Creating an Undergraduate Business Degree that Links Critical Management Thinking and Action Learning: A New Zealand Case Study

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Abstract

Imperatives for a new business degree include preparing students to face the challenges of an uncertain future, and to build a successful career in an increasingly complex environment such as the Manukau City region. This area is one of the fastest growing and the most culturally diverse in New Zealand, and will require in excess of 10,000 new degree graduates over the next eight years, predominantly in business. The framework for developing this programme evolves into four key areas: knowledge, competencies, values and context. Working in an integrated way these areas aim to develop intellectual, professional and ethical skills, and aptitudes of students. To achieve this framework, a mixed methodology of critical thinking and action learning is utilised.

Key words: critical management education, action learning, interdisciplinary business courses, case-study, New Zealand
Introduction

The focus of undergraduate business education is disarmingly simple – to turn out graduates with the skills to operate effectively in the business environment of the 21st century. Educationally, the task requires a framework that identifies the concept and methodology of the programme, and meets the expectations of stakeholders (the social communities that provide the student base, the business community, and the educational policies of the State). This combination of interests led to the choice of a critical thinking model combined with action learning as the most effective mechanism for delivering a new degree. The opportunities provided by this underpinning methodology – and the way in which this can be integrated into a degree programme – will be discussed in this case-study.

Impact of government policy

First, we will provide an overview of considerations that impacted on this choice. The influence of government policy requires brief mention, given its role in tertiary education in New Zealand. The 1990s saw a governmental policy initiative that introduced human capital theory, resulting in a huge increase of students into the sector. Its central assertion was that economic growth and social equality would be attained through increased participation. New Zealand followed the rhetoric of other Third Way governments such as the United Kingdom and Canada in introducing policies to promote access and success.

This policy has been enshrined in the ‘Tertiary Education Strategy 2002/07’ that supports six national goals: economic transformation; social development; Maori development; environmental sustainability; infrastructural development; innovation. The Strategy requires tertiary education to contribute to New Zealand’s national goals and to be closely connected to enterprise and local communities (Ministry of Education, 2002). These initiatives include greater alignment with national goals, stronger linkages with business and other external stakeholders, increased
responsiveness to the needs of, and wider access for learners, and more future-focused strategies. These ‘knowledge society’ aims impact directly on educational initiatives such as a new business degree. Each tertiary provider is required to develop a Charter, Profile and Strategic Plan on which funding is to be determined. These documents need to be consistent with the Government’s statement of tertiary education priorities and in essence impose an obligation of politically-determined relevance on the development of new tertiary programmes.

**Impact of local demographics**

The other significant external driver is the local demography. Manukau Institute of Technology and its Business School is located within one of the fastest growing industry regions in New Zealand, with estimates in excess of 40,000 new employment opportunities in Manukau City over the eight years from 2004 to 2011 (Manukau City Council, 2004). The major growth sector will be in Business Services, especially project management, marketing, information technology, research, and design. Opportunities for degree qualified people will be 31% of this total, or 12,220 vacancies.

These political and demographic domains create a number of challenges. In terms of governmental policy, the new degree needs to mirror a complex array of economic and social interests. In regard to demographics, the degree needs to serve a pluralistic community that is regarded as the ‘New Face of New Zealand’ – with its multi-cultural migrant base and the highest concentration of Pacific Island and Maori tertiary-aged students in the country. In business and industry terms, the region has a large concentration of start-up companies, established small to medium enterprises (SMEs), manufacturing plants, and national distribution centres.
Shifting perspectives in management education

A traditional degree structure and methodology would not be capable of meeting the expectations of these stakeholders. The problems of contemporary business and management education are well recognised (Grey, 2004; Ackoff, 2002; Warren & Tweedle, 2002), and the scientific basis of management studies and its failure to ascribe relevance, meaning or values to knowledge is a limitation that can no longer be ignored. Rather, the tensions inherent in management practice (Dehler, 1998) require acknowledgement and analysis in business education. In addition, the conflict-ridden and contradictory contexts of modern business require a model of learning that prepares graduates for the uncertainties and complexities of this type of environment. A critical approach that emphasises the value of questioning and challenging existing structures and practices, and identifies the social and cultural contexts of working and managing is better able to achieve these goals (Reynolds & Vince, 2004).

Similarly, action learning and its focus on learning that is generated and maintained in the social fabric of the workplace, on the application of learning from one’s own processes to a wider context, and on learning that is grounded on organisational action and problems has reflective benefits that are not available with didactic learning (Robinson, 2005; Pedler & Burgoyne, 2005; Reynolds & Vince, 2004).

Action learning emphasises reflection, connecting theory with working practice, and the nexus between knowledge, learning and experience. These competencies and skills are essential for business graduates, and, like the critical learning model, provide the foundation for working in a world of uncertainty, equivocality and conflicting values (Thorne & Corley, 2005; Gray, 2001). The integration of effective action learning into a degree curriculum is not without its difficulties, and there are a number of models that have embraced the challenge (Hoban, 2004; MacFarlane, 2001; Raffo, Lovatt & Banks 2000; Bourner, Cooper & France 2000).
Further insights into the changing nature business and education are to be found in the recent Australian Universities Business Education Study (Department of Education, Science and Training, Commonwealth of Australia, 2003). This identified the convergence of knowledge and flatter management structures in business, the need for a holistic understanding of business operations by graduates, greater integration of disciplines in business programmes, and the need to embed generic and lifelong learning skills, teamwork skills and a range of delivery methods into business programmes. Work-integrated learning experiences were regarded as important but difficult to manage effectively.

**Conceptual framework for the new degree**

The choice of linking critical perspectives and action learning as the underpinning methodology has informed the development of the conceptual framework for the Bachelor of Business degree. Two primary documents have been developed; the Statement of Values that identifies the environment in which learning takes place, and the Graduate Profile that articulates the required skills of a graduate.

A relevant excerpt from the Statement of Values is:

> Our aim is to offer the best business education by developing a student’s intellectual, professional and ethical skills and aptitudes. The focus will be on building a successful career in a future of uncertainty and change. To this end we will provide a challenging learning environment that motivates students to:

- actively participate
- be analytical
- be inquisitive
- be reflective
- pursue ongoing learning

Relevant excerpts taken from the Graduate Profile are:

> A graduate of the Bachelor of Business will have the ability to succeed in business, having developed both general business skills and those unique to specific fields of business. They will reflect not only economic but political, legal, cultural, technological, social and natural factors that influence business practice nationally and globally.
Graduates will have the following generic skills and qualities.

- **General business skills**
  The ability to:
  - Access, analyse, evaluate and use new and existing information to support effective decision-making;
  - Think logically, critically and creatively
  - Work as a constructive team member, and to work autonomously
  - Take a leadership role when necessary
  - Communicate effectively and persuasively in written and oral forms in a variety of formal and informal settings; and
  - Effectively utilise information and communication technologies.

- **Personal attributes and abilities**
  - Demonstrate self-confidence, self-responsibility, accountability and initiative;
  - Recognise and respond to change within the workplace, and the wider business and community contexts;
  - Demonstrate sensitivity, empathy, understanding and appreciation of diverse peoples and cultures;
  - Apply their ethical and values framework to both business and personal situations;
  - Undertake self-directed professional development and lifelong learning.

**A New Design**

Manukau Business School has offered a Bachelor of Business since 1992, with accounting and marketing being the key majors and double majors. The School has successfully gained Institute of Chartered Accountants of New Zealand accreditation since that time, enabling students to gain their academic component to entry as a Chartered Accountant (CA). The degree has been popular with adult learners studying on a part-time basis, and has a focus of applied vocational skills built on a theoretical framework. At the beginning of 2004 Manukau Business School commenced a full review of the programme. The inevitable question was ‘what distinguishes our business degree from other business degrees?’

Effective design is crucial to any successful review. For a business degree, key issues include the student learning experience, effective delivery processes, and an experiential element that places learning in a context of business and organisations. While applied learning had been a strong element of the programme since inception, it became evident that critical thinking and
perspectives were an integral part of where our programme should focus. In fact, combining and where possible integrating the two was identified as crucial. The development process led to a template which embodies four key frames: knowledge, context, values, and competencies/skills. These reflect the critical perspective and action learning methodologies.

The *knowledge* frame encompasses the nature of knowledge, a critical analysis, the distinction between information and knowledge, and the values and assumptions inherent in knowledge. *Context* is the integration of knowledge into business practice, and signals the need for an interdisciplinary approach that reflects business decision-making. Experiential learning is a key element. Both Katsioloudes & Tischio (2001) and Grey (2004) promote the importance of context in a critical business education perspective. The *values* frame identifies the personal aptitudes and perspectives that inform thought and action, and the realisation of these values as a driver for decision-making and behaviour, “the reasons for and consequences of all forms of managerial action” (Grey, 2004: 182). *Competencies* include the need for communication skills, the ability to work in a team – to assert/defend/negotiate a position - and the need for professionalism in behaviours.

**Translating the concept**

Three new integrated business courses at level 5 (Stage I), level 6 (Stage II) and level 7 (Stage III) were developed and will be compulsory for all students enrolled in the programme. These interdisciplinary courses embed the ‘critical framework’ and provide students with an opportunity to assess the underlying ideas, theories, and values that underpin knowledge.

These compulsory integrated courses cover:

- An *inter-disciplinary focus* on business issues, problems and solutions. This will be developed through case study scenarios that embody inter-disciplinary problems. These will
increase in complexity at the higher levels. Theoretical frameworks from each discipline -
together with business tools – will be used to critically analyse the scenarios.
This will involve virtual and real-world organisations – profit/not for profit/
governmental/start up/SMEs and larger organisations. Introduced in level 5, these will be
analysed in detail at levels 6 and 7.

- **A critical and creative perspective** focus that gives students the opportunity to assess the
underlying ideas, theories and values that underpin knowledge. These are aimed at
developing an individual world view. The aim is to build students’ abilities to articulate their
perspectives, identify other perspectives, and negotiate an outcome.
Critical perspectives will be developed through economic, political, societal, cultural, gender
and ethnic perspectives. Creative perspectives will explore innovation and entrepreneurship
and will focus on ideas, generating possibilities. There will be an increasing emphasis on
strategic perspectives at level 7.

- **A business environment** focus examines business practice and trends in globalisation,
operational issues, governance and ethics, management of information, business systems,
networks, and decision-making mechanisms. Students will be exposed to dilemmas and
opportunities in organisations. A business unit analysis will be applied at level 6 and a senior
management/ board of directors’ focus will be adopted at level 7. This will culminate in an
organisational critique focus involving presentations by senior management from different
types of organisations and seminar-style discussions and critiques. This will explore
organisational perspectives, decisions and approaches, with the aim of developing corporate
strategy skills.

- **A professional development** focus that develops individual and inter-personal skills and
behaviours, career progression and role transition, professional behaviours, conflict
management, cross-cultural communication, presentation and negotiation skills.
The three integrated business courses will be delivered by a team of academics, drawn from the various disciplines in the Business School. There will be a team-teaching approach, with different views presented at the same time – e.g., shareholder vs. stakeholder perspectives, contrasting economic models, individualism vs. collectivism. Students will be required to question and debate views and issues. The courses are built on an organisational framework (action learning) in which to place this critical knowledge and will use a range of delivery models including a question-based curricula.

In addition, both the critical and action learning perspectives will extend to the discipline-based courses. The discipline development teams have worked to align content and process to the graduate profile, the statement of values, and the three integrated courses.

Thirdly, it will be compulsory for all students in their first year to study a course in writing and critical thinking. This course, together with the integrated course in the first year, will set the scene for students for the remainder of their degree study.

**Implementation issues**

The impact of a critical management perspective on traditional curricula and delivery models that emphasises the acquisition of techniques will be a key issue. Disciplines such as accounting and marketing tend to favour an approach that is neutral as to context and application. This technicist approach becomes problematic when organisational problems that are fundamentally social and political are interpreted as amenable to technical solutions (Grey & Mitev, 1995). The solution may be found in the methodology of the integrated courses and its role in deconstructing the knowledge frames of disciplines.

The framework for the integrated courses will provide graduates with core business competencies in decision-making, negotiation, risk assessment, and the exploration of values that underpin their
own and business decision-making. It is expected that the impact of this methodology will also filter into the entire programme. This focus will be built into the discipline-specific courses and will be acknowledged and linked back to the integrated courses. Achieving coherence in this mix of learning cannot be taken for granted, however, and requires a culture shift by academics and students alike. The task is made easier, given that innovation in delivery of courses has been a feature of the School. In addition, the extensive dialogue with staff in the conceptualisation of the new degree over an 18 month period indicates that academics will embrace the change. The impact on students is less certain. Nevertheless, standard features of student learning in the Business School are small-class interaction, group work, seminars and presentations, work-based projects, and applied research. For example, a marketing project consultancy course is currently offered to final year students who undertake marketing planning activities for 5-6 small businesses each semester. Additionally, workplace projects in management, accounting and law are also built into level 6 and 7 courses.

**Conclusion**

The complexity and pluralism of modern society and work organisations requires an innovative model for delivering business education. Traditional learning and teaching is not able to fully serve the broad communities of interest. The growing acknowledgement of the effectiveness of critical management studies and the contextualisation provided by action-based learning is well suited to meet the expectations of tomorrow’s graduates.
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