

PROMOTING THE INTEGRATION OF LEARNING IN THE BUSINESS EDUCATION CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Problem. Integration of learning is a critical outcome of undergraduate education and, consequently, a highly desired trait that today's employers expect to find in college graduates. **Purpose.** The purpose of this qualitative study was to analyze interviews with and classroom observations of business students to gain a better understanding of the ways these students combine their learning experiences, which would assist business education faculty in the promotion of the integration of learning. **Methodology.** The nature of the research questions called for a grounded theory method that could produce theories that would aid in explaining issues related to the integration of learning. **Findings.** Results indicated that students are integrating learning effectively without much assistance, if any, from faculty members. Students reported that they establish connections among ideas, skills, and/or information learned; apply ideas, skills, and/or information learned across different contexts or disciplines; and synthesize/combine ideas, skills, and/or information to construct new ones.

Introduction

The National Business Education Association (NBEA) continues to mandate that business education students must be able to make connections among business content areas, synthesize business concepts, and make ideas portable from one business education context to another (NBEA, 2013). In fact, NBEA's National Standards focus on several related areas, including "an acknowledgement and deeper understanding of the interrelatedness of the basic business content areas—accounting, business law, career development, communication, computation, economics and personal finance, entrepreneurship, information technology, international business, management, and marketing" (NBEA, 2013, p. x).

Current information technology has made it relatively easy for business education students to find information. However, these students must be taught how to make connections using the material they are learning because these connections are a critical outcome of undergraduate education and, consequently, a highly desired trait that today's employers expect to find in college graduates. The problem is that many educators do not know how learning is integrated and, therefore, are unable to teach students how to maximize the integration of learning. As a result, employers are frustrated because they are unable to find

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college graduates able to demonstrate that they have made connections among their various learning experiences (Barber, 2012).

More than ever before, higher education institutions must not neglect making improvements in student learning because doing so leads to criticism by employers who are forced to invest large sums to remedy the deficiencies found in college graduates (Barber, 2012; Bok, 2005; Russ, 2009). In terms of our nation's competitive advantage, countries such as India and China are producing excellent college graduates who demonstrate that they have integrated their learning experiences (Friedman, 2005; Gaytan, 2011b). In short, "while several fundamental goals of higher education should not change (e.g., ability to think, write, speak), the way these goals are achieved should change to reflect changes in the global economy and to allow American college graduates to remain competitive" (Gaytan, 2011b, p. 29).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to analyze interviews *with* and classroom observations *of* business students to gain a better understanding of the ways these students combine their learning experiences, thus assisting business education faculty in the promotion of the integration of learning. The research questions called for a grounded theory method that could produce theories that would aid in explaining issues related to the integration of learning. The researchers sought to develop a theory to assist business education teachers in gaining a better understanding of the ways these students combine their learning experiences, promoting the integration of learning. Specifically, this study sought answers to the following overarching research questions:

1. How do business education students use their learning experiences to achieve the integration of learning?
2. How can business education faculty design a learning environment that promotes the integration of learning?

Literature Review

Integration of learning is not necessarily a new concept, as Bloom (1956) focused on the process of learning by designing a taxonomy of educational objectives that view learning "as a hierarchy of increasingly sophisticated ways of thinking" (Barber, 2012, p. 3). Twenty-four years later, Fischer (1980) introduced a skill-based theory that included a framework for understanding the enormous cognitive complexity associated with the integration of learning. He argued that, as human beings get older, they are presented with more opportunities to be able to make connections among knowledge and personal experiences acquired.

This skills-based theory has been applied by King and VanHecke (2006) to demonstrate that interdisciplinary and intercontextual learning experiences

give students excellent opportunities to make connections across courses and among academic personal and “community life” (Carnegie Foundation, 2004, p. 1) experiences from a variety of sources, reflective of a more holistic type of education (Schwartz & Fischer, 2006). *Integration of learning* is defined here as:

The demonstrated ability to connect, apply, and/or synthesize information coherently from disparate contexts and perspectives, and make use of these new insights in multiple contexts. This includes the ability to connect the domain of ideas and philosophies to the everyday experiences, from one field of study or discipline to another; from the past to the present, between campus and community life, from one part to the whole, from the abstract to the concrete, among multiple identity rules—and vice versa. (Barber, 2012, p. 4).

This definition was chosen because it includes information from sources outside academia, such as personal life experiences. The review of literature revealed, however, that while certain instructional practices facilitate the integration of learning, there is a lack of a clear description of the process through which individuals engage in the integration of learning.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this qualitative study is based on the extensive and rigorous literature related to individual learning which, in turn, serves as the foundation for the development of *integration of learning* by providing theoretical support to investigate the ways individuals use their learning experiences to integrate learning (Barber, 2012; Brunner, 1960; Dewey, 1938; Judd, 1939; Thorndike, 1924). Figure 1 captures the conceptual framework for this study, which focuses on the fact that integration of learning combines both *transfer of learning* and *experiential learning* concepts to form a more complex phenomenon.

The *transfer of learning* literature provides individuals with an opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions regarding the way knowledge becomes portable, representing an important component of integration of learning (Barber, 2012). *Transfer of learning* relates to the manner in which humans think, acquire, and apply knowledge (Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström, 2003). *Experiential learning*, on the other hand, provides a robust knowledge base of contexts and conditions that facilitate learning (Barber, 2012). Dewey (1938) argued that students’ previous experiences play an essential role in the acquisition of new knowledge, which is consistent with the concept of integration of learning.

Methodology

This study used qualitative research methodology. A grounded study method (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012) was used to analyze interviews *with* and classroom observations *of* business students to gain a better understanding of the ways

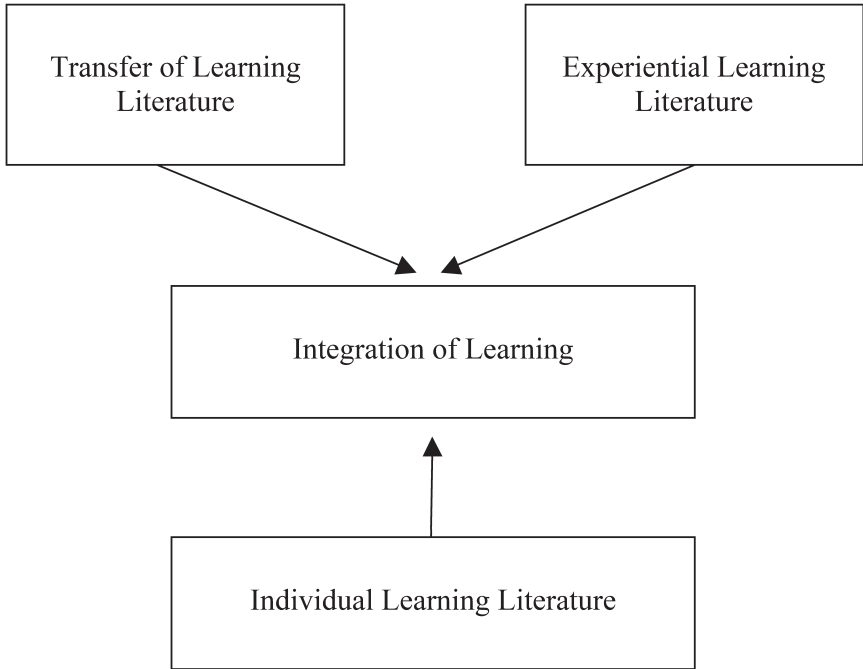


Figure 1. Integration of learning combines both transfer of learning and experiential learning concepts.

these students combine their learning experiences. The nature of the research questions called for a methodology that could produce theoretical understandings (i.e., produce theories that explain issues related to the integration of learning). Grounded theory is a systematic qualitative method that attempts to generate “a theory that explains a particular phenomenon” (Gay et al., 2012, p. 13).

In grounded theory, researchers first select a topic or situation that needs to be understood with the goal to generate a theory that might help explain that topic or situation (Lincoln & Guber, 1985). In this study, the researchers sought to develop a theory to assist business education teachers in gaining a better understanding of the ways students combine their learning experiences, promoting the *integration of learning*. The “most common strategies used to carry out grounded theory are observation and interviews” (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p. 167).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) found that constantly and consistently comparing and integrating the data that are collected through several methods (e.g., interviews, observations) is the most important part of a successful grounded theory study. This constant comparison is “inductive; that is, the analysis shifts from specific information to broader, more inclusive understandings. Theory evolves during

actual research, and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection” (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p. 168).

Data Collection and Analyses

The researchers observed student behaviors related to the *integration of learning* in six sections of business communication courses and interviewed 23 business students from these sections during the 2013-2014 academic year. The business communication courses were taught in an AACSB-accredited business school at a Southeastern university. The questions used in the interview were derived from the literature on the integration of learning (Barber, 2012; Baxter Magolda, & King, 2007; Berger, 2010; King, Kendall Brown, Lindsay, & VanHecke, 2007). Interview questions appear in the Appendix.

The classroom observations and student interviews resulted in the collection and analyses of various data types. This process repeated itself until new data began to confirm rather than shed new light on the findings (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings

Major findings related to the two overarching research questions under scrutiny are presented in this section followed by a discussion of each of the findings.

Research Question 1

How do business education students use their learning experiences to achieve the integration of learning?

Both classroom observations and student interviews provided rich accounts of the various ways business students experienced integration of learning in college. Both researchers observed students interacting in groups to create meaning for new classroom concepts throughout the semester. Students repeatedly worked together to make real-life connections to the material through examples of how concepts appear in the business world or their interpersonal lives. The process of creating meaning consistently hinged upon tangible, applied connections that took abstraction out of the material and framed it in life outside of the classroom.

Interviews were then conducted to verify and better understand the observations. The researchers interviewed 23 business students. The first three questions asked about the three different categories of integration found in the literature: (1) establishing connections among ideas, skills, and/or information learned; (2) applying ideas, skills, and/or information learned across different contexts or disciplines; and (3) synthesizing/combining ideas, skills, and/or information to construct new ones (Barber, 2012; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Berger, 2010; King, Kendall Brown, Lindsay, & VanHecke, 2007).

Category I of integration of learning: Establishing connections among ideas, skills, and /or information learned. All business students interviewed

claimed that they had established connections between ideas, skills, and/or information learned. Students reported that connections were made whenever they found that two or more ideas had commonalities or when understanding one idea more fully explained another. These connections varied in complexity. While some of them represented mental links between ideas, skills, and/or information, others were far more complex connections because they involved a variety of contexts. For instance, Student 1 described the connections among ideas, skills and/or information learned as follows:

I have connected property and law statements learned in my marketing class to concepts in accounting.

Conversely, Student 2 described the connection among ideas, skills and/or information learned this way:

I understand information better when I connect it to real-life examples. When I saw my uncle struggle with government regulations that affected his business directly, I connected these life experiences with the government regulations presented and discussed in my marketing and management courses.

In a kinesthetic effort, Student 22 reported making a conscientious, physical effort that connected concepts:

It sounds elementary, but I still use a bubble map and web diagram to help me connect and organize my thoughts. In ROTC, we always talk about managing people, increasing morale, stuff like that. I know that in Organizational Behavior, which I have, we always talk about how to motivate your employees and up the tempo without lowering morale; so I kind of try to relate information from each class. It comes together to help me out.

Additionally, Student 15 described the necessity of connecting ideas across all life lessons by explaining information synthesis in terms of baking and time management:

Establishing connections between ideas, skills, and information helps me remember the information. When baking cookies, I know that when you bake something and it heats up it will usually puff up. When it puffs up, it will get hard. If you leave it in there too long, it will burn. So, I know that when it starts puffing up to take it out. Timing! It's a time thing: procrastination. If you wait too long you will burn.

Category II of integration of learning: Applying ideas, skills, and/or information across contexts. All business students interviewed reported that they apply ideas, skills, and/or information learned across different contexts or disciplines. In addition, students claimed that they applied one idea, skill, and/or information somewhere else from one context to another. While some of these

applications took place within academia, others were experiences outside the classroom. For example, Student 5 described the application of ideas, skills, and/or information as follows:

Yes, many courses are prerequisites to other courses. It becomes a necessity to connect and apply concepts, skills, and/or information learned in the prerequisite courses to the more advanced courses.

In addition, Student 3 described the application of ideas, skills, and/or information as follows:

I applied knowledge gained from a business ethics course to community service projects to ensure that my actions are ethical. In addition, the respect for people that my parents taught me has been applied to the way I respect other people, including college professors.

Many students explained that the first step in the application is identifying how the material applies to their immediate life. For example, Student 21 stated that:

I'm a business major, more specifically marketing. So, we study how to market a product or service. So, basically, I kind of try to focus that into a music group. I have a music group back at home. So, I feel like eventually, once I get further into my major, I'll be able to further market the music group. That's kind of like my "aha" moment.

Further, Student 19 explained that life application is the first step in understanding:

I apply [new material] to real life, something I've dealt with, like with math or whatever I'll apply it to real-life situations.

Category III of *integration of learning*: Synthesizing/combining ideas, skills, and/or information to construct new ones. While all business students interviewed claimed that they synthesize/combine ideas, skills, and/or information, four students were not able to articulate a clear example of such synthesis. However, the remaining business students were able to convey the way they have synthesized/combined two or more ideas together to generate or create a new understanding and/or skill that is much more important than the individual parts.

In addition, students reported that synthesizing/combining ideas, skills, and/or information requires interactions (e.g., classroom discussions) with other students or individuals from the larger community and that it is a process that has its foundation in the collaborative interactions among students or other members of the community. For example, Student 8 described the way he synthesized/combined ideas, skills, and/or information as follows:

The business communication course requires many interactions, such as group discussions, that allowed me to synthesize/combine the ideas and information presented to create new knowledge for me. Classroom discussions allowed

me to engage in reflection exercises that, ultimately, led me to synthesize/combine the ideas and information being discussed.

Student 10 noted that:

The Critical Thinking Case Study used by the professor in my business communication course allowed me to understand the various perspectives of other people regarding a single issue that, ultimately, helped me to construct my own meaning of the issue. I almost felt as if I had engaged in higher-order thinking that allowed me to create new knowledge.

Some students explained connecting material to create new ideas to be an integral part of the learning process. For example, Student 22 explained that:

I am a firm believer that the more you learn, you shouldn't lose what you learned before. You should put it together with what you know to make a better project or idea.

Student 19 further suggested that generating new ideas based on concepts learned is the final step of learning:

The general idea you're taught is a formula for you to make new ideas and innovate from.

Research Question 2

How can business education faculty design a learning environment that promotes the integration of learning?

College professors and students throughout the nation talk about interdisciplinary (i.e., various classroom and curriculum contexts) degree programs and courses. The data from this study revealed that business students are experiencing intercontextual learning situations in which life experiences extend over a variety of disciplines and contexts at the same time. In short, business students reported that their integration of learning is taking place in a wide variety of contexts, including life experiences, work-based settings, campus-life interactions, social media involvement, and classroom discussions. Students thought this integration of knowledge was what made the information real and worth knowing.

Classroom observations and interviews revealed that students use a variety of contexts and disciplines at the same time to integrate learning. However, no student interviewed reported receiving assistance from faculty to achieve their integration of learning. This finding suggests that perhaps college faculty are unaware of the way the integration of learning is occurring in their courses. In addition, this finding is consistent with findings of major studies related to the integration of learning (Barber, 2012; Huber et al., 2007).

Students provided rich answers to the interview questions. Based upon their responses, faculty interested in designing a learning environment that promotes the integration of learning should consider the following things:

1. Faculty, staff, and administrators, as well as community-based educational leaders should assist students in the integration of learning using a wide variety of contexts and disciplines at the same time. More intentional efforts must be made to create opportunities for the integration of learning. For instance, academic advisors, faculty, and staff should engage students to determine what students consider important and how students perceive their entire college experience. As a result, students would recognize that university personnel are genuinely interested in their integration of learning, in general, and in their overall success, in particular.
2. Because students reported that classroom discussions led to reflection, which in turn led to the integration of learning, faculty should design and develop learning environments where discussion, reflection, and analyses take place regularly (Gaytan, 2008, 2011a, 2013).
3. Faculty should require that students' oral presentations and classroom discussions connect students' personal lives to the ideas and information presented and discussed in the classroom. This process helps students achieve the integration of learning. Hearing connections observed by peers may guide students in completing their own integration process.
4. Students believed that their professors must encourage critical thinking in their classrooms because critical thinking promotes reflection, which in turn leads to the integration of learning (Gaytan, 2008, 2013).
5. Faculty, staff, and administrators should first identify which classroom contexts and experiences promote the integration of learning by understanding how students connect, apply, and synthesize complex knowledge and experiences. Then, professors must identify rules in a wide variety of contexts (Barber, 2012).

Recommendations for Future Research

Researchers are encouraged to replicate this study using more participants and from the entire nation. While this *qualitative* study included interviews and observations, researchers are also encouraged to conduct *quantitative* studies to look deeper at the way *integration of learning* occurs more efficiently and effectively.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Do you establish connections between ideas, skills, and/or information learned? Does your professor help you? If so, please give an example.
2. Do you apply ideas, skills, and/or information learned across different contexts or disciplines? If so, please give an example.
3. Do you synthesize/combine ideas, skills, and/or information to construct new ones? If so, please give an example.
4. How do you construct your own meaning of something you are presented with? What recommendations can you give your professors to teach their students to achieve the *integration of learning*?
5. How do you study for an exam?
6. How do you learn?