**Developing a social impact orientation within a mainstream NZ business degree: Pedagogical goals and instrumental realities**

Abstract

The call for business schools to reorient their teaching approaches is not restricted to the remit of the UN Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) (United Nations, 2019). Business leaders, educators and researchers are increasingly in agreement that the profit-driven model of business education is not serving the needs of business, society, or the environment. These calls helped shape our own pedagogical approach when faced with the challenge of developing a core first-year course within a mainstream undergraduate degree, to be delivered to a large number of students and as a basis for a social impact theme across the degree.

Social impact, critical pedagogy, curriculum development

**Context**

The remodel of a business degree provided a unique chance to envisage and undertake a new way of doing things. Significant discussion has been undertaken into the methods and content required to bring about a shift within the business curricula (for example; Antonacopoulou, 2010; Awaysheh & Bonfiglio, 2017; Birnik & Billsberry, 2008; Burchell, Kennedy, & Murray, 2015; Dart, 2008; Dyer & Hurd, 2016; Ford, Harding, & Learmonth, 2010; NĂStase & Gligor - Cimpoieru, 2013; Painter-Morland, Sabet, Molthan-Hill, Goworek, & Leeuw, 2016; Shrivastava, 2010; Toubiana, 2014; von Weltzien Hoivik, 2009; Warwick, Wyness, & Conway, 2017) and this formed the basis of our own work as part of the remodelling of a business degree. In this discussion, we present our experiences developing the curriculum, and delivering the first semester of this paper. These reflections provide insight into the challenges faced.

At our university, the re-orientation of the Bachelor of Business, the core undergraduate business degree, provided the faculty with the opportunity to reconsider curriculum, in addition to approaches to content, delivery modes and methods, assessment types and structures. The faculty consulted with a wide range of stakeholders, and undertook to significantly revise the structure and content of the degree. Within the revised structure, a horizontal core of first year degree papers were developed to foster transitions and skill building, alongside a vertical core underpinned by a commitment to social impact. Framing the vertical core was the aim of encouraging critical thinking, collaboration and creativity, aligned to a design thinking methodology. Collaboration between core paper lecturers was facilitated with a governance group. The first semester of delivery of the new programme has seen heightened student retention and improved pass rates.

Within this landscape, our role was to develop and coordinate the first year social impact core paper, title ‘Business in a Changing World’. As co-ordinators, alongside an academic development advisor, we had an opportunity to support and influence both the horizontal structure and vertical structure of the business degree. “Business in a Changing World” is thus at the crux of both transitions/skill building and social impact.

Grounded in a critical pedagogy (Freire, 1992), our focus in the course was to develop a classroom environment that provided students the opportunity to consider the dynamic context of business, particularly with focus on three key dimensions of change: Global, digital & environmental. Our starting point was to move away from a traditional compartmentalised ‘PESTLE’ analysis, to considering the ambiguous, complex and interconnected nature of ‘wicked problems’. Inherently, this approach aimed to move students to consider the interconnection of business, government, society and the natural environment.

We were tasked to develop and deliver a very different learning experience to students, alongside more traditional discipline-focused papers. The faculty intention was to develop different teaching approaches across the degree, regardless of content, with this course seen as somewhat of a ‘pioneer’. We were keen to provide opportunities for students to explore complex ideas where there is no one right answer, and a chance to engage with uncertainty without unduly overwhelming students. Learning outcomes for this course required that students read and select material critically, explore global ideas and issues, apply concepts and consider the impact of decisions on others at an individual, organisational and societal level.

Critical thinking and critical approaches formed a starting point as we worked towards creating meaningful learning and assessment opportunities and as a way to bring together a range of ideas, and to somewhat disrupt traditional teaching modes.

**Theoretical Framing**

Implicit in our aims for the course were a movement away from surface learning, and towards developing deep learning. Surface learning is generally associated with dichotomous teacher-student dynamics, content-driven teaching, and assessment which focuses on ‘testing’ (Dyer & Hurd, 2016). Partially, this aim responds to wider institutional, national and global level recognition for critical thinking as a vital educational component. Indeed, critical thinking appears in graduate profiles and programme learning goals with regularity and is accepted as an essential part teaching at university level (Roth, 2014).

While it is well acknowledged that critical thinking can be taught in the business classroom (Reid and Anderson, 2012), we sought to move beyond critical thinking as a skill set, to the idea of critical dispositions as discussed by Bloch and Spataro (2016) in the cultivating of critical dispositions within a business curriculum. For Bloch and Spataro a critical disposition is an orientation or ‘deep internalisation’ which allows students to explore different perspectives and ways of thinking. This provides for a ‘more robust and ingrained orientation’ (p. 250) to critical thinking where individuals are more likely to be able to transfer and apply their thinking across multiple contexts. Accordingly, the authors state that such teaching and development of dispositions requires an approach beyond curriculum content. Similarly, Currie and Knights (2003) highlight process rather than content to embue a critical approach through problematising where it is not a matter of teaching critical skills and/or dispositions but engaging ourselves in critical thought and encouraging our students to be similarly critical.

A critical way of working then draws on a Freirean approach (Freire, 1970, 1998) where education becomes transformative which maintains that traditional teacher/student pedagogies not only restrict educational outcomes, but also work to replicate societal power relations, producing complicit workers who are unlikely to enact positive societal and environmental change. Dehler, Welsh and Lewis (2001) suggested that in order to prepare students for ‘the turbulent world …., future management education needs to become both transformational and emancipatory ( p.3). In this critical pedagogical environment management education moves beyond the acquiring of critical thinking skills into a place of critique, questioning and engagement with controversies and complexities where students develop their own ‘complicated understanding’ of complex issues. Indeed, increasingly teachers and students are invited to ‘interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions, ideologies and managerial discourses, and to consider the contexts and dynamics of power underlying managerial thought and action (Heath, O’Malley & Tynan 2019, p.1). For Heath et al (2019) and Gabriel (2009) this is achieved by focussing on an ethics of care which is proposed to develop a caring and critical attitude to decision making among business students.

Thus, in undertaking the design and delivery of a course with a transformative and critical pedagogical base and designed to disrupt traditional modes of business thought towards social impact, a traditional lecture/textbook mode of learning was unworkable.

**Teaching Approach: Challenges & Insights**

Aligned with this intention, we developed a 12-week course utilising a ‘flipped’ classroom model (McNally et al., 2017) aided by a blended learning approach (Smith & Hill, 2019). Within this model, students were provided with a set of ‘independent learning’ activities, to complete prior to class each week. These activities were designed to introduce students to the content/concepts required to underpin the week’s discussion. The weekly workshops were dynamic, active spaces of discussion, simulation and creativity, and aimed to provide a platform for students to apply the concepts from the independent learning to critical issues occurring within the wider business/society context. To aid the creativity in workshops, and to scaffold to 2nd and 3rd year vertical core papers, a design approach to workshops was taken, in particular focusing on defining an issue, and considering different perspectives on a particular issue (developing empathy). Hamington (2019) reinforces that design principles can assist in encouraging business students to develop an ethic of care.

However, there were significant challenges and opportunities for reflection and learning, both operational and pedagogical, in delivering this course. In some ways, the ‘reality’ did not align to the optimism of our intentions. There were a range of challenges associated with a change in approach and these tended to be associated with staff and student expectations in terms of processes to which they have become accustomed especially delivery modes and methods, assessment approaches, but also content and the critical intent of that content. The endeavour to ‘scale-up’ a critical teaching approach in an environment where the emphasis tends to be on traditional and ‘tried and true’ methods and attitudes became evident throughout the semester. It is these insights and challenges which will be the focus of our presentation and the associated discussion.

**Session Description**

In our presentation we will present the approaches used and outline the critical and experimental aspects of the approach to teaching this one paper. We will outline the highlights and challenges in the work and look to discuss some of the interesting issues that have arisen. In particular, the challenges which resulted from the ‘scaling up’ of a critical, experiential classroom, and the contradiction between the aims of deep learning goals and the instrumentality within the current higher education environment.

We will also provide an outline of the vertical core and invite comment/discussion from participants. We will facilitate a brainstorm and discussion to address our main questions and invite participants to share their knowledge and expertise.

**Key Session Questions**

Teaching Practice/Innovations

How do we develop/encourage business educators to create transformational teaching spaces/practices? How do we support those who are trying new approaches? How do current measures of faculty ‘success’ work to encourage/discourage innovation in teaching? What are some ways we can really encourage authentically engagement with flipped models of learning?

Supporting Students/Assessment

What are some ways we can encourage students to engage in a critical way during interactive sessions?

In what ways can we challenge student notions of assessment focussed learning?

Curriculum/Social Impact –

How do we authentically build social/environmental impact into responsible management education?

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