

“Why are we doing this?”: Helping students make the connection between classroom learning and their futures

Abstract

How many times have we heard students say things like, “I will never use information from this class” or “this is a pointless assignment”? Knowing that we as management educators have carefully and thoughtfully designed assignments, it can be frustrating when students do not make the connections between in-class learning and skill development with their future internships or jobs. During this roundtable, we will discuss this challenge and brainstorm ways to help students better make these connections. We hope attendees walk away with some tangible ideas of how to help students make these important connections.

Keywords

Application of learning, andragogy vs pedagogy, bridging class and work

Conference theme: This session should be considered for the conference theme track of bridges. We will facilitate a discussion around helping students recognize how what they are doing in the classroom relates to (or bridges) what they will do at work in the future. Since this is a pervasive issue that spans all types of management classes and levels, we hope the session attracts both experienced educators and new educators to share their challenges and solutions. The session will end with tangible takeaways for how to help students recognize the value and the connection between what they are doing in the classroom, their own experiences, and their future desires for high performance at their jobs.

Introduction

“I’m never going to use anything from this class!”, “Why do we have to take this class?”, “I’m not going to be a [insert class topic name here], so I shouldn’t have to take a class on it!”, “This is all common sense!”. How many times have we as management educators heard students in hallways, before classes start, or, perhaps even more directly, during classes, echo sentiments like these? While we are fortunate to teach in an applied discipline, it is sometimes extremely difficult for students to see how the theories, concepts, and ideas relate to their current role as a student, future interactions as an employee at internships and work, a teammate on sports teams, a member in university clubs. It is not until they are in the situation, perhaps years down the line, that the lightbulb goes off and they say, “hey, we learned about this in class!”. While it is great that they can make that connection, being unable to see the connection *during* class creates disengagement and apathy amongst students and we know, based on emotional contagion, that this disengagement and apathy can spread like wildfire.

While it is easy to say that students do not care about our classes or that it is their loss for not being fully engaged, we also need to take ownership that we, as the class facilitators, play a leading role in creating the class culture and fostering connections. One way to do this is to help students see the connections between the class material and their future jobs and careers (and even current topics). Another way is to purposefully design assignments, exams, and projects so that students are gaining practical skills that they can later use in their careers. For example, the

topic of leadership can be theory-heavy, which can seem very abstract to students. To solidify the concepts, we may ask students to create an infographic about leadership. The student clearly should be learning more about leadership as a topic, but the student is also gaining skills in creating a concise, visual, and informative document that would be of interest to many future employers. Many students do not slow down and reflect enough on these connections. Instead, they want to get the work done and move onto the next thing. So, our question then becomes how we can better help students overtly build the bridge between what they learn and do in class to future internships and jobs? Inherent in this is also the question of how we can design assignments, exams, and projects to help students gain and practice skills valuable to employers.

In this round table, we want to concentrate our discussion on how we facilitate students' connections and how they can concentrate more on bridging the classroom with their future jobs and careers. As we mentioned, we think it is important for students to make this connection not only with the class content, but with the skills they are gaining as they complete their class assignments. For example, if we asked athletes why they lift weights in training even though they do not lift weights on the field, they can easily make the connection between weightlifting and their performance on the field due to increased strength (Krik-Kuwaye & Sano-Franchini, 2015). This is what we need to do in our classrooms, including connecting a skill or something they are practicing in class, to how these skills will benefit their future performance. We believe that if we can get students to understand these connections, we will increase engagement and interest in our classes. The round table will be focused on sharing challenges and ideas for overcoming the challenge that management educators will be able to implement in their classrooms.

We believe this conversation is open to any class related to management and OB and any level of teaching (e.g., undergraduate and graduate). We each have integrated strategies to help

make these connections for students, such as using the Classroom as Organization design and using movies or self-reflection exercises to reflect on personal life experiences. However, we hope to have a mixture of experience in the roundtable to be able to learn more about what has and has not been successful in helping students make these connections. We will compile the thoughts and ideas into a document that will be shared with session participants.

Theoretical Foundation & Teaching Implications

We frame our reasoning for this roundtable in Forrest and Peterson's (2005) argument that management educators need to shift from thinking of "pedagogy" to "andragogy". We are likely more familiar with the pedagogical perspective, which is defined as the science of teaching children. Pedagogy assumes that students are passive learners and that professors impart knowledge *on* them. However, these ideas and pedagogical principles are not clearly applicable to college students because college students, especially upperclassmen, arguably share a mindset more similarly to adults than children (de Dea Roglio & Light, 2009). Many college students may have previous work experience, internships, and an overall desire to prepare themselves for post-graduation success or to the overall practicality of a business degree.

This then brings us to the andragogical perspective, which is defined as the science of teaching adults. This perspective assumes students are self-directed, bring a wealth of experiences to the learning process, already know a great deal, and seek immediate application of knowledge (Forrest & Peterson, 2005; Thoms, 2001). If we ignore student's needs, past and current experiences, and desires because we assume they are passive learners and focus on pedagogy, students may develop apathy toward their learning and see their courses as simply a requirement needed to graduate (Krik-Kuwaye & Sano-Franchini, 2015). The andragogical approach, therefore, is more likely to engage students because it will incorporate their own

experiences and situations. Of course, we assume that management educators likely assume many principles of andragogy in their teaching, but it may not be something we think about and, in turn, because it is not top of mind for us, we may not make these principles salient to students. However, the ability to directly connect in-class assignments and readings to their lived experiences is critical for adults to develop reflection and is key for learning (de Dea Roglio & Light, 2009).

When thinking about this idea from a Bloom’s Taxonomy perspective (Bloom, 1956), if we can engage in these practices that help students make these connections, we believe students will think more deeply about the course and course topics. That is, students will move from just understanding and remembering course topics to application and analyzing. Students should engage in more higher order thinking because the focus on understanding the purpose of the course and the assignments should help students evaluate information and ideas. It also helps them combine the information in a way that is unique to them to create a specific, personal understanding based on their current and future experiences.

We hope that this conversation propels attendees to reflect on what they currently do to help students make these connections and reduce apathy for assignments and attending class. We also hope that it motivates attendees to focus not just on the content of the course, but the course design and communication to students about the purposeful course design. The tangible implications of this roundtable will be to provide management educators with resources, tools, and ideas about how to help students make these critically important connections. We think this is an important conversation that should happen often to remind us of the purpose of our jobs as classroom facilitators. Bringing these conversations to the forefront of class rather than leaving them “behind the scenes” can help us become better instructors.

Session Description (60 minutes)

**Note: Depending on how many attendees there are, we would eliminate breaking up into small groups and simply ask the questions and brainstorm ideas with the full session.*

Time	Topic	Format	Discussion Points and Activities
5 minutes	Welcome	Large group	1. Introduce presenters & purpose
10 minutes	Frame the problem	Large group	1. Introduce the session & connection to conference theme 2. Explain the problem – “I’m never going to use this at work” 3. Mention the importance of helping students make the connection
10 minutes	Introductions	Large group or small group (depending on number of participants)	1. Participant introductions 2. Discuss what attracted them to coming to the session 3. Discuss what they are struggling with related to the problem a. Could be a particular assignment b. Could be a particular overarching problem
10 minutes	Brainstorm ideas	Small group	1. Small group discussion. Facilitators will present a list of questions to frame the discussion. a. Depending on the flow of conversation, groups will be divided by assignment type (e.g., writing assignment, video, presentation, etc.), class (e.g., management, HR, OB), or overarching problem (e.g., connecting class content or connecting skills) 2. Groups brainstorm about how to help students make the connections, see the skills they are developing, etc. 3. Discuss resources, exercises, language, etc. that will help educators focus on the connection between the classroom and the real world
20 minutes	Debrief	Large group	1. Share ideas from small groups 2. Discuss any remaining questions

5 minutes	Exchange information	Large group	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Logistics – exchange information for continuing the conversation and sending out a final document after the session 2. Wrap-up session
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References

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