

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP: FOSTERING A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION, CREATIVITY, AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY THROUGH TRANSDISCIPLINARY DESIGN EDUCATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper describes a Social Entrepreneurship course taught during the Fall 2014 semester at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). With most of its students identifying as either business or design majors, the course evolved into a truly transdisciplinary course. The students, both undergraduates and graduates, worked closely with one another throughout the entire semester, sharing knowledge and building solutions together to address societal problems. The educational outcomes were extremely favorable and, in some ways, surprising. While the instructor encouraged collaboration and peer learning, the extent to which students learned from one another was unanticipated. Design and business students alike gained a deep understanding of design thinking and its relationship to social entrepreneurship by sharing their perspectives both inside and outside of the physical classroom. Furthermore, their interest in extrapolating the benefits of design methods to scenarios beyond social entrepreneurship was also impressive.

Horst Rittel coined the term "wicked problems" in the 1970s to describe the complex problems associated with open societal systems. "The problems of governmental planning—and especially those of social or policy planning—are ill-defined; and they rely upon elusive political judgment for resolution" (1973). While wicked problems are by definition unique, they all share common characteristics. For instance, they are difficult to formulate, open to interpretation, and symptomatic of other problems. Furthermore, their solutions are never right or wrong, but rather better or worse (1973). They are also often "triggered by structures of social injustice, inequity and violence" (Ritchey 2011). And as such, Rittel argues that it is morally objectionable for a planner to deny the inherent wickedness of social problems or to treat wicked problems as though they were tame (1973).

Due to the interconnectedness of societal systems however, wicked problems are not reserved for governmental planners. Since commerce impacts society, businesses also continually face wicked problems. But how can businesses and their employees, untrained in and often unaware of the complexities of social issues deal with them responsibly? Design has been lauded as a panacea in

addressing all types of problems. The business press, including *Harvard Business Publishing*, *Fast Company*, *Bloomberg*, and *The Economist*, has fueled this interest in design with books and articles teaching businesses how to use design to innovate and compete.

But as Bruce Nussbaum argues, standardizing the design process has supported the widespread adoption of design thinking and diluted its impact (2011). Indeed, design thinking is typically taught to business professionals in a simplistic and linear manner. The complexity of interrelated systems and social constructs is rarely highlighted in design thinking workshops and classes. And without confronting the inherently unpredictable nature of design and the undeniable need for broad stakeholder input, students and other participants are unfortunately unable to fully understand and appreciate design's full potential.

Teaching design methods within the context of Social Entrepreneurship however, provides tremendous opportunity to teach design thinking more effectively. Actively engaging with design methodologies to tackle complex social issues provides a firsthand experience that fosters a deep appreciation of the power of a design-oriented approach to problem solving. Such experiences are not only missing from typical corporate design thinking workshops, but also traditional academic environments.

2. INITIAL COURSE CONCEPT

After RIT's Saunders College of Business adopted a new mission statement highlighting "design thinking" in April 2014, the instructor began collaborating with the College in order to support efforts to more fully integrate "design thinking" into its curriculum. At that point, only one other class included substantive content pertaining to design thinking. By introducing the College's inaugural course in Social Entrepreneurship, which focused on using design methods to remedy social issues, the course aimed to fill the gap in the course offerings pertaining to Social Entrepreneurship while integrating design thinking into the curriculum at a deeper level.

The interdisciplinary course was initially developed for business students interested in tackling social issues. The overall objective was to prepare these students to adequately consider and address the wicked problems that they will face as professionals by teaching them design methods to use in tandem with traditional business frameworks.

3. COURSE DEVELOPMENT AND CHALLENGES

While the course was intended for business students, its roster included an eclectic mix of undergraduate and graduate students from three different colleges on campus. Generally, however, the student population comprised two distinct groups: business students and design students. The business students generally had no awareness of the course's focus on design thinking. They simply knew that the class would focus on Social Entrepreneurship in some way. The design students, on the other hand, had signed up for the course specifically because of its emphasis on design thinking. Furthermore, the common denominator—an interest in social entrepreneurship—was weak since the University historically

had provided students with only limited exposure to this field. In fact, most students expressed that they had little to no understanding of social entrepreneurship upon enrolling in the course.

In order to accommodate the diversity of students' expectations, needs, and interests, the instructor redesigned the course shortly before the semester began by carefully rebalanced the design and business content. In the interest of the students, the instructor also restructured the course in a manner that heavily leveraged peer learning both inside and outside the classroom in order to ensure adequate reinforcement of course concepts expected to disrupt students' existing thought processes.

Given the breadth of student backgrounds and needs, the instructor did not intend to turn every student into a social entrepreneur. Rather the professor aimed to introduce all students to the field of social entrepreneurship, inspire them to make positive change in their chosen field, and empower them to do so by teaching design methodologies relevant to any context. While this proved to be challenging, the resulting transdisciplinary course was a resounding success.

4. METHODOLOGY

Instructors of Social Entrepreneurship, relative to other fields, lack practical, hands-on, interactive materials to support their teaching. A recent review of social entrepreneurship by the Academy of Management Learning & Education concluded that "instructors and professors are generally left on their own when it comes to activities that emphasize the 'create' level of critical thinking" (Moss & Gras, 2011).

With little consensus on the best practices of teaching social entrepreneurship within a business school, let alone in a heterogeneous classroom of both business and design students, the instructor had no template with which to develop the course. IDEO's Human-Centered Design Toolkit provided a framework with which to present design methodologies to students but within the context of this course, it had major shortcomings that the instructor had to address through alternative means. For instance, the Toolkit focuses on individual human needs and provides only abstract, cursory coverage of social constructs and systems. Since the instructor had specifically aimed to demonstrate how traditional business frameworks, while profitable in certain situations, are insufficient to address imbalanced systems in a responsible manner, this informational gap was problematic. Furthermore, the Toolkit "was designed specifically for NGOs and social enterprises that work with impoverished communities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America" and was built upon assumptions, especially regarding organizational structure and financing that are often irrelevant when working domestically or as a start-up (2009).

To provide students with a more holistic and robust approach to Social Entrepreneurship, the instructor leveraged content from the fields of marketing, management, entrepreneurship, economics, psychology, and sociology, and synthesized them with design teachings through the lens of social entrepreneurship. In the end, only three of the 15 classes utilized exercises recommended by the IDEO Human-Centered Design Toolkit. And while these three classes were instrumental in facilitating the teams' creative processes, the Human-Centered Design Toolkit did not play a central role in the syllabus.

Course topics covered during the other 12 classes included:

- Defining social entrepreneurship
- Comparing social enterprises to traditional non-profits and for-profits
- Creating social value
- Understanding complex contexts
- Analyzing interrelated systems
- Measuring social impact
- Financing social enterprises
- Scaling social enterprises
- Communicating mission-related activities

Reading assignments, which served as prompts for in-class discussion, included scholarly journal articles, marketing textbook chapters, and business case studies. To complement the readings, the instructor also invited social entrepreneurs to lecture on their own systematic approaches to social justice and to openly discuss problems that they encounter as entrepreneurs in ambiguous, and often messy, situations.

5. COLLABORATIVE FOCUS/ENVIRONMENT

Because design is inherently interdisciplinary, collaboration was an underlying theme of the entire course and topics pertaining to teamwork and stakeholder engagement were continually introduced and revisited. Class discussions, facilitated by readings, lectures and student presentations, played a significant role in student processing of course content and were leveraged to facilitate a class environment of respect and empathy. Students were encouraged to engage in critical thinking and express alternative perspectives throughout the course.

Given the transdisciplinarity of the team project, students continually applied newly acquired design methods and collaborative skills outside of the classroom. Teams of three or four students were formed via a matching process that considered both student input and interdisciplinary goals. Each team consisted of at least one business student and graduate student.

The physical environment facilitated collaboration within class. Class took place in a classroom with large tables that facilitated group discussions. Neither a lecture hall nor a studio, the classroom was comfortable for the business students and the design students alike.

6. TEAM PROJECTS

Student teams developed problem statements to address collectively through their project work. Problems had to represent social issues with which students had either minimal or no professional experience. The project's final deliverable included a business model that tackled the problem and

provided a critical analysis of context and risks. After identifying topics of common interest to members, teams performed preliminary research of these topics and defined the following problem statements:

- Domestic Violence is not recognized and addressed by society as collective problem.
- In Rochester, heroin-related deaths are more than doubling each year.
- People often struggle to separate their lives from the Internet and do not realize that they are suffering from Internet addiction, hurting both themselves and those around them.
- Unhealthy food preferences established during childhood result in poor eating habits during adulthood and create a public health issue with significant medical and economic implications.

7. LEARNING OUTCOMES

Student deliverables and feedback indicated that participants had fulfilled the course's primary learning objectives in terms of understanding the fundamental concepts of social entrepreneurship and applying design methods to use in solving complex social problems. More specifically, the students learned how to do the following:

- Recognize problems as opportunities for positive change
- Understand context and think systematically about problems
- Identify and analyze stakeholders
- Apply design thinking to create social capital
- Build business models to support social justice
- Measure social impact of social enterprises
- Communicate mission-related activities clearly and convincingly

Comments from students showed that their enthusiasm for the subject matter increased because of peer interactions. Student evaluations also indicated that business and design content was appropriately balanced, and the students were appropriately challenged regardless of their disciplinary background.

8. INSTRUCTOR REFLECTIONS AND INSIGHTS

Upon careful reflection of student evaluations, feedback, and performance, the instructor gained some useful insights about teaching Social Entrepreneurship. Perhaps most importantly, the professor learned that by successfully applying design methods to specific social issues, students recognized both the importance of design thinking as well as its power in all situations, even those apparently unrelated to wicked problems.

Over the semester, business students learned that managerial decisions are often more complex than implied by existing business frameworks. Moreover, while traditional business frameworks may support the revenue growth of individual companies in the short term, they do not adequately address the complexity of open societal systems. Furthermore, students developed a deep understanding of the nonlinearity of design thinking and even embraced it as means to enhance managerial decision-making in

the face of ambiguity. The following comments from the business students are representative of these findings.

Initially I looked at problems as having a solution. While the solution may not be clear or even known by anyone, I believed that there was a way to solve a problem without any backlash. The important truth to understand is that every solution causes a negative outcome in some context, and the power in recognizing that is opportunity to then address the negativity and minimize it to their best ability. Additionally, the ability to identify the negative aspects of a partly or mostly positive outcome enables people to identify the root of the problem rather than creating a Band-Aid solution.

I determined that something is not truly social entrepreneurship, in terms of innovation and social impact, if the solution isn't at least attempting to address or identify the root of a cause, especially if the endeavor is attempting to ignore negative impacts because it is also "doing good".

Innovative thinking is needed to tackle some of the social ills that are prevalent in all cultures. The previous paradigms, techniques or models, while impactful to some degree, may be somewhat skewed based on an unbalanced point-of-view.

As a business student this concept [of design thinking] totally baffled me but the more I studied and practiced this concept, it made complete sense. The nonlinear process has even helped me understand other subjects. It has helped me in my organizational behavior class, and I think this concept would make a lot of manager's lives easier.

Interestingly, the design students learned as much about design thinking as the business students did through the Management Department course. While they all had previous knowledge of design thinking, their understanding and appreciation of it grew tremendously over the semester.

As a designer I knew what design thinking was, but this class really helped to solidify the term and help to really understand the process of design thinking more thoroughly. I learned that through design thinking the opportunities and solutions are endless.

Now I understand that I do not have to be in a certain field of study to recognize an opportunity and successfully solve a wicked problem. Through the process of design thinking I can solve any problem that arises in my life, and my interior design background helps me to see things from a different angle, as would someone with a background in engineering or photojournalism. Studying interior design does not hold me back, but it supports me in creating my unique path to success. Through interior design, I have the power to do anything, and this class helped me realize that.

There are a lot of obstacles when attempting to solve diverse and intricate problems. There's no clear solution. However, through the course of the semester, we tried to tackle the problem

through the lens of an imaginary social business. This was an effective strategy because it allowed us to practice thinking about all the creative thinking steps and showed us how intricate every problem is.

I have gained a better understanding of Social Entrepreneurship and its finer nuances. In addition to that, I now understand the complexity of social issues, its identification and possible solution not only from a management, but also design perspective. Through the course, I have developed the skill of Design Thinking, and feel much more confident in applying the methodologies for other design challenges.

Undoubtedly, the project teams reinforced lessons regarding the power of diversity and divergent thinking, which are both integral aspects of design thinking. The interdisciplinary teams embraced peer learning, which supported course concepts and provided a nurturing transdisciplinary design experience.

I am positive that we all learned a tremendous amount, not just about a social issues but also how to think about addressing social issues, the need for sensitivity, the need for bringing diverse opinions to the table while having a steady footing so as to not get swayed by strong opinions that may not be grounded.

Many times I felt my classmates having a different understanding of the articles which I had not thought of, that gave me a different insight and forced me to think about articles from diverse angles.

This group was the most unique of all the groups that I have grouped with this entire semester. It had undergraduate students with the freshest ideas to throw around

It was definitely my best group experience in school

Every member put forth effort and helped in their own way. The fact that we had a diverse group of industrial design, graphic design and business helped. Because whatever weaknesses one of us had was made up by others in the group.

I learned a lot from my peers in my group. I especially enjoyed working with graduate students who had a wealth of knowledge about business and life. The diversity within the group was very synergistic.

One of the basic challenges we faced as a team was that none of us knew enough about it. It was fun to work with younger minds. What the team lacked in experience, they brought in enthusiasm and I thoroughly enjoyed sharing my understanding of the world of grants, funding, program/project management, stakeholder engagement, and proposal creation.

9. CONCLUSION

As a case study, this Social Entrepreneurship course informs educators of a context in which design thinking can be taught effectively within a university setting, outside of the framework of a typical design program. The complexity of diverse stakeholders, social constructs, and interrelated systems addressed with social entrepreneurship demonstrates the power of design in a manner simply not possible in the context of classic design studio coursework. Focusing on the application of design methodologies through the lens of social entrepreneurship can yield tremendous benefits for design students as well as their counterparts in other disciplines.

While the case study highlights a course comprised of undergraduate and graduate students mostly from the fields of business and design, its relevance extends to other interdisciplinary classrooms. Through collaboration, design faculty can extend their reach and foster an appreciation of design across all departments and colleges within a university. A single faculty member with academic and professional experience spanning both business and design taught the course discussed in this paper. However team-teaching could be another effective strategy for an interdisciplinary course. Regardless, an interdisciplinary project involving students from varied backgrounds would only deepen the learning experience by facilitating peer learning and fostering a collaborative experience.

Since students carry their knowledge into professional realms worldwide after graduating, the impact of this design education would extend far beyond any educator's immediate academic environment. The long-term implications if this influence cannot be underestimated as our increasingly complex world requires creative problem solvers in order to sustain it.

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