

Real estate mogul-turned-television tycoon **Donald Trump** has scored big with his hit show “The Apprentice.” But as a model for management educators to teach in their classrooms, the show has drawn decidedly mixed reaction. These two management educators each have two words for Trump:

‘You’re Hired!’

By **Denis Fred Simon**

Preal-estate mogul Donald Trump may not teach in a business school classroom, but his entrepreneurial lessons, showcased on his show “The Apprentice,” promise to have a lasting effect on business education. “The Apprentice,” which airs on U.S. television on the NBC network, has been a singular experience for viewers. Episodes in the show’s first season (the second season debuts this fall) feature eight men and eight women who work in teams to tackle on-the-spot business challenges requiring considerable personal talent, nerve, and an absolute commitment to radical innovation.

To emerge as the winning team, the participants need all their powers of persuasion and every skill they can muster, from guerrilla marketing to on-the-spot selling and deal making. Members of the losing team must pack their bags and meet with Trump and his organization in the boardroom. There, they analyze why they lost and who was at fault. At the end of a hard-hitting series of questions, one member of the team emerges as the obvious, although unfortunate, choice. Trump then administers the “crushing blow”—that member is “fired” and must leave the competition. Only one individual would emerge at the end of the 13-week program as the winner of the ultimate business prize: a yearlong, \$250,000 apprenticeship within Donald Trump’s real estate empire.

What a training ground for business—and what a reward!

For business schools preparing a new generation of business leaders, “The Apprentice” sends a compelling message





'You're Fired!'

by David Cadden

It is said that teaching is an art. And, like artists, teachers can work in variety of media, such as case studies; analogy and metaphor; and literature, film and television. So, when a television phenomenon like "The Apprentice" appears, business professors should take notice.

However, I would urge my colleagues to approach using "The Apprentice" in the classroom with as much caution as they would approach purchasing a new bond offering from Trump's casino empire. As faculty, we have few limitations in the methods and materials we can use to teach. Still, we must always consider a core question: "What, precisely, do we want to teach our students, and, more important, what should our students actually learn?"

What We Teach, What Students Hear

Too often, what we teach and what our students learn do not coincide. A professor of film studies, for instance, may show her students Leni Riefenstahl's "Triumph of the Will" with the clear expectation that students will understand the power of film as a potent propaganda tool. None of us wishes to be in her position when she hears students comment afterward that the Nazis could sure put on one heck of a show. At one level that might be true, but it grossly misses the point.

This is a critical distinction to make when using "The Apprentice" in the classroom. We should be very careful in determining what students are actually getting out of each episode. If they come away from it thinking that "The

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that they, too, must do more than ever to recreate real-life business challenges for students. It makes clear that many schools may have to re-think their curricula and approaches. Is it possible that a television program like “The Apprentice” could change how business schools teach? Some believe that the answer is clearly “yes.”

A Wakeup Call for B-Schools

The confluence of “The Apprentice” and an era of increased soul-searching among most business schools is intriguing. The timing could not be better, for we are seeing the first glimpse of a sea change in how business schools teach. While Trump’s approach has not driven this change, his program may very well highlight the skills successful business leaders require and encourage more young people to pursue careers in business. As a result, we could see a rise in business school applications—but only in those schools that turn the traditional MBA program on its head.

Such a transformation is especially important when many believe that the MBA has somehow lost its luster in recent years. The degree is no longer a guarantee of a C-level executive track position in a Fortune 100 company, nor is it viewed as relevant in the new world of business, a world bearing less and less resemblance to traditional commerce. In fact, among the select group of talented young people who won the chance to compete on “The Apprentice,” very few have any business degree at all.

In “The Apprentice,” individual performers aren’t just closely scrutinized by the Trump organization. Millions of viewers also watch the pressure mount for each week’s project managers, who must put themselves on the line to either demonstrate their leadership skills or reveal their lack thereof. Viewers see firsthand how well team members interact with each other and how they adapt their plans when they hit an unexpected roadblock. They learn why one team gains a competitive edge and comes out the winner and why the other team fails. In essence, viewers witness a televised, albeit highly stylized, version of business education.

Although its main purpose is entertainment, “The Apprentice” communicates several subtle messages to every-



Students with Orca Gear turned their “Apprentice”-style, trial-by-fire experience into a saleable product—a stylish jacket that turns into a life preserver in an emergency. Their product won the Freeman K. Pittman Editor’s Choice Award as Top New Gear of 2004 by *SAIL* magazine.

one engaged in business today. For example, inherent in the show’s message is that *overall performance—individual and team*—is critical to success. In ferreting out the winning apprentice, Trump and his organization suggest that companies may want to raise their expectations of those pursuing business careers. The underlying theme of each weekly segment is that innate leadership and team building skills are the *sine qua non* of a true business leader.

As companies’ expectations for leadership skills in their new hires increase, business school curricu-

la may need a crucial redesign. We must help MBA candidates escape the “commodity hell” of a traditional MBA, better manage in a world of increased turbulence and uncertainty, and perform as well, if not better, than the best competitor on “The Apprentice.”

Experiences That Matter

So-called “reality television” has its detractors, but one of its primary characteristics is especially significant to management education—*reality*. Never before has it been so important that business schools infuse and intersect their programs with real-world business.

As educators, we must find more and newer ways to place our students at the center of the action, “Apprentice”-style. In this way our students may turn their solutions into nascent companies even before they’ve earned their MBAs. Last year, for instance, a team of four first-year MBA students at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute’s Lally School of Management and Technology in Troy, New York, found that few, if any, adults actually wear life vests on boats. In response, they developed Float Tech, a stylish jacket with a removable zip-in liner that automatically turns into a flotation device if the wearer falls into the water.

As part of their project, they conducted market research to prove their concept would fly—or *float*, in this case. They convinced a local marine shop owner to allow them to survey customers in the store for several days. Once they gathered enough information, they used their findings to sell their concept to the faculty; next, they integrated flotation technology into the new boating jacket design. The new

Apprentice” represents good business, they, too, may be missing the point.

As business faculty, we must always include two dimensions to our teaching. There is the descriptive element, in which we show our students real-world examples so they see and understand how the real business world operates. And there is the normative element, through which we have an obligation to discuss *how* our students should operate in the real business world. Striking the right balance between the descriptive and normative elements of business education is critical. That is, our students should understand that some actions are desirable not just because they are legal, but because they are good for the company, shareholders, employees, and society. To address both of these issues, context and follow-up are critical.

In the case of “The Apprentice,” it’s difficult to place the show in the appropriate context or find the time to conduct sufficient follow-up. We may not have the time to ask what, exactly, students are learning from the show. Perhaps more impor-

lemonade on Wall Street, operating a flea market, negotiating the best price for items recovered in a scavenger hunt—would be rejected by most advisors to a Junior Achievement chapter. Yet these tasks passed as those that should be used to select a division president in Trump’s empire.

Let us also not forget that each contestant is functioning in a zero-sum environment. At the end of the show there can be only one winner. This distills business down to a pure Hobbesian vision of “one against all.” Trump’s television creation is particularly pernicious because the audience is led to believe that participants are functioning not only as businesspeople *do* function in the real world, but as they *should*—all under the guise of reality.

Not to mention that, at times, “The Apprentice” appears to be one large infomercial for the Trump empire—rent a Trump apartment or penthouse belonging to Trump, drum up business at Trump’s Taj Mahal, use the ice rink that was saved by “The Donald,” and sell Trump-endorsed bottled water. Of

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tant, as business educators, we may not have time to ask *ourselves* whether the lessons of “The Apprentice” actually represent any normative directions for functioning in the business world.

As business educators, we aren’t aiming our services primarily at students, but at the business community and society at large. For example, with this in mind, Quinnipiac University’s School of Business in Hamden, Connecticut, recently initiated a four-year program that aims to balance the real world of business with the contextualization of that world in the classroom. We want students to learn not just about business, but about how to function successfully in that community, something that the so-called reality of “The Apprentice” does not provide.

Reality Television—Not Real Business

A key element in the program’s success is its presentation as *reality television*—we are led to believe that we are viewing the operation of a real business enterprise. But we shouldn’t forget that all the contestants were picked for their photogenic qualities and their media-friendly personalities. Or that many, if not most, of the tasks assigned to the contestants—selling

course, Trump shouldn’t be taken to task simply because he has been remarkably successful in marketing himself. In fact, it could be said that he has turned himself into a successful and powerful brand.

For this very reason, when Trump speaks on the show, we anticipate something of interest and value. But unfortunately, we are provided only periodic, seemingly trenchant insights from Trump, such as “you have to believe in a product in order to sell it.” Given this marvelous opportunity to expose the American public and our students to business, is it too much to expect something beyond such banalities?

Perhaps it is. After all, in an era in which Spencer Johnson’s *Who Moved My Cheese?* will probably outsell Jim Collins’ *From Good to Great*, you don’t have to be a Laputan academic to realize that the facile and superficial often trumps, if you’ll pardon the pun, substance and wisdom. German poet and historian Friedrich von Schiller tells us, “Against stupidity the very gods themselves contend in vain.” This may be true, but it is this struggle that should give the teaching profession meaning. We shouldn’t be expected to bow to the trivial just because it comes covered with a very thin patina of realism.

concept proved so effective that they wrote their first business plan and incorporated as a company, Orca Gear Inc. The students then entered the Tech Valley Collegiate Business Plan Competition at the Severino Center for Entrepreneurship at the Lally School. They came in second the first year, but persevered and continued to hone their plan. When they entered the contest the following year, they came home with a first-place win, lots of publicity, and \$25,000 in seed money.

Since then, Orca Gear has raised nearly \$500,000 and intends to raise additional capital through equity investments. Now established in Troy, New York, the company has been approved as a General Services Administration (GSA) manufacturer,



Lally MBA candidates Dongyu Xu and Jeanine Thompson recognize a potential business opportunity when they see one—something that would keep them both in Trump’s boardroom. In response to the explosion of Western-style fast food operations in parts of China, Xu and Thompson plan to bring American-style bagels to Beijing.

and continuously transmit their location information. An accountability officer watching on a remote monitor can see their locations, alert them to hazards in their path, or guide them safely out of situations where they are blinded by smoke or fumes. As CEO Mark Fobare says of Tiercent’s innovative product, “*We find lost firefighters.*”

As a result, Tiercent has placed in the money round of three consecutive business plan competitions. The company won an introduction to the Boston area venture capital community by Paul Severino, founder of Bay Networks. Since receiving a \$100,000 Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) grant, the com-

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which allows it to sell to government agencies and the military. Additionally Float Tech was awarded the Freeman K. Pittman Editor’s Choice Award as Top New Gear of 2004 by *SAIL* magazine.

Likewise, Tiercent, another student company, has found a home at the Rensselaer Incubator. Like Orca Gear’s founders, the students who founded Tiercent sought out a problem in the real-world market and developed a product to solve it.

The students discovered that no company in the world builds a product capable of tracking and locating people in hostile environments. Tiercent developed a product called EgressOne, a cell-phone size device, worn by firefighters and other rescue workers as they respond to emergency situations, which incorporates 3-D radio frequency technology to pinpoint firefighters’ locations in hazardous situations

pany is on track for a second-phase SBIR this year, which will provide a seven-figure sum. Plans are in place to deliver the first product by late 2004, and talks are under way for private equity investment.

The ultimate aim of these kinds of educational efforts isn’t a good grade or a competent analysis of a corporate problem that someone else already has solved. Like their “Apprentice” counterparts, these students are hitting the ground running to develop products that will make a measurable and immediate difference in today’s real-world market.

‘Apprentice’ Training Grounds

With the needs of business becoming more complex and immediate, it’s clear that business students need to work in a problem-solving, solution-oriented, “break-the-mold”

Ironically, another NBC reality show, “The Restaurant,” probably provided much more in the way of useful and realistic insights into business operations, particularly for business startups. But few if any business schools are discussing its content in the classroom. Not surprisingly, its ratings weren’t nearly as high. In fact, it’s already been cancelled.

“The Apprentice” falls short of offering our students meaningful business insights. Business education, on the other hand, must fill the void to make sure students aren’t taking the show’s message without qualification. For example, in Quinnipiac’s new undergraduate business program, students are exposed to classroom-based business education in conjunction with a personal and professional development program. Students attend seminars, listen to a series of guest lectures, and discuss contemporary issues like ethics and governance with business leaders; those activities are then supplemented by a reading list that links classroom material and discussion to actual business practices. The program includes lessons in successful time management, business dinner etiquette, and management of one’s own future—students even learn to read *The Wall Street Journal* and use its information effectively. After class, they can use computer-assisted learning modules covering a variety of topics including using business research resources and navigating business interviews.

Our students still learn the quantitative skills of business—the numbers game of profit and loss that “The Apprentice” participants play so fervently. But in addition, they are encouraged to attend to their personal and career development and place these skills in a larger, meaningful context. This work sets the stage, beginning freshman year, for students to plan for personal and career success while recognizing the importance of ethical behavior in business.

What Will Our Students Learn?

So, let us review a few episodes of “The Apprentice,” and ask ourselves what our students are most likely to learn. Starting in the first episode, the contestants were divided into two groups based upon gender. The concept of “men versus women” in a competitive environment functions at a particularly primal level. Women can feel empowered and men can prove their mettle. However, what’s the lesson to be learned from this form of segregation? One wonders how NBC’s Standards and Practice Committee would have responded had the show decided to separate the team on the basis of race.

In the first four episodes, the women triumphed over the men at such complex tasks as selling lemonade on Wall Street, developing an ad campaign, hawking shots in a bar off Times Square, and running a minimum-cost scavenger hunt.

After these successes, Trump cautioned the women that they were relying too heavily on their sex appeal to win each task—and, of course, he wasn’t being at all disingenuous.

After the women again trounced the men in the fifth episode, Trump ordered a “corporate reshuffling.” The genders were now mixed into two teams. Television pundits enjoyed pointing out that when the women were in single-gender teams, they were aggressive and successful but engaged in a considerable amount of backbiting. Then, when teamed with the men, the women began to display passivity. This may not be a message we want to convey to our students.

Add to this the fact that several of the women on the show wound up in a men’s magazine as lingerie models—posing in a business setting. Are we to assume that to break the glass ceiling, women should rely more on a pair of stiletto heels than on talent and intelligence? What a wonderful message to send to female *and* male business students.

Then there’s the show’s treatment of the concept of teamwork, a notion critical to business. Here we see many instances of very realistic behavior—teams forming through goal-driven activities, coalition formation, and conflict resolution. However, their environment is still highly artificial because someone has to win, which means that the long-term commitment of any one player to the notion of teamwork is illusionary at best.

Ultimately, it’s to a participant’s advantage if other participants fail. Each episode’s closing scenes in “the boardroom” are a nice display of social Darwinism in action. While this display may be an accurate description of how some teams function, I don’t believe these methods would be effective for any large-scale, long-term project.

The messages students might take from the first few episodes are disturbing. Women executives should exploit sex, style triumphs over substance, knowledge of task and domain are secondary, political maneuvering and power are not only desirable but imperative—and they should do anything to win. Unfortunately, an argument can be made that these *are* truisms in business and dominate the actions of too many people in too many organizations. But while students need to know how the real world operates, we shouldn’t, in the interest of describing the real world, teach to the lowest common moral denominator.

Those Two Little Words

Finally, there’s Trump’s signature phrase, “You’re fired,” perhaps the cleverest part of the show. Each episode of “The Apprentice” ends with Trump terminating one of the participants, designed to build anticipation and interest in the

environment like the one Trump has created. Of course, business schools may not have the same cutthroat competitiveness as “The Apprentice,” but they should provide training grounds for today’s apprentices—and tomorrow’s business leaders—that go far beyond traditional, discrete business classes.

In the end, an experiential and edgy education offers students more to take into their careers than the conventional approaches of last century. Unlike the one-day or two-day deadlines “Apprentice” participants have to complete their tasks, many business students have a full year to delve into the complexity of a specific business project. As part of “formulating and executing competitive business strategies,” for example, Lally student teams work with real companies on projects significant to the company’s growth and develop-

ment. Last year, for example, MBA candidates Dongyu Xu of Beijing and Jeanine Thompson of the U.S. teamed up on a venture that would bring bagels to China, in response to the explosion of Western-style fast food operations opening in the expatriate section of Beijing. When Xu discovered only about half of the Chinese students at the university had heard of a bagel, she and Thompson created their own Chinese pronunciation of the word. Thompson then spent a day at a local bagel shop to determine how viable it would be to transport the idea to Beijing. Now in its nascent stage, the project has already won a \$1,000 prize at the Lally School’s New Venture Opportunity Contest.

Such projects give students an opportunity to break the business mold and set the tone for entrepreneurial leader-

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ment. Recently, a team developed a strategy and business plan for a local high-tech company that develops and raises genetically engineered mice for research. The students helped the company successfully integrate a European acquisition into its business. Following the project, one of the MBA team members was hired by the company.

One could also point out another central difference between the experience of “Apprentice” participants and that of business students in our real-world training grounds. Rather than end with the firing of a team member, today’s redesigned business-school project can—and, ideally, should—end with a hiring.

Reality Check

For years, business schools have measured their success by how many of their students were hired after graduation or how well their fund-raising efforts were received. As schools work to transform their curricula, perhaps there should be new criteria used to measure success: How have students contributed to real-world business *during their degree programs*?

Since Lally revamped its programs, we have been using

ship and high performance team-building. Only by creating environments that immerse our students in the real world, real problems, and real pressures of business will we enable them to enter the global market with confidence. Only then will they know how to work across business functions, manage risk and uncertainty, solve problems, and work effectively in high-performance, cross-cultural teams in cross-border situations.

As he whittles down the number of participants in “The Apprentice,” Donald Trump establishes a “trial-by-fire” atmosphere in which each participant sees immediately the cause-and-effect consequences of any business action. As educators, we must keep in mind that we, too, are grooming apprentices who will manage the future of business. Therefore, we should make sure students face similar challenges and learn to think on their feet. Then, we should do Trump one better by making sure our students make tangible contributions to business, even before they graduate. In short, our students can make a difference in the real world—not just on reality television. **Z**

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Fired!



audience. It draws on the same set of desires that the Emperor Vespasian recognized when he commissioned the building of the Coliseum. The Roman people saw their games as a reflection of their national character. Heroism was to be rewarded; cowardice was punished with death.

A quick poll of my students indicates that they love the idea of Trump firing the incompetent. How can anyone blame them? We all know of the salutary benefit to the stock price when a CEO downsizes several thousand employees. As we know, Jack Welch himself advocates eliminating the bottom ten percent of a company's workforce.

But there is one vital distinction between Trump's firing and Welch's downsizing. Welch bases his system of metrics, at least allegedly, on job-related performance. Even the most callow observer of "The Apprentice" can see that not all of those terminated were directly responsible for their teams' failures. Even so, if two teams are in competition and one comes up short—even when the difference in performance between the two teams is negligible—somebody's head has to roll.

The notion of examining what is wrong with a process, rather than identifying a fall guy, may be insufficiently dramatic and too subtle for prime time television. It is, however, a better lesson for our students. I fear that our students will view "The Apprentice" only to believe, once again, that style triumphs over substance.

Entertainment? Yes. Education? No.

Many members of business faculty have seen the value of incorporating entertainment into their teaching. They've used Shakespeare and other works of literature and film as means of teaching about leadership and other topics. But these works lack the reach of television, which has bombarded the public with images of the business world dominated by "Dallas" and "Dynasty" characters for decades. We have been exposed to a view of business that would make the crews at Enron, Worldcom, and Tyco look like Zen monks.

Mediocre entertainment—devoid of context or the most minor moral dimension—amuses and engages. Great entertainment, on the other hand, amuses, engages, and instructs by asking the audience to think about what is transpiring. It can provide ethical insights without being preachy. One must admit that "The Apprentice" is successful entertainment. It has drama, ruthless competition, treachery, betrayal, sex appeal, and romance. But I'm not sure it ever rises to the level of *great* entertainment.


There were moments when "The Apprentice" approached that status; but when it did, its voice was muted. In an early episode, for example, eventual runner-up Kwame had people

queuing up to buy basketballs with his signature. No one *told* people in line that Kwame was a famous basketball player. However, teammate and eventual "Apprentice" winner, Bill, complained that it was implied, and, therefore, Kwame was lying by omission. This was a low-key call for ethical standards in business.

Likewise, in the penultimate episode, four Trump executives subjected the remaining four contestants to high-pressure interviews. The contestants' responses and the interviewers' insights were realistic, useful, and valuable for both students and people in business. The final episode was, in my estimation, the best. It featured a classic standoff between a Harvard MBA and an entrepreneur. These polar business opposites were finally given assignments that approximated real-world executive tasks. Bill, the entrepreneur of the group, was the ultimate winner. In that final episode, I only wished more time had been devoted to why Bill was selected.

In great entertainment, we learn something about our world and ourselves. We also recognize a moral dimension to life. Shakespeare's *Richard III* is a captivating character, but I'm sure few in the audience leave the play wanting to be as ruthless as he is in the pursuit of power. Did Shakespeare want people to learn how to send "the murderous Machiavelli back to school"? I should hope not. But do our students view "The Apprentice" and want to emulate what they see? I fear, in some cases, yes.

When a show like "The Apprentice" so engages our students, it provides us with an excellent forum for active dialogues. But "The Apprentice" does not represent a model for total student development—development that provides a vital bridge between the merely descriptive aspect of education and the normative guidelines that are crucial for individual development. It does not encourage students to grow as technically competitive executives and conscientious members of society. When we use the show as an example, our normative guidelines compete with its description of business behavior. It's a battle we can't, and shouldn't, avoid. And it's a battle we shouldn't be prepared to lose.

After sounding rather sanctimonious about "The Apprentice" and Trump, I must admit to my own darker nature. I had hoped that in the last show Trump would turn to the winner and say, "You're not hired to run one of my companies because I've just outsourced that position to an executive in India whom I'll pay \$100,000 rather than the \$250,000 I'd have to pay you." Now that would be *real* entertainment—and a good dose of reality. 

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