

# Business Education for Corporate Social Responsibility and Social Justice

Shannon Deer

Texas A & M University - College Station, [sdeer@mays.tamu.edu](mailto:sdeer@mays.tamu.edu)

Jill Zarestky

Texas A & M University - College Station, [jill.zarestky@colostate.edu](mailto:jill.zarestky@colostate.edu)

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## **Business Education for Corporate Social Responsibility and Social Justice**

Shannon Deer  
Jill Zarestky  
Texas A&M University

**Abstract:** Business schools struggle to incorporate corporate social responsibility (CSR) into their curriculum. Using qualitative methods, this study explored the impact teaching CSR had on business students' beliefs, assumptions, and values.

**Keywords:** undergraduate sustainability education, corporate social responsibility, business sustainability, social justice pedagogy

The most common definitions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) involve responsible business practices “in terms of broad societal goals that can encompass economic, legal, ethical, or philanthropic business aspects in excess of what any law or regulation may require” (Goering, 2014, p. 493). Other terms have been used to express similar efforts for responsible business, such as sustainability. Sustainability incorporates business practice with long-term consciousness about impact on people, profit, and planet – known as the 3Ps, or the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1997; AACSB, 2016).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a relatively new concept gaining attention in corporations and business schools (Christensen, Peirce, Hartman, Hoffman, Carrier, 2007; Toubiani, 2012). Despite increased consideration, CSR is not widely integrated in many business schools' curriculum (Christensen et al., 2007; Toubiani, 2012). As many business students have not been exposed to issues of social justice and CSR, adult education (AE) practices in business classes may influence students' views of social justice and CSR. The purpose of this study is to evaluate how business students' perspectives evolve after exposure to CSR education, specifically when students have developed sustainable solutions from business principles to address social issues in the context of a CSR-focused course.

A change in the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB; 2016) eligibility requirements for accreditation makes this study even timelier. Schools are required to “demonstrate a commitment to address, engage, and respond to current and emerging corporate social responsibility issues (e.g., diversity, sustainable development, environmental sustainability, and globalization of economic activity across cultures) through its policies, procedures, curricula, research, and/or outreach activities” (p. 6). The AACSB's concerns about changes in the landscape of business and the public's expectations motivated the new requirements.

Society is increasingly demanding that companies become more accountable for their actions, exhibit a greater sense of social responsibility, and embrace more sustainable practices. These trends send a strong signal that what business needs today is much different from what it needed yesterday or will need tomorrow...business schools must respond to the business world's changing needs by providing relevant knowledge and skills to the communities they serve. (p. 3)

### **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

The framework for the present study draws from experiential learning, in the context of the specific course and the business school in general. Kolb (1984) first developed an experiential

learning model, which exhibits the cycle of transforming experience into knowledge through four modes: *concrete experience*, *reflective observation*, *abstract conceptualization*, and *active experimentation* (Kolb, Boyatzis & Mainemelis, 1999).

In the CSR course at the center of this study, the instructors applied experiential learning methods to teach students how to use critical thinking and business skills learned in other courses to develop sustainable solutions to social problems globally. The students came to the course with concrete experiences that caused them to want to find solutions to the problems they saw in the world, including poverty, hunger, environmental degradation, human trafficking, refugee crises, and illiteracy. Table 1 highlights some teaching methods and strategies used to provide students with experiential learning opportunities in alignment with Kolb's (1984) cycle.

Table 1. An Overview of Select Teaching Methods and Strategies

<b>Class Exercise</b>	<b>Description/Purpose of the Exercise</b>	<b>Experiential Learning Component</b>
Nonprofit founder and business faculty sharing their real world experiences and research	The nonprofit founder shared experiences developing a sustainable solution to a social problem. The faculty member shared research related to how organizations have addressed social problems. The purpose was to model comfort with uncertainty and pivoting to explore better solutions.	Abstract conceptualization
Select a social problem	The instructors tasked students with selecting a social problem to work to solve. Students were reluctant to select a problem without a solution in mind. The purpose was to have students apply the course concepts and experiment with a problem they found important.	Active experimentation and abstract conceptualization
Root problem identification	Using a tree as a metaphor, instructors facilitated an activity where students placed their problems at the tree's top. The class then worked to fill in the root causes of the problem(s) on the tree's roots. The purpose was to help students avoid addressing a symptom instead of the root.	Active experimentation and abstract conceptualization
Funneling	The instructors modeled for and with the students a funneling technique to demonstrate how one may start with a large problem and narrow it to a solvable scope. For example, illiteracy was funneled into childhood illiteracy in one location; factory farming was funneled into cost containment or effective distribution methods for alternative farming.	Active experimentation
Decision making model	Instructors introduced students to a decision making model. The model starts with clearly defining the problem and stakeholders, establishing criterion for a successful conclusion, developing alternatives and evaluating them against the criterion, and selecting and strategizing the implementation of the best alternative. The purpose was to give structure to students' decision making and prevent them prematurely developing a solution.	Active experimentation

Case competition/ develop a sustainable solution	The instructors hosted a campus case competition in which students developed sustainable solutions to social, economic, or environmental problems, with solutions implemented by nonprofits, existing businesses, or new businesses students may start themselves. The purpose was to create an opportunity to apply concepts from class.	Concrete experience
Reflective journals and metareflection essay	Instructors required students to reflect weekly on their observations, conceptualizations, and experiences in class. The final course assignment was a metareflection essay, for which students reread their weekly journals and evaluated how their beliefs, values, and assumptions changed or evolved.	Reflective observation

Study participants were students enrolled in the newly-developed CSR course, investigating business solutions to economic, social, and environmental problems, taught in a business school at a major research university. All students enrolled in the course were eligible for participation and 14 students elected to participate in the study. All participants were undergraduate business majors, including 14% sophomores, 21% juniors, 50% seniors, and 14% were completing their fifth year of a joint undergraduate and master's program. Women comprised 71% of participants and 29% were men. Data consisted of each student's weekly journals and final metareflection essay. The students' reflections included their emotional and cognitive reactions to what they were learning in the course.

Two qualitative analysis methods, thematic and narrative, were used to analyze the data (Merriam, 2009). Both analysis methods were used to examine the stories students presented in their reflections regarding their challenges, successes, and intellectual growth and achievement over the course of the semester. Using thematic analysis, one researcher unitized the reflections then, independently, the researchers coded the data using a constant comparative method to identify themes within the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The analyses were refined through multiple rounds of review, including the researchers comparing the themes they each identified using narrative and thematic analysis, evaluating any differences, and coming to consensus.

After the thematic analysis, the researchers perceived the structure of students' reflections and the evolution of their thoughts were important but obscured by the thematic analysis unitization. Therefore, the narrative analytic method was applied to examine the content and structure of students' journals as individual stories (Riessman, 2008). Both researchers independently read through the student journals from start to finish, identifying apparent themes and structures. In the following sections, we present findings from both analyses.

### Findings

Upon entering the course, the participants clearly had a desire to make a bigger and more positive impact on the world than they had previously seen from for-profit business. However, the students lacked a framework for taking action. Through the course, the participants developed criteria for evaluating solutions to social problems based on their long-term sustainability and viability. The course gave the students tools for questioning or transforming and expressing their beliefs, assumptions, and values.

#### Findings From the Thematic Analysis

The major themes from the thematic analysis of students journal data were (a) growth in and awareness of students' critical thinking skills and (b) perspective change in students' views of business as a solution to social problems and their future careers.

**Critical thinking skills.** Because students' critical thinking skills were a primary target of the course design, students were expected to develop in that regard. In evidence of success, the thematic analysis revealed ways in which students became aware of and perceived their own critical thinking and analysis skills. Most students discussed the impact one or more specific tools had on their thinking, in particular the decision-making model, the funneling exercise, and the root problems exercise. For example, Felicity explained, "sometimes I get so caught up in seeing immediate results that I miss out of the root problem entirely. In order to get a real, tangible results I must ponder on the very real, but intangible questions." The root problem exercise helped her think more carefully about complexities associated with social action.

In considering complicated issues, like the Syrian refugee crisis, Spring felt she had gained new skills. She explained, "thinking about the refugee crisis still overwhelms me, but I've been able to think more critically now on how we might actually be able to solve some of the problems associated with this humanitarian disaster." Those skills, for many students, had applications to contexts outside of the course, in terms of their other academic work, employment, philanthropy, and future career.

Students also described how they would apply their growing skills to other contexts in their lives, including other courses and their current and future workplaces. Honor connected his skills to his future work and shared, "I think most businesses that want to find sustainable solutions [face] these barricades and challenges, but I believe this course has equipped me with the mindset and perspectives to help these organizations."

**Perspective change.** Students expressed shifts in their thinking about the role of for-profit businesses, non-profit businesses, and the roles each type plays in addressing or solving social problems as well as the role of charity in comparison to sustainable solutions. For example, Noble realized that "...my role in solving generational poverty does not have to come from working in a non-profit, but can come from working for for-profit corporation". Honor stated "After...looking at the role of a business from a different perspective, I realized I was compartmentalizing [nonprofit and for-profit]. A business' goal should not just be to make a profit. A business should also help the community." The students expanded perspective of a business's purpose from primarily to generate a profit and maximizing shareholders' wealth to benefiting society. This finding was also evidenced in the narrative analysis, which investigated the stories told by students in their reflections.

### **Findings From the Narrative Analysis**

Findings emerged based upon the specific qualities and design of the course as previously described but eight of the 14 students also had strong narratives in their journals about their changing perceptions and thought processes over the semester. As a result of applying narrative analytic techniques to further investigate the stories students were telling in their journals, we found a recurring structure among those eight narratives, pertaining to their development over the semester as a result of the course, as presented in Figure 1.

The students' stories all began with their desire or passion to help others. Unfortunately, their aspirations were then tempered by feelings of being overwhelmed or not knowing where to

begin. For example, as Joy explained,

For me, I have always been passionate about people, but I fear that I will not be able to make a true difference, or even worse, I will exacerbate the problem even more. In the next week, we confirmed that everyone in the class had similar fears, but we could not let these fears stop us from pursuing a solution.



Figure 1. Students' evolution of thought as evidenced in their narratives

As part of the course design, students were taught concrete tools and strategies to address social problems through manageable tasks and sustainable outcomes. Mercy described her experience with the funneling activity designed to take broad problems and make them more focused and manageable:

I was lucky enough to receive help in funneling down my choice of a social problem to make it more specific. [The instructors] guided me through the process and with the help of my peers I was able to go from the broad idea of helping men, women, and children in prostitution, to a more precise and detailed idea. At the end of the discussion we had narrowed the social problem, it would be: to help runaway children in Texas who are homeless and unemployed by offering a safe haven, a shelter, and even an opportunity for employment. It was incredible to see how with just a few questions, I was able to create a feasible solution to a problem that could potentially be sustainable.

Among others, Mercy was able to articulate her newfound skills and resources to address problems using tools provided in the course.

From those tools, students began to express an increased sense of confidence in their own abilities. Pax believed, "after going through the course, I feel far more prepared to make a difference through sustainability, whether it is through another organization or on my own." This expression of confidence is in direct opposition to the uncertainty students expressed at the beginning of their narratives.

The ultimate conclusion from the student narratives was a strong sense of future agency and efficacy in addressing social problems through business solutions. Spring summarized, when looking at an issue of this magnitude, it's almost impossible to not feel overwhelmed and feel helpless to do something. But, I've learned to narrow down my focus on what it is I can work to fix and that makes it seem much more feasible... Throughout this semester, I think I have really learned just how much of an impact I want to have on the world around me.

Zara concluded "I am now aware that I can make a radical difference in the world without having to pack my bags and live a drastic lifestyle..." and "I am for once excited for where that will take me in the business world."

### Discussion and Conclusions

As a result of the present study, we wish to highlight the possibilities for transforming the way business students evaluate social problems and the role businesses can play in exacerbating or resolving such problems. Many students are concerned about the contributions they will make

to society and the public is increasingly aware of business's role in society (AACSB, 2016). Of particular relevance is the finding regarding students' view of non-profit versus for-profit business. Through intentional CSR coursework, students as future professionals are better positioned to make a positive impact and forward causes of social justice, sustainability, and diversity in any type of organization.

The present study's CSR course design and findings can inform business school curriculum, particularly regarding new eligibility requirements for accreditation (AACSB, 2016), as well as the role of adult education principles and practices in expanding future business leaders' beliefs, assumptions, and values. Such research could then be used to expand adult education's contribution to corporate social responsibility and engage with issues of social justice in a new context, meet the desire of millennials to make an impact on society (Christensen et al., 2007), and transform business students into sustainable problem solvers. The findings may also allow business schools to explore another vehicle for teaching business students critical thinking skills using social problems, which could be transferable into other academic and professional contexts.

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