

## **Bridging Planet and Profit – Climate Change and Sustainability in an Introductory Management Class**

There is much public focus on the challenges of climate change and much academic and professional discussion of the importance developing goals and strategies that balance profitability and long-term sustainability. Nevertheless – and critically - many business schools do not directly address these issues. Occasional references are usually sidebars or addenda. The session seeks to promote teaching about climate change and sustainability through reflection on the experience of an introductory management class in which the challenges of climate change and approaches to sustainability are treated as integral, not peripheral, to business.

**Keywords: sustainability, capitalism, climate change**

## Introduction

The last 30 years seen increasing worldwide growth in the public and academic discussion of the impact of climate change (BBC, 2013) and the existential threat it poses: “Climate change is the single biggest health threat facing humanity” (World Health Organization, 2021) and “The process of climate change is set to have a significant economic impact on many countries, with a large number of lower income countries being particularly at risk. (International Monetary Fund, 2021). National governments and international bodies have unequivocally established the need for changes in public and private sector behaviors to ensure a sustainable human future. Unprecedented global collaboration has resulted in comprehensive plans and strategies such as “17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (United Nations Global Compact, n.d.). It has become commonplace for corporations of all sorts to tout their commitment to the SDGs and similar goals (Accenture/United Nations Global Compact, 2022). In response, some business schools in the U.S. have incorporated reference to these as priorities, promoted by the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) project (Weybrecht, 2021) and AACSB (Sewchurran, 2022). In the classroom, many professors have worked hard to incorporate substantive discussion of the challenges of climate change and strategies for addressing them into their teaching (see for example, Hay & Eagle, 2020; Sroufe, 2020).

Despite the apparent institutional and sector-wide focus and the best efforts of many valiant professors, it is apparent to many that business schools are not sufficiently prioritizing the challenges presented by climate change in their teaching and research (Cator, 2022; Weybrecht, 2022). This is particularly the case in undergraduate business courses. Graduate programs (particularly MBA programs) strive to demonstrate commitment to addressing climate change

and sustainability (a Google search for “MBA sustainability”, for example, produces page after page of business school websites). But at the undergraduate level, the idea seems to prevail that students should “get the basics”. The issues are often perceived as “extras” not central to undergraduate management education<sup>1</sup>. For example, I have spent a decade, arguing in vain to have climate change and sustainability issues incorporated into my school’s curriculum.

### **Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**

The marginalization in management education of climate change and sustainability issues identified as existential by broad sectors of the scientific, governmental and business communities, as experienced through climate disruption by billions – and as articulated by AACSB! - is deeply puzzling and disturbing. As Antonio Guterres, U.N. General Secretary, has said about the PRME initiative to transform management education, “Never has this task been more important. Bold leadership and innovative thinking are needed to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.” (PRME, n.d.).

Many factors contribute to business schools’ lack of attention. For many of us currently teaching, climate change and sustainability were not part of our own academic training and have largely been marginal in the disciplinary canons we work within. Introductory management textbooks also continue to treat the issues as peripheral to the core topics and techniques and teaching resources are limited<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, in many colleges and universities funding has been in decline for years (Pew, 2019). Pressures have been exacerbated because of

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<sup>1</sup> The evidence for this is anecdotal; the data necessary to calculate the number of undergraduate business programs that offer courses on climate change and sustainability does not seem to exist.

<sup>2</sup> Weybrecht (2016) is an example of a non-textbook with helpful teaching resources. The Organization and Natural Environment Division of the Academy of Management has a site for sharing teaching resources (ONE n.d.).

demographics and the pandemic, making it difficult for administrators to meet the teaching requirements of longstanding (climate-absent) “core curriculum” and leaving little or no room for new or “special topic” courses. Another obstacle stems from the tendency for many management topics to be taught without sufficient attention to context in general. It is not simply the relationship of management and business to the ecological context that is often overlooked in business schools, but also the (historically more generally appreciated) political and economic contexts. Too often our teaching privileges profit maximization at the firm level without sufficient attention to the larger capitalist system; management practices seemingly occur in a vacuum (Khurana, 2007). Finally, it must be acknowledged that members of our profession can be actively against addressing climate change and sustainability (Block, 2023).

In the absence of support for incorporating issues of climate change and sustainability in business school curriculum, what can an average management professor with the inclination do? For more than a decade I have increasingly woven climate change and sustainability into a variety of management courses, primarily through a dedicated week each semester and reference to climate change and sustainability strategies in discussions of current events and cases. Finally, this year I decided to move past this “around the edges” approach and made the issues central to two sections of an introduction to management and organizational behavior course. The course embeds management in the political economic context of capitalism, with explicit discussion of climate change and sustainability in relation to every topic of an otherwise standard introductory curriculum. The course piggybacks on an environmental sustainability symposium being held on our campus; students will be researching and preparing proposals for the symposium on topics related to business and management in our state. As I write this proposal, it is the start of the semester and the very early days of this experiment. Throughout the semester

I will be documenting my teaching experience and for the MOBTS presentation in June I will share these along with artifacts and analysis of student experience, with the objective of learning from participants and encouraging greater experimentation in – what is to many of us – unfamiliar territory.

Climate change and sustainability are pressing, existential crises. As management educators, we have a responsibility to vigorously build a bridge between profit and a sustainable planet.

### **Session Description**

1. Introduction of session objectives and format **(5 minutes)**.
2. Introduction of session participants **(5 minutes)**.
3. Small group discussion (depending on number of session participants: if less than 10, will discuss in whole group): “do we teach about climate change and sustainability – why or why not and how?” **(10 minutes)**.
4. Presentation of experience centering climate change and sustainability in an undergraduate introduction to management course. **(15 minutes)**.
5. Group discussion: “How could we teach about climate change and sustainability?” Brainstorm list of concrete ways to incorporate climate change and sustainability into: 1) course curriculum, 2) assignments and projects, 3) classroom discussions **(20 minutes)**.
6. Conclusion: “Moving forward: allies and experiments” **(5 minutes)**.

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