

CATHOLIC EDUCATION IN A PARALLEL UNIVERSE: POSTCARDS FROM THE BUSINESS SCHOOL

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Abstract

This paper describes a strategy for overcoming a major obstacle facing faculty of Jesuit and Catholic Universities who want to more fully integrate the ideals of Catholic Social Teaching into their pedagogy and their lives. Too often, faculty members address and are aware of only the academic part of a student's life, paying little attention to the importance of the full college experience. This problem can be particularly prominent in the so-called professional schools, such as business schools, where a student's core curricular experiences is often left under-addressed. This paper describes "The Wall" exercise, a large-group intervention that uses brainstorming and story-boarding to make faculty aware of existing avenues for connecting with their students' lives.

Depending on which side of the lectern you stand, views of college can be quite different. From the student side, college is a holistic experience. It is the conglomeration of relationships, activities, and experiences (Estanek, 2007). Students often describe it as “the college experience,” of which professors and course work are just a part. From the faculty side of the lectern, however, especially the business faculty’s side, the university is often organized into distinct categories of departments, colleges, and the often ambiguous area that is “student life.” These categories constitute the three parallel universes in which business students at Catholic universities appear to reside. These parallel universes include their business school, their liberal arts foundational classes, and their co-curricular world. Rarely does business faculty attempt to connect the learning that occurs in their business school universe to the activities and learning in the other two universes. The book *Learning Reconsidered*, which argues for the integrated use of all campus resources to educate students, suggests learning “is included in a much larger context that requires consideration of what students know, who they are, what their values and behavior patterns are, and how they see themselves contributing to and participating in the world in which they live” (Keeling, 2004: 9). Unfortunately, college systems separate the student into body, mind, and spirit with faculty in charge of the mind and student life in charge of the body and spirit (Keeling, 2004). This paper proposes to discover a way for business (and other) faculty to better integrate the parallel universes into a more effective holistic education.

Parallel Universe No. 1- School of Business

The first parallel universe for business students is the school of business itself. For many reasons, business schools often are perceived as stand-alone operations, separate from rest of the university. There are many reasons for this sense of isolation. First, especially at Catholic universities, business faculty members can feel like second-class citizens left out of the university's mission (Naughton, Bausch, Fontan & Pierucci, 2007). After all, many of the key elements of university mission – such as theology and philosophy – exist in the liberal arts schools, not the business schools. Second, for schools with a strong liberal arts base, business schools can be more than just isolated; they can actually be viewed as unwelcome squatters on campus. Kraatz and Zajac (1997: 817) express this explicitly: “If there is one unifying historical normative belief or value held by the various constituents of non-profit, private liberal arts colleges (e.g., administrators, faculty, alumni, and philanthropic organizations), it is that liberal arts colleges are not intended to be schools for professional, career-oriented training.” The business schools’ perceived emphasis on professional, career-oriented training is viewed as inconsistent with norms and values of liberal arts colleges (Kraatz and Zajac, 1997). Third, business faculty members are feeling the strain of a changing discipline. Business schools are struggling with new accreditation standards while encountering articles with titles like “The end of business schools? Less success than meets the eye” (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002), “How business schools lost their way” (Bennis & O’Toole, 2005) and “Is the MBA overrated?” (Lavelle, 2006). Fourth, business faculty often does not see the connection between their work and the liberal arts foundation classes of their students. Business faculty often perceives liberal arts as too theoretical and abstract without understanding its relationship to business education (Naughton, et al., 2007).

Parallel Universe No. 2 – Liberal Arts Foundation Classes

The second parallel universe for business students are liberal arts foundational classes. While Catholic universities in particular, strive to provide a liberal arts foundation, and conceptual integration of that foundation with a business education often is left up to the students to discern (Naughton, et al., 2007). Liberal arts faculty members often see little relationship between their disciplines and business. Further, liberal arts faculty members often have an Aristotelian bias against work and business (Naughton, et al., 2007) as well as resentment against the higher pay earned by business educators (Matasar, 1986). The liberal arts faculty member often looks upon business with suspicion without understanding the work of business scholars (Naughton, et al., 2007). Also, like their business school colleagues, liberal arts faculty members are feeling the strain of change. Business and other professional schools are expanding at U.S. colleges and universities as liberal arts programs are shrinking (Brint, Riddle, Turk-Bicakci, & Levy, 2005). This trend is not going unnoticed. The development of more professional programs at liberal arts colleges will result in what philosophy professor Henry Crimmel (1993: 9-13) called a “desecrated temple” and/or an “academic theme park.” Interestingly, students also have taken notice. At Columbia Union College, for example, students protested the college’s plan to do away with most of its liberal arts programs in favor of developing a professional medical-care program (Lenhart, 2006). The students held a peaceful rally and signed a petition and the school backed down and kept its liberal arts programs. However, despite such resistance to change, the trend toward more professional schools continues.

Parallel Universe No. 3 – Co-curricular World

The third parallel universe for business students is their co-curricular world. Typically, faculty members do not collaborate with student life directors to help students connect the lessons of the classroom with the rest of their lives. Learning occurs in the co-curricular universe, but faculty members do not tie it back to the classroom. In fact, the co-curricular world has become so separate from the classroom that some universities have gone so far as to create “co-curricular transcripts” for students (Gutowski, 2006). These transcripts capture students’ out-of-class experiences that complement the academic transcript of courses and grades. There’s also a missed opportunity for faculty development in the co-curricular world (Keeling, 2004). Student life professionals have the skills to serve as consultants to the faculty on issues such as advising, career counseling, classroom issues, and student development. Other opportunities may be campus-specific depending on the needs of faculty and the expertise of student affairs professionals.

Thus, given the clear disconnect between these universes, it would appear that bringing them closer together would be a tremendous benefit for business students attending Catholic universities, as well as the universities themselves. Through increased communication, greater interdisciplinary understanding, and the development and implementation of clear integrated strategies and practices, faculty can integrate these three parallel universes into one world in which all three experiences are connected and valued. By creating a context where ideas can be generated, compiled, and analyzed, best practices can be identified and implemented. To facilitate consideration of a more unified approach to education, this study delineates a set of protocols well suited to engaging faculty and administrators in such conversations. The following section provides the details to this approach.

Method

The technique described here is similar to the campus map recommended in *Learning Reconsidered 2*. A campus map recognizes, identifies and documents the sites for learning activities on campus (Borrego, 2006). In this case, the map becomes a storyboard “Wall” that can become the framework for linking the business school to the liberal arts foundation and co-curricular activities to optimize student learning.

Background of Storyboarding. The Wall is a method similar to storyboarding, which is a visual, structured form of brainstorming used to solve complex problems. As its name implies, it helps to create a story, in this case, the story of students’ parallel universes and the connections from the business school to the rest of the university and the students’ co-curricular lives. The “wall” technique creates the story using two primary steps. The first step is to state a problem and brainstorm solutions. This is done by posting the topic(s) of the problem on the wall and asking participants to work alone to write possible solutions to the problem on note cards. The cards are then posted to the wall and participants read one another’s ideas and brainstorm new ideas to post. Once participants run out of ideas, the second step of the process begins. The participants typically are split into two groups who take turns sorting the cards by content to determine categories of comments. The cards can be shuffled, rewritten or eliminated. Once the cards are categorized, the ideas can be examined for value and relevance.

The Wall method proposed here is similar to storyboarding, but different in at least four ways. First, the Wall begins at the end. Rather than posting a problem and allowing categories to be developed on the fly, the Wall method defines the categories at the beginning of the exercise and looks for the problems and solutions in the content of the note cards.

The second way in which the Wall is different from storyboarding is that it creates much more data than storyboarding and therefore, the analysis of the ideas posted to the Wall takes longer than the analysis of ideas from storyboarding. Once the Wall session ends, the ideas are collected and likely analyzed at a different time. Ideas can be entered into a spreadsheet and shared as “raw data” with various groups.

The third way in which the Wall is different from storyboarding is that it is a large-group intervention. Brainstorming itself is a form of intervention (Litchfield, 2008). The storyboard brainstorming method uses a small group – typically 8-12 people – while the Wall can be used with groups of more than 100. Thus the Wall achieves the primary goal of a large-group intervention, which is to “get the whole system in the room” (Cummings & Worley, 2005: 254) to identify and resolve an organization wide problem, in this case the problem of parallel universes.

Fourth, the Wall is aligned with the positive models of organization change. Instead of focusing on the problems of the organization, the Wall focuses on what the organization is already doing right. It helps participants see where good things are happening and build off those success stories to achieve even better results. Positive models of organization change, such as positive organizational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton, Quinn, & Bernstein, 2003) and appreciative inquiry (Cooperride & Whitney, 2001) draw from research on expectation effects showing that

people tend to act in ways that make their expectations occur. Thus, the positive postings in the Wall exercise can energize and direct behavior toward making those beliefs happen.

The Wall Technique. For the specific problem of connecting the parallel universes of students, representatives of the business and liberal arts faculty need to work together with representatives from co-curricular programs such as campus ministry and residence hall life to build a Wall. To begin the process, organizers must define categories representing either the core values of the institution. These categories are the links between the parallel universes, links which already exist but are not being fully used. These categories might be easily taken from the university's mission statement or strategic goals. In one example (Pepper, Tredennick, & Hazel, under review), the organizers used the core values of Ignatian education to identify the categories, and were able to discover several useful cross-organizational linkages. In storyboarding, even if the wrong categories are defined in the beginning, new categories can easily be created as the process unfolds. Storyboarding is a forgiving process in which new categories can be added when ideas require a separate category (Higgins, 1996). Similarly, in the wall technique, categories can be collapsed and ideas put under a "miscellaneous" category if there are not enough ideas to warrant a separate category.

Once the categories are identified, the brainstorming can begin. Building a storyboard Wall demands a lot of involvement from participants. Specifically, participants are asked to fill out cards detailing what practices their department already uses to instill or emphasize a particular category, or what ideas they have for such practices. Like brainstorming, once the ideas begin to flow, participant's creativity increases as they embellish and build upon the ideas of one another.

To build the Wall, the following steps would be followed:

1. Organizers discern the important categories to be connected through the Wall exercise. These categories will be idiosyncratic to each effort, but could be taken from the mission of the college or from the goals of some strategic plan.
2. Posters with the defined categories of interest are spaced out on the Walls in the room in which the exercise is conducted. Adequate space below the posters allows participants to attach their note cards to the appropriate category.
3. Participants are informed that they will be taking part in a brainstorming exercise. The basic rules of brainstorming are stressed (Osborn, 1957): outrageous ideas are welcome; no criticism is allowed; quantity of ideas is important, quality can be determined later; and combining and piggybacking on others' ideas is encouraged.
4. Participants are given note cards on which to write their practices and ideas. Most of the space on the note cards is blank to give participants room to write their answers. However, there are three structured questions on the note cards. The first asks the participant to note whether this is an idea or an actual practice. The second asks for the participant's name (though names are optional) and the third asks for the name of each participant's department.
5. Participants spend some quiet time writing their practices and ideas down.
6. Participants post their note cards to the Wall under the appropriate categories and spend some time reading the note cards of other participants.
7. After reading the note cards of others, the brainstorming begins. Participants can piggyback ideas from each other to create new programs or can perhaps have "aha"

moment in which they see a way to bridge what is happening in one department with what is happening in another.

8. The process of reading note cards of others and creating new ideas continues until participants run out of energy or ideas.
9. Cards are collected and the process of drawing the map begins.

What comes next is where the corridors between parallel universes can be found. One advantage of the Wall method is that it allows the group to experiment with moving ideas into different categories to change the storyline. This movement can be done during the Wall process if participants feel they want to create a new category or collapse two or more categories together. However, most of the movement will be done after the Wall is created. The data collected from the Wall will be messy but rich with untapped potential. Teams of interdisciplinary university members can take turns sorting the cards into categories to discover different types of campus corridors between the parallel universes. For example, one group might organize the ideas in relation to the outcomes they pursue. Another might organize them in relation to tenets of the university mission. Different corridors can be created based on the creativity of each team.

Outcomes of the Wall. Once the data is collected from the Wall, several outcomes are possible. The first outcome is communication. Even in its raw, unorganized form, the data collected in the Wall exercise will contain information about what is happening in all three parallel universes. To anyone willing to read through it, it will communicate what is happening in the students' lives.

The second outcome of the Wall is connection. Once the note cards are arranged into categories, faculty and staff can examine what is happening around campus in each category and begin to connect their work to the work in other parallel universes. For example, if all note cards related to student honor societies are classified under a topic like "academic rigor," then faculty members who advise the student honor societies can easily see who else on campus is doing similar work. The information from the Wall would make it possible for a faculty member advising the business honor society to connect with the faculty member advising the English honor society.

The third outcome of the Wall is collaboration. Once connections between faculty members have been made, the opportunity to work together can arise. For example, a tutoring program for at-risk youth in the education department can be connected to a program in the business school that encourages students to volunteer in the community or to a student organization that focuses on mentoring. The programs in the different parallel universes can help and complement each other.

The fourth outcome of the Wall is reduction in redundancy. By discovering what is happening in the other parallel universes, faculty can avoid "re-inventing the wheel" in their own departments and better use the resources of the whole university. For example, after the Wall results are communicated, students interested in developing a program or starting a project can easily be pointed to needed resources in other departments.

The fifth outcome of the Wall is data. The ideas from the Wall create a warehouse of practices already in place in an institution. Furthermore, allowing participants to share ideas capitalizes on

the creativity of the entire organization, as well as providing a forum in which individuals can feel their ideas are being heard and appreciated.

The sixth outcome of the Wall is to bring all members of the campus community closer together. The Wall brings everyone together in a room and helps them discover what they have in common. By examining the different programs and work of the different departments, similarities and overlaps in interests can be found. The whole community benefits when the artificial barriers between universes are bridged.

Conclusion

It is unlikely that parallel universes will ever be completely eliminated. There are historic, structural, and political factors which will likely always influence divides on campus (Steffes & Keeline, 2006). However, building wormholes between the universes is crucial to promote the best learning outcomes for students.

Creating corridors to the parallel universes through the Wall technique has at least three potential benefits for business faculty members. First, it allows business faculty members to make vital connections for students to learning outside the business school. Second, by explicitly stating what each parallel universe is doing, redundancies in the universes can be discovered and eliminated. Finally, business faculty can find potential for collaboration outside their universe that will allow them to break out of the business school silo and find greater community throughout the university. Such endeavors ultimately serve the students for whom such universities were created.

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