

Sustainability as a Strategic Issue:

Stretching Perspectives to Engage Learners

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Abstract

This paper describes efforts to enhance student understanding of sustainability as a key strategic issue by challenging latent perspectives and orthodox assumptions regarding the strategic management of sustainable enterprise. The paper elaborates the introduction of a new curriculum for a Strategic Issues senior undergraduate course and suggests some of the challenges and rewards of endeavouring to move students beyond the narrow concept of environmental sustainability to the broader concept of sustainability as a cornerstone of 21st century management praxis.

Introduction

Over the past several decades, scientific research has made us keenly aware of the fragility of our global environment. Issues of climate change, energy crises, water and food shortages and continued population growth in tandem with global shifts in economic activity have exacerbated social, economic and political tensions. The most recent global financial crisis has only served to underscore the significance of sustainability as a key strategic issue increasingly factored into assessments of competitive advantage and organizational survival. A recent study of business students at one major public university would suggest that business students consider a business' social and environmental performance as well as economic dimensions in their choice of an employer.¹ While students may be impressively aware of, and often engaged in, social movements in support of environmental issues, Grant² suggests that the ability to critically engage with and analyze such situations from a business perspective may be limited by "internal lenses of theories and rules-of thumb of which they may have little conscious awareness"(p.276). Such limitations may be facilitated by instrumental attitudes of what Sennett³ refers to as "flexible capitalism" that focus too narrowly on rampant competition, individualism, short-termism and market fundamentalism.⁴

Benn and Martin⁵ suggest that education for sustainability is too prescriptive and dogmatic while Audebrand⁶ rejects the notion of a struggle for sustainability and advocates the adoption of new root metaphors to guide sustainability in strategic management education. While suggesting that sustainability is a contested, yet practical and cosmopolitan idea, Kelly⁷ advocates its facility as an organizing principle for higher education as it "continually presents questions of value and practice by asking what is best and why, for the long run" (p.1). Steketee⁸ suggests that assisting students to disengage from the destructive patterns and practices of the past requires defying the "consume-at-all-costs" mindset of the developed world and "a thoughtful and creative re-configuration of the offerings of management education" (p. 392). Cappon⁹ asserts that education is a prerequisite for a sustainable society. As teachers of strategy and the next

generation of business managers, how do we raise the level of student consciousness to that of a critical engagement with key strategic issues such as sustainability? How do we enable students to recognize the interrelationships among the many aspects of sustainability, integrity and responsibility in business? How do we assist them to see the business opportunities in exploring the intersection between these issues?

A Conceptual Framework for Sustainability

Over the past three years, the author has been developing a new syllabus for a senior level undergraduate course in Strategic Issues. The course functions somewhat as a capstone policy course for Commerce students at Mount Allison University, a small liberal arts undergraduate institution which consistently garners top marks in various national (Canadian) surveys of higher education.ⁱ The stated objectives of the course are “to explore in depth pertinent issues facing organizations in the deployment of strategic management, to examine some key issues and explore how these issues affect an organization’s ability to compete and survive”.ⁱⁱ

The author’s primary pedagogical intent has been to stretch student perspectives beyond the generalized conception of sustainability as simply an environmental issue to embracing the inter-relationship of three key concepts: sustainability (social, economic and environmental), integrity (leadership, ethics and corporate social responsibility) and opportunity (competitive advantage, strategic HRM, learning and innovation). The objective was to engage students in recognizing that long term sustainability at the organizational, community and global level requires active recognition of the complex relationships among these core concepts (see Figure 1) and to recognize that profit is only a short- term goal and without conscious balancing of opportunity with integrity, it is an increasingly hollow victory in a world where sustainability must extend to achievement of human rights and social equity for the world’s population as well as the environmental health of our planet.^{10, 11}

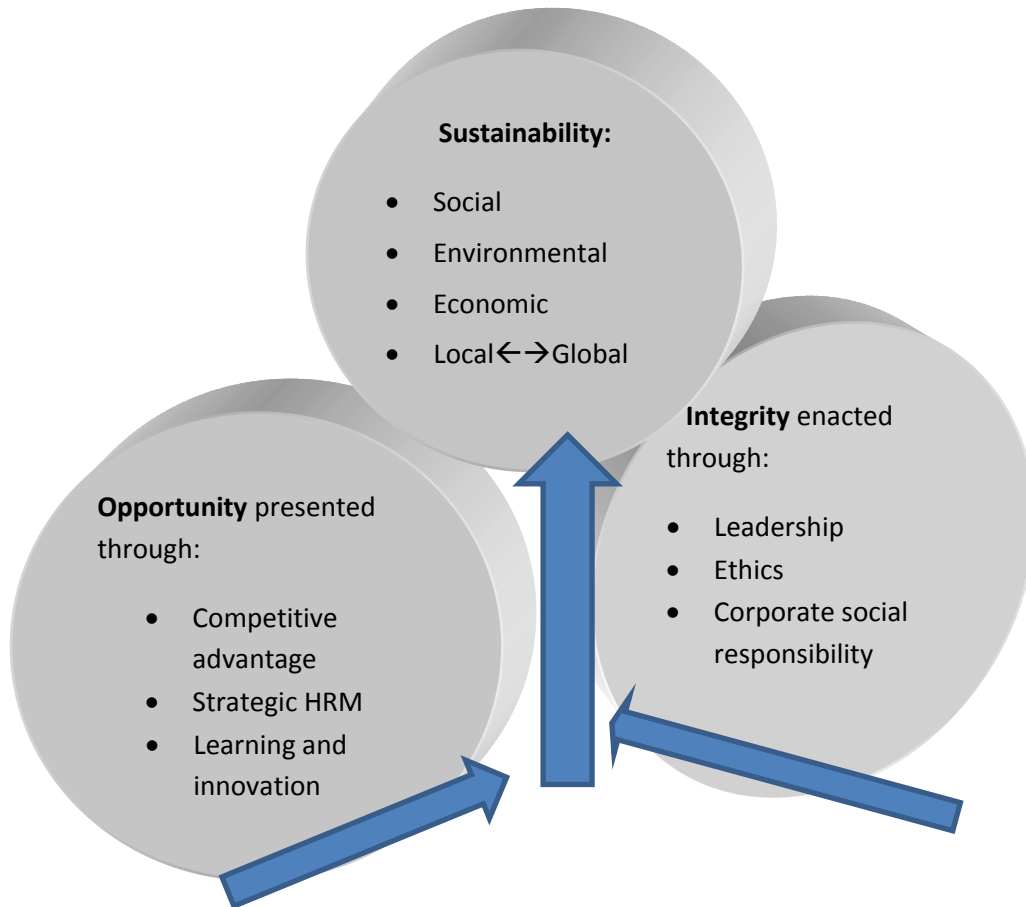
The Undergraduate Course

The search for a text that would support a conceptual framework anchored in the three key concepts of sustainability, integrity and opportunity revealed that, while integrity and opportunity were generally well addressed in several management textbooks, there appeared to be no text that also addressed sustainability to the extent that the author wished to engage her students. In the end, Hart¹² was selected as the core text supplemented with selected readings from traditional business and academic journals. Hart¹² offers an alternative perspective to the traditional economic paradigm that underpins much of the theory and practice in strategic management courses and suggests that future economic sustainability rests in recognizing and leveraging opportunities at the base, rather than the apex, of the economic pyramid. His premise is that “over the next decade or so, sustainable development will constitute one of the biggest opportunities in the history of commerce. And innovation will be the name of the game”¹² (p.32). By juxtaposing Hart’s perspective with mainstream strategy theories, the intention was to facilitate some cognitive dissonance¹³, open students up to new perspectives and inspire a deeper understanding of some key strategic issues as they completed their four years of business studies.

Class size has averaged 35-40 each year and meets once per week for an 80 minute lecture style presentation and then later in the week in three smaller groups for 80 minute seminars. Various presentation approaches are used for the large class sessions including lectures,

guest presenters and video presentations. The seminar sessions that follow enable students to

Figure 1: A conceptual framework for sustainability as a strategic issue



explore the weekly topic in greater depth and in a more interactive style through discussion of weekly assigned readings from Hart¹² as well as required supplemental readings. In terms of assignments and assessment, the course is weighted toward individual work although small group assignments are a significant part of the weekly seminars. In the first year that the new course was offered, students were required to submit a 4000 word literature review (worth 30% of course mark) on a topic related to one of the three course themes (sustainability, integrity, opportunity) highlighting key scholars, theories, issues and debates in relation to the chosen topic and demonstrating an extensive engagement with the literature (minimum of 10 scholarly papers) and understanding of the dynamics of strategic management in relation to that topic. Each student also prepared a five minute 'Finding Theory in Practice' presentation (worth 5%) which required them to source and discuss a recent newspaper article, webcast or television coverage related to course themes. Students were expected to present once during the semester, offering a brief overview of the article or coverage, justifying its significance in relation to a key strategic issue, and demonstrating critical thinking in discussing concepts/theory relevant to the issue. A final take home exam (worth 40%) consisting of essay style questions regarding the key strategic issues covered during the course and drawing upon assigned readings, seminar materials, lectures and discussions completed the individual assignments.

Students were also required to work in teams of 3-6 students to research and prepare a 30 minute presentation on a key strategic issue related to one of the course topics (worth 15% of course mark). The presentation could be presented as a case analysis, debate, dialogue, dramatic or artistic presentation. In addition to the presentation, each team prepared a seminar discussion note (2-5 pages) summarizing the topic and its strategic significance, referencing a suggested key reading and posing two key questions to be used as the basis for a class discussion in a seminar following the presentation. The final 10% of the course mark was assessed on both attendance and the quality of a student's regular, individual contributions to classes and seminar discussions.

In subsequent years, based on student feedback, the assignment and assessment has been revised to incorporate more experiential learning through live case analysis, 'Book Club' discussions, 'Movie Nights' and student video assignments. Written assignments have been restructured to facilitate a more iterative knowledge synthesis approach by encouraging students to build connections between the course themes of sustainability, integrity and opportunity.

The Masters Level Course

Shortly after completing the initial undergraduate course offering, the author had the opportunity to use the same conceptual framework as the basis for an MBA course, which ran in a concentrated format over a period of one month. The class met for three hours two evenings per week in addition to one weekend session (Friday evening and full day Saturday). The course objectives were similar to those of the undergraduate course although with an increased emphasis on the application of theory to practice. The course was challenging both in terms of content and pace. Essentially, the one month course entailed covering the same content as the twelve week undergraduate course while doing so in a fast paced, application intensive format. The student profile, however, was quite different from the undergraduate course. Whereas the undergraduates were full-time students, the MBA students were combining part-time studies with full-time employment in a wide range of organizations, both public and private. Many brought several years of work experience to the classroom; some holding key management positions in their organizations. Perspectives were often supported – or challenged - based on first-hand experiences which, when shared, add a richness to discussions that engaged student attention and understanding of what might otherwise have remained rather abstract concepts.

To enhance the application of theory to practice, I searched for case studies that would align with my conceptual framework. I first contacted Stuart Hart, who is presently the SC Johnson Professor of Global Sustainable Enterprise at Cornell University, to ascertain whether he had developed case studies to support his Sustainable Value Portfolio framework¹² (p.77) and was advised of some work with a colleague on a 'live case' methodology that guides organizations through a strategic assessment and planning process in an effort to maximize their sustainable value.ⁱⁱⁱ While this approach was not feasible for the month-long MBA course that I was designing, I was intrigued by the Sustainability Leadership Assessment posted on the Realia Group website. I felt that this online assessment, based on Hart's¹² sustainability portfolio, might help students to recognize their established preferences for several practices leading to sustainability. I was fortunate in collaborating with Realia consultant Gary Svoboda to enable the 34 students in the MBA course complete the online assessment prior to course commencement. Submission of the assessment results was worth 5% of the overall course mark. I used the results of their assessments to gauge their sustainability perspective at the outset of our work together. I would later ask the students during the last class to revisit their assessments and

reflect on what, if any, changes they perceived in their perspective.

Assignments and assessments were designed to accommodate the condensed timeframe for the course. In addition to three Topic Summaries (worth 45% of the overall course mark) based on the required course readings around selected themes pertaining to the key strategic issues of sustainability, integrity and opportunity, each student was also required to prepare a 5 minute 'Theory in Practice' presentation similar to the same assignment for the undergraduate course. The presentations, worth 5% of the overall course mark, were intended to spark awareness of the prevalence of these key strategic issues of sustainability, integrity and opportunity in everyday business policy and decision making. The remaining 45% of the overall course mark was focused on Business Case Analyses whereby students worked in teams of 4-5 to complete two cases analyses selected by the instructor. The analyses were completed in timed formats during course hours and the results presented during the final two classes. Teams were assessed on the clarity and comprehensive coverage of the case, evidence of critical analysis, quality of decisions and recommendations, impact of the presentation, and quality of a case discussion note to be submitted in conjunction with the class presentation.

The Student Perspective

Student evaluation of both the undergraduate courses and the Masters level course are achieved through voluntary participation in a standardized university-administered course-based survey. While it would be spurious to attempt to draw any substantive conclusions about the pedagogical success or failure of the course based on the results of such anonymous, point-in-time feedback it is at least worth noting what students valued and what they felt needed to be revisited in the structure and content of the course. More to the point are comments that suggest that perhaps their perspectives of strategy and sustainability have been stretched (see Appendix 1 and 2).

Undergraduate student evaluations of the course questioned the emphasis placed on sustainability, appearing not to accept the relevance of sustainability in the broader context as a strategic business issue. By contrast, while some of the Masters level students clearly struggled with the heavy reading load and writing assignments, and student responses suggesting that many held fairly traditional perspectives at the outset of the course with little or no interest in the broader concept of sustainability, post-course comments suggested that at least some of the class had gained a better understanding of the concept of sustainability in relation to business embracing a broader perspective in line with Starkey and Tempest's⁴ concept of sustainable strategic management. References in particular to the role of social responsibility, the impact of business on social issues and the value of different perspectives were encouraging as were indicators of actions taken as a result of new learning.

Given the challenging pace of the Masters level course, I was prepared for complaints and dissent at the workload required but I was pleasantly surprised at the positive and proactive attitudes of the class. Many of the students were familiar with one another, having previously taken several courses together and were now close to the end of their Masters studies. A positive group ethos had developed and students appeared to approach this course with a 'boot camp' attitude! While I sensed that some clearly struggled with the heavy reading load and writing assignments, class engagement remained high and assignments were completed and submitted on time. The final cases analysis presentations indicated that many of the students were clearly engaged with this alternative perspective on strategy.

Reflections on Teaching Practice and Questions to Ponder

There are several variables that would need to be considered in any effort to compare learning outcomes of the undergraduate and MBA level students. There were, of course, obvious differences in the student demographics (age, full-time vs. part-time) and course format (one of 5 courses taken in a 12 week semester vs. one course in a one month intensive timeframe) but I sensed as well that context and life experience factored into the ‘world views’ underpinning individual perspectives, class discussions and small group assignments. Undergraduates have limited work experience on which to draw and often appear to rely heavily on media perspectives to formulate views on topical business issues. However, the presence of a small number of students from China, Africa, Southeast Asia and the Middle East in the undergraduate class offered a level of cultural diversity and world experience that contributed richly to discussions around globalization, environmental impacts of climate change and sustainable and non-sustainable business practices and opportunities. This cultural diversity was largely missing from the MBA class. By contrast, MBA students bring a diverse range of career and work experiences and opinions which factor into a class discussion and certainly into problem solving groups. Perspectives are often supported – or challenged - based on first-hand experiences which, when shared, add a richness to discussions that engages student attention and understanding of what might otherwise be rather abstract concepts.

In terms of the undergraduates, I was surprised to have comments from students referring to Hart¹² as a ‘novel’. Neubaum et al.¹ suggest that business texts are written based on research and writing that favours profit as the ultimate arbiter of success. While Hart¹² certainly doesn’t reject this perspective, his efforts to rebalance concerns for profit with those for humanity and our environment appear to have left some students questioning the ‘validity’ of his text for a business strategy course. Have undergraduates become so accustomed to the standard textbook format and bottom-line profit perspective that they might actually view an alternative perspective when presented in a non-standard format as a work of fiction? Surely not, but it does trouble one to think that as senior students they may not be ready to transfer the notion of learning outside the formulated textbook ‘box’. Welsh and Murray¹⁴ found that management students struggle with the complexity of addressing sustainability constraints on efficiency-effectiveness trade-offs in product development but that their learning can be facilitated through the use of a critical pedagogy and project-based collaborative learning where the outcomes can be “deeply personal and potentially transformative as student come to recognize their personal efficacy” (p.221).

I have also found myself reflecting on the timeframe and format of the two courses and wondering if the semester approach offers the optimum learning context. While the usual 12 to 14 week semester certainly should provide students with adequate time to undertake substantive reading, class interactions, group projects and individual assignments, the reality is that undergraduates are usually full-time students who are juggling five courses along with extracurricular and social activities as well as part-time work. Is there a false security in the extended semester timeframe whereby students procrastinate in undertaking the ‘leg work’ required to get comfortable with and manage the course content and assignments in such a way as to scaffold their learning over the course of the semester? Is there too much time between active learning engagement opportunities? Are students more inclined to favour one or two courses per semester according these primary attention and parcelling out what time is left to the remaining courses on an ‘as needed’ basis to meet deadlines and keep their heads above water? By contrast,

does the intensity of a concentrated one month course perhaps actually contribute to learning outcomes where the abbreviated timeframe requires students to purposely set aside the time to focus on the course? Is there a greater potential for a robust learning community to form in the 'boot camp' environment thus created and does this manifest in enhanced learning outcomes?

Finally, perhaps the key question to be addressed is whether the course has succeeded in stretching perspectives and, if so, whose perspectives may have been stretched – students' as was intended or the author's as teacher. As in all good learning, it is hoped that both perspectives have been stretched; that the knowledge constructed and shared has broadened perspectives, has deepened understanding and has motivated further pursuit of the issues addressed. It is perhaps too early to assess substantive impact but these are matters that the author continues to ponder and that will guide further pedagogical experimentation and development of this course.

Endnotes

ⁱ<http://www.mta.ca/apply/whymta/rankings.html>

ⁱⁱCourse Syllabus, Commerce 4321 Strategic Issues, Mount Allison University Academic Course Calendar

ⁱⁱⁱWhile at the University of Michigan, Hart and colleague Susan Svoboda developed Transformation: The Business Strategy Laboratory www.realiagroup.com

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Appendix 1 Undergraduate Student Course Evaluation Comments

'I liked the discussion part in our seminar. It broadened my learning experience with regard to various strategic issues encountered in the business world. (2008-09)

The text was expressed more as a novel and the ideas of sustainability, opportunity and integrity were hard to separate, a real textbook would be very helpful to define these concepts more concretely and then combine them. (2008-09)

The videos we watched in class were my favorite aspect of the course. The most memorable was the discussions on China, I think it added a lot of value because studying information about other countries and industries gives a fresh new look on things. It helps to give a better grasp on the world as a whole and not a self-centered focus on Canada or North America for that matter. I would continue to encourage global contexts of business.(2008-09)

I really liked how the course began with sort of a feel for international development and the real, big issues surrounding the world that generally people in Western culture like to turn a blind eye too. Although it may be more comfortable to ignore these problems and carry on our lives as we have them now, it needs to be realized that it's just not sustainable and we should address global issues immediately. Sustainability and the opportunities to resolve the bigger issues is interesting to me, although can be pretty unsettling! (2009-10)

The issues are inherently vital for us to be exposed to in the Commerce program. To be honest, before the course began I couldn't help but have negative feelings toward being involved in business for the rest of my life. There are so many negative aspects to business (money, greed, corruption) that we become exposed to (although not necessarily in the academic setting!). Not only becoming aware of these pertinent issues- sustainability, integrity and opportunity- but thinking critically about solutions to combat them with classmates, is almost a perfect way to conclude the BComm program ... Realization that there are astronomical levels of opportunity available to do "good" business is heartening. I think we are the generation that will change frigid business models and push struggling markets in the right direction. (2009-10)

I'm actually pretty excited to finally have a Commerce class that discusses impacts and influences of environmental and climate changes. This of course being a growing element in all aspects of business around the world. This I feel is a great summarizing course for us graduates moving into the world. Hopefully it will help give us a feel of how corporations and governments react in a real world sense. I am looking forward to the rest of the class. (2009-10)

I think education is key, and although it seems like we are bombarded with "green" messages and sustainable initiatives, we need to be aware and encouraged of what we can do, individually and collectively, to help address this global issue. We need to be reminded that,

although technology has saved us before, sustainability is never a bad thing - it does not only refer to climate change, deglaciation or deforestation, but is a much broader issue that we need to be aware of. Instead of saying that technology is the culprit, I think technological advances need to be accompanied by the environmental impacts of our actions. It needs to be clear what sustainability is in order for humans to work to achieve it. (2009-10)

Appendix 2 Masters Student Course Evaluation Comments (2009)

1. What do the results of your sustainability profile suggest about your perspective on the strategic issue of sustainability at the outset of this course?

My profile suggests a fairly balanced perspective of sustainability with a slightly stronger emphasis on pollution prevention and sustainability vision/BoP (Student 4)

Focus on small gains (easy wins) before focusing on sustainability at BoP. Sustainability through organic process vs. giant leaps often more acceptable in corporate culture and therefore will be sustainable in long term (Student 10)

Business experience has taught me to focus on what I can change quickly so [my] focus on prevention was stronger than focus on vision (Student 12)

My perspective was very one dimensional; little/no interest in environmental issues related to business (Student 15)

Focused on 'controlling the bad' first, then move to clean technology. Not much focus on 'vision/BoP' (Student 22)

I believe you have to get the small things right before looking at utopia. My mind was more along the lines of 'incremental mode' than 'creative destruction' (Student 29)

Large focus on pollution prevention (Student 32)

I had a clear understanding of what I thought was the best way to be 'green' and the best way to conduct myself and my business (Student 34)

2. Will you change your behaviour in any way as a result of your learning through this course?

I will be more aware and confident of my perspective and I will try to spread the perspective of BoP to those business people I associate with (Student 4)

My corporation has focused on sustainability (environmentally) and triple bottom line. Our BoP perspective is different as our shareholder is local government (Student 10)

Broader way to see the world. Seeing different points of view. (Student 12)

Yes, I have already proposed to my CEO (today!) how to create a triple bottom line – we have the profit part well developed – now we are looking at the other dimensions. He was extremely interested and we will be looking at possible projects (with success measures) (Student 15)

Be more cognizant and look for 'opportunities' (Student 22)

Will likely look further into Hart's philosophy and have a better appreciation for opportunities outside of 'standard thought' (Student 32)

Yes, from a business perspective I will expand my focus to include a wider range of customers and opportunities and how to interact with them and partner with them to grow

(Student 34)