



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

The International Journal of Management Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijme



“Old school” meets “new school”: Using books and tablets to improve information literacy and promote integrative learning among business students



Colin Mang, Natalya Brown*, Linda Piper

Nipissing University School of Business, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 October 2016

Received in revised form 21 May 2017

Accepted 21 July 2017

Keywords:

Common book

Common reading program

Information literacy

Integrative learning

iPad

Tablet

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the use of Common Book and Tablet programs in post-secondary business education. We highlight methods by which each program enhances information literacy and integrative learning. We demonstrate how these programs can enhance students' communication and collaboration skills and enhance employability. We discuss classroom activities that both a Common Book and a Tablet can be used for as well as ways in which the programs offer mutual reinforcement to provide additional benefits during implementation. The article concludes with a discussion of obstacles to implementing either a Common Book or a Tablet program and methods to overcome those obstacles.

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1. Introduction

Business graduates require interpersonal, integrative learning, and other meta-skills to remain up-to-date in their field well after graduation, and to tackle an increasingly complex environment with challenges that may be non-linear, interrelated, and unstructured. Cullen (2011) and Tian and Walle (2009) argue for the importance of improving business students' critical thinking and qualitative evaluation skills, while Azevedo, Apfelthaler, and Hurs (2012) identify communication, relationship building, and “the ability to see the bigger picture” as key competencies that employers seek in graduates. Given the need to foster critical thinking, build strong communication and information literacy skills, and promote integrative learning and co-operative conduct, we evaluate the concurrent implementation of two innovations in teaching pedagogy: a Common Book program, and a Tablet program, which are growing in popularity across North America.

A Common Book program, also known as a Common Reading program, involves distributing a single book each year, generally a non-academic text with subject matter not necessarily specific to any particular subject or discipline, to all students in one or more academic programs at an institution. In some institutions, the “common book” becomes an integral component of curriculum of many different classes, guiding or inspiring one or more academic activities. The book is thus “common” in two senses: first, for an individual student, reading the book is a common requirement for several different

* Corresponding author. Nipissing University, 100 College Drive Box 5002, North Bay P1B 8L7, ON, Canada.
E-mail address: natalyab@nipissingu.ca (N. Brown).

classes, and second, reading the book is a common experience for many students who are not necessarily enrolled in the same classes together.

A Tablet program involves the use of tablet devices by all students in a course, or group of courses, in one or more academic programs throughout an institution. The most commonly reported tablet used in academic trials so far has been the Apple iPad, released in 2010 (see for example Eichenlaub, Gabel, Jakubek, McCarthy, & Wang, 2011; Fischman & Keller, 2011; Kaya, 2010; Keller, 2011; Mang & Wardley, 2012; Weider, 2011), and that is also the technology we have adopted.

This paper reflects on the joint experiences of introducing a Common Book program and a Tablet program among first-year business students. The Common Book program was introduced to our Faculty in 2010 while the Tablet program was established the following year. In our experience, a Common Book program and a Tablet program can be combined to generate activities that improve information literacy and promote integrative learning for business students. First we identify key learning outcomes and then discuss the relevant literature. We then discuss how each program can achieve the learning outcomes and we explore how the two programs can mutually reinforce each other to provide additional synergistic benefits. Finally, we discuss the challenges of initiating both Common Book and Tablet programs and provide guidance for faculty in establishing these programs at their own institutions. We discuss ways to overcome objections among those who value “old school” teaching techniques as well as methods to promote adoption of these “new school” innovations in teaching.

2. Learning outcomes

2.1. Information literacy

Information literacy is the ability to know when information is needed; how to access, synthesize, and use information effectively; how to evaluate information across all media; and how to critically reflect on the nature of information itself. Business graduates often become overspecialized in one particular area (accounting, marketing, human resources, etc.), but they need to be able to relate to the world of knowledge that exists outside their area of specialization. Information literacy when combined with highly developed meta-skills provides graduates with the flexibility required to have a successful career.

Doyle (1992) defines an information literate person as one who:

- Recognizes that accurate and complete information is the basis for decision-making;
- Formulates questions based on information needs;
- Develops successful search strategies;
- Identifies and accesses potential sources of information;
- Evaluates information;
- Organizes information for practical application;
- Integrates new information into an existing body of knowledge;
- Uses information in critical thinking and problem solving.

Today's ease of information access often provides students with a false feeling of security. Through technology, students can easily find research relating to any topic; however, in many cases, they lack the ability to filter out non-essential information and focus on information pertinent to the issue being considered. The students lack experience in critically evaluating types of information, in making judgments about the relative merits of the content presented, and in searching effectively for the most useful types of information to support decision making. Essentially, what students need to be reminded of is that *just because you find something on the internet, that does not mean it is either the best source or the most complete source of information*. Effective information literacy skills must be developed through experience; they cannot be “taught” to students by lecture-style instruction. Instead, such skills must be nurtured over time, through trial-and-error type activities, where students conduct research, are evaluated and receive feedback, and then try again to do a better job.

2.2. Integrative learning

Integrative learning skills enable students to bridge learning across disciplines and time. Specifically, integrative learning in the context of business education allows students to

- develop an integrated view of business functions,
- make connections between knowledge and practice, and
- understand issues and positions contextually

While discipline-specific expertise is necessary, exposure to integrated learning provides students with the flexibility required to succeed in industry. Huber, Hutchings and Gale (2005) note that today's graduates cannot expect to remain in the same line of work or with the same employer for their entire career, and can expect to be collaborating with individuals with diverse expertise and academic backgrounds. Huber et al. stress the need for graduates to be “aware of complex

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