

# A PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING BUSINESS STRATEGY: DESIGN AND ASSESSMENT

**Qian Xiao, Eastern Kentucky University**  
**Lana Carnes, Eastern Kentucky University**

## ABSTRACT

*This article outlines the course design, assessment and complementary learning activities as a result of integrating multiple pedagogical approaches. We try to integrate multiple pedagogical philosophies of service learning, student-centered approach, classroom as organization approach, and reflective learning into one pedagogical framework. This study tries to further our understanding of how an integrative instructional framework may be better employed to encourage students' critical thinking and managerial capabilities development and propose insights for wider application of an integrative instructional framework.*

**Key words:** Teaching Business Strategy, Pedagogical Framework, Service Learning.

## INTRODUCTION

A challenge for undergraduate learning in strategy is that students lack professional work experiences. Without a rich background of experience, many strategic management topics are difficult to grasp through traditional teaching methods of pure lectures and in-class discussions.

Our solution is to develop a semester-long service-based metaproject mentored by a board of advisors that students will need to resolve real business problems, take actions and reflect upon the results. We try to integrate multiple pedagogical philosophies of service learning, student-centred approach, classroom as organization approach and reflective learning into one pedagogical framework.

Service learning approach assumes that knowledge and learning cannot be isolated from practice and situation (Bowen, 2015). Learning takes place via a process of learning by doing or experimentation and practice. Activities involving service-learning can provide students with rich experiences working with unique aspects of organizations and improve applying management concepts and theories to business and social problems. Most importantly, service learning encourages students to give back to communities in a meaningful way. Specifically in our pedagogical framework, students work as business consultants and serve the local community by providing needed consulting services to the local clients.

Service learning approach fits well with the student-centered learning philosophy as the former creates a setting where involvement, interaction and socialization are combined with a business-like approach to accomplishing a certain task. New meaning and understanding are acquired through a process of personal discovery.

Specifically, this pedagogical framework for teaching business strategy transforms the classroom into a consulting organization composed of various consulting teams that students will engage in a self-directed learning process as they are running a functioning organization, addressing real business issues, and integrating into a whole, their prior learning in functional

business courses (marketing, finance, accounting, management, operations and information systems).

In the end of the project, students will wrap up through writing a reflective paper to express their thoughts, feelings and experiences toward the learning content and processes. The practice of reflective thinking offers a key to a deeper sense of learning and experience and reinforces the learning process with students exploring their personal engagement with academic subject content, the individual learning processes and practical applications of those subject matters in a consulting service context.

We truly believe that our designed semester-long service-based metaproject could function as an effective platform that integrates the above learning/teaching philosophies within a pedagogical framework. This pedagogical framework brings together the management theories, real world practice and personal reflection, challenges students to tackle real world business issues, and as a result enhances students' managerial capabilities (Marquardt & Yeo, 2012). The purpose of this article is to describe how we integrate multiple pedagogical philosophies in a meaningful way to create unique learning experience for students and enhance their learning with students experiencing the unstructured problems that actual organizations face, engaging in a real problem solving process and practicing skills and knowledge to help community organizations. The article outlines the course design, assessment and complementary learning activities as a result of integrating multiple pedagogical approaches. This study tries to further our understanding of how an integrative instructional framework may be better employed to encourage students' critical thinking and managerial capabilities development and propose insights for wider application of an integrative instructional framework.

### **Course Overview and Learning Objectives**

Under the umbrella of the business strategy capstone course we will create student-run consulting companies that provide consulting services to small businesses in the local regions. GBU480 (Business Strategy) classes will participate in the project. GBU480 is a 15 weeks capstone and applied critical creative thinking course, where students need to demonstrate all that has been learned in his or her major.

Our plan is to create a real business problem-based hands-on encounter where students will be able to run a functioning organization, address real business issues and integrate into a whole, their prior learning in functional business courses (marketing, finance, accounting, management, operations and information systems). Such integrative and pedagogical framework will lead to a culminating learning experience for deeper understanding of the discipline, and fits well with the course requirements of GBU480. Specifically, students will organize as consulting companies to either partner with local clients from Small Business Development Centre (SBDC) of the university or go out to seek for their own local clients, and provide consulting services to help them address issues of business growth and development. This teaching approach through the action learning based project provides a rich context where learning takes place through concrete actions, reflections on experience, and a process of resolving problems and identifying opportunities for real organizations, not simulations. The direct benefits would be that "learning by doing" offers a great educational experience for students; and this brings the campus and community together. Specifically, expected objectives include: first, by creating a real organization to do the consulting and engage in the real business operations, students will be able

to practice and enhance comprehension of many concepts, theories, and techniques of strategic management; second, the course design simulating a functioning organization lets us mimic business conditions that students will experience when professionally employed or when starting their own businesses; in the end students will be able to gain confidence in addressing unstructured problems in organizations and business operations, have a greater understanding of what it is like to work in an organization and be better prepared for the workplace, and develop the emotional competencies necessary to manage themselves and others in an organizational setting. Meanwhile, this course design leads to tangible benefits to the local community: while building community involvement and providing professional services to local communities is part of College of Business and Technology's strategic objectives, this course design allows students to integrate their learning into outcomes that are valued by the community (through working with local business owners and helping addressing their operations issues) and skills (e.g. team work, communication, critical thinking, decision making and problem solving, etc.) valued by future employers.

### **Course Design and Assessment Activities**

The course design practices a teaching pedagogy based on action-learning oriented projects and advisory board mentoring. The project will unfold in sequential phases. At the start of the semester, students will form cross-functional teams (e.g. marketing, accounting/finance, MIS, general management, etc.) based on their major/specialty supplemented with a students' rank-ordered listing of their interest in the functional choice. The collaboration required among team peers promotes a high volume of interaction through which students can develop emotional competencies in social awareness and relationship management. Cross-functional teams represent self-running organizations that provide consulting services to local clients. Students will collaborate to create a set of organizational norms and policies, as well as a core purpose and set of core values which they will incorporate in their service work and use to address peer conflicts and out-of-norm behaviours. By the end of the second week teams will need to identify their clients with which they will work for the duration of the semester. Students could either partner with local clients from Small Business Development Centre (SBDC) of the university or go out to seek for their own local clients.

Teams will be provided with the detailed research modules that parallel the major elements of strategic management. Each module requires data collection and analysis relating the course material to the firm that teams select for study throughout the course. The module outlines the major research questions, the stages of strategic analysis and the structure of applying relevant strategy tools. For example, one research module pertains to studying the external environment of the local client. In this module, besides the research questions students need to address through working with local clients, students are also provided with a logic procedure of applying major analysis tools to understand external environment (e.g. step 1 involves PESTEL analysis to understand general environment; step 2 involves five-force model to understand the industry environment; and step 3 involves the strategic group mapping to identify the competitive landscape and most direct competitors). As such, research modules serve as handy instructions regarding where to start, and how to proceed in the consulting service project.

Teachers from different disciplines (e.g. marketing, accounting, operations, business communications, management, etc.) would form a board of advisors to serve as facilitators and

content experts, and provide advice in the analysis and address students' frustration with their inability to find adequate information or solutions. Such academic advice supplements with regular lectures on strategy topics to help deepen students' knowledge of strategy and discipline-related skills.

Student teams will need to produce several written reports and oral presentations to the board of advisors throughout the semester. First, teams will need to document their observations and administrative information collected from interview and site visit, such as the organization's structure, human resource functions, method of marketing, delivery of business, management style, financial issues, etc.; then produce an initial analysis of external environment (e.g. comparative information on competitors, industry trend data, benchmarking data, etc.), internal capabilities, and strategic direction and goals, identify any potential capability gaps, resource gaps, and performance gaps between a current level and an ideal level; and finally propose pragmatic actions/strategies to address the issues or fund new initiatives. Board of advisors will give advice regarding the feasibility of the proposed action plan, what other information will be needed for the teams to proceed, etc. Based on the feedback from the advisory board, teams will pick on one recommendation from the proposed action plan in the initial analysis to actually act on it by generating a self-initiated project. The self-initiated project should be directed to address a specific business issue, and could take various forms such as organizing an one-day marketing campaign, designing an online platform for business visibility, seeking out external funding resources, working out a business procedure on quality assessment and control, revising the existing business policies, etc. In the middle of the semester, students will report the self-initiated project aimed to grow/improve the business or address a business issue.

Specifically teams will report:

1. what the self-initiated project is
2. The objective of the project (i.e., what specific issues the project is trying to address)
3. The implementation process
4. The outcome evaluations.

As is often the case in life, we fail to understand how meaningful something is until it is internalized as our own experience and until we can reflect on such experiences. Most of the value and impact students experience is usually realized when they reflect on the course at the project's conclusion (Zuber-Skerritt, Fletcher & Kearney, 2015). As such, to conclude the project, students will prepare for an individual based reflection paper that assesses the impact of this action learning based project on students learning. This personal reflection essay helps students to make sense of their organizational experience and derive meaning from their experience. Students will document their personal observations and insights into their behaviors, interactions, feelings, beliefs, fears and successes. Students make connections between class discussions and actual business consulting practices.

In the end of the semester, each student will be able to generate a performance portfolio consisting of a reflection paper about the learning experience, a written report of the self-initiated project out of the second presentation, and an analysis report out of the first presentation.

The research and service took the form of learning while doing, interviewing and doing trial runs to determine how to best serve the organization. Such course design gives students a tangible application of many of the concepts discussed in the course. By the end of the project,

students will not only have practice in using key strategic management components and processes to increase their understanding of the material, but students will also be able to conduct a complete strategic business consulting service to any company. Service learning also provides an experiential opportunity to help students gain insight into the anticipated and unanticipated outcomes of business activity.

Control over learning is measured by the service learning project itself, the presentations that translate “learning by doing” process into oral communications, the regular course content-related quizzes and exams, and the assessment methods that require students to describe their activities in a reflective way such as reflection papers and in-class discussions and thoughts exchange. The formal evaluation letter and survey will be requested from the served organization to provide instructor with insight as to the effectiveness of the project as a whole and the student’s individual performance.

### **CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Designing a project that directly relates to the course material being taught is likely to enhance learning and allow students to make meaningful and significant contributions in the process. Students themselves get the benefit of making a real, measurable contribution to the community and realizing their personal potential. Such common experience can be brought back into classroom discussions to generate informed conversation and facilitate learning through it. This experiential method also provides opportunities for students to practice test and reflect on learned behaviours in and out of workplace and positively contribute to emotional competency development (Coelho, Sousa & Marchante, 2016). Students completing the experiential management process transform to have greater self-confidence, greater self- and social-awareness and a greater understanding of what it is like to work in an organization.

Some efforts could be pursued to further improve the learning and teaching experience in this integrative pedagogical framework. For example, in the execution phase, student-run companies could be provided with working capital that helps with the implementation of business activities and reimburses student travels to clients. Project rooms and computers could be reserved from the college lab for the student teams to hold weekly meetings and work on written reports.

Material incentives could be considered to reward and motivate students’ efforts. For example, student teams will have two oral presentations during the semester: one is for the initial analysis; another is for the self-initiated service project. Board of advisors could pick winning teams for the analysis awards and self-initiated project award of gift cards respectively to motivate students to keep up with the great work, and reward their service contributions to the local clients.

Furthermore, a deeper understanding of learning outcomes of such integrative pedagogical framework would result from the empirical evidence that compares the traditional lecture format with this service-project based teaching model. Students could participate in some standardized assessment exams that test students on strategy concepts and theories. Such standardized assessment scores could supplement with students self-reflection and course evaluations. For example, a useful management research instrument Critical Incident Interview, a qualitative data collection tool, could be used to assess behavioural changes as related to competencies that contribute to job performance (Simon & Halford, 2015). It is expected that

empirical evidence as a result of comparing different teaching methodologies would provide important and necessary support for the continued and increased use of such integrative approaches to teaching business strategy.

Although the context of this article is teaching business strategy, we believe that similar integrative pedagogy can be used in other courses offering project-based activities. The significance of applying those methods in this and other business courses extends beyond students' immediate academic success and emotional competency development to include a commitment to a deeper purpose of contributing to their longer term well-being and personal development, not to mention more adequately preparing students for the workplace.

## REFERENCES

- Coelho, V.A., Sousa, V. & Marchante, M. (2016). Social and emotional competencies evaluation questionnaire teacher's version validation of a short form. *Psychological Reports, 119*(1), 221-236.
- Bowen, G.A. (2015). Service-learning essentials: questions, answers and lessons learned. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 19*(4), 213-218.
- Marquardt, M.J. & Yeo, R. (2012). *Breakthrough problem solving with action learning: Concepts and cases*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Simon, T.J. & Halford, G.S. (Eds.). (2015). *Developing cognitive competence: New approaches to process modeling*. Psychology Press.
- Zuber-Skerritt, O., Fletcher, M. & Kearney, J. (2015). *Professional learning in higher education and communities: Towards a new vision for action research*. Springer.