

Introducing Liberal Arts and Catholic Ideas in a Technical Business Education Course

by Michael H. Carlson

Participation in this seminar “Management Education at a Catholic University” motivated this author to consider ways to include themes of liberal education and the Catholic education tradition into the course currently being offered concurrent with the seminar, as well as plan for inclusion of such themes in future courses. Such thought was inspired by the seminar discussions as well as some of the readings. Several items in the *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* were of specific relevance in this motivation. Thinking was thus guided in this effort by the fundamental foundation that our primary educational task is essentially a “joy of searching for, discovering and communicating truth.”¹ In technical courses where the content is often dated quickly there must be an openness to accepting the new concepts, ideas, products and methods as they are developed and made available to the general community. Likewise there must be acceptance that ways of the past must be dismissed sometimes too soon for individual comfort. Awareness of the stress of technological displacement of familiar practices is common. In specific courses taught by this instructor a significant message is that we maintain the “priority of the ethical over the technical, of the primacy of the person over things, of the superiority of the spirit over matter.”² Such high-minded ideals can get shuffled aside as students spend many intense hours struggling to make sense of complex technical issues. Still in this variety of course as much as in any, it seems reasonable to seek some level of integration of such liberal education themes into the curriculum. Otherwise indeed what would be the difference of attending the University of St. Thomas (UST) versus any other Business College or University?

During this seminar there were many discussions that motivated consideration of ways to include more liberal thinking content in the course offerings. Hearing examples of the efforts of other instructors was very helpful. Other inspiration was provided by comments of Michael Jordan in his paper, “The Tension Between Liberal Education and Career Education” originally prepared for the 1987 Faculty Seminar on St. Thomas History. Noted with interest was his discovery of the early catalog claim that the main objective of the college was to prepare the student to “respond with ease and grace to all those life situations in which the cultured man will inevitably find himself.”³ A cognate goal in this instructor’s thinking is to have students, women and men, respond to the use and implications of computer methods in their work with due consideration and confidence. The conflict in education of Newman and Dewey of 50 years ago, before the first digital computer was in operation, still carries forth to our current efforts to provide both operational skills and situation analysis for our students in a moderately technical course offering. The threat of overemphasis on a technological tool or concept of current usage conflicts with the need of the student to get a better grasp of the greater picture. Ever improving and upgraded computers, software and networks put considerable pressure on

student and instructor alike to learn an ever increasing body of information and rapidly dismiss much of our earlier efforts. Sometimes information about technology yields confusion rather than knowledge. “The success of technology places new demands upon human being to serve the needs of technological advance, and the rewards of new advances encourage continued cultivation of the human powers that produce such success.”⁴ Also there was a challenge offered by the call in the encyclical for the need of a Catholic university to provide “priority of the ethical over the technical, of the primacy of the person over things, of the superiority of the spirit over matter.”⁵ As a humanist this writer felt immediately challenged to find a way to begin to pull these themes together in the courses being taught and planned for the future.

Bringing in liberal Catholic content does prove a challenge. This report covers some first efforts to put content in place and consider ways other material and method may be added to future course sections. Content direction and ideas would be such that similar ideas could be developed in any course of a similar nature, be it graduate or undergraduate courses here at UST or at any institution that lays claim to bridging the management education vs. liberal education abyss. This essay offers some ideas just being tested with students as well as ideas for the future to try. This paper is not presented as research, but course enrichment exploration.

The current course being taught, Business Communication 505: Computer Information Processing (BCOM 505 hereafter), is primarily a hands-on, computer laboratory style course. The course is designed to give a student basic preparation, practice and confidence in integration of computer tools into ordinary business communication practice. BCOM 505 course content includes basic study of computer components, history, system software, word processing techniques, an introduction to spreadsheets, basic database development, exploring Internet research and the use of presentation software. Liberal education it is not, but likewise it is not intended to be computer training. We must remind ourselves that we are in the process of putting “new human discoveries at the service of individuals and society.”⁶ Thinking, problem solving, cooperating and evaluating are stressed as the course proceeds. The examples described herein are some additional small efforts to bring integration of thinking and application of computer methods.

The course has an alternative of testing out by demonstrating competency in word processing, spreadsheet and database methods. Those who do take the course are tested in these areas to certify that the student has achieved a reasonable level of facility in application of these tools similar to the student who tests out of the course. The first effort at course enrichment for the BCOM 505 class came with the competency test for word processing. During the class session before the test a sample test was offered for review purposes. In both cases content from this seminar describing the liberal arts and Catholic nature of the university were chosen as the text to enter and format. These are shown in Appendices 1 & 2. Student reactions were varied. In fact discussion that UST should be different from other business education roused surprise from many class members. The intention was to make the point with the students that an effort is being

made to make this course more than just a “mechanical” work session and to inculcate some higher and broader thinking into the course.

For the Internet survey part of the course there was considerable content available that would be appropriate to the theme of this paper. Choosing something rather than offering all is most of the challenge. As we studied Internet browsing in the summer BCOM 505 course, Bible study information was brought up as a relevant example for a Catholic Business University. Pages visited as representative examples were explored. Those available at the time of this writing that were of particular interest included:

Bible Gateway at <http://www.gospelcom.net/bible> (Contains full text search tools for many versions NIV, NASB, RSV, KJV, Darby, or YLT as well as multiple languages including English, German, Swedish, Latin, French, Spanish, and Tagalog.)

The Interactive Bible at <http://www.bible.ca/> (Contents include such headings as “Ask a Bible Question, Get a Bible Answer,” “False Doctrines,” and “Telephone hotlines in your own home town.”)

Students were encouraged to start with these pages and move around to related sites and topics as their interests dictated. The response to the chosen study direction seemed more accepted than that of pursuing multiple searches on matches to “Business Communication” as the topic to examine as had been done in previous courses.

For the database section of the course the history of the University of St. Thomas seems reasonable fodder for the course. Use of this will be attempted this fall as part of the material for the introductory demonstrations offered in the course. An outline of this application would set up a table structure similar to this:

The table could be extended similarly for succeeding years. This is just a simple example of course, but it is a way to tie in a subject that would otherwise not be included in this course with the goal of giving a view of the UST history in the process. Other application may include encouragement to consider broader implications of the use of databases as to how they affect our lives. Questions to consider include: What are limitations on privacy that databases allow? How do you use databases in ways that protect personal information? How do databases give business people power to make more effective and accurate decisions? These are issues that have been given short shrift in the past courses.

While admittedly a minor first effort there has been some change in the way students seem to approach this course. Efforts to dismiss the presumption that one will know all about some aspect of computing have been better received than in past sections of the course. Students have sought to pursue more varied individual projects in the course. In future courses there will be opportunity to explore further enhancements to provide a richer experience for the student. There could also be appropriate applications of this new direction for the course that can be applied to spreadsheet analysis part of the course. Such consideration is not included in this paper. Overall the effect of attendance in this

seminar has provided a foundation for considering some course content and direction that would not have been considered otherwise.

The other UST course this instructor has taught, Business Communication 522: Communication Technology (BCOM 522) offers some great opportunities for bringing in liberal education themes. BCOM 522 is a course of exploration. Methods employed include: outside speakers, technical readings, general readings, student oral and written reports. The intent of the course as stated in the syllabus is to: survey some of the current and emerging communication technologies available to the professional communicator. Our chief objective is to qualify the student to make thoughtful, critical evaluations of technologies as potential tools in business communication.

For a text in BCOM 522 the book chosen in the past was Technopoly by Neil Postman. Even though originally published in 1992, the book continues to fit this course well. Since Technopoly was already out of print, The End of Work by Jeremy Rifkin was chosen as an alternative to give students a chance to consider ideas of the human impact of technology. Use of the Rifkin book in BCOM 522 had interesting and varied reactions, mostly negative. At the start of the course comments were offered like "I'm not just saying this to please you, I really do find this to be one of the most interesting course books I have been assigned in this program." Toward the middle of the course there was a level of disagreement, distaste and perhaps denial directed towards the ideas Rifkin offered. By the end there was generally an acceptance that indeed there have been massive changes in the world's employment patterns over the past 20 years and we may expect that to escalate in the next 20. Dealing with personal places in that future was a direction that the students seem to be seeking. As many of the students in the program are early in their careers, they don't like to consider themselves to be part of a redundant class. Looking to a future in alternative work modes is a difficult concept to handle at the start of one's career. In the future course offering more examination of how the student will be personally affected by various technological developments needs to be enriched. Participation in this seminar gives some added support to the direction of the course.

Since one of the stated objectives in the Syllabus of BCOM 522 is "to qualify the student to make thoughtful, critical evaluations of technologies as potential tools in business communication," it seems obvious that the challenge is open to tie in liberal Catholic ideas and ideals. Also stated is the intention to "examine even larger issues, such as the social effects of technology and its history and management." In future course sections there needs to be an effort to tie this together. Questioning techniques, appropriate writings and structured discussion sessions can all be modified to improve the connection. Throughout the next courses there will be frequent application of the ideas considered in this seminar.

Personal Note:

This writer's preparation for bringing liberal and business ideas together was greatly enhanced by attending this seminar. Previous preparation in liberal arts comes from an

undergraduate program which had as its humanities content satisfied by mathematics (major field) and one music appreciation course. Moreover almost all personal formal study has been at public institutions rather than the private university. This seminar provided a clearly different perspective.

Overall the current BCOM 505 course experiments have been a satisfying diversion for the instructor and perhaps has given the students a small sense that we are trying to look at a bigger picture in the course. One student midterm evaluation offered the comment, "Maybe you shouldn't include in quizzes those features you haven't discussed in class." In response at the next class we reiterated that this is graduate education, not computer training. There is a concerted effort in this class to stretch people beyond the mere cursory application of program parts to the point of thinking about how and what to use to accomplish a task. Also students were reminded of the long standing academic tradition of the maintenance of three separate and distinct course components: lecture, text, and test. There was no laughter when this statement was offered. Unfortunately, the humor involved had to be explained. I do believe that study should have an element of fun, but can not always include that.

I found the Papal Encyclical to be an important connection to the seminar. A search for truth as the key theme linked to the place of current knowledge was revealing and unexpected. This seminar was a rewarding experience and I was glad to have the opportunity to be part of the sessions and to write this paper. In the process I will claim to have a new direction for what I can do to encourage a broader learning experience in my classes.

Bibliography

Paul II, Pope John, The Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities. Origins, Oct.4, 1990. Vol. 20: No. 17.

Jordan, Michael. The Tension Between Liberal Education and Career Education. Papers 1987, Faculty Seminar on the History of the College of St. Thomas.

Postman, Neil. Technopoly. (1992). New York: Knopf.

Jeremy Rifkin, The End of Work, (1995) New York: Tarcher/Putnam.

Bible Gateway [On-line]. Available: <http://www.gospelcom.net/bible>

The Interactive Bible [On-line]. Available: <http://www.bible.ca/>

Appendix 1

Sample Word Processing Quiz
BCOM 505
Summer 1997

Reproduce the following document accurately. Use matching type faces, sizes, styles, margins and alignment. Check spelling and punctuation.

Ideas to Ponder

From Participants in the Summer Seminar
on Management Education at Catholic University

1. We seem to be saying that management is not fully a profession yet. Although it is incomplete as a profession, we have a desire to begin to think of it as a profession. To do so, we need to consider management in light of its public and social dimensions.

2. The three marks of a profession carry with them three attendant virtues:

Mark	Virtue
Intellectual content—a profession has a unique body of knowledge	Prudence
Moral dimension—a profession has a collective belief about right and wrong, about what is professional and unprofessional	Fidelity
Organization—a profession is organized as a guild to recover the ideas that the practice of the profession is an art	Public-spiritedness or commitment to the profession

mhc 6/9/97

Appendix 2

Word Processing Quiz
BCOM 505
Summer 1997

Reproduce the following document accurately. Use matching type faces, sizes, styles, margins and alignment. Check spelling and punctuation. Substitute your initials in the last line. Save the file on disk (hard disk or floppy, but know where it is located) with the name Quiz 2 and print your final version.

Quiz text starts here.

Ideas to Ponder

Management Education at the Catholic University

1. Liberal arts deals heavily with the intangibles. Liberal education has subsumed many of the things that were originally part of classical education. Liberal arts, and the education they provide are important for “wholeness.” Whereas management tends to deal with the tangibles, it also has to get to the intangibles.

2. “But a university and especially a Catholic university, has a living union of individual organisms dedicated to the search for truth... It is necessary to work toward a higher synthesis of knowledge, in which alone lies the possibility of satisfying that thirst for the truth which is profoundly inscribed on the heart of the human person.”

Ex Corde Ecclesiae

Quiz Grading Chart

<u>Criteria</u>	<u>Possible Points</u>	<u>Points Given</u>
Intellectual content – text is entered completely and correctly. Spelling is correctly used.	6	
Moral dimension – margins are set and styles correspond. Punctuation is accurate.	5	
Organization – borders, shading, font types are correctly used. Able to locate file on disk.	9	
Total Points Given	20	

place your initials here, 6/11/97

Works Cited

1. Pope John Paul II, The Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities, Origins, Oct. 4, 1990. Vol. 20: No. 17, p. 265.
2. John Paul II, p. 269.

3. Michael Jordan, The Tension Between Liberal Education and Career Education, Papers 1987, Faculty Seminar on the History of the College of St. Thomas, p. 21.

4. Jordan, The Tension, p. 26.

5. John Paul II, p. 269.

6. John Paul II, p. 273.

First chart

Historical Summary of the Development of the University of St. Thomas

<u>Time Period</u>	<u>President</u>	<u>Major Changes</u>	<u>Student Body</u>	<u>Other Changes</u>	<u>Issues</u>
1885-1902	Bishop John Ireland	Founded 9/9/1885	62 to 100, ages 10-20's		Money woes
1903-21	Rev. Humphrey Moynihan	Five major buildings constructed	Enrollment grows to 1000	Full military program, students in uniform	Accredited in 1916
1921-27	Rev. Thomas Cullen	Placed under direction of Holy Cross priests	Decline in enrollment	Abolition of military training	
1928-33	Rev. Matthew Schumacher	Aquinas Hall construction starts Gothic look of campus		Bleak finances a condition of the Depression	
1933-43	Rev. James J. Moynihan	O'Shaughnessy Hall built	Enrollment drops to below 100	Financial stability improved	