

PARTNERING FOR PURPOSE: CROSS-CULTURAL MODEL TO ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION, EXPLORATION, APPRECIATION, REFLECTION, AND LEARNING IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION AND BEYOND

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Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to share with a wide range of organizational professionals three methods we find useful for educating a diverse undergraduate student body. Using metaphors from business, participants in two undergraduate classes were invited to co-create value by positioning their work in the context of their career goals. Following a description of our purposeful design for participation, exploration, appreciation, reflection and learning (PEARL), we arrive at the fertile delta that nurtures learning and grows a crop of confident, competent, culturally sensitive, and ethical participants with a refined understanding of success. We use narrative inquiry of participants' writing to suggest that PEARL may be useful in arenas beyond the undergraduate business classroom as it is beneficial in the development of ethical, managerial, and leadership values.

Introduction

Masaru Ibuka and the company he founded, Sony, have made enormous contributions to human well-being with their innovative products. This well-being and Sony's products are results of Ibuka-san's firm persuasion in a higher purpose: "To establish a place of work where engineers can feel the joy of technological innovation, be aware of their mission to society, and work to their heart's content" (Czikszentmihalyi, 2003, p. 70). Ibuka-san framed his responsibility as creating the conditions for maximizing the human potential of employees through their work and for the intrinsic purpose of promoting their personal growth and dignity; not just to create products for sale.

Like Sony, the best organizations sprout from execution on a well-developed purpose. Masaru Ibuka didn't start with a product, but rather an idea to develop an environment that was conducive to innovation. Execution of that vision led to the development of products that captivate the mind and imaginations of consumers around the world including professors in institutions of higher learning. The purpose of college instructors is to disseminate knowledge to their students, and by extension, to society in general. This chapter chronicles our exploration, development and refinement of the means utilized to achieve that purpose with our student population. What started as development of an interdisciplinary academic assignment led to the analysis of the common strategies and methods that resonate with our students? This examination of our individual and collective experiences has led us to closely examine and refine the purpose of our time in the classroom in ways that are distinguishable from our own undergraduate educational experiences.

Within Western Civilization the "ivory tower" of academia has served as the gatekeeper and primary distributor of academic scholarship (Bok, 1982). Academic institutions historically reference the size of their library collections as a point of distinction, thereby highlighting the value proposition to scholars (Bok, 1982). As a consequence, the best and brightest scholars were typically concentrated at the universities with the greatest available resources (Bok, 1982). The result was the centralization of academic scholarship, which could be disseminated to the rest of society (Bok, 1982).

The authors attended esteemed, top-tier research institutions that emphasized a top-down educational approach. This is not to say our undergraduate education sojourn was devoid of discussion; rather, graduate student assistants generally facilitated these exchanges. Access to

meaningful discussions with the instructor did not occur until graduate school, and when they did, they focused the new developments of the discipline, and rarely forayed into the presumed knowledge proffered in undergraduate courses.

As instructors, we face challenges that were not present in our respective undergraduate tenures. The first of which is technological. We teach college in an age where “google,” “wiki,” “Facebook,” “twitter,” and “What’s App” have become common parlance and constant companions. Through the Internet, information is accessible instantly through a point and click, or a few taps on the screen of a smartphone. In short, knowledge is more accessible today than ever before. Students today need not travel to the library collections of the top institutions to find cutting-edge scholarship, as it is routinely available on the Internet. Today, students can take classes and obtain college degrees without ever leaving their homes. This represents a shift in the role of undergraduate institutions serving as the sole repositories and curators of knowledge and a shift in faculty emphasis to ‘how we teach is what we teach’ (Christensen, 1991; Foster, 1995). Reflectively, we pose the question: what is the role of the formal educator and how is their background, experience, and pedagogical approach likely to make a difference above and beyond the information available freely in the public domain?

The authors both teach at a historically teaching university that is clearly distinguishable from their undergraduate experiences. We attended college full-time, and proceeded directly from high school for this pursuit. Our classes were largely homogeneous in this regard – while there were exceptions; the bulk of the student population had the opportunity to focus primarily, and many times exclusively, on their educational attainment. In contrast, we currently teach at the largest public university system in the United States – where the student population, preparedness and experience varies significantly. Within the California State University system, our campus is the most racially and ethnically diverse, with a 68.5% traditionally underserved student population as of fall 2013 (California State University, Office of the Chancellor, 2014). This student population generally lacks the history of familial educational attainment, as many are the first in their family to attend a university (California State University, Office of the Chancellor, 2013). Similarly, these students are products of often sub-standard high school preparation, as only 20.5% of regularly admitted first-time freshmen for fall 2013 matriculated to our campus proficient in English and math (California State University, Office of the Chancellor, 2014). The community of learners that we support is generally pursuing their degree part-time or at least in addition to full-time work demands, as the cost of higher education has continued to soar, with many students having extensive work careers prior to starting their educational journey (California State University, Office of the Chancellor, 2014). These students have a wealth of accumulated knowledge from the workforce that is often discounted within the formal academic setting. Cumulatively, these students generally lack the supports necessary to focus exclusively on their education, and the academic world represents a significant departure from their existing life experiences. In short, this student population often lacks a firm understanding of the relatedness of their formal academic journey to their existing world and future goals.

Reflecting on the factors outlined above, the authors find that the traditional objective of knowledge dissemination is subservient to the challenges of creating appropriate expectations for college work and beyond, understanding and serving the multiple layers of diversity, and enrolling participants to contribute to their course, college and professional work. Our diverse, multi-faceted student body presents the following challenges:

- a. Creating relevance of the materials to their own lives, academic pursuits and post-college goals;
- b. Providing opportunities for participants to take ownership of their own work, thereby increasing the value of their academic experiences;
- c. Creating dynamic assignments that stretch across disciplinary boundaries and endeavor to take students beyond descriptive and rote learning within a discipline to higher order learning that emulates real-world problem solving (Lombardi, 2007; Raelin, 1997).

Through development of an interdisciplinary collaborative case assignment (outlined below), the authors discovered that we had separately identified these educational challenges among our student population. These challenges necessitated a divergence from the “top-down” pedagogical approach that typified our undergraduate experience. Both of us utilize strategies to collaborate with our students in creating knowledge in the classroom. As we co-create value in our work, we have found greater participant engagement with materials as they connect their academic pursuits to their own contexts and existing experiences and build their own sense of its relevance for their lives and careers. Our student-instructor collaborative model for undergraduate education has yielded dividends with our student population by encouraging participation, exploration, appreciation, reflection and higher-level learning. We believe this approach sets the foundation for long-term success, well beyond mastery of the underlying course material. Consequently we have refined our purpose as college instructors to go beyond merely disseminating knowledge to providing the tools and opportunities for applying course materials to solve real-world problems (Lombardi, 2007). Our goal is to create the conditions for “flow” in our class environments, where participants lose themselves in work that challenges them, and develop personally as a result (for more, see Csikszentmihalyi, 2003, 2008; Vogt 2005). Our thought is that designing work which is meaningful and involves participants in the framing and design of their work is transformative for the learning process, growth and well-being of our participants.

References Available upon Request