Reflections on Teaching Practices in Management

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INTRODUCTION

Excellence in teaching has been considered a key success factor for business faculties and schools around the world, including Australia. In particular, the competitive landscape of tertiary business education and the ever-increasing student expectations on teaching have amplified the importance and urgency for academics to excel in their teaching engagements (Broadbent, 2002). While university and student expectations for academics to be excellent teachers are understandable, this has unfortunately created an extra pressure on research-active academics who often find themselves walking on a tightrope of time, juggling priorities among writing publications, obtaining research grants, supervising research students and handling various administrative duties, not to mention other non-work commitments at home and in the family. Given these constraints, becoming an excellent researcher and teacher, and not just either one, is typically considered difficult if not unachievable.

In spite of this larger context, however, as we outline in this paper, our cumulative years of experience in teaching undergraduate and postgraduate management students at Monash university do provide ample opportunities for us identify good teaching practices, which we have implemented in our respective classes. As university lecturers in the Department of Management, we have individually pondered upon the best way to teach our students. As part of this reflection exercise, we have examined our own teaching in the light of some key educational theories.

The aim of this paper is to review the prescriptive models of good teaching that appear in the literature, with a specific focus on models that are helpful to time-poor academics who are struggling

to balance teaching, research and administrative duties. This paper also aims to demonstrate how these models apply to management education through three short case studies based on the experiences of the authors.

We begin with a discussion of student learning, including different styles and types of learning. This leads to a brief discussion of prescriptive models of tertiary teaching that outline elements of effective instruction and course design. Finally, three case studies are provided that demonstrate how these models have been applied in three different management units at *(name removed in review process)*

Types and Styles of Learning

Kolb (1984) developed a model of learning styles based on the premise that individuals differ in their preferred ways of learning. The model describes four learning styles: (1) concrete experience (a preference for 'real life' types of situations); (2) reflective observation (a preference for reflection and understanding rather than action); (3) abstract conceptualisation (a preference for using theories and models to understand things); and (4) active experimentation (a hands-on style: learning through doing). According to Kolb (1984), the traditional approach to teaching social science theory draws at most on two abilities, namely reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation, but often just on abstract conceptualisation. An implication is that students who learn best through other means (that is, have different preferred learning styles) may engage less successfully in the course content.

Pheiffer, Holley, and Andrew (2005) have developed appropriate activities around the four learning abilities. Concrete experience can be examined through group projects that require students to research, analyse, and synthesize information. Reflective observation can be assessed through a learning log whereby students had to reflect on their learning during lectures, group work, classroom discussions, meeting with tutors, and so on. Abstract conceptualisation can also be developed through individual assignments which necessitate a critical analysis of concepts and their applications to certain organisations. Furthermore, written examinations at the end of the semester are typically held to test students' understanding of the key concepts covered during the semester. Active

experimentation is perhaps the hardest ability to test on on-campus students, but it can still be cultivated through class activities such as role-play, team-building and problem-solving exercises.

Taking a cognitive, rather than individual-differences approach, Bloom, Engelhart, First, Hill and Krathwohl (1956) developed a model of six major levels of learning: knowledge; comprehension; application; analysis; synthesis; and evaluation. At the simplest level, *knowledge* involves merely acquiring and storing information. Rote learning operates at this level. Slightly more involved is the level of *comprehension*, which requires some basic processing of information (for example tasks requiring information to be given back in a different format). The next level, *application* uses information to make a decision or solve a problem. *Analysis*, the fourth level, involves dividing a situation into components which are then studied in isolation. Conversely, *synthesis* involves creating a new product or combination of elements. Finally, *evaluation* requires the application of some criteria to judge the quality of ideas or theories. In general (though there may be exceptions), each level requires or subsumes the levels below it. For example, application requires both knowledge and understanding.

In the context of tertiary education, the unit objectives that are usually found in unit or course descriptions give indications of what levels of learning are required. Typically, management units target at least the application level of learning, and quite often target evaluation, the highest level of learning. An implication is that instructors have to take care to lay the building blocks for higher level learning by first ensuring students have adequate knowledge and comprehension. Different teaching tools and techniques address the different levels of learning (for example, readings address knowledge; case studies address analysis), and so this model is helpful for curriculum design to ensure an appropriate set of formats are used.

Similar to Bloom et al's (1956) model, other authors (for example Biggs, 1976; Entwistle, 1981) differentiated between "surface" learning, that is, merely storage and reproduction of information, and "deep" learning involving more complex functions such as applying knowledge to solve problems. However, unlike Bloom et al's (1956) approach which made no assumptions about which level was appropriate, these authors argued that good teaching involved using strategies to foster deep rather than surface learning in students (Entwistle 1981). Table 1, compiled from the

writing of Biggs (1999), Entwistle (1981) and Ramsden (1992) typifies the characteristics of deep and surface learning.

Table 1 Deep or Surface Learning

	Deep Learning	Surface Learning
What it is	A critical examination of the facts, linking them into existing cognitive structures and linking ides.	Uncritical acceptance of new facts and ideas without connection to other facts or ideas.
What it involves	Interacting actively and seeking meaning. Problem solving, though isolating the key argument or concepts. Relating new and previous knowledge and linking new concepts to experience.	Mainly rote learning. Seeking formulae to memorise information. Not engaging in understanding and not building on prior knowledge.

The deep approach to learning has its origins in the work of Marton and Säljö (1976) and has been explored further by Entwistle (1981), Biggs (1987), Ramsden (1992) and others. The deep approach is further characterised by the following students' responses and attitudes both in and outside the class: (a) intention to understand the concepts as opposed to just memorising and reproducing the facts, (b) ability to link ideas to previous and existing knowledge as well as experience, (c) identification of patterns among the various topics addressed during the entire course, (d) examination of the underlying evidence and logic behind each conclusion or outcome discussed in class, (e) ability to apply ideas and concepts in their personal contexts, and (f) interest and active participation (Entwistle, 1981; Fransson, 1977; Svensson, 1997). Interestingly, the findings on approaches to learning amongst undergraduate students by Violato & Donnon, (2003), indicated that students utilise both surface (reproduction of contextual material) and deep (comprehensive understanding) approaches in their approaches to learning.

Lecturers' own implicit theories about the nature of learning, and their preferences for teaching in particular ways, may create classroom environments that favour either surface or deep learning. Ryan (1995) discussed the difference between two models of instruction, aptly called the "expert model" and the "learning community". The former assumes that the instructor/lecturer is an expert who knows the right answers to every question asked by students. Meanwhile students are ignorant, empty vessels need to be filled up by the expert expounding knowledge. Similarly, earlier work by Freire (1972) used the term 'the banking model' where lecturers and students found

themselves in the ‘depositing’ and ‘receiving’ relationship, a learning style that is still well and alive today in countries imbued by Confucian philosophy and values.

The learning community model, on the other hand, values highly the practice of asking and exchanging questions, by which both the lecturer and students embark into a realm of curiosity together and share the collective process of discovery. Similar to the deep approach to learning, the learning community model challenges the traditional model of instruction where the ‘expert’ and ‘learners’ are behaving in a transactional manner. In the learning community, the lecturer’s intellectual curiosity and learning spirit becomes contagious, infecting students with desire to engage in meaningful learning. This interaction style requires the lecturers’ willingness to be vulnerable in front of their students. The lecturers are prone to lose a sense of control and respect when, in the process of learning, they cannot offer students the correct or at least sensible solutions to the problems and questions raised by students.

The models discussed above tend to be focused on cognitive aspects of learning. However, there are broader sets of factors that may impact on the experience of a university student. Issues such as motivation, enjoyment, interest, career development, collegiality and development of friendship and professional networks also have an impact on a student’s orientation to learning. Further, a “whole-person” view can help us appreciate the role of teachers not only in facilitating learning, but in developing independent learners. Chickering and Gamson (1987) integrated insights from a variety of research areas, such as goal setting, motivation and self-efficacy, in order to develop a set of guidelines for university teachers. These guidelines are as follows:

1) Encourage student-faculty contact

Student-Faculty contact in and out of class keeps students motivated and helps them to overcome difficulties.

2) Encourage cooperation among students

Team effort tends to be more effective in stimulating ‘deep’ learning than solo attempts. Sharing ideas deepens understanding and facilitate thinking.

3) Encourage active learning

Interactive learning, by using both didactic and dialectic teaching, can make learning become part of the students’ daily life.

4) Provide prompt feedback

This is important to maintain the focus on student needs and to provide them with an opportunity to reflect on their learning and progress.

5) Emphasise time on task

Students should be given realistic deadlines to learn to effectively manage their time.

6) High expectations need to be communicated

Expecting students to perform well is an incentive for both the poorly prepared and those willing to exceed the normal requirements.

7) Respect diverse talents and ways of learning

Students have different ways and approaches to learning. Students should be given an opportunity to show their talents.

These guidelines are very practical and provide a good checklist for lecturers wishing to review and improve their units. Having reviewed a range of perspectives and models of learning above, the following section presents three short case studies of university teaching in management subjects. The application of the above principles and guidelines to these case studies is discussed.

MANAGEMENT TEACHING CASES

Context

(Background information removed in review process)

Given the size and diversity of the local and international student profiles and backgrounds, not to mention their various learning styles, it is quite a daunting task to be able to teach effectively in this department. Teaching a large percentage of international students poses a unique challenge for us. For example, many students from an Asian background are very accustomed to a rote learning style. They tend to be silent listeners in class and their primary concern is to reproduce the lecture notes for the purpose of the exams and other pieces of assessment.

We are also mindful of the fact that students obtain university degrees primarily to secure and enhance their employment prospects (Stewart and Knowles, 2002). Having an in-depth comprehension of concepts is likely to come last in the students' list of expectations. This pragmatic priority certainly has some implications on their motivation to fully engage themselves in classroom activities. For example, students may be most keen to engage in teaching-learning interactions that might enhance their employability prospects and ignore those interactions that they think will not. Their attention may

be geared towards competency development, rather than the type of knowledge acquisition that might equip them to be effective managers and leaders.

With these challenges in mind, we have tried to do our best to utilize various exemplary teaching practices and apply them in our individual classes. What we focus on in this paper is our teaching within small to medium size classes where the teacher-student interactions occur at a level that allows students to develop critical and comprehensive understanding of concepts as well as the opportunity to apply them in practical ways. Three case studies are presented below to highlight our individual experiences in engaging students in the process of active learning.

Case 1: A Journey in Teaching 'Leadership Theory and Practices' (name removed in review process)

In the postgraduate subject *(removed in review process)*, lecturer *(name removed in review process)* decided to concertedly put the deep approach (Entwistle 1981) to learning into practice. He encouraged students to relate concepts discussed in class to their current and past experiences, working in small groups. Group members then shared some of what they had learnt from the group with the class. In most cases, the re-framed knowledge brought a new perspective on students past experience. The deep approach also provided a fresh approach to addressing some of the past learning problems of students.

The deep pattern of learning applies Kolb's (1981) conceptualisation of learning as a process of transformation of experience which creates new knowledge. Hughes, Ginnett and Curphy (2005) reinforced Kolb's view and argued that both formal study and real-life experience in leadership are not mutually exclusive, instead they complement each other. They argue that the greatest single contribution of a formal study of leadership provides multiple perspectives from which particular leadership situations and experiences can be analysed, re-interpreted and given new meanings. The challenge to practice this in class is inherent in the students' lack of work experience, which inhibits them from relating concepts to their own individual work situations. *(name removed in review process)* typically encounters this situation in undergraduate settings where many students have

virtually no full-time work experience. Often what he does is to ask them to reflect on their non-work experience, particularly those which shape them into who they are today.

To enable active and deeper learning, students are encouraged to use the discussion board facility where they can post questions, discuss problems, and share views on various topics pertinent to the unit. For example, students compare vision statements of various organisations they are familiar with and discuss leadership metaphors, among others. The discussion board is also used as a place to facilitate discussion around their own learning progress and identify areas of improvement which the lecturer and students can work together on. This double-loop learning process helps students to take ownership of and be more active in their own learning.

On a more personal level, *(name removed in review process)* in the past had a tendency to show students what he knew rather than what he was curious about, something that was often done to amaze students with the vast amount of knowledge he possessed. Interactions with students were typically conducted in the "Question-and-Answer" format. In short, students' curiosity was always met with the lecturer's certainty. This didactic method was very poor in encouraging student's active learning. What he now does differently is to ask many questions drawn from his own curiosity. Now, before he answers questions from students, he usually asks himself, "How would my response to this question further the student's curiosity and learning?" His aim is to arrive at conversations of mutual curiosity that will allow students to arrive at new insights. These dialectic conversations are characterized by enthusiastic energy, periodic silences, and the willingness to venture down various lines of inquiry, dancing back and forth as needed.

Case 2: Teaching Approaches to Facilitate Learning in 'Managing People and Organisations' (name removed in review process)

In teaching the postgraduate subject, *(removed in review process)*, *(name removed in review process)* is acutely aware that the students need to engage in the learning process, and it is easiest for them to disengage in a situation where they are passively listening. According to Murphy (1998), the 'lecture' encourages passive learning and that "too often a lecture is a one way process of the lecturer talking and students either making aimless notes, chatting or dozing". Agreeing with this line of

argument, Murphy (1998, p. 41), cited Jacques (1997) who wrote about the “indestructibility of the one-hour lecture institution, despite loads of evidence about its limitations.” Being of similar persuasion, but also aware of the lecture requirement in universities, *(name removed in review process)* has been making the most of the lecture scenario and constantly attempts to engage the students in active learning, even though many will be passively taking notes.

(name removed in review process) believes that much of the learning that will be taking place in the lecture will be ‘surface’, covering coursework without time and opportunity for reflection – and hence easily forgotten. Ramsden (1992) also presented the viewpoint that lectures may not foster deep learning, although he did go on to say that lectures can be a useful way to introduce new topics and provide an overview of the relation between topics (Ramsden, 1992, p.156). Bearing these points in mind, *(name removed in review process)* initially provides a framework and a realistic context with visual cues to introduce new material. She also tends to break the lecture up with disseminated case examples and short activities with students interacting in groups of two or three because, according to Bigg's (1976) ‘seven principles for good practice’, “team effort tends to be more effective in stimulating deep learning that solo attempts”. She also employs film clips and interpretive activities in order to foster active learning engagement and some level of deep analysis. *(name removed in review process)* adheres to the ‘learning community’ viewpoint of Ryan (1995), referred to previously In her lecturer role she attempts to motivate students to be interested in the subject area through posing challenging questions that focus the students’ attention and set them thinking. She also revises concepts and relates them to wider contexts in order to broaden the students’ knowledge and understanding of the given subject.

(name removed in review process) often starts a lecture series with a model and historical overview of subject being explored, providing the learning aims and following up with an introduction to component aspects. She draws upon her industry experience and where possible uses examples from industry case studies where appropriate. One of her preferred teaching methods is the problem-solving method, posing questions and leading the students towards theory from field experience or

historical clues, providing motivation for the students to focus on the main idea being explored at the time. She occasionally like to use a little drama in lectures, using gestures, changes in modulation, pauses and face scanning to maintain attention and focus all on the topic.

When it comes to tutorial teaching, what *(name removed in review process)* enjoys is interacting and facilitating collaborative and individual learning, exploring ideas, and seeing the students grow in terms of their analytical skills, expression and self esteem. Sharing ideas deepens understanding and facilitate thinking (Ryan, 1995). Once she has established the expected student learning objectives and academic standard requirements, she usually makes sincere efforts to understand the students as individuals and find suitable ways to challenge or encourage them all to produce high-standard outputs. She usually seeks on-going feedback and is adaptable, customising learning experiences to suit groups and individuals where considered necessary and appropriate within the subject structure. Based on her experience and studies in education, *(name removed in review process)* personal teaching philosophy has become very student-focussed, based on the knowledge that individuals learn best when they are actively engaged in and enjoying an activity that is related to their experience in some way, is reasonably challenging and is viewed by them as important to learn. Because of this philosophy, she continually attempts to foster student centred and collaborative learning in a fun, stimulating learning environment.

Case 3: Reflection on Teaching Philosophies and Approaches in (removed in review process) (name removed in review process)

Israel Scheffler (quoted in Passmore, 1980) defines teaching as “an activity aimed at the achievement of learning”. *(name removed in review process)* found the definition to be well suited to his philosophy of teaching, which involves engaging students in the learning process. This quote from Scheffler also challenges us to consider that teaching should imply that the students have achieved “the learning”. Passmore (1980) gives an example that a teacher cannot claim that he or she has taught his or her students to swim unless the students can swim. However, *(name removed in review process)* feels that this implication is beyond the realistic scope of teaching especially in the context of “mass”

education. This is because there are several factors that are beyond the capacity of the lecturer to control, which will moderate or mediate the teaching processes and the achievement of learning of the students. These include the match between students' expectations and the perception on the content of the subjects, meaning that the learning achievement will not be optimum if the students have no personal interest in the subject, no matter how well we lecturers teach the subjects.

In terms of teaching approach, there are several challenges that *(name removed in review process)* has identified. The first challenge in developing his teaching strategy is to transform the learning approaches and environment among students from being passive into active. This is because most university students have spent the majority of their lives in passive learning environments at primary and high schools that used conventional pedagogical techniques. Within this type of environment, teachers were disseminators of information, and students were simply required to memorise the information. In an active learning environment, lecturers and tutors play their role more as facilitators of learning, and students become active participants, engaging in a dialogue with their fellow students and with their facilitator. In this way, students will be exposed to the use of higher order 'thinking skills', developing problem solving, analytical, evaluation, discussion and conceptualisation skills that would lead to a situation where knowledge is directly experienced, constructed, acted upon, or even tested and, if necessary, revised by the learner.

The second challenge *(name removed in review process)* identifies is to give what is "just right" for students. He often found himself in a dilemmatic situation: on the one hand, he has several ideals about learning such as developing critical thinking skills, and to understand the practical implications of the concepts that would be beneficial for students in the future workplace. In this way, normally he would expect the students to go beyond textbooks and researching further sources of information. On the other hand, he is fully aware of the notion (and the factual experiences) that students' most primary concern is that they will be taught what they need to know in order to pass the subject, or for some, obtain the highest possible mark. It is not uncommon to hear such questions as "Will this come up in the exam?" In this way, they would expect to receive a set of information on which they can set the boundary of their learning focus.

The third challenge is related to the particular case of the postgraduate subject *(removed in review process)* that *(name removed in review process)* has been teaching since semester 1, 2005. There are several characteristics in this subject that make it somewhat unique compared to other subjects in the management area:

- It contains a great deal of quantitative elements although the level is maintained to be minimal for those with no adequate mathematics and statistics background.
- It also contains a fair portion of technical elements which could give an impression that it should belong to engineering rather than management field.
- In conjunction with these, it also requires a high degree of structural and algorithmic thinking.
- It has a relatively low level of theoretical abstraction (when compared to, say, Organisation Theory and Organisational Behaviour) and a high degree of pragmatic application.

These issues create challenges for students in management who might have spent most of their previous studies with non-quantitative and non-technical subjects. With this background, many of them find it difficult in their encounters with mathematical and statistical materials.

Approaching the subjects and topics in lecture and tutorials

In delivering any topics of the subject during lectures, *(name removed in review process)* has attempted to maintain the following sequential steps. First, he attempts to create stimulus to attract students' interests on the topic. The primary theme of the stimulus is always "Why is this important for me?" and the primary means of stimulating the interest of students are real-world and practical facts relating to the topic. He follows this up by outlining the objectives of the session and expects to see that students will be able to identify the key issues within the topic that need to be covered. The second stage is the core of the learning where key details of the concepts and subject matters will be discussed. He normally uses a combination of seminar-type teaching and interactive question/answers with students to activate their alertness and concentration. Following the coverage of conceptual elements of the topic, he concludes the teaching session with providing and discussing a few examples of the practical implications of the concept using supporting material described in the next section.

Therefore, the lecture is targeted to achieve the first three levels of learning -according to the Bloom's (1956) taxonomy- namely, knowledge, comprehension, and application.

The size of the class, which is around 25 students, gives *(name removed in review process)* an opportunity to design and handle the tutorial by himself. The tutorial class is focused primarily on applying the theory to quantitative as well as qualitative problems (that is, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation level of Bloom's (1956) taxonomy). Therefore, practising the use of the quantitative formulas and discussing case studies by reflecting on the theory covered in the previous lecture are the primary content of the classes. The problem solving exercise often also involves the use of simulation programs which will lead students to have "active experimentation" defined by Kolb (1984). Group discussion is the primary format *(name removed in review process)* applies in the tutorial session.

CONCLUSION

The case studies above demonstrate that the literature on learning and pedagogy provide practical guidelines that can be implemented relatively easily. By incorporating an understanding of learning styles and levels of learning, along with the impact of various teaching strategies, techniques and formats have on these styles and levels, university teachers can enhance both student learning outcomes and the student experience more generally. The case studies also demonstrate that awareness of fundamental principles of learning and teaching enables instructors and course designers to customize their approaches based on the particular needs of their students and the nuances of their material/content. Engaging in the learning literature enables one to avoid adopting a "one-size-fits-all" approach. That is, rather than being prescribed a standard set of teaching practices (for example "chalk-and-talk" or "use a case study every week"), instructors are equipped with an understanding of how to evaluate and design innovative teaching practices best suited to their particular situation.

In this paper we have reviewed aspects of the learning literature that were particularly useful to us in our own teaching. We have also attempted to demonstrate the usefulness of that literature by describing its impact on our teaching. However, there are doubtless numerous other models and other related literatures that may be more particularly suited to other lecturers' topics and circumstances. We

encourage others to document their own experiences, and the conceptual frameworks that they have found most useful. Such a dialogue will, in our view, open up new ideas and possibilities for lecturers and course designers that they might not have otherwise considered.

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