

Your Turn

by Marianne W. Lewis

I The Paradox of 'The Box'

My eyes were opened to the limitations of traditional business education when I overheard an exchange between two teams of students, one from the university's business school, the other from the school of industrial design. They were all part of an initiative called InventureWorks, which pairs cross-disciplinary teams with corporate partners exploring new product development.

The business students were astounded when they were confronted by the design students. "We're sick of this. None of you can think outside the box," the design students said. Shocked, my students responded, "Yeah, well, you can't think inside the box." The silence that followed was awkward but instructive. To me, this confrontation between design and business students—between creative and analytical thinkers—represented a paradox that has become more prominent in the business world. Should we think "inside the box" or "outside the box"? Who's right?

In fact, business leaders often have to think both ways. It's only when we take a step "beyond the box" that we can see that fact, and then begin to teach students what business already knows—creativity and analysis go hand in hand.

Unfortunately, it's still routine for business schools to choose one side or the other. Some business schools have moved from lectures to experiential learning, emphasizing hands-on projects while skimming on the traditional teaching methods that provide a vital foundation for best practices. Others remain mired in



traditional teaching methods—lectures, readings, and case studies—that oversimplify and overrationalize business challenges. A common product of the first approach, I fear, is a street-savvy yet impulsive and reckless graduate; a common product of the second is a book-smart yet narrow and naïve graduate. Neither has the comprehensive skills required in the modern workplace. Creativity or analysis alone can't solve every business problem; in isolation, neither approach can replicate the intricacy of business.

Take my academic field, organizational behavior. For the moment, let's consider this field to be a "toolbox" of managerial knowledge and methods. In the classroom, we typically teach one theory at a time to provide students with clarity and structure. Each theory puts another "hammer" in the student's toolbox, a means to understand one facet of human behavior. A carpenter's apprentice could hardly make a liv-

ing if he was sent to a job site with a toolbox full of hammers—without the screwdrivers, wrenches, and pliers that would enable him to do everything the job requires. Yet business schools routinely send their graduates into the professional world equipped with the managerial equivalent of nothing but hammers.

Business schools attempt to solve the problem by offering students experiential, hands-on learning sessions to round out their educations, but often fail to put the traditional lessons of the classroom into a real-world context. For example, when students participate in global field studies, many business schools treat them as little more than tourists. Students are herded onto buses to see the sights; then, they are herded back to a college campus. There, the students are given classroom instruction identical to what they would receive at home. They return with no more tools at their disposal than they had when they left. The opportunity to integrate the classroom and the real world, to join "inside the box" thinking with "outside the box" applications, is lost.

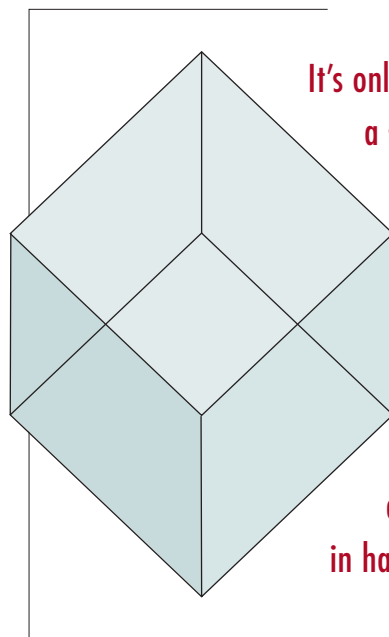
When done right, however, international studies can bring about a remarkable transformation in students and faculty. They come to understand that the two ways of thinking are not mutually exclusive. For example, I've witnessed how these intense programs bring traditional international business concepts to life, helping students to "think globally and act locally." On a recent field study in Queretaro, Mexico, my students spent each morning in a different company, each afternoon at the national university, and each evening with their

host families. As a result, my students experienced a huge change in attitude as the field study progressed. Their initial reaction was to point out the impact of the slower pace of daily work life in the culture, and the society's emphasis on family and social activities. On paper, such an emphasis might seem a hindrance to an economy. But after spending more time in the culture, my students gained a profound respect for the tremendous work ethic and rising business sophistication of the people. They could step outside the confines of traditional approaches to business to see that less structured ways can lead to successful business practices.

Such cultural complexities would not have become evident had the students continued to think questions in business can be answered with an "either/or" approach. Many times, the answer to questions in business will be "both." Once students have honed their analytical prowess in the classroom and paired it with real-world creativity, they can discover when analysis alone does the job and when it comes up short. They become more holistic thinkers who are able to take an apparent paradox and find where two seemingly opposing objectives intersect, and often, even work together.

So, let's return to where we began, with the face-off between the design students and the business students. In this case, pairing business and design students pushed both groups to recognize the need

to be both creative and analytical to achieve new product development. As the students work with a corporate partner to explore product variations for a different venue—say, coffee vending machines for a theater, gas station, or family restaurant—their greatest insights revolve around learning to manage a multidisciplinary team. During the term, design and business students continue to shift from a feeling of frustration to one of excitement, moving away from a dogmatic belief in their



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own points of view and toward a genuine appreciation of the others' different perspectives and expertise. The need for a union between traditional instruction and real-world insight is powerfully illustrated through their "inside the box, outside the box" debate. We must bring that debate into the learning process; through such open discussion, business students can see the limitations of logical, systematic

analysis, and the design students can realize that artistic, improvisational thinking alone won't sell a product.

These types of opportunities still seem unusual in most business schools, but they can, and should, become more rule than exception in management education. Educators must look more diligently beyond the traditional classroom, to one that is neither merely traditional nor merely unconventional. They must apply more subtle, more elastic control over their classrooms, integrat-

ing conventional teaching methods with hands-on applications. That is, educators themselves must be able to step inside and outside of the box with ease, before they can effectively teach their students to do the same.

Failing that, educators will squander opportunities to develop critical and paradoxical thinkers for a business world that sorely needs them. They will also lose an opportunity to develop their own skills at managing paradoxes, which would be a shame. After all, while paradoxes offer a challenge to business educators, they also have the power to

inspire innovation. Not only that, they create a learning environment where teaching becomes an enriching experience, one that challenges and invigorates not only the students, but the teacher as well. **Z**

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