"Unearthing" Engaging Business Students in Creative Learning Through the Use of Social Media

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Abstract

The use of social media is increasingly becoming more common place in general education as part of a learning management system that is progressing beyond traditional instructional teaching approaches. Student's everyday lives are today very much entwined in social networking and online communities engaging in social conversations which are now finding their way as an integral part of their educational experience formally and informally. This paper outlines the use of 'Unearthing Ideas', a social media Facebook community created to support, engage and enhance the teaching of creative thinking in business courses at the University of South Australia.

Work in progress is beginning to demonstrate increased student engagement, deeper understandings and broader confidence in applying creativity principles and methodologies to their core studies and overall educational experience. Business and industry are increasingly demanding innovation in the suite of graduate attributes of university students and the University of SA is meeting this challenge by marketing itself as university of enterprise and innovation through its research, teaching and community engagement. The site provides a platform where students are expert, in order to express, share and reflect on their creative thinking and for lecturers; this creates the opportunity to move the classroom beyond traditional physical and pedagogical boundaries to meet these industry needs.

Keywords: social learning, social media, creativity, business, education.

Introduction

The need to teach creativity in business programs has occurred primarily in response to the phenomena of change and the acknowledgement that not only is innovation necessary for dealing with the impact of change but in fact it is the driver of change. Change and the ever increasing rate at which it is occurring is a phenomenon we recognise as impacting on communities and societies and it is challenging our capacity to adapt across many aspects of life.

Education recognises that in order to respond to the various challenges that complex environmental, social and economic pressures present, students need to learn how to be creative, innovative, enterprising and adaptable, as well as having the motivation, confidence and skills to use critical and creative thinking purposefully (General capabilities in the Australian Curriculum, January 2013). (McWilliam & Haukka, 2008).

Business as well has been forced to adapt to an increasingly changing environment in order to prosper and survive. Responding to meeting this

challenge becomes a prime issue given that an increasing number of problems faced today have no precedents, and there are fewer tested ways of approaching them. This awareness of the impact of change has been recurring over a long period of time, and it becomes obvious in these situations that conventional thinking is not always adequate. (Mc Grew 1970; Postman & Weingartner, 1971). In order to overcome these deficiencies, we are seeing business, politics and education emphasising the need for creative learning in a wide variety of areas not previously taught (McWilliam, 2007).

However, the nature of traditional University education, both within and outside the institution, is seen as not meeting the needs of a world in a state of rapid change (Robinson, 1999). Assumptions are being formed stating that enhanced creativity can provide a company with a competitive edge, and this was confirmed by a 2010 Survey of 1500 Chief Executives by IBM's Institute for Business Values, revealing creativity was seen as the key to successful business leadership in an increasingly complex world (Majaro, 1992; Robinson & Dechant 1997; Bassett-Jones, 2005; Dunne D & Martin R. 2006; Beheshtifar & Korouki, 2013). However, with the wealth of literature supporting the need for innovation and extensive investments and processes by companies for exploring new technologies and ideas, they often still don't have the ability to innovate (Chesbrough, 2010) and thus what the literature prescribes and what firms do, are miles apart (Kleinschmidt & Cooper, 1991).

Creativity in business and education

The University of South Australia acknowledged the importance of innovation and creativity in the business environment, and the need to form collaborations with industry, as well as prepare students to meet this challenge. As a result in 2014, it released its report which set out to create the framework to becoming a University of Innovation and Enterprise. What has been identified is that for a business (including a university) to build creativity and enterprise within its structure, requires a deeper organisational cultural change that mere technical proficiency on the part of its personnel cannot achieve (Crossing the Horizon UniSA, 2013).

Perceived essential talents that need to be acquired for any business to succeed, are a capacity for creativity and innovation, personal integrity, strong service focus, effective communication, team work and collaboration, openness to diversity, leadership, adaptability, adeptness at solving problems, and a capacity for strategic thinking and self-awareness. Specific behavioural attributes of its leaders and its employees is the need to focus on taking the initiative, intuitive decision making, strategic thinking and personal effectiveness that have been identified in the literature and in practice as key characteristics of enterprising behaviour (Martínez, Lorente, Dewhurst & Dale, 1998).

In acknowledging the importance of creativity, innovation and entrepreneurial skills in business and enterprise, Universities are in turn presented with a challenge for how they develop strategies to educate and produce graduates that

have these skills (Martin, 2010; McWilliam & Dawson, 2008). This may not be surprising, as educational institutions exhibit many of the characteristics of business organisations: regimentation, social conventionality, employability expectations from business, populist interference from government, obedience, rules and protocols, risk management, the predictable behaviour and performance expected, with authoritative hierarchies of learning and assessment. In turn, creativity is not well understood in such institutions. Educators themselves recognise that existing approaches in university business programs don't foster creative thinking and are not meeting the requirements of a rapidly changing business environment. Creativity is not recognised as an explicit or a required part of many business programs, and as a result it receives the least attention amongst a suite of business related skills offered in business curricula (Grenci, 2012; Schlee & Harich 2014). Many concerns are also echoed in a number of articles in business education literature (Driver 2001; Fekula, 2010; Kerr & Lloyd, 2008; Schmidt-Wilk, 2011; Kimbell, 2011; 2009; Weick, 2003).

Business education needs to embrace a pedagogy which emphasises the capacity to be flexible, think critically, solve complex problems, take responsibility and innovate (Burrus, 1997; Pink, 2005; Sawyer, 2003) and examples like the IDEO model of 'educating for creativity' (d. school, 2014) among many others, emphasise collaboration, cross disciplinary, project based experiential learning and creative thinking.

Teaching creativity through social media
Our work with business programs within the University came at the behest of program leaders in this discipline who, recognising the deficiencies and lack of creative capacity and application in their courses, turned to the '*creative disciplines within the University for Ideas*'. We began by providing lectures and then workshops on aspects of creativity. These sessions covered the nature of creativity: its meanings, misconceptions, impediments and the thinking processes and ways of working that facilitate creative outcomes, some of which challenged conventional practice in these disciplines. Then this developed into full courses where our social media site *'Unearthing Ideas'*, which was incorporated to generate a conversational environment. It is recognised that social media in education provides an extension of class content into the student's personal world where they tend to be more responsive to content that is delivered in "their territory", its informality creating an interactive less intimidating environment to work in (Blankenship, 2011).

Although initially 95% of students said they did not think they were creative, they were encouraged through these courses, to generate new ideas by challenging their assumptions, deconstructing and reconstructing concepts and taking small achievable steps to build their confidence and allow new insights to develop. The interactive environment of the social media platforms have been vital in stimulating student thought as information was gathered, processed, and reconfigured - using a medium that students themselves were expert in, helping

to build their confidence in applying their knowledge creatively with encouragement and support. Students commented that this contrasted markedly with other courses in their program which they found stressful, demanding and sometimes difficult to connect with. Our students commented favourably about the experience, stating work remained ongoing and interesting:

'The way they incorporated modern technology into the work, such as Facebook as it (sic) *made it more interesting. We can continue to go back to the Facebook page for new ideas'.* [UniSA My Course Experience Questionnaire 2013/14].

Students assumed ownership of the process, which had not happened on this scale in their learning before. Many had rarely experienced this autonomy, creating a powerful engaging environment. They expressed appreciation for the unique innovative and flexible responses possible from this fluid *'model'*.

Social media builds its success on engagement and participants being interest-driven, creating what might be termed 'Interest - Power learning' embedded within social relationships and cultural contexts (Connected Learning, 2011), where students contribute to the acquisition, flow and exchange of information beyond formal educational contexts. Significantly, students perceived that they now had an attitude and approach that was going to influence their learning and experiences in their future education and into their work experience:

'What is learnt in this course can be applied to all disciplines. I would say that this has been the most useful course I have undertaken. It has allowed me to better my work in other courses'.
[UniSA My Course Experience Questionnaire 2013/14].

The social media environment reinforced learning by extending the classroom experience beyond the architecture of the university. By linking learning, home and community, students could incubate ideas over time and they acknowledged the benefits of this wider conversation in a time place context that facilitated thought processes, sharing, collaborating and reflection:

[the social media site] *'…encourages you to be open minded and succeeds in doing so... it makes you want to know more and realise the possibilities in anything you do'.* [UniSA My Course Experience Questionnaire 2013/14].

'I'm starting to see the benefits for constructive conversations'.
[UniSA My Course Experience Questionnaire 2013/14[.

'Collaborative thinking and approaches can be an advantage. The manner in which my colleague and I approached our assignment.... was inspired by interactions within our group and

our interactive approach was inspired by more than the assignment brief... but much of what I learnt from and shared with my study partner'. [UniSA My Course Experience Questionnaire 2013/14].

In the business environment it is acknowledged that collaboration is essential for improving productivity and building organisational innovation at a personal, team, and group enterprise and business coalition level (Porter, 2011). Socio-technical settings greatly enhance the outcomes of creative groups by multiplying, rather than simply collating individual creative efforts. Business organisations get their strength from the creativity and engagement of their individual members (Fischer, 2005; Burrus, 1997). Through social media environments feedback from peers and audiences, who have personal connections and interest in the work, has promoted collaboration and informal learning, and has proved to be a strong feature of our own work:

'Great sense of teamwork developed through Facebook conversations....felt great to get feedback from peers'. [UniSA My Course Experience Questionnaire 2013/14].

'What was refreshing was that I found validation in the ideas and posts I submitted online from other people in my class'. [UniSA My Course Experience Questionnaire 2013/14].

Participants in the interest driven communities, including the business sector, are motivated by the fact that their work will be viewed by others or, by being part of an appreciative community / organization, they gain validation, recognition and an audience for their input and ideas *(*Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project, 2009).

We have demonstrated ways of working that remove creative thought inhibitors, previously frustrating students own belief in their ability. We challenged the common perception students have that creativity is an exotic and rare innate mental ability that stands apart from normal cognition (Claxton, 2006):

'I have learnt a lot about myself and have decided I am creative and have always been, I just never looked at [it] enough to realise it'. [UniSA My Course Experience Questionnaire 2013/14].

We observed that business students, when compared to the more traditional 'creative' art and design students, bring a different mindset to the classroom based on a greater emphasis on fixed bodies of knowledge around product development, business processes, and the theory of good business administration with little scope for looking at things in different ways. Our research revealed that most business and entrepreneurial studies relied on the

employment of business plans, viability and finance considerations, identifying characteristics of innovator personalities and detailed business model analysis as an insight to the predictor of success. There was very little in the way of 'practicing ' creativity and innovation and more on learning about it, thus not providing the qualities and attributes for what the industry was saying they needed, such as insightful observation leading to new ideas and solutions that creativity and innovation offer (Bennis, 2005; Khurana, 2008).

'It really helped me to think creatively and look at things in new ways. I can now apply this method of thinking into my work'. [UniSA My Course Experience Questionnaire 2013/14].

Generating the conversation became a focus for engaging students. Asking "*How might we?*" at the start of a project was a creative problem-solving concept we utilised and one that can be applied to any ambitious, achievable business challenge:

'In my opinion and that of many other students in this course, was (sic) that it should be made a compulsory component to any art, marketing, or design subject. If this was to be implemented, the impact on each student's approach would be instrumental in the development of ideas'. [UniSA My Course Experience Questionnaire 2013/14].

Students value the exposure social media provides and these approaches have empowered students to make unexpected connections or perception shifts leading to new ideas. They realise that improvements in creative application of their specialist knowledge *can* be learned*:*

'It's interesting how ideas are bounced off one another - which provoked the idea to be pushed further. Ideas build fluently and are continuous'. [UniSA My Course Experience Questionnaire 2013/14].

'Made me look at the topic in a completely new way'. [UniSA My Course Experience Questionnaire 2013/14].

We found the fluency and flexibility of ideas was enhanced by posting and interaction on the Facebook site due to the self-reinforcing function that commenting and then subsequent conversations created. Many ideas (fluency) were being encouraged whereas students noted this did not happen in their other business courses where in the main they worked in convergent thinking isolation. Ideas were being interrogated/discussed and reworked, (flexibility) and students were grasping the underlying principles, *the thinking behind the thinking* (elaboration) relating to creativity and building confidence in knowing when and how it was taking place.

Evidence of this deeper learning and understandings was evident from what students were posting and commenting on. Growing ideas and re-conceptualising of business topics and concepts were going far beyond specific task orientated course requirements and even beyond the bounds of the business courses as social media was allowing students to enthusiastically take control of their learning:

'*The beauty of using social media in conjunction with the more formal approach to education is that you have the opportunity to work with a more collaborative approach, which often stretches our thinking and methods beyond the initial working brief. Ultimately, resulting in greater engagement. As confidence grows, we extend the process further, which often results in reconsidering the preliminary approach as the idea grows and is out-worked further, creating better results*'. [UniSA My Course Experience Questionnaire 2013/14].

The site also promoted a questioning attitude and approach purely through its interactive nature. We encouraged students to consider big picture scenarios in their topics, in order to clearly articulate issues they were dealing with. Students experienced the ability to write a question succinctly, interrogate and overcome misunderstandings, giving them a focus to generate new ideas.

The value of the social media site was in opening up the conversations, for these questions to be articulated, a process not as well facilitated through individual closed approaches. Through the social media environment, students could, in an open interactive forum, dissect or deconstruct concepts and examine their questions in a way that greatly facilitated their refinement:

'*I found it intriguing how my views have been shifted in such a small time, and how differently I look at things. I look at objects and try and think about the thinking behind the idea*'. [UniSA My Course Experience Questionnaire 2013/14].

It is our contention that participation in online environments means more than accessing business information but rather engaging in social conversations that enhance learning and influence teaching. One of the major objectives of social creativity is to foster innovation and creativity through the creation, accumulation and sharing of knowledge, by building creative academic content in a collaborative social cultural context (Fischer, 2005, 2011).

We allowed students to take control of their own learning, not rely on predetermined responses or follow a prescribed process. They were genuinely excited when they realised they could work things out for themselves to enhance their current practice. They demonstrated how creativity can be applied to their specialisations through specific examples and projects of their own choice. By

continually reflecting on this approach, they added a creative dimension, reflecting the reality of their professional practice, realising its insufficient to just replicate the knowledge and skills of a discipline. We were able to confirm the medium has unique properties that greatly influence engagement and creative thinking and these were able to be manifested differently than their interpretation within the formalities of traditional business education.

 'The course has pushed my thoughts and allowed me to think "I can" instead of worrying about doing something…just to do it'. [UniSA My Course Experience Questionnaire 2013/14].

'I was so used to following structures within assignments . . . making your own expectations and structure for yourself became more important than anything else, opening my mind to new ways of thinking….putting more faith back into yourself' . [UniSA My Course Experience Questionnaire 2013/14].

We wanted our approach using social media to encourage a focused and collaborative model of learning reflecting real life, where people don't work in isolation or secrecy and take initiatives to work through problems by sharing and communicating. This represents a shift from a traditional educational model, focusing on teaching, not learning.

We used various aspects of the Facebook functionality, such as using page notes and events for student task orientated collaboration. Students engaged most with visual elements therefore we frequently posted class pictures or had them contribute their own works for display. We posted images using differing visual styles also, such as the use of black and white photography to help stand out in the general crowded and colourful newsfeed. We found students willingly posted their thoughts direct to the page of their own accord.

Students became engaged in applying their knowledge creatively, motivating and making sense of the acquisition of that knowledge, some conveying that for the 'first time' their tertiary education experience made sense in terms of its relevance and context. The results of our surveys demonstrated students found the social media environment user-friendly, giving them a sense of belonging. They expressed an increased activity and participation in their course:

'The course instilled great knowledge which I know I will continue using through my course and my work life'. [UniSA My Course Experience Questionnaire 2013/14].

Students applied their business knowledge innovatively and flexibly, and demonstrated understandings of broader principles and deeper learning. They appreciated '*learning how to learn*' rather than relying on fixed and predetermined knowledge and methods:

'The teacher's methods of teaching are very interactive and encourage students to participate with the learning processes'.
[UniSA My Course Experience Questionnaire 2013/14].

The reason we started the Facebook page initially was for students to continue their conversation as the creative mind doesn't rest. What we have since learnt is that this is an application of thought that is across all mediums; people need the time to incubate an idea, develop, discuss and broaden original thoughts into something far more worthy and social media facilitates this. Business typically, through the day to day pressures, doesn't have nor make the time to let ideas flow. Creative thought is a fluid process relying on generating and continually growing ideas able to be expanded through engaging conversations.

'I have learnt not to worry about the outcome, apply methods to what I am doing and I will get there. I've learnt that preconceived ideas limit us in our thinking'. [UniSA My Course Experience Questionnaire 2013/14].

Conclusions

Creativity and innovation are recognised as crucial for the long-term survival of business, enabling organisations to remain competitive in our rapidly changing world. Business and industry are increasingly demanding innovation in the suite of graduate attributes of university students. Embracing social media in our creative thinking teaching has allowed us to utilise its socialising, community and communication attributes to enhance understandings and application of creativity in the way students apply their knowledge to meet these industry needs.

'*Unearthing Ideas*', the mix of learning combined with social media, continues as a work in progress being applied in a range of courses, including business, at the University of South Australia.

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