

Meaningful Learning and The Integration of Responsible Management Education in the Business School Courses¹

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International Journal of Modern Education Studies

June, 2018
Volume 2, No 1
Pages: 24-33

<http://www.ijonmes.net>
<http://dergipark.gov.tr/ijonmes>

Article Info:

Received : 13.01.2018
Revision 1 : 17.04.2018
Accepted : 23.06.2018

Abstract:

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in responsible management education. Integration of the principles of responsible management education (PRME) within the core curricula of business schools and management education-related institutions calls for the creation of innovative pedagogies and educational approaches. Responding to the inherent challenges associated with the development and implementation of education for sustainability within existing business-related education, this paper seeks to discuss a teaching initiative of introducing Model United Nations (Model UN) as a classroom activity for undergraduate students. The main purpose of research presented in this paper is to explore students' experience of engaging in Model UN debates around topics related to the sustainable development goals as defined in the UN 2030 Agenda for sustainable development (for example, youth unemployment, climate change, poverty, etc.). Model UN is traditionally known as an extra-curricular educational simulation of the United Nations where students play their roles as delegates from different countries and endeavour to solve real world issues using the policies and perspectives of their assigned country as well as policies and procedures of the United Nations. In this paper Model UN is proposed as a classroom engagement activity which assists undergraduate students in recognising the complexity of international negotiations and reflecting on challenges associated with the decision making process and how it affects the sustainability agenda on the individual and societal level. This paper seeks to provide a useful insight into the practical value of Model UN simulation as a means to facilitate meaningful learning on the course. It is suggested that experience of introducing Model UN as a core curricular activity, rather than one that is extra-curricular, will be of particular interest for educators who are involved in delivering sustainability-related courses or wishing to teach sustainability-related topics in globally responsible business-related education programs for undergraduate students.

Keywords: Responsible management education, meaningful learning, sustainability

Citation:

Gadelshina, G., Vemury, C., & Attar, A. (2018). Meaningful learning and the integration of responsible management education in the business school courses. *International Journal of Modern Education Studies*, 2(1), 24-33.

¹ This study was presented as oral presentation in The International Conference on Modern Education Studies.

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INTRODUCTION

In the era of the post-2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals there has been an increased attention to the integration of the skills and concepts of sustainability in higher education curricula. Many universities and business schools worldwide are now exploring possibilities of incorporating principles of sustainability and responsible management into their teaching, research and enterprise activities. Towards the end of the 20th century, the global debate on mankind's role in causing irreversible changes within the atmosphere and various elements of the biosphere has gathered considerable momentum. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change formally recognizes the unfavorable effect of human activity on the environment and stipulates its member states to work collaboratively in addressing this grave problem. Various intergovernmental panels and conventions have acknowledged the credibility of the body of scientific evidence that suggests a direct correlation between the industrialized way of life and the damages suffered by the ecosystems and the wider human society (Earth Council, 2000; Paris Agreement, 2015). The vision set out by the Brundtland Commission (1987) can only be realised if everyone across the board, from a lay individual through to global governmental systems truly understand the dynamic interdependence between the human and natural systems (Dale & Newman, 2005). As highlighted by Vemury et al. (2013, 2015), it is incumbent upon Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE) institutions to engender among their students as well as the wider community, an understanding of the dynamic nature of earth's ecosystems and a responsible way of engaging with them.

Nowadays, there are multiple perspectives on the way teaching professionals can promote and deliver sustainability teaching and learning. It has been recognised that creating learning environments in which students can meaningfully learn about sustainability and sustainable development presents significant challenges for higher education professionals. Students on business-related programmes at universities should be given the opportunity to learn about sustainability and sustainable development to a sufficient level of rigour so in the future they can then take informed decisions and actions driven not just by ambitions of increasing bottom-line profits and shareholder value, but by a sense of environmental consciousness and socio-economic equity throughout their professional career. It has been argued that delivering principles of sustainability requires dedicated HE institutions to adopt pedagogic strategies that are cross-disciplinary and broad enough to show a good balance between the environmental and social equity issues (Jucker, 2001; Mulder et al., 2012).

This paper presents discussion and reflection on the importance of a teaching and learning concept called meaningful learning. The overarching aim of the study is to provide a useful insight into the practical value of Model United Nations activities in the classroom as a means to facilitate meaningful learning on business-related university

courses. To illustrate pedagogical opportunities and challenges related to sustainability education informed by the UN Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), data drawn from first year undergraduate students at Newcastle Business School (Northumbria University, UK) has been analysed.

Responsible Management Education and Meaningful Learning

The United Nations' Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) is a global initiative which seeks to embed principles of sustainability and responsible management in business school teaching, research and enterprise activities. The PRME represents a set of voluntary standards to which business schools agree to adhere to and incorporate universal values into curricula and research. Acting as 'a catalyst and as a facilitator' for the development of a new generation of business leaders, the PRME calls for a more systemic understanding of the mission of management education in society (Alcaraz & Thiruvattal, 2010). Since its official launch in 2007 more than 650 leading business schools from over 85 countries have become PRME signatories (UNPRME, 2016). Higher education institutions involved in the PRME are guided by the following six principles:

1. Purpose: Developing the capabilities of students to be future generators of sustainable value for business and society at large and to work for an inclusive and sustainable global economy.

2. Values: Incorporating into our academic activities and curricula the values of global social responsibility as portrayed in international initiatives such as the United Nations Global Compact.

3. Method: Creating educational frameworks, materials, processes and environments that enable effective learning experiences for responsible leadership.

4. Research: Engaging in conceptual and empirical research that advances our understanding about the role, dynamics, and impact of corporations in the creation of sustainable social, environmental and economic value.

5. Partnership: Interacting with managers of business corporations to extend our knowledge of their challenges in meeting social and environmental responsibilities and to explore jointly effective approaches to meeting these challenges.

6. Dialogue: Facilitating and supporting dialog and debate among educators, students, business, government, consumers, media, civil society organisations and other interested groups and stakeholders on critical issues related to global social responsibility and sustainability (UNPRME, 2016).

As discussed by Waddock et al. (2009), PRME presents a unique opportunity to business schools and educators to critically reflect upon and form their own perspectives

of the numerous challenges faced by humanity and to help them develop pedagogic strategies that address these challenges. Muff et al. (2013) call upon educators to amend their instruments of imparting management education so they contain greater emphasis on inclusivity and environmental consciousness. Given the nature of their expertise, business educators may not have adequate level of initiative and understanding to deliver PRME without receiving additional training in sustainability matters (Cezarino, 2016). This calls for the leadership team of a business school to clearly set out its vision and plan for achieving PRME and seek the active support of its academic staff and students in this endeavour.

Model United Nations (Model UN) is known as an educational simulation in which students can learn about international relations and the United Nations role and responsibilities. Model UN is one of the world's most popular extra-curricular educational simulations where students play their roles as delegates from different countries and endeavour to solve real world issues using the policies and perspectives of their assigned country as well as policies and procedures of the United Nations (Levy, 2016).

Increasingly, research demonstrates a wide range of benefits which Model UN can bring to support students' learning journey in the university (Obendorf & Randerson, 2012). For example, Philips and Muldoon Jr (1996) argue that the students participating in Model UN are likely to develop an ability to view complex problems with a perspective which is broad and more global in its essence. This, in their opinion, prepares business students really well to function and succeed in the business environment which is characterised by the interdependence of various national and international governmental and non-governmental organisations. Despite the evidence of the educational potential of Model UN, there has been little research on how Model UN simulations can support sustainability education in the university context. The study presented in this paper begins to address this research gap.

In this paper Model UN is proposed as a classroom engagement activity which assists undergraduate students in recognising the complexity of international negotiations. It also encourages reflection on the challenges associated with the decision making process and how it affects the sustainability agenda on the individual and societal level. Design of the "International Business Environment" module which is used as a case study in this paper has been informed by the principles for responsible management education. This module incorporates Model UN simulation as a core learning activity to facilitate meaningful learning.

Meaningful Learning

Meaningful learning is one of the educational topics which has been built upon the ideas of Ausubel (1963, 1968, 2000) and which has been extensively discussed in academic literature over the last fifty years. It is generally agreed that meaningful learning occurs

when the learner interprets, relates, and incorporates new information with existing knowledge and applies the new information to solve novel problems (Cortright, Collins & DiCarlo, 2005). Some researchers link meaningful learning with the reflective practice of the learner, allowing for reconstruction of a person's view of him or herself. From this perspective meaningful learning can be defined as a realisation of a person's weaknesses, strengths, and potentials (Taniguchi, Freeman, & Richards, 2005).

According to Ausubel (1968), new information is meaningful to a learner to the extent that it can be related to what is already known. In this sense, there is a clear distinction between the idea of meaningful learning and rote learning or memorising. Considering that knowledge stored in our brain consists of networks and propositions, when meaningful learning takes place “new concept meanings are integrated into our cognitive structure to a greater or lesser extent, depending on how much effort we make to seek this integration, and on the quantity and quality of our existing, relevant cognitive structure” (Novak, 2002, p. 551). Being accompanied by the creation of multiple mental models, meaningful learning results in the acquisition of knowledge that is well integrated with everything else that the learner knows, as Michael (2001, p.147) explains. In contrast to meaningful learning, if we learn by rote memorising “no integration of new concept meanings occurs, and existing cognitive structure is not elaborated or reconstructed” (Novak, 2002, p.551).

When it comes to factors that promote meaningful learning in the classroom experience, it is argued that one of the powerful ways to facilitate meaningful learning is to get students’ to talk about subject matter by discussing it with one another, justifying and explaining their points of view as opposed to simply listening to the tutor’s explanations (Michael, 2001). Therefore, for meaningful classroom experiences students should play an active role in exploring the interaction opportunities provided by learning activities. In addition to student interactions, the relationship between the new content and students’ prior knowledge can be enhanced by scaffolding students’ learning and providing them with support when and where it is needed. As Michael (2001, p.155) puts it “meaningful learning... is possible, but students need our help to get there.” Furthermore, it has been suggested that facilitation of meaningful learning in the classroom requires teaching professionals to learn new ways of interacting with their students by clearly articulating meaningful teaching as a major objective of their course.

It is argued, that the integration of sustainability in higher education curricula requires critical thinking about re-orientation of existing didactical arrangements (Wals & Jickling, 2002). New didactical arrangements call for the exploration of new ways of teaching and learning. This will require moving from rote learning towards more creative and meaningful learning practices. However, to date there has been limited research exploring the relationship between sustainability education and meaningful learning. In

what follows next, we will begin to address this gap by discussing opportunities and challenges associated with facilitation of meaningful learning in the classroom.

METHOD

In this study, we have examined to what extent Model UN, as a pedagogical method, can be effective to promote meaningful learning through facilitating student participation in classroom discussion and increasing student interaction. In order to get students' feedback on the success of the chosen teaching approach, the leading author who is a module tutor of a core undergraduate module "International Business Environment", collected 302 questionnaires from the first-year undergraduate students studied on this module in 2015-2016 academic year. For the purpose of this paper we have analysed two open-ended questions from these questionnaires: To what extent have the Model UN activities been beneficial to your learning on the module? What is the most important skill you have learned during the Model UN seminar sessions? To explore and understand the phenomenon of meaningful learning we utilised an inductive approach based on the principles of grounded theory which allowed us to interpret 'real' experiences of the students involved in Model UN simulations (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

RESULTS

Students' resistance

Students' feedback provided in their questionnaires has been an eye-opening experience for a teaching team as it suggests that a lot of students have been challenged by the Model UN classroom activities. Most of the learning expectations of the first year undergraduate students are based on a mix of traditional rote learning activities, and students are experiencing difficulties when meaningful learning activities (such as Model UN) are introduced in the class. Our research has shown that it is not an easy task for the first-year students to move from the traditional approaches which emphasise rote learning to teaching and learning patterns where meaningful learning prevails. At times, for example, we were faced with students' dissatisfaction which have been highlighted in the comments such as "Model UN is irrelevant to my learning", it "did not spark my interest", "I wasn't interested, if I wanted to do Model UN discussions I would've opted for politics". Thus, implementation of the innovative teaching methods can cause some resistance from particular groups of students. Therefore, as teaching professionals, we have to learn how to identify possible areas of resistance and how to address them in order to support students' learning journey.

Benefits of Model UN simulation

On the other hand, many students consider that Model UN activities have been beneficial to their learning on the module. Positive comments of the students in relation to Model UN included their appreciation of "similarities and differences between countries"

during the classroom discussions, as well as the possibility of “learning in depth about certain countries” they “had little previous knowledge on”. Students’ responses also highlighted their interest in the work of the UN which they consider as important knowledge for international business managers. In addition, students mentioned that Model UN discussion has been one of “the best and most interesting ways to learn” about international business. Model UN discussion has been recognised as an informative activity which has provided students with the opportunity of “consolidating” their own knowledge and thus contributed to the development of their course work. One of the students wrote “It was my first time experiencing something like that [Model UN activities] and it was very interesting to think of solutions to today’s problems. It broadened my understanding and I’ve become more interested in similar issues and UN approach”.

Importance of critical reflection

Our data suggests that some of the students expect to see relevance of the Model UN classroom activities to their assessment only, rather than to be challenged by in-depth discussions about global business issues in the class. Moreover, several comments were quite disappointing as they showed that students did not see any relevance of classroom discussion to their future, as one of the students mentioned “It was a good experience... however, I don’t think it would benefit me in the future”. We also observed that meaningful learning requires both the facilitators and the students to exercise sufficient levels of critical reflection throughout the learning period. As teaching professionals we should find new ways of active engagement with our students in order to get more in-depth insights in their learning experience on the course. Our active engagement with students can help us to consider what ignites their interest in subject matter and facilitate their meaningful learning by creating teaching materials and environment that support their objectives in personal and professional development.

Role of tutor’s guidance and tutor’s support

We have also collected interesting comments which allowed us to shed some light on the important role of tutors in guiding and supporting students’ participation in Model UN simulation. Students were specific in their criticism of the Model UN terminology and procedures which they said they have found confusing. For example, one of the students mentioned being “ a bit lost at the start”, while others were much more explicit saying that they simply “did not understand all the UN activities”. Several students pointed out that they found the Model UN related tasks “quite difficult” as “they never done anything like that before”. Obviously, these comments suggest that innovative teaching approaches might hinder meaningful learning when students have a lack of clarity in new terminology and have difficulties in linking it to their previous learning experience. Thus, students need careful guidance and support from the teaching staff during their first exposure to Model UN simulation.

Model UN simulation and students' skills development

When asked “What is the most important skill you have learned during the Model UN seminar sessions?” 26 % of students highlighted that one of the most important skills they’ve learned during their Model UN experience is research skills. Team-working skills have been developed by 21% of respondents. Students highlighted their expectation of active engagement from their peers, at the same time our data suggests that this was not always the case. One of the students put this explicitly by observing that “not everyone participating in the debate were taking the task seriously, therefore at times it wasn’t productive”. Similarly, another student mentioned “people did not give the activity their all, this led to only a few people contributing”. Public speaking and academic writing have been recognised as important skills developed during Model UN discussions by 10% and 11% of the students respectively. Students also mentioned the importance of other skills such as communication, leadership and presentation skills.

CONCLUSION

There is a growing number of scholars emphasising the importance of the re-orientation of the existing business curricula towards sustainability teaching and learning. This paper helps to understand better how meaningful learning can help to facilitate and support sustainability education. This study provides a useful insight into the practical value of Model UN as a means to facilitate meaningful learning on business-related courses. It provides a useful analysis of the challenges and complexity related to the delivery of Model UN simulation as a classroom engagement activity. It is important to acknowledge that the current study has been conducted in one British university and data has been collected from one cohort of undergraduate students. Considering the importance of meaningful learning on sustainability-related programmes, more research is required to explore a range of factors that may limit or facilitate meaningful learning in the classroom.

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