forward that potentially addresses both concerns of relevance and student motivation is through introducing contemporary management challenges into the classroom, beyond the traditional market-led and skill-based approach (Christopher et al., 2017). By having students learn and critically think about the major issues facing organizational leaders today, students will not only build management-relevant skills and apply the evidence-based practices they learn from the textbook, but they can also learn to look beyond their own economic interest and that of the firms and become change agents when they enter the workplace upon graduation (Holt, 2020; Pettigrew & Starkey, 2016). The sentiment echoes many others who advocate that management classes should address emerging or existing societal issues, such as inequality (Fokati & Prasad, 2015; Robinson, Van Esch, & Bilimoria, 2017; Wagstaff, Fernanda, Hadjimarcou, & Chanoi, 2020), poverty (Neal, 2017), climate change (Buch, 2020), gig

economy (Caza, 2020) and general corporate social responsibility (Deer & Zarestky, 2017; Parris & McInnis-Bowers, 2017).

Towards this end, in the past decade, the management education scholarly community has made frequent calls and suggestions for incorporating current events or issues into management classes, both in journal publications (e.g . Academy of Management Learning & Education, Journal of Management Education) as well as in the MOBTS annual conferences. Yet, to date, we still lack a systematic approach to introducing these issues in Introduction to Management classes. Specifically, we identify that the work done in this vein thus far lacks a discussion of what topics we should choose and focus on from the sea of pressing issues, and how to introduce these topics into the classroom and build synergy with other goals we want to achieve, such as core management subject content and skills development. Considering the challenges surrounding student learning capacity and their lack of work experience (especially at the undergraduate level), the instructors' intellectual capacity to adequately address these issues, and the class limit on time and other resources, we believe that it should prove very beneficial for the management educator community to move the conversation beyond the piecemeal approach to focusing on designing a systematic framework to address the "what" and "how" issues in covering these topics in Intro to Management.

Therefore, in this roundtable discussion, we would like to engage the audience with an in-depth conversation regarding the following overarching questions:

1.   What should be the threshold (Wright & Gilmore, 2012) for determining which contemporary challenges to introduce to students, particularly undergraduate students? What do they "have to" know at the end of the class?

2.   What sources are ideal for identifying the top contemporary challenges of the day? Shall MOBTS be a platform to discuss, aggregate and disseminate these insights regularly (e.g., during annual meetings)?

3.   How should we incorporate these contemporary challenge topics into the course? How can we strike a good balance between core content subjects, skill development, and the contemporary challenge issues? Or better yet, how do we create synergy between these 3 components to deliver a more impactful course?

4.   Above all, in light of the "what" and "how" questions above, what should be the learning goals for students when these contemporary management issues are incorporated into the class?

Pedagogical and Practical Implications

We believe that this roundtable discussion should draw implications on several fronts. From a theoretical perspective, although we are not creating new management theories, we aim to explore a more systematic and innovative pedagogical approach to reconfigure existing management theories to integrate the contemporary management challenges faced by managers. Although there have been numerous attempts in management pedagogy journals to shed light on a range of emerging management issues, such as transgender employee wellbeing (Robinson et al., 2017), mental health issues (Martin, Woods, & Dawkins, 2015), sustainability (Andre, 2020; Sroufe, 2020), and gig economy (Caza, 2020), this isolated, piecemeal approach falls short of making the connection between the issues at hand and the Intro to Management class curriculum *as a whole*. A similar trend is evident over the past 4 years of MOBTS conference programming, where sessions have addressed including current events into courses, discussed how students and faculty must prepare for changes over time, and sporadically focused on a variety of recently popular issues (such as social justice, diversity and inclusion, empathy, mindfulness, corporate

social responsibility, social media, civility, mental health, and resilience). That is, a rationale is often missing that explains *why* a certain issue should be chosen over other important issues within the boundaries of the class (since there are simply too many issues to address with too little time), and the considerations that go into the decision. This is not purely a philosophical question, because individual instructors are invariably constrained by their own biases or preferences or the boundary of their own knowledge, hence may not see the forest, but only several trees. In other words, while we want to introduce students to these "big picture" topics, by only considering the ones most accessible to us, we may be missing the bigger picture.

Moreover, it is rather easy to address one contemporary issue in the class and have it fit with the course agenda with simple tweaks. Yet it is more challenging when we try to make addressing contemporary management issues a much more substantial part of the class and balance it with other components of the original course. More massive changes may be required for successful implementation. If the former is like adding a power window to a gasoline-fueled car, the latter would be like manufacturing a hybrid car, one that requires much more than tweaking a few wires. It is for this reason that Christopher and colleagues (2017) called for a paradigm shift in designing the Intro to Management class. It is definitely a tall order, yet it would help our classes stay relevant, maintain legitimacy from stakeholders, and make a more meaningful impact on the future of the workplace (Holt, 2020; Pettigrew & Starkey, 2016).

Therefore, in this roundtable, we strive to synthesize the previous suggestions for actions and changes on bringing the contemporary issues into the Intro to Management class and redesign our pedagogical approaches in order to have a more systematic and smooth integration of contemporary issues into the class. It may require a re-imagination of the purpose, the structure, and the process of the course. In this regard, we believe that the roundtable discussion

is an excellent and fitting platform to solicit and exchange ideas, discuss and evaluate the merits of different approaches, and ultimately craft a prototype of a new alternative Intro to Management course. As such, these conversations should bear significant pedagogical implications.

Furthermore, from a more practical perspective, by dedicating more class time to contemporary issues and letting them become a more substantial part of the Intro to Management class rather than a mere application of some constructs, we are also addressing the issue of student motivation, or rather, the lack of it (McEvoy, 2011). Brown Charlier, Rynes, and Hosmanek (2013) found that for the most part, the Organizational Behavior classes (very similar to Intro to Management class, and in some programs, used interchangeably) overwhelmingly adopted a traditional construct-driven curriculum. Textbooks used for Management classes also tend to be construct driven and outdated and can prevent critical thinking (Errington & Bubna-Litic, 2017; Snyder, 2013). In contrast, practitioners outside academia care much more about publications and insights that address "interesting questions" (Birkinshaw, Lecuona, & Barwise, 2016), questions that are readily relevant and applicable to them. Most of our students will become management practitioners, but they often fail to see management classes as relevant for them from the traditional approach; therefore, the "radical" approach of moving away from a construct-driven model to one that doubles down on current events and bigger picture issues might be one of the more sensible ways to improve the outcomes of these management classes. Not only can we increase the students' motivation, but they could also walk away from the class knowing what is top of mind in the workplace and having thought about the major issues. As a result, we may see a positive impact on their critical thinking skills and career success as well.

Session Description

We plan to divide the 60-minute session into 3 consecutive parts. We will start with some polling questions to gauge the audience members' opinions and interests. Specifically, we may ask them about what they think are the most important topics in today's management world, and what are the best sources to locate this information. These questions will help transition the session into the next part, where we will assign the attendees to breakout rooms, each with a different focus. One group will focus on the "what" question, that is, what topics we should include in the intro to management class curriculum and how to best update the topic list in a timely manner. The other group will focus on the "how" question, which concerns how to better incorporate not one, but a series of top big picture questions into the class. After each group holds their own discussion, we will finally bring everyone together for a general discussion. We, the organizers, will mainly serve as facilitators, but will also share our thoughts towards the end of the session, depending on the overlap with the contribution from the audiences. Here is the detailed proposed timeline:

Agenda	Time
Introduction	10 minutes
Breakout room discussion	20 minutes
General discussion	25 minutes
Summary and call for action	5 minutes
Total:	60 minutes

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