

Bringing liberal arts (and other subjects) into business classes: Why and how I do it (3 pages)

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1. A broad education benefits everyone

A good friend, a minister, asked me what I want in life. I said I want a sense of meaning and contentment from having a purpose, and that I want to do a share of something good.

My answer isn't unusual. Most of us probably want similar things, a simplified version of Maslow's hierarchy of needs—personal safety and security, opportunities for happiness and joy, and the sense that our work is interesting and worthwhile, that it matters.

In economic terms, faculty use personal endogenous factors to shape an exogenous world. In terms of Newtonian physics, faculty apply personal energy to influence the velocity and direction of students' lives, knowing this will in turn affect people whom we will never meet. Since the long-run results of this work are mostly invisible, we want to believe within ourselves that we pursue a meaningful purpose.

Of course, people soon forget course material, so faculty reinforce in teaching what we believe matters most. For me, this includes reinforcing two core themes—**curiosity and connections**—by drawing on diverse fields like literature, history, geography, arts, languages, and sciences.

I focus on the long run because learning accrues and compounds. I especially want students to increase their curiosity about new sources of knowledge and ideas, and to make better management decisions by thinking about connections between topics. It is heartening when I learn that a former student remembers and cares about something I emphasized.

It isn't only about sound business decisions, though. It's about supporting students to have broad and unique interests. It's about encouraging their belief that exploring the complex and often mysterious world will make their lives fuller and more meaningful. And, it's my effort to help reinforce students' conviction that they can and will influence the world in some way.

Most of the people that business students will encounter in life *won't* be business students.

With that in mind, all students are well-served by an integrative education which focuses on a particular field and, at the same time, fosters a fuller world view which recognizes, values, and connects diverse perspectives, fields, and bodies of knowledge.

## 2. Connecting to personal interests

Faculty have diverse personal interests. Here are a couple of mine, and some ways I apply them.

### *a. History*

When I was young, I learned that my ancestor stole a Russian government ship to escape a Siberian prison in 1771. That was one of many things that hooked me on history. For many years I have been especially interested in polar exploration, and Siberia/the Gulag/Soviet leadership.

Historian Stephen Ambrose tells us we don't hate history, we hate the way it was taught to us in high school. My message is that history isn't just interesting—good decisions require it.

Can we understand ourselves and our families if we don't think about our experiences and learn something about our ancestors? Can we understand an organization—a town, company, industry, country, world—without knowing something about the past? Can we understand any subject—business, scientific, artistic, political, spiritual—without some history?

In teaching, I use examples in history as one of the ways to bring managerial topics alive. In my research, history is a recurring theme, whether studying entrepreneurship education, creativity, strategic choices for new technology, or organizational economics.

### *b. Arts & music*

People easily understand the basic idea that artists and performers are linked to diverse businesses and industries that make it possible for them to do their work. I find opportunities to go farther, to show how studying arts and music can influence and improve management and business, and to show the deep influence of arts and music in business and in our lives.

Some examples:

- Classes sitting in on a rehearsal for an orchestra with no conductor, to study self-organizing systems and how leadership works without formal positions.
- Classes going to the opera to think about just-in-time production systems and preconceptions.
- Using Steinway pianos as a teaching case to connect topics like international competition, industrial economics, technological change, marketing, and social aspirations.
- Watching Cirque du Soleil so we can discuss multicultural workforces, international logistics, creativity, and technological integration.
- Inviting a jazz musician to explain how improvisation works in individuals and groups, so we can discuss responsiveness, organizational learning, and innovation.
- Studying how we look at art in order, to study how we look at environments and decisions.
- Going to public monuments to discuss leadership and decision-making, and to museums to discuss the relationship between corporations and the arts.
- Strengthening student self-confidence and showing new views of communication by asking them to write a case analysis, and then create a non-written, non-spoken metaphor (a piece of art) to communicate the essence of their business recommendation.

### 3. Taking myself across campus

Work across campus has included presenting to doctoral students in engineering, creating business courses for non-business majors, guest-speaking on creativity and entrepreneurship to music and art students, serving on non-business search committees for new faculty, acting as judge in art and music department student competitions, and so on.

### 4. Bringing other fields into class

An assignment may be simple, but not necessarily easy. Tasks, discussions, and exams often include integrating or connecting material from fields and sources that may seem unusual.

#### a. *Strategic management*

The first day begins with the tale of explorer Ernest Shackleton, a personal hero since my early teens. His story reinforces decision models in a **strategy course**, basic concepts in an introductory management **principles course**, and leadership, selection, and motivation in a **human resources course**. Strategy students apply books which have been read by centuries of decision-makers: Musashi's A Book of Five Rings, Machiavelli's The Prince, and Sun Tzu's The Art of War. Other readings like "Lend-Lease" (a short story from Shalamov's Kolyma Tales) and an excerpt from Sinclair's The Jungle are strong material to discuss functional strategy, models of corporate governance, and ethics. They reinforce the importance and relevance of literature and history.

#### b. *Creativity*

Classes read dance choreographer Twyla Tharpe's book on structured innovation (The Creative Habit), articles from National Geographic and Smithsonian magazines, a book on the neuroscience and psychology of disaster survival (Deep Survival), and a book on socio-economic/structural components of innovation (The Creative Class).

#### c. *International business*

The first day begins with the history and global impact of 20th century American music. During the course, each student must learn the map of the world. This supports class topics like supply chain management, internationalization strategy, business-government relations, industry analysis, law, and cultural issues. Looking at language differences helps explore cultural differences, and we study and compare industry examples as diverse as beer, diamonds, pianos, and shipping.

#### d. *Management principles*

The first day explores Cirque du Soleil, integrating management with theater, sports, and information technology. Later, the facts of a famous decision in history—the secession of states which sparked the American Civil War—are used to study twenty specific decision-making concepts.

#### e. *Management in the movies*

Films explore management issues like international business and entrepreneurship, decision-making and group dynamics, negotiation and leadership, mission and motivation, bureaucracy and adaptation to change.

#### f. *Entrepreneurship*

The first day begins with an introduction to Peter the Great, a remarkably entrepreneurial person. Entrepreneurship often attracts non-business students, so class draws on subject material from across campus: engineering to art, information technology to music.